

**The Journey of Faith
Abraham in the Autumn of Life
Laughter and Sorrow!
Genesis chapter 21:1-21**

Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

What shall we do with difficult OT texts?!

Many centuries ago, when Greek philosophy was emerging, some Greeks became embarrassed by their nation's fables and myths: the mythical gods and characters that Homer and Hesiod wrote about behaved badly!

So what they did was turn to allegory: "we're not meant to take these bad-boy stories literally, they're meant to point symbolically to some higher, more nobler truth." In this way they felt more comfortable with these awkward stories!

Some Jewish writers copying the Greek philosophers began talking about the stories of the Old Testament in the same way: stories such as the immodesty of Noah, the drunkenness of Lot, the Song of Songs and so on. Ashamed of these stories, they explained them away by saying, "we're not meant to take them literally, no, these stories are meant to point to some higher moral truth."

Some people today—even people who call themselves Christians—are embarrassed by the Old Testament. But instead of turning to allegory to "soften" the stories, they simply ignore them. I heard this very week of a prominent church in the US, which used to have a reputation of being faithful to the Scriptures, now doubting the authority and value of the Old Testament.

Rejecting the OT is a big mistake! Because the OT is the foundation of the New Testament. Because the first Christians who did not have the NT regarded the 39 books of the OT as their Bible—that's all they had! The Bible Jesus held and prized was the OT. Because the OT continually points to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Because Paul writes in Romans chapter 1 that the Gospel was promised beforehand through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures—by which he means the OT! Because the OT was inspired by God no less than the NT ("All scripture is God-breathed", writes Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, "and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in

righteousness...”). And because the sinful human behaviour stories we find in the OT are no different from the sorts of sinful behaviour that take place today and in all of history—these stories are real life in a broken world!

There is no reason, whatsoever, to be embarrassed by the OT folks! Yes, we are to interpret it in the light of the NT, and to be sensitive, but let us remember that the OT has been written for our learning and profit. Which is why this series of sermons from the life of Abraham.

The Story

So today we gladly consider the events of Genesis chapter 21 together. Abraham has settled south of the promised land, in the lands “owned” by king Abimelech.

The time has come for the child of the promise to be born to Sarah. It’s been 25 years since God promised, “I will make you into a great nation,” 25 years of waiting for the promise to be fulfilled. About a year before chapter 21, God told them the child would be born in a year’s time! And so Sarah bore a son to Abraham in the normal way and Abraham called him Isaac, which means “he laughs.”

Playing on his name, “he laughs”, Sarah says that God has brought her laughter—she’s talking about the joy a little baby has brought to her. But she also realises that people will laugh, not in scorn, but in wonderment at the fact of a 90 year old and a 100 year old having a baby! The home was filled with joy!

And when Isaac was weaned, which in those days could be as old as 3 years, Abraham held a great feast to celebrate the promised child. Now, in the background, another darker story was brewing. Some, fourteen years earlier, with no promised baby in sight Sarah had suggested to Abraham that perhaps God’s will was to build a surrogate family through her maidservant, Hagar. In those days a baby born in this way could be legally regarded as Abraham and Sarah’s child.

The result of this plan was baby Ishmael, but his birth sparked bitter enmity between Hagar and Sarah—no surprise there! And Ishmael, Abraham's son (perhaps now 17 years old) was at the feast. And Sarah notices Ishmael making fun of baby-cum-toddler Isaac. It’s more than innocent play: *“Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking....”*

What was he saying? We're not told. "How can that little chap turn into a great nation?!" We don't know. Paul tells us in Galatians 4:29 that Ishmael "persecuted" Isaac, which is strong language! "Persecuted" sounds as though this mocking was not a one-off event, but had been going on for some time. But when he mocked at a feast designed to celebrate the life of little Isaac, Sarah exploded: *"Get rid of that slave woman (she can't even bring herself to mention Hagar by name) and her son (nor can she bring herself to mention Ishmael's name) for that slave woman's son (she's putting them both in their "place", with the word 'slave') will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."*

Abraham is torn between loyalty to his wife and new baby Isaac, and his love for Ishmael, who was his son after all, and had lived in the house some 17 years and who Abraham had thought at times was the promised child. Abraham's really upset. Mercifully God intervenes in the situation. God comforts Abraham, "Do not be distressed about the boy and your maidservant. God directs him: "Listen to whatever Sarah tells you." God confirms him: "Because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. God assures him that he also has plans for Ishmael: "I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring." Early the next morning, Abraham does the impossible: he says goodbye to his beloved son - he gathers food and water and sets Hagar and Ishmael off on their own journey. Obedience to God is sometimes full of pain, especially when it involves a broken relationship. Abraham has to say goodbye to his first-born son, and entrust Ishmael's future into God's hands. *"Early in the morning...."* where you and I might delay obeying a difficult command, Abraham's on it straight away.

That's not the end of the story, because on her way back to Egypt, Hagar got lost in the treacherous wilderness, and they ran out of water. Ishmael, growing fainter by the minute, falters, unable to go any further, and so his mother gently rests him under a bush, fully expecting him to die. Helpless and hopeless, she walks a short distance away unable to watch her precious son die of thirst, and there she begins to cry. Ishmael is weeping too. God, who hears the cries of the poor, sent an angel to speak to Hagar words of hope: *"What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand for I will make him into a great nation."* In her despair and hopelessness she had failed to notice a well of water, just in front of her, so God opened her downcast eyes and Ishmael was revived.

And God was with the boy as he grew up. We're even told what he became - an archer! And Hagar managed to find a wife from among her people, the Egyptians, for him too! God took care of Hagar and Ishmael!

What we learn from this episode in the life of Abraham:

A Reminder: the life of faith is a mixture of Joy and Sorrow

The whole spectrum of human emotion is here in this short story:

Happy emotions such as Joy at the birth and weaning of baby Isaac. And sad emotions such as the jealousy, the bitterness and anger of Sarah towards Hagar and Ishmael, the deep sadness of Abraham at the losing of Ishmael and the despair over the dying thirst of Ishmael.

Life is a tapestry of many colours is it not?

Look how quickly joy can be overshadowed by sorrow! In an instant, joy turned to sorrow! The mocking scorn of a teenage lad brings forth a sudden fountain of deep emotions in Sarah's heart —bitterness, jealousy, anger, resentment. And look at when joy can turn to sorrow! On the very occasion which should be filled with joy—a feast in honour of little Isaac! *“Get rid of that slave woman and he son.”*

Believers in Jesus need to remind ourselves that in a fallen world, our lives will be filled with both joy and sorrow. Joy is normal, and sorrow is normal. Cloth is made of two rows of fabric, one called the warp and one called the woof, and in the same way life is made up of both of the warp of joy and the woof of sorrow.

Jesus is called a “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.” (Isaiah 53:3) but then we also read in Luke 10:21, “Jesus was filled with joy by the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21). The Psalms, which show us authentic human emotion, are filled with song both of joy and of lament. *“For you make me glad by your deeds, O Lord; I sing for joy at the work of your hands.” (Psalm 92:4). “My soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.., you have put me in the lowest pit in the darkest depths.” (Psalm 88:3,6)*

Someone from across the pond, sent me a text a few weeks ago: *“There is a belief among evangelicals today that if you believe in Jesus, everything is going to go well*

with you—you won't suffer, you'll prosper; you'll be healthy and wealthy; you won't face the kinds of things that others have to endure; you're a King's kid, and God will always protect you. But that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible makes it very clear that suffering is part of the Christian life, that we shouldn't expect a life of ease and prosperity. Instead you and I are called to follow Jesus and to take up our crosses every single day, which might include suffering and persecution."

The person who sent it to me wasn't sure what to make of the text, I think they themselves wondered if the words were right. I replied, *"That is absolutely true, suffering is part of the Christian life! How can it not be if we are followers of the man of sorrows?"*

At the conference on mental health and the Bible Yvonne and I attended recently, the last session included open mic. One man said, "I go to a happy-clappy church, but this week I have learnt it's OK to be sad!" It's OK to be sad! It's OK to be sad.

Oh how different it will be when we get to heaven, no tears only ecstatic, eternal joy! This chapter is a simple Reminder: the life of faith, here below, is a mixture of joy and sorrow.

A Lesson: Wait patiently

Few of us are good at patience! It was twenty-five years before God's promise was fulfilled! Very late on Abraham and Sarah's timetable, but bang on time in God's divine programming! *"Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him."* The Bible filled with examples of waiting! At the age of forty Moses was all ready to lead God's people out of bondage! But God knew there was much to do in his heart before he was ready. How many more years did he have to wait? Forty more! Samuel anointed David as king in the place of Saul. David was the king, but he wasn't the king! Year by year David was hounded and hated by Saul! How many years did he have to wait? Around 15 years! Not surprising then that David psalms are filled with the waiting theme. Psalm 40:1 "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him." (Psalm 40:1) "Lord, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God." (Psalm 38:15)

What, may I ask are you waiting for? Some good gift you have been seeking God for? For vindication? Resolution to a problem? A reconciliation? The conversion of a loved one? The return of a prodigal? Some ministry you believe God has called you to, but nothing has happened—yet?

What are you waiting for? Don't rush in, don't act. On more than one occasion, Abraham and Sarah stepped in to "give God a hand, because heaven was too slow! Ishmael, Eliezer? But their human attempts to hurry along Gods good purposes, only brought sorrow upon their heads.

Here's the deal: Psalm 27:14, "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."

And finally,

A Comfort: God is in Sovereign Control of our Lives

In spite of all the mistakes Abraham and Sarah made, God fulfilled his good purposes in their lives! In fact, time after time, Abraham and Sarah acted in such a way that might have thwarted God's purpose for them to bear the promised child. When Sarah was taken into the king of Egypt's harem, Genesis 12. When Abraham was convinced that the heir would be Eliezer, chapter 15. When Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham, chapter 16. When both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the Lord's message "I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son." (Chapter 18) When Sarah was taken into Abimelech's harem, chapter 20.

And yet, in spite of their folly, God fulfilled his good promises in their lives, because God's sovereign, good, purposes and plans for his people will be fulfilled, no matter what!

My reading yesterday morning was Psalm 138, my aim on my day off, is to take away just one verse from that Psalm into the day and meditate on it, "The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me." What a great comfort to know that God's good plans for his children, his purposes, will succeed!

Nowhere was the sovereign rule of God more manifest than in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God.

Stan wanted to destroy him, the religious leaders were envious of him, but God raised him victoriously from the dead and fulfilled his glorious saving purposes through him.

And as with the Master, so with his true servants! God will fulfil his good purposes in our lives!