

A Son Saved: Part 1

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Hagar in the Desert" by Marc Chagall, 1960 Lithograph

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us,
may the Spirit of God rest upon us.

Help us to be steadfast in our hearing,
in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living.

Amen.

Old Testament Reading

Genesis 21:8-21 (NRSVue)

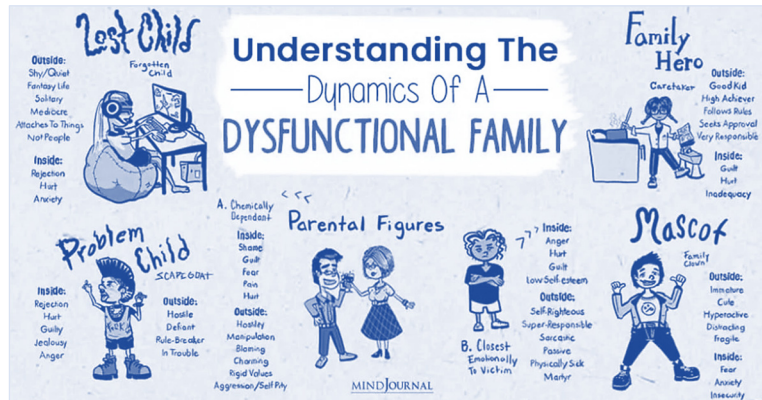
⁸ The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.^[a] ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “A Son Saved: Part 1”



Do you remember a few weeks ago, Tolstoy's first sentence in his classic novel *Anna Karenina*? "Happy families are all alike; unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way." Well, we certainly see some unhappiness played out in Abraham's family tree in Genesis.

So if you want a step-by-step guide to creating the perfect family in ninety days or less, Genesis is definitely not the place to turn. It's all here out in the open: blended families, jealousy, reluctance, squabbling, abuse, and agonizing break ups. The stuff of reality TV. There's no whitewashing or sugar coating going on here. This is an ancient story that feels very current.

Not too long ago there was an extensive study done on the American family. Research found that 95% of families in our country are dysfunctional. There was a bit of an uproar about these numbers though. Psychologists and sociologists were shocked that the percentage was so LOW!

Why is family life so messy and not sanitized in Genesis? Because it's honest and realistic about our humanity. This is no fairy tale. There's a reason why the delays and disappointments are in there. Why the complications of Ishmael are there. Why after fifteen long years of waiting for Isaac, God has the audacity to ask Abraham to sacrifice his long-awaited son Isaac.

Genesis teaches us how to live in the real world, with real people, warts and all. Us included. We learn how to live with delays, without losing faith. How to feel disappointment, without giving up hope. How to move forward after failure. By wandering through, not around, the desert of pain and suffering, we're taught how to trust and persevere. How to treasure what we have the greatest risk of losing. How not to take life for granted. How God can use our "worst laid plans" and colossal failures as raw material to make something new. Nothing is wasted. With God, all things are possible. We don't have to be perfect for God to be at work in us. Abraham sure wasn't. And Sarah, too.

It's been a few years since Isaac was born to Sarah and Abraham. In the Middle East, at age two or three, parties were often thrown when a child was weaned—it was a graduation from being an infant to a child. Family gatherings can be heavenly... and they can be hell on earth. This one was the latter.

The sixteen-year-old Ishmael was “playing” with Isaac. Sarah read it as Ishmael “playing” *the role* of Isaac. There’s a word play going on here in Hebrew. Ishmael was “Isaac-ing.” The name Isaac means “laughter.” This wasn’t the laughter of Abraham or Sarah. Someone different was laughing—*Ishmael*. Ishmael was “Isaac-ing” at Isaac. Laughing at him. Poking fun at him. Maybe even mocking him. Sarah saw and heard what was going on. She was livid, a Mama Bear and Tiger Mom hybrid.

Ishmael was a threat. Ishmael, not Isaac, was the oldest child. Sarah didn’t want this outsider, this son of a slave, having a share in the inheritance. She knew it was her own fault. Her plans backfired. Having Abraham marry that slave woman was a dumb move. Now Sarah had her own child. The slave girl and her son were encroaching on *her* territory. Her legacy. Later that night, while getting ready for bed, Sarah gave Abraham an earful. “Cast out **that slave woman** and **her son**.” She can’t even bring herself to say their names. Hagar and Ishmael aren’t people or personalities to her. Just objects. Obstacles in the way of her plans.

This word “cast out” was also the word used for “divorce.” I want them cut out of our lives... and the will. Abraham was caught in the middle. He felt paralyzed. It was a “darned if you do, danged if you don’t” situation. First you, *you Sarah*, tell *me* to go to Hagar. I do that—now **Hagar** has to go because your family planning *succeeded*? I can’t win here Sarah.

Plus Abraham loved Ishmael. Hagar gave him a new lease on life, a little spring in his step. Can’t we all just be two big happy families together? Nope. End it *now* Abraham. End of story. Abraham needed to get out of the tent and walk it off. Get some fresh air. Then he heard a voice: “Abraham, don’t worry about it—I’m going to take over now. *Just do what Sarah says*, just say ‘yes dear.’ My promise will be fulfilled through your son Isaac. But don’t worry about Ishmael. He too is your offspring. I’ll make a great nation of him too.”

Abraham trusted God. He made his way back to the tent and drifted off to sleep. Woke up early next morning. Made some coffee. Then he did what he had to do. What God told him to do. What Sarah said to do. He woke up Hagar and Ishmael. Filled up their hydro flasks. Gave them some trail mix.

“Hagar, I don’t want it to be this way. But I have no choice. It’s over. You have to move out. We’re done. Sign these papers.”

Hagar wasn’t surprised. Things between her and Sarah had soured for a while now. The mother and son walked off into the sunset. Hagar had no idea where they were going. Who they would go to. How to get there. After wandering for quite a bit, they got lost. Then they ran out of water. When your water is finished in the desert, *you’re* finished. She couldn’t bear seeing her son die, so she placed him under the shade of some shrubs. Went about a bowshot’s distance from the child. Then prayed and wept. “Don’t let me look upon the death of my child.” Hagar’s tears are the first recorded tears in Scripture.

And then we hear something beautiful: **God heard the cries of the boy**. The name Ishmael means, "**God hears**." God lived up to the meaning of Ishmael's name. God heard and had compassion on the single mom and her son. God "ishmaeled" Ishmael.

The Angel of the Lord called to Hagar from heaven. "What troubles you Hagar? Don't be afraid. I've heard the cry of your son. You will survive this. It won't be easy. This is a new beginning. A new Genesis. I will make a great nation of your son. This isn't the end of your story."

Then God gave Hagar the eyes to see a well of water—right there! They drank. Filled their bottles. And walked Egyptward. And then we hear this: "God was with the boy." God was on Ishmael's side, too. He would grow up, marry an Egyptian, just like his mom. He'd live in the wilderness. Become an expert archer. He, like his half-brother, would have 12 Tribes. His people would be a great people, blessed by the Lord. A son was saved. The Arab people would come from Ishmael.

This story is so important for us today. First of all, God doesn't work in a bubble of "perfect planning" and "pure motives." God works with us right where we are, as we are, when we are. In our mixed-baggedness, in the real world. God rolls up his sleeves and gets his hands dirty. He straightens out our "worst laid plans" and "dubious decisions." God is right there with us, even if we find ourselves in Plan F.

With God, we can have a new start. Our story isn't over, even when we think we're finished. Like Hagar, you can feel abandoned by your spouse or friends, crying your eyes out, scared to death, penniless and alone with nowhere to go. And yet, at the same time, you can believe that God is right there with you. Because—

- God cares for the suffering.
- God hears the cry of the abandoned.
- God cares about the orphan and the outcast.
- God loves single-moms and single-dads.

When you're down to nothing, God is up to something. Trust that God's going to point out that fresh mineral spring that just hasn't come into view yet. Like Ishmael, God is with us, in the thirst, in the valley of the shadow of death, or if you feel misplaced in your family. "I will fear no evil."

But the key also is **faith**. If you've been dealt a bad hand in life, **have faith**.

- Do the best you can with what you have.
- Believe that God can transform your tragedy into triumph.
- Don't give up—keep the faith. Hold on.

The impossible is possible with God.

Another lesson here is to think BOTH/AND rather than EITHER/OR.

BOTH sons matter to God—Ishmael AND Isaac. God was with them both—active, involved, making things happen. The Scriptures teach that God would assist and help Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and also **ISHMAEL** when the chips were down. We don't have to be in competition or choose sides. Jew and Arab. Jew and Gentile. White and Black. God made us all.

God's blessings are more diverse than we can imagine. God's blessings change the way we see others. True, Sarah and Abraham and Isaac went their separate ways from Hagar and Ishmael. Both would flourish, but separately. Sometimes relationships aren't forever. They carry on—but in different directions and expressions.

A few chapters later, at the age of 175, Abraham breathed his last: old and full of years. Isaac and Ishmael reunited, themselves old men by this time—burying their Father Abraham *together*. A beautiful scene of reconciliation and coming together. And we continue to hope and pray for that today. For healing between these two great nations: Jews and Arabs. For in their blessing we are blessed.

We pray also for healing in our families. Our memories. Our past and our future. Our children. This healing and shalom come from the Great I AM WHO I AM, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and yes, even the God of Ishmael.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Hagar in the Desert*" by Marc Chagall, 1960 lithograph in color, thematthewsgalary.com

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