

Two Covenants

Genesis 21

God has preserved Abraham and Isaac through Egypt and Gerar, famine and war, Sodom and destruction, pledging to keep His promise that a son would be born to him by Sarah. That day has come, and because Abraham would be the father of a multitude of faithful nations, this is a momentous event for all people (Gen. 17:5-7). The story of Isaac and Ishmael not just about two brothers, but two covenants, two ways of life, two opposite approaches to serving God (Gal. 4:24-26).

The Birth of Isaac

Isaac means laughter, and this scene is surrounded by laughter. When Abraham heard from God that he would have a son, he fell on his face laughing (17:17). He believed and was astonished. But when Sarah heard behind the tent wall, she laughed cynically to herself, sure that God wouldn't do as He promised (18:12). Now a ninety-year-old woman has conceived with an hundred-year-old man, and Abraham does the right thing and named him Laughter (v3). Abraham trusts the Lord and circumcises Isaac, obeying God's command and recognizing his son's need for forgiveness and salvation (v4). And now Sarah says wonderfully, "God has made laughter for me, and all who hear will laugh with me" (v6). God has transformed her laughter by His grace from doubting and mocking to rejoicing. She processes her past sins in light of grace, gets the joke, and knows God's people will be laughing in the future (v7; cf. 18:15).

The Son of the Flesh

Sarah's laughter is juxtaposed to Ishmael's mockery. When Isaac is weaned, probably about three years old, Abraham throws a great party to celebrate on that day (v8). At the feast, Ishmael, who is about 16 years old, mocks Isaac. We should not think Ishmael simply told a rude joke or wouldn't eat cake. This is a covenantal rejection of God's plan, and it's symbolic for what sons of flesh do to sons of the Spirit (Gal. 4:29). It's reminiscent of when Hagar despised Sarah after conceiving (16:4). Hagar wanted to displace Sarah and disregard God's plan, and Ishmael is imitating her. His big question is "*Why not me instead of you?*" Entitlement begins with thinking we are owed something. It develops into envy that would deprive someone else of the thing (Jms. 4:2). Ishmael wants to hurt Isaac, so he mocks him. Ishmael is not a son of the flesh because he has the wrong father or mother, or went to the wrong schools. He is a son of the flesh because the grace God gave him was not enough. These sins are not just out in the world but happen among spouses, siblings, families, classmates, colleagues and churches like ours (Gal. 5:19-21; Matt. 20:1-16). The two covenants are among the people of God. The closer we are to similar people, the more opportunity we have for ungodly comparisons. God is exceedingly patient and kind both leading up to this incident and after, but He doesn't bless pride on its terms (vv12-21). He supports Sarah's decision to send Hagar away, which is justice and not evil for evil (v12).

The Strength of Laughter

The two covenants represent two fundamental orientations possible for human beings: I've been given enormously more than I ever deserved, or I have been given less than I earned (cf. Rom. 6:23). It can be tempting to see the entitled, envying, mocking and grabbing way of Ishmael as strong, and the way of Isaac as weak. After all, sons of the Spirit aren't allowed to play dirty. But we shouldn't be short-sighted: "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Tim. 6:6-7). You're only on the right side of history if your side is right for the long run. Abraham and Sarah are laughing in joyful strength, and they show exhibit it in the land (vv23-28). Their hearts are free from the rot of envy and full of abundant life (Prov. 14:30; Jn. 10:10).

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Genesis 21:1-9

And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. 2 For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. 3 And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. 4 Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me, and all who hear will laugh with me.” 7 She also said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age.” 8 So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. 9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing.

1. When the Lord visited Abraham and Sarah in chapter 18, Sarah laughed, not believing that God would give her a child in her old age. Now what has happened, and what does Sarah say (verse 6)?
2. Abraham and Sarah name their son “Isaac” which means Laughter! God’s grace has made them laugh. Can you think of something God surprised you with that made you laugh?
3. Ishmael was Isaac’s older brother, and instead of celebrating his little brother and God’s grace in their family, what does Ishmael do (verse 9)? Why do you think he did it?
4. Draw a picture of Sarah and Abraham laughing with joy at the birth of Isaac.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me, and all who hear will laugh with me.” —Genesis 21:6