



**BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: By Faith We Live: Genesis 12-25 wk. 4**

**By Pastor Bryan Clark**

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In ancient times among the Hebrew people, they had certain significant events in the life of a child, which were celebrated. So, at the time when a child was weaned, it was a big party, it was a big celebration for them as a very significant event.

So they're having this significant party. Ishmael would have been about 16 years of age. For 13 of those years, he was the only son and would have certainly been the focus of Abraham's attention, his beloved son. But over the last three years, that's changed. Over the last three years, Isaac has really become the focus of that family. And neither Hagar nor Ishmael quite knows what to do with that. So at this celebration, this 16 year old teenager, Ishmael, begins to mock his little three year old brother on his special day. So, Sarah comes to Abraham and says, Ishmael and his mother, they need to go. They need to go. They can't live here. They can't exist together. As a matter of fact, she goes so far as to say he will not be a part of this inheritance, this promise, this being an heir to the Promise Seed.

Well, the text says that that greatly distressed Abraham. One reason that distressed him is because I think Abraham loved Ishmael very much. It was his son. He loved him. But I think there's more to it than that. There have been several conversations that Abraham has had with God in which Abraham has tried to say, God, can't Ishmael be the Son of Promise?

In a sense, what Abraham was saying was, God, I know I had a crisis of doubt and I know because of that I made a bad decision that produced this son. But I'm just kind of wondering, would you mind changing your sovereign plan so that we could include Ishmael into this promise? And God responds, and He says, Abraham, listen to your wife. She's right. This son cannot be included in the promise. This son cannot be included in the inheritance. He is not the Promise Seed.

I think the great concern was that God had purposely waited until Abraham and Sarah were past any potential of childbearing so everyone would know this is totally a miracle child. This is totally an act of God, totally of the Spirit of God. But when Ishmael was there, there was a tendency to confuse that, because Ishmael was simply a product of Abraham's choice and his relations with Hagar. And he was a work of the flesh. And God didn't want any confusion between that, which he had done miraculously, and that which was Abraham's work of the flesh, and because of that, then Hagar and Ishmael, they've got to go.

Now the text, in my opinion, bends over backwards to say it isn't that God was just sending them out on their own, but rather God was going to take care of them, He's going to meet their needs. He would make Ishmael into a great nation. God cared for them very well. The point was simply he's not the Promise Seed and so God was removing any confusion.

It's very interesting to go to the New Testament, the book of Galatians Chapter 4 where Paul offers commentary on Genesis 21.

He goes back to Ishmael and Isaac and he says, these two sons of Abraham create an allegory, what he calls it. It's a picture. Ishmael represents the works of the flesh and that leads to bondage and slavery. Isaac represents the work of the spirit, which leads to freedom. And basically what he says is it is not possible for Ishmael and Isaac to live together. You cannot mix the law and grace. And that is why it was necessary for Ishmael and Hagar to be sent away. So there would be no confusion. So Paul really helps us understand what's going on in Genesis 21.

You know this very day, there will be hundreds upon hundreds and hundreds of churches that will gather together and they will hear a message that basically tells them that yes, in order to have a relationship with God, you need to believe that Jesus was nailed to a cross, buried, rose again. But you also have to include with that this, this, this, and this, in order to be declared righteous before God. That it's not just an act of faith, but it's faith plus some works, that ultimately cause you to be righteous before God. In other words, what they're saying is Ishmael and Isaac, yes, they can live together. When God has clearly said in both Genesis 21 and Galatians four, no they can't. Those two just cannot mix.

But it's more than that. We struggle with the problem too. We come to Jesus by faith, believing it's not by any works of the flesh that we've done, but it's based on our faith in Jesus Christ that we are declared righteous. But as we begin to live out our Christian faith, we have a proneness to go down that path of legalism, where we start to establish certain rules, certain policies in certain ways of life, where if we do these things, these external things, then we're more spiritual. We're more righteous than if we don't.

Now, there's no question that the Bible is full of commands that are very black and white, and it's a matter of either obedience or disobedience. But even when we obey, we don't obey because we think somehow, we're becoming more righteous before God. We obey as an outflow of our relationship with Him. We obey because we love Him and we know Him. But legalism goes beyond that even to manmade rules and standards, by which we then judge if somebody is spiritual or not.

I think back of my own spiritual journey over the years, and all the different rules and regulations that have been a part of that journey, as trying to discern if you're spiritual or not spiritual. Go all the way back into the 70's. One of the big issues was hair. For guys, it was hair length. You know, the 70's were kind of a time when hair length was on the longer side, and it was believed if you really had a heart for God, you had to have short hair. When I went to Bible College, your hair was not allowed to touch the top of your ear. As a matter of fact, we had what we called the Moody Salute. When you saw the dean, you did Moody Salute and tucked it back. Somehow that was supposed to be more spiritual than not. And then there was a little bit of grace that entered in, and you could have it over your ear, but the bottom of your ear lobe had to show. For the girls, they had to wear dresses to class, but at six o'clock, at sundown, then they could switch to pants, and somehow that was the standard. Don't ask me to make sense of that, but that's what it was.

One of the big battles in the 70's was music. There were all kinds of battles about what was spiritual and what was unspiritual. Now there's no question, there's music that's very offensive to God. There's music that praises God. But that's really not what these discussions were about. They were about styles of music, different kinds of instruments, about different volumes, and basically saying one was more spiritual than the other. I remember there were huge battles fought over the guitar. Even though David played an instrument very similar to that, there were battles as to whether or not you can be spiritual and play one of those things. And then there was kind of a compromise: okay, you can play it, but you can't plug it in. That was a big discussion. You can play it, but if you plug it in, then it suddenly crosses

that line. All kinds of discussions about most of these instruments that are up here, related to what's spiritual and what's not spiritual.

When I was growing up, the theater was another battle ground. If you were committed to God, you didn't set foot in the theater. I remember, years ago I was preaching through the book of Ruth, and the Book of Ruth is really written like a play, like a four-act play. And so I set it up that way; every introduction, every conclusion, basically was like a play. Had a family leave the church because it sounded too much like the theater and that offended them. I remember the theater was out of bounds until Billy Graham made *The Hiding Place*. And then there was a special dispensation: you could go to that one movie. So you had to go in like this, and not see anything, and you couldn't watch the previews, but then you could watch *The Hiding Place*, and then you had to leave. I mean again, you look back at that stuff and it seems so silly, but it was very serious at the time.

A couple of years ago, there was a missionary that came back and the missionary said to me, you know, it's very discouraging. I see so many of the Bible teaching churches that are compromising their faith. And I said, well that's really disappointing. You tell me what you're saying. Well a number of the Bible teaching churches, they no longer have Sunday night church. That's it? In this person's mind, that was a compromise to the faith. At that time, we still had Sunday night church, so we were still among the elect.

You know how Sunday night church started? Nobody ever had church on Sunday night because it was dark. And then when gas lanterns were invented, they used to hang those up inside the church in the evening. And people were so curious about this indoor light, that they'd flock into the church on Sunday night and they'd have a service. They'd have an evangelistic service, to reach people who otherwise would never set foot in a church. But then it goes from that to becoming a point of orthodoxy. And if you don't have it, you're just not committed. It's as if Paul himself established it as a way to do church. Well, all of this is to say there is a proneness within us all to not trust God and to create a legalistic structure by which we determine if people are spiritual or not.

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There is a proneness within us all to not trust God and to create a legalistic structure by which we determine if people are spiritual or not.

We do that because we lack faith. We don't think God's going to do His job. What we're saying when we do that is we think that Ishmael and Isaac can live together. We think we can make this work, the work of the Spirit and the work of the flesh together. When you go back to Genesis 21 and what God was saying clear back then is, it can't work that way. I don't want any confusion between the work of the Spirit and the work of the flesh. So, Ishmael and Hagar, you've got to go. As far as we know that, this is the last time Abraham ever saw his son, Ishmael. We see him again when he comes back for Abraham's funeral, but not before.

Finally, we have one more story in this chapter, Verse 22. *"And now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham saying, "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned." And Abraham said, "I swear it." But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, nor did I hear of it until today." And Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What*

*do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?" And he said, "You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand in order that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well." Therefore, he called that place Beersheba. There, the two of them took an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, rose and returned to the land of the Philistines. And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days."*

Now you come to this chapter that leads all the way up to chapter 22. Chapter 22 will be the greatest test of faith in Abraham's life. So, we're working our way up to really the climax, Genesis 22, the test of Isaac. So why would this little story of Abimelech and Abraham be kind of sandwiched in between these other events? I think it's showing the flow of the rewards of faith versus the consequences of doubt. Just go back to chapter 18 for example: Abraham experienced the intimacy with God, which was a reward of faith; chapter 19, the consequences of doubt that Lot and his family experienced; Chapter 20, Abimelech comes along and Abraham fails to trust God and suffers the consequences. Abimelech basically has to give him a tongue lashing and straighten him out. But now you get into Chapter 21 and you have this magnificent fulfillment of this promise and an absolute celebration- the Promise Seed, Isaac, had been born. But then you have to deal with Ishmael, because that's a reminder that there was a crisis of faith, doubt, and Abraham had made some choices, and the consequences of those choices don't just go away. They continue to be there, and Abraham had to come to grips with that.

But you have one more look at Abraham's faith leading up to Chapter 22, that while he had been fearful of Abimelech, now Abimelech was coming to him saying, I see God's hand on you and I want us to make a covenant- that we are going to get along here; I'll take care of you; I'll protect you. Basically you have a pagan king saying to a sojourner in the land, I'll just take care of you, I'll give you whatever you need. Abraham says, well, I've got a problem with this well, but consider it done. Abraham plants a tree next to the well, as a way of saying, I'm going to be here for a while. A tree is a long-term investment. It's going to grow, it's going to provide shade and I'm going to access that. It's going to be there for me, because I'm planning on being here for a long time. He even called God the Everlasting God. It's the only time in the book of Genesis that name is used, as a way of saying, I believe God's going to be with me for the long haul. I just need to trust him.

As far as we know, Abraham stayed in that place for over 15 years and never had a problem. He dwelt in complete safety, he had his well, he had everything he needed, provided by a pagan king, because God rewarded Abraham's faith. If you take chapter 12 all the way up through chapter 21, I think all of that has been preparing us for chapter 22. And what we've seen story after story after story is if you choose to trust God by faith, God longs to reward that faith. That's where the joy is. That's where the miracles are. That's where the celebration is. That's life. But when we doubt, there's consequences to that and we will suffer those consequences. And we basically reach a point with Abraham. Abraham's at a point now where he's ready for chapter 22. And hopefully the writer's brought us to this same point, where we're able to say, you know, based on all of this, I do want to be a person of faith. I want to trust God. There'll be times, there's things I don't understand, I can't explain, just like with Abraham and Sarah. But I do believe God has promised. I do believe God will keep His promise. I'm just going to trust Him, because I also understand the consequences of doubt. And I don't want that.

When we make that kind of a commitment, it becomes evident in the most ordinary, everyday decisions that we make. Those decisions reflect an all-out commitment to follow God, to trust Him, to believe He tells the truth.

Lord, help us to be a people of faith. Help us to understand what it means to trust you day by day in the most ordinary decisions that we make. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Cara: Bryan, I'm going to second your Amen in this message. Most of us want to trust God and be a people of faith. We Love God's grace. So what is it that makes us drift toward the bondage of legalism?

Bryan: Yeah, so that's a great question. You know, I make the case that legalism is the number one concern of the New Testament writers for believers. So it is a huge problem. And my answer would be, I think it's because legalism caters to the flesh. Legalism isn't being super spiritual. It's actually giving the flesh what the flesh wants. I want to be my own God. I want to make myself righteous. I want to do this. I at least want to contribute. And that's the danger of legalism is that thought, that somehow I can add or I can do something that makes myself more in God's eyes. So it's a huge problem and it roots all the way back to the story in Genesis 21.

The other thing I think is grace is so unlike anything we'll ever experience in life. That's just so hard to comprehend. You know, I use it as an apologetic-grace is so "other" than anything else you'll ever experience, it could have only been birthed in the mind of God. Nobody else would have come up with such a concept.

Arnie: So you're telling me I can't have one foot in grace and the other in law. So how do we know when we're living that way and what's the solution?

Bryan: I like to start with the belief, I am a legalist. I think every Christian needs to start there, because it's in us all. We're foolish to think that's not the case, especially when you look at how much of the New Testament is dedicated to this problem. So, you have, for example, Peter, as a result of the Jerusalem council, Acts 15, giving the great speech about the wonder of grace and Gentiles don't have to be circumcised. And shortly after that, we find out that he goes to Antioch, and Paul has to publicly confront him, because he got so caught up in legalism and the damage it was doing. Now Peter got the message out of the mouth of Jesus himself. And in a very short amount of time really got it all messed up. That just tells you how serious it is. So, it's a great question and it can be very hard to see. That's why it's easy to see in others, it's hard to see in ourselves. And we wrestle with, are these actions an outflow of the presence of Christ in me? Or, am I trying to merit some sort of favor with God? So, let me give you a super simple definition, because I think this is where a lot of the confusion is. I think legalism is the belief that I can somehow make myself more before God. So, it doesn't have to do with rules and regulations and all of that, so much as what I believe about those rules. You can actually be obeying clear commands of scripture and be legalistic, if you think by obeying them, I'm making myself more righteous before God. That's the very essence of legalism. So, it's the belief: why am I doing this? Is it the outflow or is it to merit something more with God?

Cara: Boy, I've got a lot of work to do.

Bryan: We all do.

Cara: It's surprising to see Abimelech back in the picture here. Last time we saw him, Abraham lied to him, and now it seems like God is actually using that for good.

Bryan: Yeah. So it is very interesting. Abimelech was a title, but I think this is the same Abimelech, and something happened when God got in his face. And whatever that was, he still seems a bit shaken, and he's wanting to be on good terms with the God of Abraham. So it's just a reminder, God can do amazing, unexpected things through our messes and failures. That's what God does.

Arnie: So what does Abraham's life tell us about handling the long-term consequences of sin?

Bryan: Yeah, so I think you have to face the reality. Sometimes we make bad decisions and sometimes the effect of that lasts a lifetime. If we don't just face it and face up to it, we compound it by making more and more bad decisions. There is reality. I can't change the past. I can't do anything about it. I can't go back and fix it. There's no point dwelling on it. There's no point piling up a bunch of guilt and shame, but I need to face into it. I need to experience God's forgiveness and I need to trust that God can still use it to do wonderful things for the kingdom if I'm willing to trust Him.

Cara: So once more, give us that overview of Isaac and Ishmael and what they represent.

Bryan: Yeah, so I think you have the story in Genesis 21, but the best commentary is in Galatians Chapter 4. So, the Judaizers were wrestling with like, just like in Romans - who's your father? And Paul really turns it over and says, actually, the question is, who's your mother? And he goes back to the story of Sarah and Hagar. Hagar represents the flesh and what can be done in human effort and that represents the law. He says if you're children of the law, children of Hagar, then that's what you can do in your flesh. Sarah represents what's impossible in our flesh and only possible by the Spirit of God. And that represents grace and the life of faith. So I think what Paul's saying in Galatians 4 is Hagar represents our own solutions through our own effort. And Sarah represents what's only possible through the power of the Spirit, which is made possible by the grace of God. So the relevant question is, who is your mother? Is it law or is it grace?

Cara: So, can I ask you, what do you mean by "the law"?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. And it gets very confusing. So, we're talking about the Law of Moses, the old Covenant Law. You get in the New Testament, sometimes it's not The Law, it's just law, which tells us it's not just the old Covenant Law - it's the principle of law, which means basically legalism. The idea that by doing this, keeping these commandments, living this way, I can merit favor with God. So the old covenant was good, the law was good, but the law was never a means of salvation. Paul calls it a ministry of condemnation. He calls it a tutor in Galatians. In Hebrews, says the law is obsolete. So it was to lead us to Christ, by showing us the standard in revealing our sin, in order that we would recognize our need for a Savior and the fulfillment then as Christ. But in the New Testament, they're still going back to the law, which is legalism as a means of righteousness. And that's what Paul is addressing in Galatians.