

Genesis in Biblical Perspective: The Gospel of Christ from Genesis – God’s Grace Cleans Up Our Mess

Genesis 21:8-21

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Genesis 21:8–21 says,

[8] And the child (Isaac) 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, laughing. [10] So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” [11] And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. [12] But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. [13] And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman 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 in the wilderness of Beersheba.

[15] When the water in the skin was gone, she put 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, “Let me not 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? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. [18] Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” [19] Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. [20] And 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 took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

This is an interesting passage of Scripture. To tackle this let me come back to Father's Day for a minute. Parenting is not for cowards. A good reason to hang in there as a parent is that grand-parenting is coming. Grand-parenting is God's reward for not killing your children. It is so much fun. For those of you who already have grandkids you know this. Boy the wisdom it takes to parent, to know when out of love you confront your child to bring consequences that are hurtful in order to discipline in love, so greater hurt won't come in the future. As you get older you'll find out that your parents did this and that is when do you not confront and just come along and clean up their mess afterwards. So when do you confront very pointedly, also bringing consequences where you love them but not their behavior? How much do you tolerate? What battles do you pick and when do you just have to clean up after them? When do those things happen? When do you do that as a parent?

That's what our Heavenly Father does all the time. Our Heavenly Father is involved in that in our life all the time – confrontation and cleaning up the mess our sin has made. In fact, that is kind of the transformational truth I want you to see. As a Christian we are saved by God's grace. It is God's grace through Jesus Christ. Here is an acronym for GRACE – God's Riches At Christ's Expense. The riches that God has secured for me through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has saved me by God's grace. I am saved through Jesus Christ. It is what He has done for me and it's not because of me but in spite of me. It is not what He's done plus what I've done but it's what He's done for me and through me. I am saved from the penalty of my sin. I am being saved from the practice of my sin and one day I'll be saved from the presence of my sin. It's all a gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. I love that truth, but God's grace that saves me and keeps me, is a grace whereby God in love at times will radically confront my sin in my life. At times He just comes along behind me and just cleans up my mess.

As you get older and you look back and see how much of a mess your parents have been cleaning up, I think the same thing is going to happen to us when we get to heaven. I think we're going to find out all kinds of things we don't yet know that the Lord did for us. Sometimes it's a radical confrontation. As a parent you learn when to do that because you love your children. My dad did one of those with me. My dad was in baseball so he was gone for long periods of time during the year. During those years I was headed down a downward slide of rebellion and ungodliness before the Lord and against my parents. It was seen in the frustration that I caused particularly with mom because she was there by herself. She found herself thinking "What do I do with this young man and how do I handle it?" So the frustration was coming into her life all the time. After a while, she started just saving up and then tell my dad when he'd get home. So he'd get home and get this list he'd have to handle with me.

After a couple of years of that, one day I'll never forget. My dad took me upstairs and said "Son, you're causing your mother a whole lot of problems and that means you're causing me a whole lot of problems, and I'm tired of this routine. I have seen what it has been doing to your mother. Son, I met your mother and loved her long before I met you and loved you and if I have to choose between you and her, you're history. I can get another one of you. I have already checked at the Jackson Reformatory School in Concord, North Carolina and they have an open spot and I've reserved it for you. Now you have a choice to make and this family will not revolve around you and your rebellion." Now I don't necessarily recommend that as a parenting method but I'll never forget getting radically confronted, I didn't get converted, but I sure changed my behavior very quickly. As I got older I saw the many things my mom and dad must have been doing all along that I never saw where they never confronted me.

We have an interesting passage here. Isaac has been born. He is the promised child, through the promised miraculous birth through Sarah and Abraham and he has now been born. We covered this in our last study in Genesis 21:7. Now from Genesis 21:7 to Genesis 21:8 (one verse) there is a three year time lapse. Genesis 21:8a says [8] *And the child (Isaac) grew and was weaned.* The child is three years of age. How do I know this? If you read some of the extra Biblical literature in those times and also in the book of Samuel you'll find that the weaning age for the Hebrew child was around age three. Abraham at age 86 had, had a child of the flesh with Hagar and then Abraham at age 100 had the child of promise through Sarah. Now Abraham is about 103 years old and Ishmael (Hagar's and Abraham's son) is probably about 15 or 16 years old.

When Isaac becomes weaned, it's at that moment that Abraham decides to have a feast for he says "This is a great day in the life of Isaac." He has a feast and celebration and not everybody is celebrating. The word laughter was repeated five times in Genesis 21:1-7. Laughter is now in the house of Abraham again, three years later, but it's not the laughter of the joy of Sarah. It's the laughter of mocking. In fact, the mocking is even in some translations appropriately is called sneering. Paul will tell us later that it was representative of Ishmael persecuting Isaac already. Enmity was all over the house of Abraham. Sarah sees this and discerns what to do. She says "I will not have that one, mocking, sneering, and persecuting Isaac, in this house. This one must be removed." That displeased Abraham for even though this wasn't Isaac she was talking about, Ishmael was still his son too. Abraham didn't want Ishmael to be dismissed.

So he was distressed over this and God intervenes. God says to Abraham, "Do what your wife Sarah says to do. It is necessary." Because of the appointment of Isaac through which the covenant shall come, the land will be given through, the seed will be given through, and redemption will come so remove Ishmael from the household. However God tells Abraham two things. One, I'll take care of him and two, he also will be a great nation. So now Abraham under Divine orders,

takes a skin of water, about three gallons worth, some food and gives it to Hagar and Ishmael. They leave.

After a while the water is gone and the food is gone and it seems as though Ishmael who would have been about 15 or 16 must have given all the food and water to his mother because he is the one who is famished first. The mother can't stand to see it so she puts him aside underneath a tree and goes a bow shot away. That is as far as an arrow will travel so that she can't see him die. Yet what she doesn't know, the boy, according to the text, begins to cry out to the Lord. The Lord hears. Then Hagar has something of an enormous blessing. This is the second time now that God graciously visits the slave woman. God comes in a Theophany. The angel of the Lord comes to her.

In order to understand this passage in Genesis 21 you have to go back to something very similar that happened back in Genesis 16. In Genesis 16 Hagar had ridiculed and laughed at Sarah and had left the house. Genesis 16:3–12 says

[3] So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. [4] And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. [5] And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" [6] But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

[7] The angel of the LORD found her (Hagar) by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. [8] And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." [9] The angel of the LORD (a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord) said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." [10] The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." [11] And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. [12] He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

So the Lord is telling Hagar she will have a son and he'll be a nomad. He'll be a wild man, against many. The idea is he'll be a marauder, but the Lord will bless her and He tells her to go back into the household under Sarai, which she does. Now let's fast forward to Genesis 21. What Hagar did to Sarai, now Ishmael does

to Isaac. When Ishmael does this to Isaac they are sent out again and now the angel of the Lord appears again. A pre-incarnate ministry of Christ now occurs a second time. He brings back the promise that had been made back in Genesis 16. God basically says “Don’t worry I have a destiny, an appointment for Ishmael. He will be a great nation and will have an offspring. I will take care of you.” After a promise of a destiny for her son comes a provision. God opens Hagar’s eyes and she sees the water. It looks as if the water was already there but in the providence of God they had been blinded to it. Their eyes are opened and they drink of the water and they are refreshed.

We’ll hear more about Ishmael a little later but I’ll tell you what will happen to him now. Ishmael is going to get married. His wife will go back down into Egypt where she came from. He will have a number of children, including twelve sons. The twelve sons will represent twelve tribes and they will become a nation. Ishmael will die at the age of 137. His twelve sons will be a nation that will dwell in the wilderness of Paran. They will take on the characteristics of their progenitor, Ishmael, who is a hunter. We saw in the text where it said Hagar was a bow shot away and interestingly her son Ishmael will rise up and be an archer. He will be a man of the bow and a hunter. He will be a nomad and a marauder. That is the beginning of a whole group that is still there today. In fact, when you go to Israel you can sometimes still see them still in their tents. The Ishmaelites are called the Bedouin tribes of the area today. They will not have a place in the land but they will have a numerous nation. One other little piece of Biblical insight here is that Ishmael will also have a daughter. His daughter will marry Esau. That is for another time though.

This Old Testament text is also used in the New Testament. Let’s see how this Old Testament text is used in the New Testament and look at Galatians 4. Paul picks up on the insistence. In Genesis 21 God refused to call Hagar, Abraham’s wife or his surrogate wife. He refused to call her anything but the slave woman. It is that which Paul picks up on in Galatians 4. Paul is dealing with the fact that we’re saved by grace and not by our works. Galatians 4:21–31 says

[21] Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? [22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. [23] But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. [24] Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery (those under the Law); she is Hagar. [25] Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [26] But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. [27] For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.”

[28] Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. [29] But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. [30] But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." [31] So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

In other words, you are not under the slavery of the Law. Christ has come under the Law. He has paid the penalty so that you like Isaac was supernaturally brought forth in birth by God's grace as a child of promise. If you're a Christian you're a child of promise. You are not a slave under the Law. You have been born supernaturally. You have been born again and you have been born unto the freedom to know and serve Christ, having been saved by His grace. Paul also uses this in Romans 9. Romans 9:6–9 says,

[6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [7] and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. [9] For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son."

Now Isaac points to Christ and it is through Christ that those of the promise have life. Christ says "Father, all whom You have given Me, I lose not one, but raise them up on the last day (John 6:39)."

What is this telling us? No one by obedience to the Law can make it to heaven. The heavenly Jerusalem must come down to you and that is in Jesus Christ. As Christ comes then you are saved with the supernatural birth of grace and the work of Christ under the Law so that you're not under the Law but under grace. For He obeyed the Law perfectly for you and He paid the penalty of your sin, therefore you are children of the promise, not children of the flesh. What did Sarah and Abraham think? They would think they would get the child through their own endeavor. So they used Hagar and here comes Ishmael. God says "No, it is not of the flesh that the promise of salvation comes. It is of grace and My power." By His grace and power through Sarah comes Isaac and ultimately will come Christ. By Christ's power and grace come forth the children of promise who know Him by faith and repentance.

I want to give you three takeaways from this text. The first one is a warning. The second takeaway is an encouragement and the third takeaway is that I will be an accountant. Now that is a frightening thought for me to be an accountant because I can't even balance a checkbook but I will do this for a moment. Here is my warning from this text. We are saved by grace through the work of Jesus Christ. In front of us who believe in the Gospel that God has sent His Son into the

world to pay for our sins and all who repent of their sins and put their trust in Him are saved completely because He paid for all of their sins of all their time. He has given them a perfect righteousness that brings them to heaven. It is His perfect righteousness. So I am not saved by my obedience or my works. I am saved by grace.

That wonderful Gospel message always leaves the people of God teetering on two possible errors, misrepresentations. This is the warning. One error is what we call legalism. That is when God's people know that if you're saved by grace through faith there will inevitably be a changed life and we begin to attach our salvation to our changed life instead of our changed life to our salvation. In other words, our obedience and our works become the reason that we're saved, the ground of our salvation and what keeps us saved instead of what they are which is the evidence of our salvation. Then as that legalism begins to weigh us down and oppress us as we keep going back to Mount Sinai, to the flesh, to the endeavor, we begin to wear ourselves out because we cannot do enough for our assurance of salvation. We hear [1] *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1). It's not what you do that saves you, but it's what Christ did that saves you.

Then there automatically there comes the possible pendulum swing to the other error which we are warned about in II Peter, Jude and continually which is don't let salvation by grace become a cloak for licentiousness, for libertinism, where you can live anyway you want to because you're saved by grace. I want to always echo those two warnings. I believe in our day and time it is in vogue to warn against legalism but it is not in vogue to warn against licentiousness. However I will warn against both and one of the ways I want to warn you is to remind you even though you are saved by grace from all of your sins, sins in the life of a Christian can still bring consequences that are destructive. You sow the wind, you can reap the whirlwind. This text is full of it.

Why do you think Ishmael persecuted Isaac? Why do you think Ishmael mocked with laughter Isaac? What had his mother done? His mother had mocked, sneered and held in contempt Sarah and the apple didn't fall far from the tree. The sin of the mother was visited in the life of the son. Why is there even any mocking, dissention and sneering in the household? It is because there is a concubine Hagar and she has produced a son. Why? It was because Sarah, in sin, did not believe the promise of God and tried to get God's promise through the flesh. Instead of waiting upon God's timing which was going to be about fourteen years later, she did it in her own flesh. How did she do it? She gave Hagar. Where did Hagar come from? Hagar came from Egypt. Why did they have Hagar from Egypt? When Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt because of a famine, Pharaoh had given them slaves and money to show his repentance in having taken Sarah into his house. Why did he have Sarah in his house? It was because Abraham and Sarah had lied. Do you not see what's happening here?

Here they are in the land and God said He'd take care of them. A famine comes and what do they do? In the flesh, they don't trust God and leave the land to go to Egypt. In the flesh Abraham preserves himself by lying about Sarah and is willing for her to go into an adulterous relationship to protect himself. Sarah goes along with it but this is one of those moments where God radically confronts and God lets Pharaoh know what He's doing. So Pharaoh comes in God's love and grace and is used in a confrontation to confront Abraham and his sin. Then out of that Pharaoh gives Hagar and other slaves who now go with Abraham and Sarah. Sarah takes Hagar and gives back to Abraham. Abraham enters into an adulterous relationship and has a child of the flesh. All of this is sin after sin after sin that just keeps coming down the road. You sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind.

Now is Abraham forgiven of all of his sins? Yes. Is God keeping Abraham? Yes. Sometimes He keeps him out of love by confronting him in his sin and sometimes like this text, He has to come behind Abraham and just clean up his mess. I'm going to have to take Hagar and Ishmael out of the home in order for that which is purposed in Isaac to come to fruition. That means they are taken out of the land that belongs to Isaac and not to them. So they are removed and God has to come behind and clean up his mess.

I am absolutely assured that I am not a youth pastor. I realized this last Sunday night. Last Sunday night we had the rising 7th graders and their parents who are entering into the Raiders group, into our home for a hotdog supper after church. So there were about sixty 7th graders and their parents. I don't know which was worse, the parents or the kids, but it was fun having them in our home. We do this every year. The youth leaders began to share about the summer programs and you could see the 6th graders, rising 7th graders get excited. As a pastor I was excited to hear about the regular Bible studies. Then came the special events for the summer. It was at that moment that I realized that I would never be a Youth Pastor again. Sloppy Olympics is not in my category at all. It is rolling around in ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise and then playing games just won't work on my pink tie. I just can't handle that. I said "Do you just send them home like that?" They said "Oh no! When it's all over we lay them down in a gutter, call the Rocky Ridge Fire Department and with a power hose begin to wash them down. Then that becomes our opportunity to share the Gospel, because what does Jesus do with our mess?" He washes us clean. I'd like to use that illustration on Sunday morning sometime.

It made me think about laying down in the gutter out here. It struck me that, that is downhill which means as the kids at the top get washed, it goes to the next kid. Do you get the picture? Then it goes to the next one and the next one, etc. That's what is happening to this sin. The sin in Egypt comes back to the land and it rolls down to Isaac. It rolls into the family. Right now I'm counseling with a couple long distance not to divorce even though divorce is a Biblical gift from God to protect a victim in the appropriate situations but it is not the remedy. I'm pleading with

them to save this marriage if at all possible. One of the mothers of this couple said "Let's just cut it, God will forgive and get it over with, even if it's not what they ought to do." Then came the quote from Luther and I love Luther but I despise this quote. She said "Didn't Luther say 'sin boldly'?" He did say that but he was wrong. I boldly go to the Lord in my sin and ask for forgiveness but I don't sin boldly. In fact, I want to sin less knowing I won't be sinless but I want to sin less because sin while we're forgiven, still has consequences. Let me show you what happens to children when parents' divorce and then their children's children. Let me show you what happens to people emotionally and I could go on in situation after situation.

I will never bow to the idea that the more I've known sin the better Christian it will make me. God will use my sin for His purposes but I do not believe sin is the route to the joy of the Lord or effectiveness in ministry. Now when I do sin I know I have a Forgiver. I know I have redemption and I know that God will take my mess and start cleaning it up, but sin has consequences. That is my encouragement, the second takeaway. I have already hit on the second takeaway where God's grace even takes those moments, even as He is doing in this text. He is coming behind the sins of Abraham and Sarah and He's cleaning it up so that a Redeemer will come for you. So that a Redeemer will be born from the seed of Isaac and it is Jesus Christ our Lord. Even this will become a picture in the New Testament that we are absolutely dependent upon God's grace and God's grace alone.

The third takeaway is accounting. There is a key phrase back in Genesis where God says "Isaac the child I promised you, Abraham, shall have the land and I will show My common grace to Ishmael. I will give him a nation, give him life, and take care of him, 'on account of you'." But I do not stand today pleading for mercy, grace and a new life (a transformed life, a forgiven life, a forever life) on account of Abraham. Today we have eternal life and a new life on account of Jesus Christ. He is your Redeemer. He is your Savior. It is not on our account that we have a hope. It is not even on Abraham's account that we have a hope. It is on account of Jesus Christ as His righteousness is counted for us, as our sin is counted to Him. We have, on account of Christ, everlasting life.

There is a phrase I never use. I hear it all the time. I hear Christians use it all the time. They say "Well, that was just hell on earth." No, hell has never been on earth, because in hell there is no grace. There was common grace to Ishmael and redeeming grace to Isaac. There is no hope. There is no account to call on but today there is heaven on earth, a taste of it. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you will come to Him and put your trust in Him on account of Him, you can have everlasting life. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the enormous blessing to come to the Scriptures, bow our hearts and be taught of You. Lord, would You let these Words sink deeply within us that while we have the joy of all of the forgiveness of our sin even knowing that You come behind us to clean up the mess and the remaining sin in our life, and sometimes You confront us radically in that sin, allow us not to sign peace treaties with sin or treat sin in a trivial fashion. Would You allow us not to try to tell the world we believe in grace by how much and how close we can get to sin, sinful words, sinful thoughts, sinful deeds? Father, our wonderful position on account of Christ of being forgiven, renewed and transformed, would You now give us a hatred of sin, even the garment that it touches, and a love of the Lord Jesus. So fill our lives with Him that sin would not even be thought of – temptation we would flee, our Savior we would embrace and love but O thank You that in our faltering steps in this life, by Your grace You'll confront us just as You did with Pharaoh to Abraham, and by Your grace You have cleaned up afterwards when we didn't even know it. O what a Father we have! Father, I would be remiss if I did not take this moment to pray for every father reading this, whether by adoption or reproduction, we do not celebrate just the fact that we have a child or children, but would You allow fathers the kind of wisdom that is reflected in this text by our Heavenly Father that love and grace would be manifested with perseverance, patience and principle. O God who is sufficient for these things? We aren't but our Savior in us is our Hope, for now and for forever, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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