

CRY OUT

Genesis 21:8-21

Intro

I had to do a whole lot of background reading in order to get my head around the totality of the story that we are about to hear.

However, the confusion did not take place because of the events that took place. In fact, that was actually cut and dry.

What through me for a loop was *when* it took place.

Here's why: contrary to popular belief, Genesis was not written by one person who was composing a concise narrative that seamlessly takes you historically from point A to point B. In fact, there are least three different streams of thought that come together to form what we call Genesis. At various points in the chapters, one of the streams would push to the fore and take over, while in other cases the traditions were merged to form an amalgamation.

To highlight the first point (that one stream would push to the fore), one of the traditions tells us that Abraham's first son Ishmael (who was born of Sarah's slave Hagar after Sarah got frustrated at her inability to bear a child) was some 13 years older than Isaac, the child who would constitute the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise that God made with Abraham to have descendants that "would bless the world". If this timetable carried through to the passage we are about to hear, that means that Ishmael would be about 16 years old.

However, as I read the passage, I could not conceive of this passage referring to a young man who was able to speak and literally stand up for himself. It was under this level of confusion that I finally came to the understanding that what we are about to hear is a different stream of tradition compared to the line of thought that says that Ishmael is a teenager.

Therefore, as you hear these words, I invite you to picture two young brothers (one three and the other four or five) playing with one another. Understand the turmoil that Abraham is forced to face by turning his first born out into the wilderness. Envision a mother who is so despondent that she puts her son under a bush and walks away because she cannot stand to watch the death that is sure to come. Understand the compassion of God and the patience and trust that we must have in that compassion. The scripture reads this way.

Genesis 21:8-21

⁸The child [Isaac] grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son [Ishmael].

¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him 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 about 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 opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me 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? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ 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 got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

“Cry Out”

It can be very easy to hear this passage and go to an emotional place that what is able to be derived from these words speaks to patience. And it certainly does.

But anyone who has ever experienced a time of real turmoil (wait, doesn't that include most people? Yes, it does!), is able to hear a whole lot more.

So with that little bit of an addendum, let's look at it.

To begin with, and contrary to the way that the rest of Genesis lays it out, Abraham was not the father to only one child. There may have been only one child of the promise of God in Isaac, but there were two children who were able to call Abraham their father.

As you may recall (and was mentioned earlier) Ishmael came into being after Sarah (Abraham's wife) became disgusted at her inability to bear a child. She told her husband in chapter 16, “go in to my slave-girl [Hagar]; it may be that I shall obtain children by her”. Sarah initial thought was that Hagar might be able to be a surrogate mother the old fashioned way. As we quickly learn, only a few verses later, this idea does not work. Sarah does not accept Ishmael, or for that matter, Hagar.

However, just because Sarah is not able to accept Ishmael, does not mean that Abraham has the same feeling.

In fact, in chapter 17, as God is declaring that Sarah will give birth to a child of the promise, we actually hear Abraham raise the plea, “O that Ishmael might live in Your [God's] sight!” It is clear that Abraham loves this child and wants the best for him. This is why it “distresses” him so when Sarah tells him to cast Ishmael and Hagar out into the wilderness.

Although it is not explicitly stated, we can assume that Abraham called out to God in this point of stress and asked and even begged for some resolution that would allow Ishmael to live and ultimately prosper. The reason we can assume this is because we hear that “God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; ... for ... I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” God has answered Abraham's prayer and even though he does not know how this will take place, he trusts in God enough to believe that it is so.

It is at this point in the story that the focus shifts from Abraham to Hagar and Ishmael. They are sent out into the wilderness with a skin of water and some bread. Whether it be a few hours or days later, we are not told, Hagar realizes that there is nothing else that she can do. The water and bread have run out, the sun is beating down upon them, sapping her and her young son of their strength, and she knows that death is upon her. She cannot bear to hear the last breaths of her son, or be close to him as he releases his last cries. She leaves him under a bush and walks away, despondent, trying to escape the reality that is upon him, all the while knowing that there is nothing else that she can do.

She cries out to God. But if we listen to what the scripture tells us, she is not the only one who is crying out. It says in verse 17 that, "God heard the voice of the boy". With this statement, we are now able to know that Hagar called out with her words and that Ishmael cried out with his tears. They lifted their voices to God, and much like God heard Abraham and reassured him that his son would be safe, God responds to Ishmael and his mother and saves them by opening Hagar eyes to a well that gave her and Ishmael the water that they need to not only survive but ultimately grow into, as it says in the scripture, "a great nation".

However, in order to receive that comfort, they had to cry out.

Crying out does not feel like something that we are all that comfortable with any more.

Yipping and complaining? That we have locked down.

But crying out; crying out for help, assistance, and relief? There is a place where we struggle.

Think about how you experience other people...even yourself. Do you hear complaining...or do you hear people crying out for the assistance that is needed in order for them to get to whatever the next step is?

I think about my life and the different things that have transpired in it...and there have been a few occasions when I've cried out (I think about the circumstances revolving around Austin's birth), but for the most part what I remember are occasions when I complained, maybe quietly, but complained.

That is not the scriptural example that is laid before us! God shows us, time after time after time people of faith crying out to God in sadness, frustration, or anger, but still crying out to a God in whom faith still resides, begging for some kind of relief, for some way in which the angels of God are able to intercede, even if it is in a way that is completely unexpected.

Thankfully, much like was the case with Ishmael, the angels of God do appear and they are able to show us the a moment of respite to a well of reserve. These angels come in the form of doctors and nurses; friends and neighbors; passing acquaintances and complete strangers. They come in the form of a look, a call, a note or email; a song or news article. God responds, in so many ways,...when we cry out.

With that said, I implore all of you, in those times when you are searching for a well of nourishment that at this moment seems impossible to find, to cry out to God. And not just by yourself. Allow others to be there with you in the midst of that wilderness so that they may call out with you. This may sound presumptuous (until you start to remember how God works in the world), but that other person may be that presence of God that you need right now. Allow the church to pray with and for you. If you do this, I firmly believe that although we may not get the result that we were necessarily hoping for, that the angels of God will hear our cry and lead us to the sustenance that we need in order to continue on. It's

so very easy to lean upon the excuse that we don't want to bother anyone or that we should be able to deal with whatever we are facing on our own.

However, this is not the scriptural precedent that we have before us.

Instead, we are told to cry out in our need. Do so; cry out and allow the angels of God to come and care for you.

After Sermon Prayer

O holy God, it can be incredibly difficult to call out in the midst our need. However, time after time, story after story, we are able to hear how the power of prayer, crying out to You, is able to receive the support that we so need. God, we pray that Your Holy Spirit might work in our lives so that we are able to lift our need to You. God, we place our trust, indeed our very lives in Your hands. Help us to do so in our everyday lives as well. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.