

CHAPTER 21

In this chapter we have,

- I.** Isaac, the child of promise born into Abraham's family (v. 1-8).
- II.** Ishmael, the son of the bondwoman, cast out of it (v. 9-21).
- III.** Abraham's league with his neighbour Abimelech (v. 22-32).
- IV.** His devotion to his God (v. 33).

GENESIS 21:1-8

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

Long-looked-for comes at last. The vision concerning the promised seed is for an appointed time, and now, at the end, it speaks, and does not lie; few under the Old Testament were brought into the world with such expectation as Isaac was, not for the sake of any great person eminence at which he was to arrive, but because he was to be, in this very thin, a type of Christ, that seed which the holy God had so long promised and holy men so long expected. In this account of the first days of Isaac we may observe,

- I.** The fulfilling of God's promise in the conception and birth of Isaac, v. 1, 2. Note, God's providences look best and brightest when they are compared with his word, and when we observe how God, in them all, acts as he has said, as he has spoken.
- 1.** Isaac was born according to the promise. The Lord visited Sarah in mercy, as he had said. Note, No word of God shall fall to the ground; for he is faithful that has promised, and God's faithfulness is the stay and support of his people's faith. He was born *at the set time of which God had spoken*, v. 2. Note, God is always punctual to his time; though his promised mercies come not at the time we set, they will certainly come at the time he sets, and that is the best time.

2. He was born by virtue of the promise: *Sarah by faith received strength to conceive* ^{<8111>} Hebrews 11:11. God therefore by promise gave that strength. It was not by the power of common providence, but by the power of a special promise, that Isaac was born. A sentence of death was, as it were, passed upon the second causes: Abraham was old, and Sarah old, and both as good as dead; and then the word of God took place. Note, True believers, by virtue of God's promises, are enabled to do that which is above the power of human nature, for *by them they partake of a divine nature*, ^{<601>} 2 Peter 1:4.

II. Abraham's obedience to God's precept concerning Isaac.

1. He named him, as God commanded him, v. 3. God directed him to a name for a memorial, *Isaac, laughter*; and Abraham, whose office it was, gave him that name, though he might have designed him some other name of a more pompous signification. Note, It is fit that the luxuriancy of human invention should always yield to the sovereignty and plainness of divine institution; yet there was good reason for the name, for,

(1.) When Abraham received the promise of him he laughed for joy, ^{<0177>} Genesis 17:17. Note, When the sun of comfort has risen upon the soul it is good to remember how welcome the dawning of the day was, and with what exultation we embraced the promise.

(2.) When Sarah received the promise she laughed with distrust and diffidence. Note, When God gives us the mercies we began to despair of we ought to remember with sorrow and shame our sinful distrusts of God's power and promise, when we were in pursuit of them.

(3.) Isaac was himself, afterwards, laughed at by Ishmael (v. 9), and perhaps his name bade him expect it. Note, God's favourites are often the world's laughing-stocks.

(4.) The promise which he was not only the son, but the heir of, was to be the joy of all the saints in all ages, and that which would fill their mouths with laughter.

2. He circumcised him, v. 4. The covenant being established with him, the seal of the covenant was administered to him; and though a bloody ordinance, and he a darling, yet it must not be omitted, no, nor deferred beyond the eighth day. God had kept time in performing the promise, and therefore Abraham must keep time in obeying the precept.

III. The impressions which this mercy made upon Sarah.

1. It filled her with joy (v. 6): “*God has made me to laugh; he has given me both cause to rejoice and a heart to rejoice.*” Thus the mother of our Lord, ^{<0145>}Luke 1:46, 47. Note,

(1.) God bestows mercies upon his people to encourage their joy in his work and service; and, whatever is the matter of our joy, God must be acknowledged as the author of it, unless it be the *laughter of the fool*.

(2.) When mercies have been long deferred they are the more welcome when they come.

(3.) It adds to the comfort of any mercy to have our friends rejoice with us in it: *All that hear will laugh with me*; for laughing is catching. See ^{<015>}Luke 1:58. Others would rejoice in this instance of God's power and goodness, and be encouraged to trust in him. See ^{<0374>}Psalms 119:74.

2. It filled her with wonder, v. 7. Observe here,

(1.) What it was she thought so wonderful: *That Sarah should give children suck*, that she should, not only bear a child, but be so strong and hearty at the age as to give it suck. Note, Mothers, if they be able, ought to be nurses to their own children. Sarah was a person of quality, was aged; nursing might be thought prejudicial of herself, or to the child, or to both; she had choice of nurses, no doubt, in her own family: and yet she would do her duty in this matter; and her daughters the good wives are while they thus *do well*, ^{<0185>}1 Peter 3:5, 6. See ^{<0203>}Lamentations 4:3.

(2.) How she expressed her wonder: “*Who would have said it?* The thing was so highly improbable, so near to impossible, that if any one but God had said it we could not have believed it.” Note, God's favours to his covenant-people are such as surpass both their own and others' thoughts and expectations. Who could imagine that God should do so much for those that deserve so little, nay, for those that deserve so ill? See ^{<0180>}Ephesians 3:20; ^{<0075>}2 Samuel 7:18, 19. Who would have said that God should send his Son to die for us, his Spirit to sanctify us, his angels to attend us? Who would have said that such great sins should be pardoned, such mean services accepted, and such worthless worms taken into covenant and communion with the great and holy God?

IV. A short account of Isaac's infancy: *The child grew*, v. 8. Special notice is taken of this, though a thing of course, to intimate that the children of the promise are growing children. See ^{<418>}Luke 1:80; 2:40. Those that are born of God shall increase of God, ^{<512>}Colossians 2:19. He grew so as not always to need milk, but was able to bear strong meat, and then he was weaned. See ^{<365>}Hebrews 5:13, 14. And then it was that Abraham made a great feast for his friends and neighbours, in thankfulness to God for his mercy to him. He made this feast, not on the day that Isaac was born, that would have been too great a disturbance to Sarah; nor on the day that he was circumcised, that would have been too great a diversion from the ordinance; but on the day that he was weaned, because God's blessing upon the nursing of children, and the preservation of them throughout the perils of the infant age, are signal instances of the care and tenderness of the divine providence, which ought to be acknowledged, to its praise. See ^{<422>}Psalms 22:9, 10; ^{<311>}Hosea 11:1.

^{<123>}GENESIS 21:9-13

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL EXPELLED

The casting out of Ishmael is here considered of, and resolved on.

I. Ishmael himself gave the occasion by some affronts he gave to Isaac his little brother, some think on the day that Abraham made the feast for joy that Isaac was safely weaned, which the Jews say was not till he was three years old, others say five. Sarah herself was an eye-witness of the abuse: she *saw the son of the Egyptian mocking* (v. 9), mocking Isaac, no doubt, for it is said, with reference to this (^{<409>}Galatians 4:29), that *he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit*. Ishmael is here called the *son of the Egyptian*, because, as some think, the 400 years' affliction of the seed of Abraham by the Egyptians began now, and was to be dated hence, ^{<153>}Genesis 15:13. She saw him *playing with Isaac*, so the Septuagint, and, in play, *mocking him*. Ishmael was fourteen years older than Isaac; and, when children are together, the elder should be careful and tender of the younger: but it argued a very base and sordid disposition in Ishmael to be abusive to a child that was no way a match for him. Note,

1. God takes notice of what children say and do in their play, and will reckon with them if they say or do amiss, though their parents do not.
2. Mocking is a great sin, and very provoking to God.
3. There is a rooted remaining enmity in the seed of the serpent against the seed of the woman. The children of promise must expect to be mocked. This is persecution, which those that will live godly must count upon.
4. None are rejected and cast out from God but those who have first deserved it. Ishmael is continued in Abraham's family till he becomes a disturbance, grief, and scandal to it.

II. Sarah made the motion: *Cast out this bond-woman*, v. 10. This seems to be spoken in some heat, yet it is quoted (~~400~~ Galatians 4:30) as if it had been spoken by a spirit of prophecy; and it is the sentence passed on all hypocrites and carnal people, though they have a place and a name in the visible church. All that are born after the flesh and not born again, that rest in the law and reject the gospel promise, shall certainly be cast out. It is made to point particularly at the rejection of the unbelieving Jews, who, though they were the seed of Abraham, yet, because they submitted not to the gospel covenant, were unchurched and disfranchised: and that which, above any thing, provoked God to cast them off was their mocking and persecuting the gospel church, God's Isaac, in its infancy, ~~506-1~~ Thessalonians 2:16, Note, There are many who are familiarly conversant with the children of God in this world, and yet shall not partake with them in the inheritance of sons. Ishmael might be Isaac's play-fellow and school-fellow, yet not his fellow-heir.

III. Abraham was averse to it: *The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight*, v. 11.

1. It grieved him that Ishmael had given such a provocation. Note, Children ought to consider that the more their parents love them the more they are grieved at their misconduct, and particularly at their quarrels among themselves.
2. It grieved him that Sarah insisted upon such a punishment. "Might it not suffice to correct him? would nothing less serve than to expel him?" Note, Even the needful extremities which must be used with wicked and incorrigible children are very grievous to tender parents, who cannot thus afflict willingly.

IV. God determined it, v. 12, 13. We may well suppose Abraham to be greatly agitated about this matter, loth to displease Sarah, and yet loth to expel Ishmael; in this difficulty God tells him what his will is, and then he is satisfied. Note, A good man desires no more in doubtful cases than to know his duty, and what God would have him do; and, when he is clear in this, he is, or should be, easy. To make Abraham so, God sets this matter before him in a true light, and shows him,

1. That the casting out of Ishmael was necessary to the establishment of Isaac in the rights and privileges of the covenant: *In Isaac shall thy seed be called*. Both Christ and the church must descend from Abraham through the loins of Isaac; this is the entail of the promise upon Isaac, and is quoted by the apostle (^{<897>}Romans 9:7) to show that not all who come from Abraham's loins were the heirs of Abraham's covenant. Isaac, the promised son, must be the father of the promised seed; therefore, "Away with Ishmael, send him far enough, lest he corrupt the manners or attempt to invade the rights of Isaac." It will be his security to have his rival banished. The covenant seed of Abraham must be a peculiar people, a people by themselves, from the very first, distinguished, not mingled with those that were out of covenant; for this reason Ishmael must be separated. Abraham was *called alone*, and so must Isaac be. See ^{<2512>}Isaiah 51:2. It is probable that Sarah little thought of this (^{<815>}John 11:51), but God took what she said, and turned it into an oracle, as afterwards, ^{<1271>}Genesis 27:10.

2. That the casting out of Ishmael should not be his ruin, v. 13. He shall be a *nation, because he is thy seed*. We are not sure that it was his eternal ruin. It is presumption to say that all those who are left out of the external dispensation from all his mercies: those may be saved who are not thus honoured. However, we are sure it was not his temporal ruin. Though he was chased out of the church, he was not *chased out of the world*. *I will make him a nation*. Note,

(1.) Nations are of God's making: he founds them, he forms them, he fixes them.

(2.) Many are full of the blessings of God's providence that are strangers to the blessings of his covenant.

(3.) The children of this world often fare the better, as to outward things, for their relation to the children of God.

GENESIS 21:14-21

GOD'S MERCY TO HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Here is,

I. The casting out of the bond-woman, and her son from the family of Abraham, v. 14. Abraham's obedience to the divine command in this matter was speedy — *early in the morning*, we may suppose immediately after he had, in the night's visions, received orders to do this. It was also submissive; it was contrary to his judgment, at least to his own inclination, to do it; yet as soon as he perceives that it is the mind of God he makes no objections, but silently does as he is bidden, as one trained up to an implicit obedience. In sending them away without any attendants, on foot, and slenderly provided for, it is probable that he observed the directions given him. If Hagar and Ishmael had conducted themselves well in Abraham's family, they might have continued there; but they threw themselves out by their own pride and insolence, which were thus justly chastised. Note, By abusing our privileges we forfeit them. Those that know not when they are well off, in such a desirable place as Abraham's family, deserve to be cashiered, and to be made to know the worth of mercies by the want of them.

II. Their wandering in the wilderness, missing their way to the place Abraham designed them for a settlement.

1. They were reduced to great distress there. Their provisions were spent, and Ishmael was sick. He that used to be full fed in Abraham's house, where he waxed fat and kicked, now fainted and sunk, when he was brought to short allowance. Hagar is in tears, and sufficiently mortified. Now she wishes for the crumbs she had wasted and made light of at her master's table. Like one under the power of the spirit of bondage, she despairs of relief, counts upon nothing but *the death of the child* (v. 15, 16), though God had told her, before he was born, that he should live to be a man, a great man. We are apt to forget former promises, when present providences seem to contradict them; for we live by sense.

2. In this distress, God graciously appeared for their relief: he heard *the voice of the lad*, v. 17. We read not of a word he said; but his sighs, and groans, and calamitous state, cried aloud in the ears of mercy. An angel

was sent to comfort Hagar, and it was not the first time that she had met with God's comforts in a wilderness; she had thankfully acknowledged the former kind visit which God made his in such a case (^{<163>}Genesis 16:13), and therefore God now visited her again with seasonable succours.

(1.) The angel assures her of the cognizance God took of her distress: *God has heard the voice of the lad where he is*, though he is in a wilderness (for, wherever we are, there is a way open heaven-ward); therefore *lift up the lad, and hold him in thy hand*, v. 18. Note, God's readiness to help us when we are in trouble must not slacken, but quicken, our endeavours to help ourselves.

(2.) He repeats the promise concerning her son, that he should be *a great nation*, as a reason why she should bestir herself to help him. Note, It should engage our care and pains about children and young people to consider that we know not what God has designed them for, nor what great use Providence may make of them.

(3.) He directs her to a present supply (v. 19): *He opened her eyes* (which were swollen and almost blinded with weeping), and then *she saw a well of water*. Note, Many that have reason enough to be comforted go mourning from day to day, because they do not see the reason they have for comfort. There is a well of water by them in the covenant of grace, but they are not aware of it; they have not the benefit of it, till the same God that opened their eyes to see their wound opens them to see their remedy, ^{<616>}John 16:6, 7. Now the apostle tells us that those things concerning Hagar and Ishmael are *allegoroumena* (^{<402>}Galatians 4:24), they are to be allegorized; this then will serve to illustrate the folly,

[1.] Of those who, like the unbelieving Jews, seek for righteousness by the law and the carnal ordinances of it, and not by the promise made in Christ, thereby running themselves into a wilderness of want and despair. Their comforts are soon exhausted, and if God save them not by his special prerogative, and by a miracle of mercy open their eyes and undeceive them, they are undone.

[2.] Of those who seek for satisfaction and happiness in the world and the things of it. Those that forsake the comforts of the covenant and communion with God, and choose their portion in this earth, take up with a bottle of water, poor and slender provision, and that soon spent; they

wander endlessly in pursuit of satisfaction, and, at length, sit down short of it.

III. The settlement of Ishmael, at last, in the wilderness of Paran (v. 20, 21), a wild place, fittest for a wild man; and such a one he was, Genesis 16. 12. Those that are born after the flesh take up with the wilderness of this world, while the children of the promise aim at the heavenly Canaan, and cannot be at rest till they are there. Observe,

- 1.** He had some tokens of God's presence: *God was with the lad*; his outward prosperity was owing to this.
- 2.** By trade he was an archer, which intimates that craft was his excellency and sport his business: rejected Esau was a cunning hunter.
- 3.** He matched among his mother's relations; she took him a wife out of Egypt: as great an archer as he was, he did not think he could take his aim well, in the business of marriage, if he proceeded without his mother's advice and consent.

GENESIS 21:22-32

ABIMELECH'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

We have here an account of the treaty between Abimelech and Abraham, in which appears the accomplishment of that promise (¹¹¹²Genesis 12:2) that God would *make his name great*. His friendship is valued, is courted, though a stranger, though a tenant at will to the Canaanites and Perizzites.

I. The league is proposed by Abimelech, and Phichol his prime-minister of state and general of his army.

1. The inducement to it was God's favour to Abraham (v. 22): "*God is with thee in all that thou doest*, and we cannot but take notice of it." Note,

(1.) God in his providence sometimes shows his people such tokens for good that their neighbours cannot but take notice of it, ¹⁸⁸⁷Psalms 86:17. Their affairs do so visibly prosper, and they have such remarkable success in their undertakings, that a confession is extorted from all about them of God's presence with them.

(2.) It is good being in favour with those that are in favour with God, and having an interest in those that have an interest in heaven, ^{<3823>}Zechariah 8:23. *We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.* We do well for ourselves if we have fellowship with those that have fellowship with God, ^{<4113>}1 John 1:3.

2. The tenour of it was, in general, that there should be a firm and constant friendship between the two families, which should not upon any account be violated. This bond of friendship must be strengthened by the bond of an oath, in which the true God was appealed to, both as a witness of their sincerity and an avenger in case either side were treacherous, v. 23.

Observe,

(1.) He desires the entail of this league upon his posterity and the extension of it to his people. He would have his son, and his son's son, and his land likewise, to have the benefit of it. Good men should secure an alliance and communion with the favourites of Heaven, not for themselves only, but for theirs also.

(2.) He reminds Abraham of the fair treatment he had found among them: *According to the kindness I have done unto thee.* As those that have received kindness must return it, so those that have shown kindness may expect it.

II. It is consented to by Abraham, with a particular clause inserted about a well. In Abraham's part of this transaction observe,

1. He was ready to enter into this league with Abimelech, finding him to be a man of honour and conscience, and that had the fear of God before his eyes: *I will swear,* v. 24. Note,

(1.) Religion does not make men morose and unconvertible; I am sure it ought not. We must not, under colour of shunning bad company, be sour to all company, and jealous of every body.

(2.) An honest mind does not startle at giving assurances: if Abraham say that he will be true to Abimelech, he is not afraid to swear it; an oath is for confirmation.

2. He prudently settled the matter concerning a well, about which Abimelech's servants had quarrelled with him. Wells of water, it seems,

were choice goods in that country: thanks be to God, that they are not so scarce in ours.

(1.) Abraham mildly told Abimelech of it, v. 25. Note, If our brother trespass against us, we must, with the meekness of wisdom, tell him his fault, that the matter may be fairly accommodated and an end made of it, ~~4185~~Matthew 18:15.

(2.) He acquiesced in Abimelech's justification of himself in this matter: *I wot not who has done this thing*, v. 26. Many are suspected of injustice and unkindness that are perfectly innocent, and we ought to be glad when they clear themselves. The faults of servants must not be imputed to their masters, unless they know of them and justify them; and no more can be expected from an honest man than that he be ready to do right as soon as he knows that he has done wrong.

(3.) He took care to have his title to the well cleared and confirmed, to prevent any disputes or quarrels for the future, v. 30. It is justice, as well as wisdom, to do thus, *in perptuam rei memoriam* — *that the circumstance may be perpetually remembered*.

3. He made a very handsome present to Abimelech, v. 27. It was not any thing curious or fine that he presented to him, but that which was valuable and useful — *sheep and oxen*, in gratitude for Abimelech's kindness to him, and in token of hearty friendship between them. The interchanging of kind offices is the improving of love: that which is mine is my friend's.

4. He ratified the covenant by an oath, and registered it by giving a new name to the place (v. 31), *Beer-sheba*, the *well of the oath*, in remembrance of the covenant they swore to, that they might be ever mindful of it; or *the well of seven*, in remembrance of the seven lambs given to Abimelech, as a consideration for his confirming Abraham's title to that well. Note, Bargains made must be remembered, that we may make them good, and may not break our word through oversight.

~~4123~~ GENESIS 21:33-34

ABRAHAM SOJOURNS IN BEER-SHEBA

Observe,

1. Abraham, having got into a good neighbourhood, knew when he was well off, and continued a great while there. There he planted a grove for a shade to his tent, or perhaps an orchard of fruit-trees; and there, though we cannot say he settled, for God would have him, while he lived, to be a stranger and a pilgrim, yet he sojourned many days, as many as would consist with his character, as Abraham the *Hebrew*, or *passenger*.

2. There he made, not only a constant practice, but an open profession, of his religion: *There he called on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God*, probably in the grove he planted, which was his oratory or house of prayer. Christ prayed in a garden, on a mountain.

(1.) Abraham kept up public worship, to which, probably, his neighbours resorted, that they might join with him. Note, Good men should not only retain their goodness wherever they go, but do all they can to propagate it, and make others good.

(2.) In calling on the Lord, we must eye him as *the everlasting God, the God of the world*, so some. Though God had made himself known to Abraham as his God in particular, and in covenant with him, yet he forgets not to give glory to him as the Lord of all: *The everlasting God*, who was, before all worlds, and will be, when time and days shall be no more. See ^{230B}Isaiah 40:28.