

## **Isaac is Born. Two Kinds of Seed. Covenant with Abimelech.**

*Genesis 21*

### **Isaac Is Born**

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At the time appointed by God, one year after the last announcement (18:10, 14), Isaac was born.

Compared with the short and businesslike announcement of the birth of Ishmael, who entered life in a natural way, the special miracle of Isaac's birth is, from the start, summarily related as a praising of God, ending with the happy laughter of the mother.

The God of the promise visited Sarah's life, bearing the gift which meant the very most to her. He fulfilled His promise to Sarah, and that promise became the power that rejuvenated her life. She, namely, conceived and "bore Abraham a son in his old age."

This last-mentioned fact receives a great deal of stress in the story. It is like a musical keynote which is heard throughout the story, the theme which echoes through it in praise of God, giving the accents to the story in its separate parts:

- when the name is given: "his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him."
- at circumcision: "his son, Isaac."
- when Abraham's age is mentioned: "when his son, Isaac, was born to him."
- at the end: "I have born him a son in his old age."

We would say, "Sure, we know, why repeat it so often?" But don't we see how great a miracle God has wrought here in His faithfulness and good-

ness? After the long, long wait the course of God's revelation through history breaks way through the birth of the SEED, not of Ishmael, but of Isaac, and the historical perspective is opened for THE seed, Jesus Christ, through Whom the promised salvation of the world would come.

Abraham and Sarah were not unaware of this.

Something of this we may notice in the inexpressible joy which fills Sarah's words when we hear her glad laughter: "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." With this laughter God was pleased. Did He Himself not use it at the announcement of the birth when He derived the child's name from it? Isaac (in Hebrew: Yitschaak) means: one (or he, she) laughs; the name indicates that the boy is reason for joy.

Who would have dared to predict that Sarah would give a child suck at her advanced age? Still it became a fact, for "yet," she says, "I have born him a son in his old age."

If John, in chapter 8:56, refers to *this* occurrence, we may call Isaac's birth Abraham's and Sarah's Christmas. There were no angels to sing, that is true, but nonetheless they experienced the "great joy which will come to all the people."

In conclusion: Isaac is called a child of the promise in Scripture (Galatians 4:28). Why? Because by faith Sarah received power to conceive . . . since she considered Him faithful Who had promised it (Hebrews 11:11). For the merciful word of promise going forth from God's mouth is a power and shall accomplish that which He purposes, and prosper in the thing for which He sends it (Isaiah 55:11).

Thus we, who have received the promise of salvation, are the spiritual seed of Abraham through faith, and like Isaac, children of the promise, in whom the word of God's promise works out eternal salvation.

### **Two Kinds of Seed**

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When Isaac was weaned (i.e. no longer to be nursed by his mother), which in those days usually took place between the ages of three and five and

was festively celebrated, Abraham made a great feast in his camp, of which also those of his numerous servants who were present in the camp were allowed to partake.

During this feast an incident occurred which, though it perhaps escaped the attention of many, yet had far-reaching effects.

We image it to have been like this: when Isaac, the guest of honour, was led into the circle and presented as future successor, he was greeted with joyful cries. Just as nowadays the whole family rejoices when the little one comes in. People were no different in those times from now. But through the joyous sounds came the dissonance of the mocking laughter of Ishmael who was now 17 to 19 years of age. In his eyes were the flames of hatred and envy. He was the son of a slave woman, he knew it, for his mother will probably have related the whole tragic history of his birth to him, but was he not Abraham's son as well, and the oldest at that? One thing he was certain of, he was not going to give up his birthright to that son of Sarah. In him, Hagar's son, was revealed the spirit of Egypt, the land of oppression and murder of the holy seed, as it would be fully revealed later. It was also the spirit of Hagar who would never forget what Sarah had done to her. Not for nothing is Ishmael called "the son of Hagar the Egyptian" in verse 9.

Chapter 21 has been called the chapter of laughter. With Sarah there was genuine laughter of faith, with Ishmael satanic laughter. We read that he "mocked" (KJV). The Hebrew text gives a word that occurs in the favourable sense of jesting, mirth, play, or foolishness; but it can also be used in the unfavourable sense to indicate mocking, making a mockery of, or laughing at someone. This is what is meant in this case. Ishmael's laughter was a mocking laughter.

Sarah noticed it. With her keen mother's eye, she saw a threat. The image of Hagar in years gone by came to her mind. Was she not the protectress of her child? Did she not know of and believe in the promise of the inheritance? And because of that she freely dared to demand of Abraham that he send Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp. The son of this slave woman would not be heir with Isaac. In these words,

“this slave woman,” we taste bitterness and the desire to humiliate, which proves that the proper relationship was never restored. But right she was: although it does seem cruel to send mother and child into the wilderness; it had seemed to be no more than an incident, and yet . . . it predicted trouble in the future. However, it displeased Abraham who loved Ishmael, who was also his own son.

However, probably at night, God spoke to him telling him to listen to Sarah. Again we find Abraham to be one who obeys God’s Word, for already early in the morning, he actually did send them away with a supply of bread and a skin of water—forever, no matter how painful it was for his flesh.

As Hagar wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba with her son, the waterskin soon became empty, and nowhere could she find a well. Is anything more horrifying in the prospectless, storm-swept, dune-like sand hills of the desert than having to die of thirst?

When the boy, unused to life in the Arabian desert, probably having tired himself out too much, falls down in exhaustion, she drags him to the closest bush that offers a narrow strip of shade and casts him down there. She herself goes a good way farther, about the distance of a bowshot, because her mother’s heart cannot bear to witness the death-struggle of her son. What misery! Here lies a boy, moaning; there behind a sand dune, a mother, weeping.

However, when the need is the greatest, the angel of God reappears, this time as a heavenly figure, calling down to her from above, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad, where he is.” God had stayed with the boy when his mother had left him. Then follows: “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand: for I will make him a great nation.” Then he opens her eyes to see the well of water that she had not noticed earlier, probably because it had been covered to keep it from being blocked by sand drifts. After having filled the skin with delightfully cool water, she gave the lad a drink.

Here the story ends. The epilogue is summarily given: God was with the lad; he grew up and became an expert with the bow in the wilderness of Paran south of Palestine; his mother took a wife for him from Egypt. Later we read that he has been in the land once more to bury, together with Isaac, Abraham, their father. Then their ways part forever.

### **Galatians 4:21-31**

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In Galatians 4 the apostle shows the deeper meaning of what is related in Genesis 16 and 21. The law (meaning: the Old Testament) teaches that Abraham had two sons, first Ishmael and then Isaac, having two different origins and two different ways of life. One's mother was a slave, the other's a free woman. Ishmael was the slave's son, having (through his mother) the status of a slave; Isaac was free, having (through his mother) the status of a free man. A child's status was determined by that of the woman (cf. Exodus 21:4). One was born according to the flesh, the other through promise.

What Scripture teaches us here has a deeper meaning. It has a prophetic tendency. It indicates two orders. The one points to the covenant order of Mount Sinai, seen apart from Christ, bringing forth slaves, bound by the law, for the word Hagar means Mount Sinai in Arabia outside the land of the promise, and corresponds to Jerusalem living under the law and thus in slavery with her children. What the other order refers to, that of living through faith in Christ, is not specifically mentioned. In contrast with the former part, Jerusalem above is spoken of, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free and has been given this name because of its descent from Christ, that is, the church free from slavery to the law (cf. Galatians 5:1-6).

Thus we, like Isaac, are children of promise, God's children, through the power of God's promise. As the child of the promise was at that time persecuted by the slave's son, so it is now. However, Scripture says: Cast out the slave and her son, for the son of the slave shall not inherit with the son of the free woman. True, Sarah was the one who said it, but God gave it His sanction, and thus it is rightfully called a word of the Scriptures.

Is it not true, even today, that he who wishes to be saved by fulfilling the law persecutes him who truly lives through faith in Christ? But the word

is still true that such a person, unless he repents, will be cast out of the kingdom of God.

Finally, the remark that God, Who spared Nineveh, also was with Ishmael, and gave him temporal blessings, although he was cast out. Also the deserts where his descendants would live were the site of God's merciful work of gathering His people (Isaiah 60:7, where two Ishmaelite tribes are mentioned).

### **Covenant with Abimelech**

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Abraham still lived in the Philistine region governed by Abimelech of Gerar, where he had gone after the judgment over Sodom. Now he no longer lived near that city, but further to the east, where later the city of Beersheba would arise, a distance of about 50 km (30 miles) from Gerar. At the time that Ishmael and his mother were cast out, and travelled eastwards through the wilderness of Beersheba, Abimelech and the commander of his army, Phicol (with, of course, a military escort) came from the west for a visit. The purpose was to let Abraham swear to repay the friendship he had experienced by never dealing falsely with him or his offspring.

The king was driven to this by what was in fact fear of Abraham's growing position of power within the confines of Abimelech's country, and above all, by fear of Abraham's God, for this heathen monarch acknowledged that it was God Who blessed Abraham, and was with him in all that he did.

Abraham said: I will swear. Nowhere do we read of objections, that he could hardly bind himself for the future, not knowing in what possible position his descendants might find themselves. Abraham had not received anything of the promised land as his possession yet, although he was heir, but he could assuredly leave his future in the hand of his God. In any case, he did not want to cause difficulties; the fact that the commander of the army came along was a subtle warning not to deny the request, as well as a camouflage of fear. Abimelech had fear, in spite of how haughtily he spoke, or commanded, you might almost say, that Abraham should swear "here" where they stood, in other words, without delay.

However then it is Abraham's turn: he reproved Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had appropriated; wells were scarce. The king's defense was that he had not heard about it until that moment.

Then Abraham gave sheep and oxen for the making of the covenant. He gave seven lambs separately, which Abimelech at first refused, but finally accepted as a token that the nearby well had been dug by Abraham's servants. Because of the covenant oath that place was called Beersheba, that is: well of the oath. Then Abimelech returned to his country, but Abraham planted an evergreen (tamarisk) and called on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God, and he stayed there as a sojourner many days.

The patriarch's prayer by that evergreen tree (or plant), one common to that area and symbolizing everlastingness, may be understood in relation with all that has been told in Genesis 21. The power of God, working in Abraham's life because of the seed, repels disobedient people, and in that time causes heathens to come to witness of the blessings bestowed upon Abraham, and to win Abraham's favour. God's eternal faithfulness grants perspective, and it comforts him to know that this God can and will give further realization and development of His promise regarding the future because He is the eternal One.

### **Questions**

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1. How could Abraham know that the Saviour would be his descendant?
2. To what does the miracle of Isaac's birth point? Does a miraculous birth also take place with us?
3. Which promise is meant when we read that we also are children of promise? Was there also a promise for Ishmael at his circumcision? Does this promise also apply to his descendants? If not, what meaning does the circumcision have for the Arabians descended from him?
4. Did Ishmael's circumcision mean the same as Isaac's?

5. Could Ishmael be saved? If so, how?
6. What was the cause of Ishmael's rejection?
7. Why did Abraham send away Hagar and Ishmael so early in the morning? What do we learn from this?
8. Which present-day nations can be reckoned to Ishmael's descendants?
9. Was Hagar allowed to leave her son to his lot in the wilderness? Why, or why not?
10. Was Abraham allowed to make a covenant with a heathen king?