

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
October 20, 2013

A Blessing for Ishmael and Isaac

Read Genesis 21:13-14, 17-21 & Genesis 26:2-5, 12-13

Key verses: “Do everything Sarah tells you to do because your descendants will be traced through Isaac. But I will make of your servant’s son a great nation too, because he is also your descendant” (Genesis 21:12b-13).

The juxtaposition of these two texts (from Genesis 21 and 26) invites us to think deeply about the power of God to redeem our failures and mistakes. Abraham and Sarah had risked their lives to follow God, trusting in God’s promise of descendants. When Abraham and Sarah were growing old—too old to conceive a child—and were still childless, they decided to take matters into their own hands. Out of that decision came Abraham’s son by Hagar, named Ishmael.

Then God gave a second son, Isaac, miraculously conceived by Abraham and Sarah when they were well past the age of child-bearing. Although Ishmael’s birth had given joy to Abraham, conflict arose between the two mothers, Hagar and Sarah. Not wanting Ishmael to have a share of Isaac’s inheritance, Sarah persuaded Abraham to send Ishmael and Hagar away. Abraham reluctantly did what Sarah wanted in this matter.

Genesis 21:13-14, 17-21 tells of God graciously rescuing Ishmael and Hagar as they were struggling to survive alone in the desert. Genesis 26:2-5, 12-13 tells how God blessed Isaac and renewed with Isaac the covenant God had made with Abraham.

In short, God blessed *both* Ishmael and Isaac. God’s words to Abraham summarize this “double blessing”: “...your descendants will be traced through Isaac. But I will make of your servant’s son [Ishmael] a great nation too, because he is also your descendant” (Genesis 21:12b-13).

“The message of the Gospel,” wrote Andrew Sullivan, “is that *God works with the crooked timber of human failure.*”

“For those who love God,” wrote Dallas Willard, “nothing irredeemable can happen to you.”

When Abraham tried to “help” God fulfill His plan by fathering Ishmael with Hagar, Abraham was following his own will, not God’s. Although Ishmael was not a “mistake”—no child is—the way that Ishmael was conceived was not God’s perfect will. The conflict and hurt that eventually came into Abraham’s family was a consequence of Abraham having chosen his own way rather than God’s. Yet, God, in his grace and love, blessed both Ishmael and Isaac.

Aren’t you glad that God doesn’t give up on us when we fall short of His perfect will? Even though our sins and wrong choices often bring painful consequences, God doesn’t give up on us. God can use even our shortcomings for our good and His glory. “God works with the crooked timber of human failure.”

God’s grace and mercy are so much bigger than we fully understand. Frederick Faber wrote about this truth in his hymn, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”:

*There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.*

*There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper room of bliss.*

*For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

*But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal he will not own.*

*Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Savior who would have us
Come and gather at His feet?”*

*There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea.*

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