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## THE JOY AND PAIN OF A LIFE OF FAITH

Genesis 21:1-21  
By

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Genesis Lesson 43

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Genesis 21:1-21

A couple was expecting their first child. The wife was given a test that would reveal the baby's sex. The doctor asked the mother-to-be if she wanted to be called with the news. "Just mail it," she said. "My husband and I want to share this moment together." A few days later an envelope from the doctor arrived. The couple made a special evening of it and dined at their favorite restaurant. Finally they opened the letter. It was the doctor's bill (*Reader's Digest* [5/93]).

We've all faced the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations. It's a main reason people drift from the Lord. They came to Christ because they heard that He could solve their problems, but their problems have only grown worse. They heard that the Christian life would give them peace; but they have inner conflicts that they never knew before.

Isn't the Christian life supposed to be one of great joy? Yes, it is! There is no joy greater than that of knowing Jesus Christ, of being assured that your sins are forgiven and that you're going to heaven. There is great joy when God answers prayer, or uses you to lead a person to Christ or to help him with his problems. But while the Christian life results in great joy, the path to that joy often leads us through great pain. We need to be realistic in our expectations of what the life of faith entails.

A life of faith in God yields ultimate joy,  
but involves great pain.

The pain comes as God prunes from our lives the things that do not honor Him. We all bring into the Christian life the baggage of the old life, what the Bible calls the flesh. The flesh is what I can do in my own power, apart from dependence on God. It includes sins, such as pride, immorality, anger, and selfishness. But the flesh also produces things that are outwardly good--deeds of service, giving money, helping the needy, etc. But if those good deeds stem from my flesh, they are offensive to God because they feed my

pride and often are an attempt to balance out my sin and guilt, which can only be dealt with at the cross. So God has to tear away those deeds of the flesh, both good and bad, so that I learn to depend totally on Him for all that I do. It's a painful process.

In Genesis 21 Abraham experiences the joy and the pain of the life of faith. Isaac is finally born in fulfillment of the promise, and Abraham and Sarah laugh for joy. But the birth of Isaac threatens Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar. For 13 years, he has been the sole heir, the focus of his father's attention, the hope of his father's dreams. But now he is set aside in favor of this newcomer. So the tension in Abraham's family begins to grow. It climaxes at the feast held for the weaning of Isaac, probably when he was about two or three years old. Ishmael mocks Isaac and Sarah lays down an ultimatum: "Drive out this maid and her son [Sarah won't even use their names], for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac" (21:10). Abraham is plunged from the heights of joy to the depths of grief because of his love for his son.

After all, Abraham loved Ishmael. He was every bit as much Abraham's son as Isaac was. He would now be 15 or 16, on the edge of manhood. Abraham had spent years teaching him the skills of life. They had spent many happy hours together, watching over the flocks, talking about life's questions. And Abraham had a fond spot in his heart for Hagar, the boy's mother. Even if they had only had relations that once, still they had produced a son together. Hagar had been in the family for years. But now Sarah was insisting that Hagar and Ishmael had to go. Abraham was torn as these competing loves fought on the battleground of his heart.

He faced the most difficult decision of his life. Should he make Sarah face reality and learn to live with Hagar and Ishmael? Or should he consent to her request, which clearly was based on jealousy, and send Hagar and Ishmael away? At this point the Lord intervened and told Abraham to do what Sarah had said (21:12). Frankly, this is a bit startling. From Hagar's and Ishmael's perspective, it seemed unfair. Hagar had not had a choice in the matter of conceiving Ishmael with Abraham. Ishmael hadn't asked to be born into that situation. His jealousy toward Isaac is understandable for a teenage boy. While Sarah's attitude was also understandable, it was not commendable. So why did God take Sarah's side?

God's reason is stated: "for through Isaac your descendants shall be named" (21:12). God wasn't endorsing Sarah's jealousy, but in His sovereign purpose, God had chosen Isaac to be the one through whom His blessing would flow to all nations. Since He is God, He has the right to make such sovereign choices without giving us His reasons (see Romans 9). But in this case, I think we can discern the reason behind God's choice.

Isaac represents that which only God can do. Sarah had always been barren. Now, due to age, Abraham and Sarah were physically unable to produce a child. So Isaac was the result of God's power, apart from human ability. But Ishmael represents what man can do without God. Abraham and Hagar produced Ishmael by natural means. In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul says that this story has a spiritual lesson behind it. Ishmael was born according to the flesh, but Isaac was born according to the Spirit (Gal. 4:23, 29). Abraham and Sarah could not boast in Isaac, but could only glorify God for him. But Abraham could boast in Ishmael, because he produced him.

God chose Isaac so that we would know that the life of faith requires total dependence on God, so that all the fruit comes from Him. That which stems from our flesh, which we can do apart from God, can never please Him. It exalts human pride and robs God of His glory. That which the Spirit produces in and through us brings God the glory due His name. So even though it seems unfair that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled, it was necessary for God's purpose and glory.

This story teaches us that the joy of the life of faith comes from obtaining what only God can do; the pain comes from separating from what I can do in my own power. Let's first look at the joy and then at the pain.

1. The joy of a life of faith comes from obtaining that which only God can do (Isaac, 21:1-7).

When Isaac was born, there was great joy and laughter. God told Abraham to name the child Isaac (17:19), which means, "he laughs." While Abraham laughed in shock and Sarah laughed in unbelief when they were told that Isaac would be born the next

year, their laughter was changed to the laughter of joy as they held the child of promise in their arms.

Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (21:6). When God does great things for you, you laugh with joy and others rejoice with you. Laughter ought to be a part of every Christian home and church, as we see God do great things for us and as we enjoy His gifts to us. The poet, Thackeray, said, "A good laugh is sunshine in a house." I hope you enjoy your children as God's precious gifts to you and laugh often with them.

Too often Christian homes and churches are uptight and rigid. The great British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, used humor in the pulpit, which wasn't often done in his day. Once when a woman objected to some humorous remark, Spurgeon replied, "Madam, if you had known how many others I kept back, you would not have found fault with that one, but you would have commended me for the restraint I had exercised."

There are three aspects to the joy that comes from obtaining what only God can do:

- A. There is joy in knowing that what God promises, He does.

Note verse 1: "Then the Lord took note of Sarah *as He had said*, and the Lord did for Sarah *as He had promised*." God always keeps His promises! The Christian life is a process of discovering, unwrapping, and enjoying the many promises of God that are scattered throughout His Word. It's like looking for hidden treasures. The apostle Paul wrote, "For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him [Christ] they are yes" (2 Cor. 1:20).

Do you fear death and judgment? God promises eternal life to those who put their trust in His Son. Do you struggle with guilt? God promises forgiveness of all our sins in Christ. Are you anxious about some situation? He invites us to cast all our anxieties on Him because He cares for us. Are you fearful? He promises His protection. You can count on these promises and more and have great peace and joy, knowing that what God promises, He does!

You may be thinking, "Well, that's nice to say. But I've been asking God for some things for years, but He hasn't come through." That's the second aspect of this joy:

- B. There is joy in knowing that what God promises, He does in His time.

Note verse 2: "So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, *at the appointed time* of which God had spoken to him." God doesn't work according to our timetable, but His. With us, 25 years (the time Abraham and Sarah had to wait for Isaac) seems like forever. With God, a thousand years is as a day. Clearly, God is not in any hurry to bring about His plan!

It would be 2,000 years until the promised seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ, would be born. That's a long time! Many generations went to their graves longing to see the fulfillment of God's promise of the Savior. Was God late in bringing Christ into the world? The Holy Spirit writes through Paul, "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son ..." (Gal. 4:4).

Maybe you've been waiting on God for years to fulfill some promise. You may even go to your grave without seeing it fulfilled. But you can have great joy in knowing that what God has promised, He will do in His time. You ask, "Why does He make me wait?" There are a number of reasons, some of which we may never know. But one reason is clear in our text:

- C. There is joy in knowing that what God promises, He does when we reach the end of ourselves.

Verse 5 mentions Abraham as being 100 years old. Verses 2 and 7 repeat the fact that it was in his old age. The point is that God provided Isaac for Abraham and Sarah when they had reached the end of their ability to produce a son. If they were going to receive the promised son, it would have to be totally God's doing. It was, and they rejoiced in seeing God do the impossible on their behalf.

God wants each of us to come to that point of casting ourselves completely on Him so that He gets all the glory for the results in our lives. That doesn't mean that we are passive. Here we see Abraham actively obeying God by naming the boy Isaac and by circumcising him (21:3-4), as God had commanded (17:9-12, 19).

Coming to the end of ourselves doesn't mean that we passively sit back and do nothing. It means that we actively obey God, depending totally on Him for the power and the results.

I experience something of this each week in my ministry. I feel totally inadequate to be a pastor and to prepare sermons that will feed God's flock. That's a great place to be, because the minute I start thinking I can do it, I'm relying on myself. Paul put it, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5). But at the same time, I don't sit around waiting for a sermon to float down from heaven. I work hard to understand the biblical text and to know how to apply it, but I'm aware that if God doesn't come through, I'm in big trouble!

Our independent, fallen nature makes us prone to fall back on our own schemes and power. Abraham had trusted the Lord for Isaac. But he still had Ishmael. If anything happened to Isaac (as in chapter 22), Abraham could always fall back on Ishmael as the standby. So God said that Ishmael would have to go. That's where the pain of the life of faith comes in, when God knocks out those human props we've been leaning on or keeping in storage.

2. The pain of a life of faith comes from separating from that which I do in my own power (Ishmael, 21:8-21).

This was the most difficult thing God had told Abraham to do in his 100 years. Although the text doesn't say, I don't think I'm off base when I picture Abraham with tears streaking down his weathered cheeks as he sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. As far as we know, this was the last time Abraham saw his son whom he had loved for 16 years. I don't care how much you trust God, something like this hurts deeply. And you don't get over it in a few days or even in a few years. Even though there was great joy over the birth of Isaac, Abraham suffered ongoing pain over the loss of Ishmael.

I can't begin to cover these verses in detail. But I want to point out three lessons which stem from the separation from Ishmael:

A. There will always be conflict between what I can do in my own power and what only God can do.

The birth of Isaac not only resulted in joy; it also resulted in conflict. Ishmael mocked Isaac. Paul applies the spiritual lessons of this event: "But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh [Ishmael] persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit [Isaac], so it is now also" (Gal. 4:29). The Judaizers, who gloried in their own "righteousness," persecuted those who gloried in Christ and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3). And, as Paul says in Galatians 5:17, "The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, ..." The Christian life involves conflict, both with those who are religious, but do not understand dying to self and living to glorify God; and, conflict within, as my prideful self dies a slow death as I learn to trust more fully in God.

B. The only way to resolve the conflict is to put away that which I can do in my own power.

Peaceful coexistence is not possible. Whatever stems from my old life has to go. Ishmael had been Abraham's pride and joy, his hope. When God promised to give him Isaac, Abraham said, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You" (17:18). But God said that Ishmael had to go.

In practical terms, this involves the painful obedience of saying no to myself and yes to God. It means denying my pride, my sinful desires, and all that stems from my old self, and consciously depending on God's Spirit to produce His fruit in me. It is an ongoing process of submitting to God's pruning my flesh so that He can accomplish His purpose through me. It hurts, and often I won't understand. But my part is to obey. I'm sure Abraham didn't understand God's reason for sending Ishmael away, just as later he didn't understand God's reason for sacrificing Isaac. But he obeyed without questioning God.

Elisabeth Elliot, whose first husband, Jim Elliot, was one of the five missionaries killed by the Auca Indians in 1956, and whose second husband died of cancer, tells of visiting a shepherd in the mountains of North Wales. One by one, he would grab the rams by their horns and fling them into a tank of antiseptic. They would struggle to climb out, but the sheep dog would snarl in their faces to force them back in. Just as they were about to climb up the ramp, the shepherd would catch them by the horns with a wooden

implement, spin them around, and force them under again, holding them completely under for a few seconds. The sheep didn't have a clue about what was happening.

Mrs. Elliot observes, "I've had some experiences in my life that have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor rams--I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from the Shepherd I trusted. And He didn't give me a hint of explanation." (*World Vision*, 4/77.)

There will always be conflict between my flesh (what I can do in my power) and the Spirit (what only God can do). The only way to resolve the conflict is obediently to put off the deeds of the flesh.

- C. When we obey, God graciously softens the pain of parting with the old life.

Even as God tells Abraham that Ishmael must go, He tenderly reassures him, "And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant" (21:13). God takes us through painful times, but He always does it with compassion. We also see His compassion toward Hagar and Ishmael. She has abandoned him, thinking that he's about to die. She begins sobbing. But in verse 17, it says that God heard, not Hagar, but the lad crying. He then calls to Hagar and points her to the well of water which she had not yet seen.

The point is, we often think we're the only ones who care for our loved ones who are in distress. We cry out to God. But God has heard their cry before He hears our cry! He cares for them more than we do! Even in those difficult times of pain, God graciously softens the pain for those who call out to Him.

### Conclusion

We all enjoy watching the Olympics. The high point is watching the beaming faces of the winners as they stand to receive their medals. We vicariously rejoice with them. But we sometimes forget the years of pain that led up to that moment of joy. Behind the scenes they spent the better part of the last few years going through grueling daily work outs. Many days they didn't feel like practicing, but they did it anyway. Why were they willing to endure

the pain? Because they were going for the ultimate joy of winning the Olympic medal.

The life of faith yields great joy, but the path is often through great pain. Some of you are going through painful trials. You may be confused and disappointed and grieving. You didn't expect the Christian life to be like this. God may or may not let you understand why He's doing what He's doing. But He does want you to submit obediently to his pruning process and to trust Him that by yielding to the pain, you'll ultimately experience the joy of obtaining that which only God can do with your life.

### Discussion Questions

1. How would you have felt if you had been Abraham? Sarah? Hagar? Ishmael? Who had the hardest time trusting God?
2. Why didn't Abraham supply Hagar and Ishmael with plenty of supplies and servants?
3. How can we know if our efforts for God stem from the flesh or from His power? Does His power make it easy?
4. Was God unfair to choose Isaac and send Ishmael away? Did His choice show approval of Sarah's jealousy? Why/why not?

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