

Two Sons of Promise

Genesis 21:8-21

How many of you remember the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour? Yes? Their comedy show ran for three years and hosted not only their comedy routine, but many musical acts popular in the late 1960's. One Smothers Brothers sketch that has long stood out in my mind is the one where Tommy, the elder Smothers brother, complains that "mom always liked you best" to his younger brother, Dickie. Dickie had a pet dog, Tommy had a pet chicken. Dickie had a bicycle, Tommy had a one-wheeled wagon, and it goes on from there. If you ever want to revisit that sketch it is available on YouTube. While "mom always liked you best" was played for laughs, the truth is that sibling rivalry has existed as long as man has walked the earth and it's not always funny. We have the story of Cain and Abel, although in that story Cain likely complained that "God always liked you best" before killing his brother.

In our story today we have two brothers, again, although from different mothers, each beloved by their father Abraham. Their story begins back in Genesis 12 we learn that the Lord called Abraham, then called Abram, to leave his home and travel to the land of Canaan saying:

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

Abram was 75 years old at the time. He packed up his wife and nephew and all their belongings and set out for the promised land. However, seeing the fulfillment of God's promise was not without peril.

Sometime after arriving in Canaan, there was a famine and Abram packed up his family again and moved to Egypt. Fearing harm from the Egyptians, Abram tells his wife to say she is his sister, which was not entirely false. When Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's household, the Egyptians were once again beset by plagues, causing Pharaoh to ask Abram to leave Egypt.

Returning to the Negev, Abram became very prosperous. His nephew Lot was with him and was also becoming prosperous, so much so that it was necessary for them to part ways, so each had enough space for all their family and flocks. Lot moved to Sodom, where unfortunately he was captured during a war between enemy kingdoms. Learning of Lot's capture, Abram rallied an army from among his men and the with aid of several allies, freed Lot from his captors.

Upon returning to his home, Abram once again heard a word from the Lord:

“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer

of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ...Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15)

This is the covenant that God made with Abram. Learning of God’s promise and being aware that she was well past the age of conceiving and giving birth, Abram’s wife devised a scheme to provide a child of the promise by having Abram take her handmaid as a wife. The handmaid, Hagar, indeed conceived which brought strife between the two women. Hagar runs away from the now abusive Sarai, only to have an experience of God in the desert.

The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered.

Then the angel of the LORD told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

With this promise Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai and gave birth to a son that Abram named Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old at this time. Several years later, when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord spoke to him again:

“I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

...God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ... I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ... and I will be their God.”...

God also said, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

Abraham ... said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of

ninety?” And Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!”

Then God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.” When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

At the age of 99 years old, Abraham once again received a word from 3 visitors that at the same time the following year Sarah would bear him a son. Both Abraham and Sarah are dumbstruck at the possibility! The prophecy comes to fruition and at 100 years of age Abraham held the son of the promise in his arms.

Now Ishmael, who has likely been told his whole life that he is the son of the promise, finds out that his new little brother has usurped that position. Several commentaries say that what Sarah witnessed between the now teenaged Ishmael and the toddler Isaac was not a pleasant exchange, so she demands that Ishmael and his mother be removed from the camp. This may be the first time that the firstborn son loses out on

the inheritance he expected, but it will not be the last of these stories in the Bible. We have the story of Abraham's grandsons Esau and Jacob, where the younger Jacob steals his brother's blessing from their father Isaac. Consider the story of young King David, chosen over his seven older brothers to succeed King Saul. And our Lord Jesus tells the story of a younger brother who misspent his father's wealth, yet when he returned home was blessed by his father.

In each case, the Lord disregarded the customs of men and gave greater glory to the younger sibling. In the case of Isaac and Ishmael, however, both shared a promise of becoming the patriarch of great nations, but only Isaac would carry the mantle of the child of the covenant. Isaac would go on to be considered the patriarch of the Jewish and Christian faiths, while Ishmael would be known as the patriarch of the Muslim faith as an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad.

Why do we tell this story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac? One reason is that it goes against expectations. In ancient Palestine the first-born son always inherited the lion's share with the younger one working under him. Yet here we have Ishmael, the first-born, significantly older brother, being passed over to make Isaac the child of the covenant. The work of God is being done here, and God being sovereign can do as He wishes.

Have you had the experience where something you thought would work out in your favor then it did not? We don't or won't always know why those things we expect don't happen. This is one of the mysteries of God. Abraham experienced trials of faith which preceded God's blessings. It's just not something we can explain with our own human understanding.

God is free to do as he pleases. Abram and Sarai questioned God's promise of a son to be born in their old age. Age, barrenness, and doubt are no obstacles to God's freedom of choice – which was to have Isaac born to these two aged parents. We see this again and again throughout the Bible. Baby Moses is saved and becomes a savior of a nation. The murderous Saul's life was turned around and he became the prolific apostle, Paul. Christ was crucified and returned from the dead. Nothing is impossible with God. Do not despair!

In our story we are given God's promise that he is with us. The name Ishmael means "God hears." When Hagar thought that her life and the life of her son would end in the desert, God heard their cries and told Hagar not to be afraid. He repeated the promise made to Abraham that He would make a great nation of Ishmael, and He did. Nothing is impossible with God.

Don't be afraid to look into the mystery of God. When we are at our most vulnerable – like an elderly barren couple faced with leaving their

estate to one of their slaves, God is there. When we are in our darkest hour – like a freed slave woman and her son fainting in the desert, God provides what we most need. When despair overwhelms us, we hear once again that we are precious to God and He is with us. How do we know this? We look to Immanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ.

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