

LIFE WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

By Steve Zeisler

I am struck by all the advantages Abraham had that many of us would desire for our own walks with God. Never in his adult life did he have to question what the plan of God was--whom he should marry, where he should live, what his job should be, or with whom he should associate. God spoke clearly to him as friend to friend about where he was to live and what he was to do.

Although he never had to ask about what he should do, he always had to ask how he should do it. In the long run, this is the more important issue and more critical concern for eternity's sake--by what means will I live? Am I going to be a person who walks by faith or by sight? Will I do what I am assigned in the strength of the power of God or in the power of my own human capability? This issue faced Abraham day after day: would he carry out God's intention for his life by trusting himself or God? His failures illustrate to us our own need, and his great successes when he trusted in God also teach us. Abraham's growth in faith made him a source of blessing in his own generation and in every one since. He was a giver of life to the desperately needy race of Adam.

I would like us to consider what it is that will make us effective life-givers to our world. How can we have an influence for Christ's sake on the people around us? How can we offer the words of truth, the perspective of God and the hope born of the Spirit so that the needy, dying people around us can receive life? How can we like Abraham be a blessing to our generation?

In Genesis 21, there are two individuals highlighted who will benefit from Abraham's ministry. The two individuals are Ishmael and Abimelech. First let us look at Ishmael in verses 8 through 21:

And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." And the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. And the water in the skin was used up, and she left the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, "Do not let me see the boy die." And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand; for I will make a great nation of him." 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. And God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

It is hard to read these words without wondering at the apparent harshness of both God and Abraham. It seems cruel to send the boy and his mother away into the wilderness. But if we look carefully and think about what is happening, we will realize that this is not a cruelty but a blessing.

Conflict arose quickly between the sons of Abraham. At the time Isaac was weaned, his father Abraham gave a feast in his honor. Children tended to nurse longer in those days and in that culture. As a result, Isaac may have been as old as three or four when he was finally weaned. Remember Ishmael was thirteen when Isaac was born. That would make him somewhere around 16 or 17 years old now. Ishmael was loved by his father also. Abraham cared deeply for him. As the only child born to this man who desperately wanted children, he was probably pampered while growing up. Since he was the son of a very rich and powerful Bedouin chieftain, we can easily conjecture that Ishmael's first thirteen to sixteen years consisted of prestige and comfort without much being expected of him.

In contrast to Ishmael's preferred treatment, his mother remained a slave. When Hagar left the family because of her pregnancy in chapter 16, she was told by God to return to live under the hand of Sarah. She continued to be a slave. Thus, the experience of being handed the water skin and the food to carry and being sent out into the desert would have been her lot in life. She was merely performing the duties of a female slave in that culture.

Interestingly, when Hagar and Ishmael went into the wilderness and the supplies began to dwindle, this young man in the robustness of youth whimpered so much that he was left under a bush to die. His mother expected to survive him because she was a heartier person, more physically capable and probably less pampered. She was accustomed to the difficulties of life.

In Genesis 16, it was predicted that Ishmael would be a wild donkey of a man who would live to the east of his brothers in the wilderness. God also said that he would found a great family of his own with 12 sons who would become the heads of 12 tribes in their own right. He would be a man of substance and ability in a hard world. Yet, as we see him here, he is nowhere near that kind of person.

What we see unfolding before us in God's direction to Abraham and Abraham's willingness to obey, even though it hurt him deeply, is a blessing for Ishmael. Miraculously, Hagar and Ishmael were supplied information about a well unseen by them previously, and they were able to refresh themselves. Once Ishmael was on his feet again, the story continued with provision of a wife for Ishmael. Like Abraham who would go back to his country to find a wife for Isaac, Hagar found Ishmael a wife in Egypt, and he began to mature. And he did become a man of stature. In fact, at the end of Abraham's life, Ishmael will come as a prince to bury his father. He and Isaac will stand shoulder to shoulder at the burial of their father, each the head of a family and the head of a nation.

This never would have happened if Ishmael had stayed in Abraham's home. He never would have become a man of substance in his own right. Rather, he would have always been the rejected son. There would have always been tension between the two brothers, and Ishmael would have been rejected and set aside. Isaac would receive his father's blessing, his father's inheritance, his father's name, and his father's influence. And Ishmael, pampered and set aside, would have lived with the bitterness that accompanies rejection, and he would have become a man of hatred, lacking in self-worth.

In order for him to become the man that the Angel of the Lord predicted he would be, he had to leave his father's home forever. He had to go into the world and make his own way. God knew he would supply for Ishmael and his mother, but the Lord's way of making Ishmael a man of stature was through a difficult experience. It was not a punishment; it was God's way of bringing blessing to Ishmael.

The focus I want to keep before us is that when Abraham obeyed God and chose the difficult course in obedience to God he was able to do good to those around him. He did good to his first son in obeying God even though it was painful to do so. Although it distressed him to send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, it was his willingness to obey God that finally brought blessing to them both.

For Abraham's sake, why would God require that Ishmael be sent away? We can understand doing it to bring about Ishmael's growth into mature manhood. But why was it necessary for Abraham to have this son sent away? I think there is an important lesson in this question. The great test of Abraham's life, the high point of his experience as a man who trusted God, is going to take place in the next chapter. Isaac's life will be

threatened by God's command and by the hand of Abraham his father who was told to sacrifice him. If Abraham had another son at home, he would have experienced a different reaction in his willingness to carry out the sacrifice of Isaac. If Abraham had another son as a buffer to his life of faith, the experience would not have been as great a challenge to his trust in God. It is only because the door had been shut forever to Ishmael that Abraham walked up Mount Moriah, we are told in Hebrews, willing to believe that God would raise Isaac from the dead if necessary. All of his eggs were in one basket. Everything depended upon Isaac's life because Ishmael was no longer an option. I think the Lord required Ishmael's dismissal of Abraham because he wanted him to have the experience of trusting God and having nowhere else to turn if God did not provide.

In the previous chapter, Abraham laughed at the announcement of Isaac's birth. He said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before thee." In the back of his mind, he knew he already had one son and retained that hedge in case God failed. He always had Plan B available, but now the Lord said, "You must reject every option but the one I have provided for you. Your fleshly rebellion produced Ishmael. You have had him to love and care for as a son. You have had him as a backup to the life of faith all these years, but you must reject this backup." Thus, for Abraham's sake as well as for Ishmael's the separation was required.

Abraham loved Ishmael. It must have been a poignant scene as he placed the water skin and bread on the shoulders of Hagar and sent them away. Just the day before, he had thrown a great feast at the weaning of one son. Now he was broken-heartedly sending his other son out into the wilderness.

I believe the Scriptures teach that you and I will have this same kind of experience more than once in our lives-- times when we will need to actively reject the fleshly second option that we have retained while growing in the faith, the well-loved Plan B that makes it easier to trust God. But we are going to be asked to take the same step of rejection. If we would become an influence on our world and do good for Christ's sake, we need to become men and women of such faith that we have given up hope that anything else can save or sustain us except the promises and grace of God. We will find ourselves distressed, like Abraham, in giving up the fleshly safety net underneath us as we try to walk the tightrope of trusting God.

I was impressed at the Conference on Biblical Exposition this week with the repeated theme given by Christian leaders and teachers of great stature. The repeated theme expressed, "It does not matter whether your rhetoric is slick, your insight into Scripture is deep, or you are a genius as a communicator. If there is no heart for Christ--no genuine love of God, no purity, no humility, and no dependence, then there will be no blessing." Repeatedly, great men and women of leadership in the Christian world made the same point. Whatever success they had achieved did not depend upon their human contribution.

There are two young men in our congregation now who are back in this area with their families on furlough from missionary service. Both men were raised here and were highly regarded as students and leaders in a community that is proud of its educational excellence and doors opened to worldly success. Yet, they have chosen to live in obscurity in distant places. One now lives in West Africa and the other in the Philippines, both translating the Bible into tribal languages. They took advantage of the opportunities granted to them by this culture but have chosen to live to the glory of God without wealth, respect, or prominence.

Now my sons and daughters are growing up in the same community. They too will receive good educations and the likelihood of open doors before them. I have found myself wanting them to live for the glory of God but also hoping they will take advantage of all of the other things. While wanting them to live for God, I do not want them to experience poverty and obscurity but wealth and prominence. I hope that they will do well in school, be successful in sports, be highly esteemed, and have all the advantages of this culture while serving for Christ's sake. It is a rebuke for me to realize that it may well be (and what an honor it would be!) that God will assign my children to poverty and obscurity for His sake. I realize that I want a safety net for my children. I want them to have the advantages this world has to offer along with the life and adventure of faith.

This is the question we need to seriously ask ourselves. Do we really want both? Do we not want Isaac to grow to maturity but also Ishmael just in case the life of faith fails us? The Lord said to Abraham, "You have to send your son away for as long as you have a second option you will never be as great a man of faith as you could be. All your hope for the future depends on the miracle son, the one I gave you." I Corinthians 15:17 through 19 says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those

also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied." Paul says that if the Christian message is not true, if it is a hoax, then people like the apostle who have no other hope are of all men most to be pitied. They have no other choice because they have given up everything to follow the Lord. They chose to have no Plan B, no other options, no other source of life.

Do you remember when Jesus' teaching became too hard to bear for most of his followers and they began to leave? He turned to Peter and said, "Are you going to leave also?" Peter's answer was interesting. In effect, he said, "I would love to, but to whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life. Nobody else says what you say. I have cast my lot with you. I am stuck. I don't have anywhere else to go. If what you say isn't true, we are of all men most to be pitied."

This was the bridge Abraham was crossing. It was not an act of cruelty to send his son into the wilderness. In fact, it was the very act by which God blessed Ishmael. But it was also the act by which Abraham finally set his course to trust God with the life of his son Isaac. This is why we see him succeeding so valiantly when the greatest test of all is put before him in the next chapter.

Look at the rest of Genesis 21 starting in verse 22. Now we will meet a second individual to whom Abraham will minister. Actually, we have met him before. Abimelech was the ruler of the Philistines, the great tribe among whom Abraham was living. He is another man for whom Abraham is going to be a blessing. Look at verse 22:

Now it came about at that time, that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do; 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 according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me, and to the land in which you have sojourned." And Abraham said, "I swear it." But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, nor did I hear of it until today." And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them to Abimelech; and the two of them made a covenant. Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?" And he said, "You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand in order that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well." Therefore he called that place Beersheba; because there the two of them took an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, arose and returned to the land of the Philistines. And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days.

When he first met Abimelech, Abraham deceived him. But even though he got off on the wrong foot in the relationship, at the end of their first encounter it was Abraham's prayer that returned the fertility to the women of Abimelech's tribe. Through Abraham, blessing was brought to these people even though he had sinned and failed at first. By now, it was clear in Abimelech's mind that Abraham was a man of God. He said, "God is with you in all that you do. There is something about the life you live, the character you show, and the influence you have which is an aroma of Christ. There is a spiritual depth in you that is undeniable. And it is because of your character that I appeal to you now. Let's defeat any tension or threat that might be between our peoples."

These were two great nomadic tribes trying to occupy the same area. The fact that Abimelech brought along the commander of his army underlined the present possibility of tension, threat and violence that typically occurred when two great families tried to pasture in the same region. Remember even the families and herdsmen of Abraham and Lot, uncle and nephew, clashed because they were trying to occupy the same land (Gen. 13:6-7). There was a very real threat here. Thus, Abimelech said to Abraham, "You are a man of God. Is there any way through your character, knowledge of God and influence that we can reduce this tension and bring about peace?"

Realizing that he has a platform for speaking and that Abimelech would listen to him because he was God's man, Abraham swore his allegiance and faithfulness. Then he mentioned a disagreement regarding a well. They were able to agree on a solution, and Abraham gave gifts and promoted fair dealing. He resolved the tension and became a peace maker. Once this interaction was over, Abimelech and Phicol returned to their home while Abraham chose to reside in the region of Beersheba, 'the well of seven.' The name recalls the gift of the seven lambs given to Abimelech and is the name of that region to this day. Abraham even went back and planted a tree to honor God.

We are told he lived for many days in this region and was able to bring about a lasting peace. He was able not only to do good for the moment but also for a long time after. In thinking of these events, Abraham addressed God as 'The Everlasting God.' He thought of the God who is not only capable of doing the important thing for the moment but also of producing character and godliness so that he could continue to be a blessing, a peacemaker, and a lightbearer.

Abraham made the difficult choice to reject the fleshly alternative in his life. He put away the safety net and removed the buffer so that he had only the Lord God to trust. When he did that, he became a blessing to Ishmael, sending him out in order to mature rather than allowing him to grow up stunted in his own home. And he was a blessing to Abimelech. This scene must have been repeated hundreds of times in Abraham's life when he lovingly interacted with the people of his world and taught them about God. He was able to operate for their best interest. We have been given just one example of what must have been the regular experience of this man--doing good for his world, having truth to offer, and having character to live before these people.

If we wish to be God's servant; to have a word for the people around us and to bring honor to God, then we must be willing to reject fleshly religion. We need to become men and women who have only one choice left, having given up every option except the one to trust God. When we make this choice, then suddenly the aroma of Christ becomes stronger in our lives. And the opportunities to speak, teach, encourage and give life are made abundant for us.

There are two wells serving as focal points in each of these stories--the well miraculously supplied to Hagar and Ishmael and the well named Beersheba where Abraham lived for many years. Wells are critical in that part of the world where water is scarce and provender depends on it. Thus, they have become symbolic in Scripture as the source of life. There was another patriarchal well, Jacob's well, that Jesus would teach beside centuries after this incident. Here he spoke to a guilty, self-hating woman who feared association with other women. In John 4, we are told that Jesus said to her, "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." He used the symbolism of water as spiritual life and wholeness in order to minister to her.

The kind of influence that we will be permitted to have on our world is like these words of Christ. We can be the ones to offer a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. We can share the source that allows water to spring up from within so that life itself becomes the experience of the people around whom we live. We can be the ones who shed light in the darkness, influencing our world. We can have the utter freedom and joy of seeing God use us.

But the choice Abraham made is critical. He chose to not have two options, to not have two sons but depend upon the son of promise. This is the importance of this chapter. This is what we are intended to see--the distressingly painful choice to give up what this world has to offer and our own strengths and abilities. If we refuse to trust them and place all our trust in Christ instead, he will give us the opportunity to pass on to others the well of water that has sprung up within us.

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