

# The Birth of Isaac / Expulsion of Ishmael

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## I. REVIEW OF WEEK # 15 – THE SIN OF SODOM

God announced His plan to visit Sodom and test it, and Abraham seemed to know that He would find great wickedness there, wickedness worthy of destruction. He boldly stepped in to suggest that to destroy the righteous along with the wicked would give the appearance of injustice and was not in keeping with God's character as the just Judge of all.

- God accepted his proposal to let the righteous spare the wicked, even if only ten were found.
- In fact, not even ten righteous people could be found in Sodom.
- Lot, his wife, and his daughters escaped the destruction, but barely.
- Lot's wife did not fully realize her deliverance; she looked back at the city and was turned to salt.

In this deliverance, God proved His justice and His mercy. He had been willing to spare the whole city for ten righteous souls. When He didn't find them, He didn't condemn the righteous to destruction along with the wicked.

- Lot was saved by the prayer of Abraham that released God's mercy.

### A. Abimelech

When Abraham and Sarah resumed their wandering in Canaan, Abraham repeated the same deception about his relationship to Sarah [claiming Sarah to be his sister, which was half-true] that he had used earlier in Egypt.

- This led to the abduction of Sarah by a man named Abimelech.

**Note:** Prohibitions against marriages between close relatives did not arise until the Torah was given to Israel [Lev 18:11].

## **B. Sarah's Chastity and Reputation Saved**

God caused Abimelech to become gravely ill, so that he could not have sexual relations with Sarah. Then God visited him in a dream, urging him to restore her to Abraham and to have Abraham pray for his healing.

In this episode God showed that His work on behalf of people is not put in jeopardy by the weakness and failure of those through whom He works, if He has placed them in positions of authority.

God healed Abimelech through the prayers of Abraham, and Sarah's chastity and reputation were preserved.

## **A. A Sinful Leader Can still be a Vessel of God's Grace**

This episode is the first example in Scripture of how God continues to work His will through weak and even sinful humans if they have been chosen by Him to be in positions of authority, as Abraham clearly had.

The work that He does through them is for the sake of others; it does not cancel out their responsibility for their own choices.

In Matt. 23:1-3, Jesus tells the people what the simple rule is to be towards people who are in positions of God's authority but who do not live up to the truth:

“Do what they tell you to do (because the truth they teach is God's gift to you through these individuals), but don't do what they do.”

A sinful pope or priest can still be a vessel of God's grace, just as Abraham and Moses and Caiaphas were.

- Our Catholic confidence in this truth is entirely biblical.

# The Birth of Isaac

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The promises by God to Abraham recounted in Genesis 15:18 and Genesis 17: 19-21:

- *"To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.*
- *"Sarah your wife shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac . . ."*

Now begin to be fulfilled.

The pivotal events of the birth of Isaac and the banishment of Ishmael will ensure that Isaac alone will inherit the covenant promises made to Abraham [17:21; 21:12].

With the birth of Isaac, Abraham's trust in God grows. The Lord is strengthening the patriarch for the final test he will have to undergo later. This test is described in chapter 22 – the Sacrifice of Isaac.

Read: [Genesis 21:1-7](#)

*[1] The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.*

*[2] And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.*

*[3] Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.*

*[4] And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.*

*[5] Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.*

*[6] And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."*

*[7] And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."*

### **A. With God All Things Are Possible**

Sometimes the deepest kind of joy in our lives is experienced in the things that at one time seemed the most impossible.

When Sarah first laughed at the idea of having a child after so many years of being barren and Abraham being so old, there must have been a good bit of incredulity in it, or she would not have tried to deny it.

When her son is born, he becomes the living proof that God keeps His promises, no matter how impossible they seem. Sarah's attitude towards God must have grown from reverent respect (she feared she would be in trouble if she acknowledged her laughter) to deep love for and confidence in Him as she held her son in her arms.

The birth of this child, for Sarah, was not just a demonstration of God's power and trustworthiness. It was a profoundly personal expression of His love for her [*"God has made laughter for me,"* i.e. He has made me happy].

She seems to be liberated by this encounter with Him, for now she envisions others sharing her laughter of delight, with no need to deny it.

- The laughter will be a response to an unthinkable reversal - that which had seemed too good to be true has actually happened.

Sarah's prophetic word about the effect that the news of the birth of her son will have on "every one who hears" is a foreshadowing of Mary's prophetic word about the effect of the news of the birth of her Son: *"All generations will call me blessed"* (Luke 1:48).

- The mother of Israel [Sarah] foreshadows the Mother of the Church [Mary].

## Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away

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This second expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from the house of Abraham completes the story began in chapter 16.

We now see the reason for it, given that expulsion went against the established law.

- Sarah's attitude was a decisive factor in ensuring that Isaac alone would be Abraham's heir.

**Read: Genesis 21:8-21**

*[8] And the child 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, playing with her son Isaac.*

*[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 lad and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants 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 Beer-sheba.*

*[15] When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes.*

*[16] Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Let me not look upon the death of the child." And as she sat over against him, the child lifted up his voice and wept.*

*[17] And God heard the voice of the lad; 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 lad where he is.*

*[18] Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him 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 lad a drink.*

*[20] And God was with the lad, 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.*

## **B. Isaac Is Weaned**

Isaac would have been perhaps 2 or 3 years old when he was weaned. At the feast given to celebrate his weaning, Sarah observed Ishmael (who would have been about 16-17 years old) "playing" with Isaac.

St. Paul, in Gal. 4:28-31, says that this was not innocent child's play but "persecution." The implication is that Ishmael was mocking or taunting Isaac about becoming a "big boy" but not being as important as a firstborn son, as Ishmael was.

This was the traditional Jewish understanding of this episode.

## **C. Sarah is Angry at Ishmael**

Why do you suppose this kind of "playing" would have so provoked Sarah?

Sarah probably could see the handwriting on the wall. Ishmael, as Abraham's firstborn son, would try to pull rank on Isaac. If this was allowed to fester, it would undoubtedly present problems for the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make a great nation of him through Sarah's son.

- What kind of rights as the firstborn would Ishmael have?
- Would he receive the patriarchal blessing instead of Isaac?
- Would Ishmael continue to harass Isaac, especially if Isaac's unique role as the child of promise in the family became clear with time?

It is not hard to see why Sarah urged Abraham to take action and send Hagar and Ishmael away.

## **D. Abraham is Displeased**

But Abraham loves Ishmael. His affections are deeply attached to the boy. It will cause him agony to lose him and his mother. That pain, of course, will be the consequence of a mistake made long ago.

To do God's will by making Isaac his sole heir will require a kind of death for Abraham. It will mean facing up to the affection that has developed in his heart for Ishmael. It is a moment of decision.

It appears that Abraham took this idea to God; vs. 12 seems to be God's end of a conversation Abraham was having with Him.

*"Be not displeased because of the lad and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring."*

This time, God has an opportunity to respond to Sarah's suggestion. Surprisingly, perhaps, to Abraham, this time Sarah is right.

### **E. Sarah's Concern for the Covenant**

We may wonder why it is necessary for Hagar and Ishmael to be sent away.

- How does God temper the harshness of it?
- What does this reveal about Him?

Sarah's concern over the future roles of Ishmael and Isaac seem to find some justification in the fact that God endorses the expulsion of Hagar and her son from the household.

This severe action suggests that Abraham's weakness concerning Ishmael was significant. He has shown himself in the past to be very attached to him; perhaps this attachment would threaten Abraham's resolve to follow through with the terms of the covenant he had made with God to make Isaac his heir.

The harsh remedy was the most effective way of getting to the root of this kind of weakness. It was severe but necessary.

God promises to be merciful to Hagar and Ishmael, which must have eased Abraham's mind somewhat. One has to wonder, though, why Abraham gave only bread and a skin of water to them when they set out from the camp.

- Did he secretly hope they would have to quickly return when the food ran out?
- We don't know. We do know that God intervened to rescue them and that Ishmael grew up to fulfill God's promises about him.

In this, as in the case of Lot, God shows Himself to be very responsive to the ones that His chosen people hold dear. Even in the midst of a severe remedy for weakness, God is a Lover.

## A Covenant with Abimelech

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Abimelech and Abraham establish a covenant of mutual peace. The initiative of Abimelech is explained by 20:1-18. The pagan king acknowledges the divine origin of Abraham's material success, and wants to establish an alliance

**Read: Genesis 21:22-34**

*[22] At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do;*

*[23] now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned."*

*[24] And Abraham said, "I will swear."*

*[25] When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized,*

*[26] Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today."*

*[27] So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant.*

*[28] Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart.*

*[29] And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set apart?"*

*[30] He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well."*

*[31] Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath.*

*[32] So they made a covenant at Beer-sheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines.*

*[33] Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.*

*[34] And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.*

Abimelech may have been very impressed with how God was so protective of Abraham and how effective his prayers were. He must have had a reputation of being highly favoured by God.

Perhaps it seemed wise to Abimelech and Philcor to secure for themselves an enduring relationship with Abraham. He would be an excellent ally.

First, however, there is the need to establish honesty and loyalty between them. This may be a veiled reference to Abraham's earlier deception concerning Sarah. In any case, Abraham agrees to deal honourably with Abimelech and his family.

- The men make a formal agreement, a covenant.

This is the first time in Scripture we see a covenant being made among men; before this they have been initiated by God.

It suggests that what men do among themselves to secure peace and well-being is actually a reflection of God's own nature, Who continually extends to man the opportunity to live as a member of His family, in covenant with Him.

## **F. Covenant and the Number Seven**

Note the importance of the number seven as the men make a covenant. This is in keeping with our discussion of the dual meaning of the Hebrew word for "oath" and "seven" in an earlier lesson. The seven lambs formalize the agreement between Abraham and Abimelech. For Abraham, they represent his intention not to go back on his word: "I swear."

## **G. The New Covenant**

The use of the number seven reminds us of the original covenant God made with man and all the cosmos, by hallowing the seventh day. That covenant expressed His intention to be a Father to the entire created order.

Men kept breaking that covenant until God made one that wouldn't depend on men. This New Covenant, ratified by the seven sacraments of the Church, is God's

final expression of His intention to be Father to us all; the seven sacraments assure us that He will never go back on His Word.

### **H. Abraham's Relationship with God**

In vs. 33, Abraham calls on the name of the Lord. Based on the last two chapters, what kind of relationship do you think Abraham has with God at this stage in his life?

- We know from previous chapters that Abraham is a man of faith, a friend of God.
- We also know that he isn't perfect. He has both inspired and disappointed us.
- He has lived with God for more than twenty-five years by the time we reach these chapters.
- He has not turned back from following Him or trusting in His promises, but he has stumbled and stalled out a few times.

In Genesis 20-21, we have a chance to ponder some of the weaknesses we see in Abraham. The most disturbing one is the possible presumption he has in his relationship with God, a confidence that leads him to repeat an earlier misstep.

What would prompt this kind of presumption?

- We don't know for sure, but usually it comes when one has lost the balance between confidence and humility, and thinks everything is "in the bag."

In this particular case, has Abraham lived so long with God that he can't imagine that anything he could do would cause him to forfeit what God has promised?

- If so, his soul is fertile soil for presumption.

Indeed, if he believes that nothing can happen to revoke God's covenant with him, he would not have much incentive to strengthen himself where he knows he is weak.

- Did we signs of that in his reluctance to let Ishmael go?

To sum up, we have seen many wonderful elements in Abraham's life of faith and trust in God. Yet we also see some evidence that Abraham may believe that his life as God's chosen man is a sure thing, with nothing left to question.

Is he right? We shall see.

## Summary

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1. When Abraham and Sarah resumed their wandering in Canaan, Abraham repeated a strategy of deception about his relationship to Sarah that he had used earlier in Egypt. This led to the abduction of Sarah by a man named Abimelech. God caused this man to become gravely ill, so that he could not have sexual relations with Sarah. Then God visited him in a dream, urging him to restore her to Abraham and to have Abraham pray for his healing.
2. God showed in this episode that His work on behalf of people is not put in jeopardy by the weakness and failure of those through whom He works, if He has placed them in positions of authority. He healed Abimelech through the prayers of Abraham.
3. Sarah's chastity and reputation were preserved.
4. In Abraham's old age, Sarah gave birth to a son. She was so delighted with this gift from God that she anticipated the laugh of joy and delight from everyone who hears her story. Her happiness reflected a deepening in her personal experience with God.
5. When Sarah saw Ishmael "playing" with Isaac, whatever she saw made her realize that sooner or later, Ishmael's presence within the family would pose a threat to Abraham's obedience to the covenant God had made with him. She urged Abraham to take the drastic measure of expelling the boy and his mother from the household.
6. Abraham was directed by God to do what Sarah has said. God promised to show them mercy, but the severe action was necessary in order to break the deep attachment that had developed between the father and his son.

7. Abraham obeyed, although reluctantly. When Hagar and Ishmael were on the point of exhaustion and desperation, God intervened to preserve their lives and their hope.

8. Abraham was approached by Abimelech to secure an honourable alliance. The two men formed a covenant which guaranteed them and their posterity peace and well-being. It was sealed with seven ewe lambs, a number carrying great covenantal significance.

9. In evaluating Abraham's relationship with God to this point, we saw strengths and weaknesses. Abraham is obviously God's friend, but we wondered whether that friendship was so secure that little slips (like the dishonesty over Sarah) or inordinate attachments (like the one to Ishmael) just didn't matter anymore.

## Questions

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Refer to **“Come and See” Catholic Bible Study: Genesis** – Pages 102 – 105.

## Preparation

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Preparation for Week #17 Read Genesis Chapters 22 -23