

Introduction:

- A. It really galls people when we say that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved. *Illus.:* I've mentioned before the time my niece, a Christian author, was interviewed on Canadian Public Radio. Just as the interview came to an end she was bushwhacked by the interviewer:

"A guy comes up to you on the street and says. 'I don't believe in Jesus. Am I going to hell?' What do you say?"

In the studio, the clock ticks, ticks, ticks in front of me, and the audio guy yawns behind the glass, and the question feels like an unexpected blow to the side of the head. "Am I going to hell?"

- B. We're going to take a round-about way to answer that. Turn to **Gen 21**. We're returning to our sermon series on the life of Abraham and today we look at the happiest day in Abraham and Sarah's life. Let's walk through this story.
- C. **Vv.1-5... Note the emphasis on God's word—on God's promises kept.** The story of Isaac is the story of God's promise. Years before God had ushered Abram outside to look at the stars. "*Count the stars—if you can,*" the LORD said, "*So shall your offspring be.*" And the next verse says, "*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*" Abram wasn't righteous but God gave him *credit* for being righteous when he trusted God's promise. *Because,* though Abram didn't realize it at the time, it was through Abram's greatest descendant—the bright and morning star—that his sins would be forgiven and the perfection of God's sinless Son would be credited to Abraham's account. Life and hope depend on trust in God's Promise.

Vv.6-7... God had said to name the child Isaac, which means *laughter*. V.1 says, “*the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said.*” The word *gracious* means he visited her, like one of those visits from Publishers’ Clearing House. And after waiting all those years, when that 90-year-old woman bore a son, she couldn’t stop laughing. Nor could anyone else. **God’s grace has a way of unleashing a kind of holy hilarity.**

D. But now things are going to take a dark turn. Vv. 8-13... (V.8) Children then we’re weaned at about age 3, and a feast to celebrate this turning point was common. If Isaac was three that would make Hagar’s son, Ishmael, about 17; not really a ‘boy’. Let’s call him a *lad*. He was old enough to be responsible before God, which is important here.

It’s interesting that throughout this passage Ishmael is never actually named; he’s mentioned 14 times but always Hagar’s son or the lad. His unmentioned name, by the way, means *God Hears*. Remember that.

The Heb word translated “*mocking*” in v.9 is actually *laughing* like what Sarah did, but the context indicates it was the wrong kind of laughing! This 17-year-old boy, jealous of the new favored son in the family, mocked him. When Paul refers to this story in Galatians he says that Hagar’s son *persecuted* little Isaac. Can you picture that angry 17-year-old taunting and teasing the 3-year-old toddler, Isaac?

Remember that this is not the first time there’s been severe friction between Hagar and Sarah. Back in **ch.16**, after Hagar got pregnant, she *despised* Sarah and Sarah mistreated Hagar badly enough the Hagar fled into the desert. There was no love lost between them.

Sarah had no love for Hagar's son but Abraham did. He was Abraham's firstborn, after all. You can understand why this seemed terribly harsh to him, so it must have been a surprise to him as it is to us when God confirmed what Sarah said and told him banish them.

- E. We've seen a progression and now we're going to see a kind of negative mirror of it. Notice the structure here:

The son God had promised is miraculously born

Sarah laughs and Isaac's name means

laughter

“that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son, Isaac.”

Hagar and her son, banished to the desert,

weep

God miraculously rescues and preserves Hagar and her son, as he had promised

- F. **Vv.14-17...** This is quite similar to what happened in **ch 16** when Hagar fled with her infant son into the desert. In that earlier story God came to Hagar as she sat by a well. Here she's by a well but doesn't see it because kept her from seeing. Why do you think he did that?

The striking thing here is the **contrast** between Sarah's **laughter** at the birth of Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael's **sobbing** at the imminent prospect of their deaths.

- G. **Vv.18-21...** Did you notice how v.18 began? “*God heard the lad crying*” and then the angel says to Hagar “*God has heard...*” God had given Hagar's son the name Ishmael, which means *God hears*. Do you see the irony of those words in a story where Hagar's son is mentioned 14 times but never by name, as if the truth of his name had been forgotten.

V.20 is poignant: “God was with the lad as he grew up.” Ishmael made a home for himself, became an archer, which I take to be an indication of how he put food on the table, and he married a woman whom his mother found for him from among her people in Egypt. He would have 12 sons, each who became “tribal rulers.” He is the father of the Arab people—about 130 million strong today.

H. This account is one story—a tale of two mothers and two sons, of laughter and tears, a story of a promise kept and a promise forgotten. Here are the timeless truths I see here:

I. **THE GOD-BLESSED LIFE DEPENDS COMPLETELY ON THE SON GOD PROMISED (21:1-7)**

A. In all the Bible, only Isaac and Jesus share such a unique birth. Isaac’s birth is the OT’s nativity story. Both boys were promised to their parents by angel visitors before they were born. They were born through a stunning miracle to mothers who could not possibly give birth naturally. Both had God-given names. Both were sons of Abraham. And both were bearers of God’s covenant blessing. **Most importantly, God’s promise to bless the world through Abraham could only be conveyed by the sons God promised and delivered.**

B. One lesson of these tales of two sons and two mothers is that the blessing of God is no one’s right. It is only God’s gift. Hagar and Ishmael thought Abraham’s inheritance was theirs by right.

One of the Bible’s big lessons is that no one has a right to the God-blessed life except those born of God. So many people think they have a *right* to God’s blessing, that a good God *must* keep terrible things from happening to them or he isn’t good and they’ll disown him. They are angry

with God if he doesn't heal them, if he doesn't bail them out of trouble, if he doesn't make life work well. They're angry if God doesn't stop other people's sin yet they expect God to leave them alone. As if that is his *duty* to us. As if they have a *right* to God's blessing. But it doesn't work that way. Just ask Ishmael.

- C. Make no mistake, God loves to bless people's lives. He *wants* us to have deep and abiding peace, to be forgiven and clean, to be free from the fear of death and hell. He loves us and he wants us to know it, and to be able to love others. He wants us to have the deep satisfaction of a righteous life. He wants us to be secure in our hope of eternal life at home with him. But no one has a right to it. God's blessing is free gift, given through the miracle Son of God. **John 1:12** says, "*Yet to all who did receive him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*" **Isaac was Abraham's first miracle son. Jesus was his last. What Isaac began Jesus completed.**

II. GOD GOES FAR FURTHER THAN WE IMAGINE TO FOSTER FAITH IN THE SON HE PROMISED (21:14-21)

- A. Hagar and Ishmael are spiritual enigmas. I think we are inclined to sympathize with them but they each had their dark side. Back in Gen 16 when Hagar learned she was pregnant v.4 says "*she began to despise her mistress.*" Here in ch. 21, we're told that Hagar's 17-year-old son *mocked* the toddler Isaac. I wonder where he learned that attitude?
- B. Remember: Sarah's pregnancy and Isaac's birth were an *incredibly obvious miracle from God.* Nothing could be more clear than God's astonishing blessing upon Abraham

and Sarah who were 100 and 90 respectively when Isaac was born. Anyone with any spiritual sense would figure out that God's blessing was on that child. Ishmael's mocking and Hagar's apparent silence (I suspect she still despised Sarah) were spiritually foolhardy! Reminds me of the line, "*Son, your arm's too short to box with God!*"

There are countless people who are even more spiritually foolhardy because they reject Jesus as Savior and Lord. Could the evidence of God's hand be any clearer?! Jesus rose from the dead, for goodness sake!! In time and space history!! People can argue about the existence of God but sooner or later they have to deal with Jesus of Nazareth—a real man with an astonishing story of virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death *and* bodily resurrection. There are the testimonies of transformed lives and hope to countless people all over the world. If Hagar and Ishmael were accountable for what they saw, how much more those who dismiss Jesus as the Son of God and our Savior?!

- C. We read how Abraham was commanded by God to banish Hagar and her son from his household and it seems very harsh, doesn't it? It seems like an opposite of the prodigal son story. But it was actually the mercy of God that drove them into the desert. They had lived in Abraham's God-blessed household for many years. They had witnessed one of history's greatest miracles in the birth of Isaac. They knew of God's promise that those who blessed Abraham would themselves be blessed. Yet neither of them appear to honor God for the gift of the promised son. There was no fruit of faith. The desert was God's merciful last resort to bring them to their knees. **God was shouting at them in their pain.** God works that way often.

- D. Not only should they have seen and honored God's blessing on Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, they had *their own* miraculous story of God's personal love and care for them, as recorded in Gen. 16. When Hagar had fled Abram's household with her baby in order to evade Sarah's mistreatment God told her to go back because, as hard as it was, that was the place where God would bless. But God's angel—*an angel!*—also promised her that she would have innumerable descendants through her son. God told her the boy's name: Ishmael, which means *God Hears* because "*the LORD has heard of your misery.*" And she had given God a name we still love: *The God Who Sees Me*. You'd think something like that would change their lives and build an unshakeable faith in the LORD.
- E. In this story—and across Ishmael's growing-up years—it seems that they both had forgotten that *God Hears*, which I think is signaled in this story by the complete absence of Ishmael's name despite 14 mentions of Hagar's *son* and the *lad*. There in the desert when the water ran out—a terrifying situation, to be sure—neither of them prayed. They sobbed but they didn't pray! Hagar had God's own promise—spoken to her by God's own angel—that her son would not die. Why didn't she bring that promise to God? In her crying, didn't Hagar cry out her son's name? "*Ishmael, O Ishmael, my Ishmael – God Hears, O God Hears, My God Hears.*" **Yet *she* appeared to be deaf!**
- Still—even then—God heard, spoke and rescued them.* God had kept her from seeing the well that was nearby no doubt to see if she'd call on him. And when she didn't, God *still* showed her! **But what he was also seeking to do was to get her and her son to open their eyes to see *him*—**to trust him, not only for their deliverance but in his gift of

Isaac. Isaac was their blessing too. If they had blessed him God's blessing on Abraham would have been theirs.

How great is the kindness of God here! He was harsh out of mercy that they might seek and find him. And when they didn't seek him God even revealed himself again!

Notice, too, that statement in **v.20**, "*God was with the boy as he grew up.*" What parent could ask for anything more! Yet **Ishmael grew up an angry man**. God had told Hagar it would be so when he was a baby: "*He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.*" God didn't *make* Ishmael so angry and contentious. He simply saw what this boy would become. I don't think it takes much psychology to see his and his mother's jealousy over Isaac's inheritance and favor infected his whole life. He passed that along to his 12 sons. **Gen 25:18** says of his sons, "*And they lived in hostility toward all the tribes related to them.*" Bad apples, one and all. And not a whisper of thanks for the hand of God upon their father or grandmother, or on Isaac. They didn't have a prayer.

- F. Hagar and Ishmael were offered the God-blessed life. They lived in its house, carried its name, drank it in as water from a well, and were rescued by God twice, but they squandered their great God-given opportunity. There is no evidence that they ever actually lived in the blessing of God's covenant, despite all God had done for them.

Conclusion:

So back to the original question: "*A guy comes up to you on the street and says. 'I don't believe in Jesus. Am I going to hell?' What do you say?'*"

What would you say to Hagar and Ishmael if they said, “*I don’t believe Isaac matters. I don’t care if he is God’s promised son. I don’t believe that God’s blessing on me or anyone else depends on him. I have a right to claim God’s blessing.*”

If Hagar and Ishmael were accountable to God, how much more are people who know of Jesus. As I’ve told you before, having thought about that question, I’d say, “*You certainly don’t have to go to hell if you don’t want to, but God has provided only one way to avoid it, and that is through faith in Jesus. Why wouldn’t you trust in him if you really want to live the God-blessed life?*”

And for those of us who do rest our faith in Jesus Christ, rejoice. We should certainly echo Sarah, “*God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.*”