

God's Kindness to Outsiders

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[0:00] We'll read tonight Genesis 21, starting in verse 8 and reading through 21. The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a great feast.

But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking. And she said to Abraham, get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant.

Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.

Early the next morning, Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy.

[1:10] She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes.

Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bow shot away, for she thought, I cannot watch the boy die. And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob.

God heard the boy crying and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 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. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer.

[2:15] While he was living in the desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt. Jesus said, I did not come to bring peace but a sword.

A mother would believe on him and a daughter would refuse him. And so that sword would divide families. Maybe that sword is at work in your families.

And if that's you, you know then that it's hard sometimes to keep perspective when you're in that situation. When every day feels like a tug of war.

Every family reunion feels like just another round in a boxing match. And so if you're in that kind of conflict, which we all are to some degree or another, then we need to hear what God tells us in Genesis 21.

We need to see, you need to see God's example. Because in this passage we see that God is gracious to even those who are outside his saving purposes.

[3:21] He's gracious and merciful and kind to Ishmael, even though Ishmael is outside of his saving purposes. And as we see God at work in this situation, we do get some encouraging lessons for us when we experience situations like this.

In difficult providence or when the sword is in our families, in our friendships, in our lives. And so in our first two points this evening, we're going to see why Ishmael is on the outside.

And then we get to see God's surprising attitude towards him. So it's not going to be very surprising. We already read it. But it is surprising that despite why he's on the outside, God is still gracious towards him.

And so in our first two points, we're going to see why he's on the outside. Well, in the first place, we see that he's on the outside because of his own unbelief. He's on the outside because of his own unbelief.

As we begin, as we dive into this passage, we find ourselves in the middle of a great and wonderful feast. Isaac is about two or three years old.

[4:34] He's weaned. So he's passed from infant to little boy. And to mark that occasion, Abraham celebrates. Abraham kills the fattened calf, so to speak.

The whole household is there. It's a wonderful party until Sarah notices Ishmael mocking Isaac, ridiculing him.

And it will help us to understand the passage to realize their age difference. Isaac is two or three. So Ishmael is somewhere along 16 or 17.

And so this is not innocent teasing. This is a cruel, mean-spirited, selfish mocking of a teenager. So remember when Hagar, when she became pregnant, if you can remember back that long ago, when Hagar became pregnant, what did she do to Sarah?

She scorned Sarah and her self-confidence and her selfishness. She scorned Sarah. Now it's like mother-like son. Ishmael, full of himself, full of pride, full of confidence then, in his own position, in his natural position, in his fleshly position, scorns Isaac.

[5:45] And so it's important for us to see that this is more than just an innocent sibling rivalry. In opposing Isaac, Ishmael is taking his side in that life or in that history-long, age-old conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

That is a clear theme in Genesis as you read it from the beginning to the end. And you see it played out in different scenarios. And we shouldn't miss it here. God said to the serpent, I'll put enmity between your seed and the seed of the woman.

And so Adam and Eve had two boys, Cain and Abel. And then the genealogies of Genesis 4 and 5 show us the seventh from Cain was a man named Lamech, who was a violent, arrogant man.

And the seventh man from Abel, or from Seth, was a man named Enoch, who walked with God.

You remember. So in Genesis, there's this laying out of history according to these two lines.

There's always been this conflict between these two lines. And now that conflict has come into Abraham's house. It's manifested itself in his family. Now remember, Ishmael, he'll be in hostility.

[7:09] His hand will be raised against all of his brothers. His hand will be raised against Isaac all of his days. So Ishmael will not submit. He cannot submit to God's chosen seed.

It's hard to be exactly sure what is motivating Ishmael. But it seems as we look at the passage and we look at what happens to Ishmael, and then we look at how Paul uses this passage in the New Testament, that it seems that Ishmael was confident in his place and who he was.

He was the oldest son of Abraham. And who is this Isaac that I should celebrate him? Who is this Isaac that I should give way before him?

And so his heart, full of confidence in himself and his natural position, who he is in the flesh, but he wasn't submitting to God's plan or God's purpose.

He wasn't submitting and putting himself under God's chosen seed, who is Isaac. And so the Apostle Paul, looking back on this passage, compares Ishmael to those self-confident, self-righteous, confidence in the flesh, Jews and Judaizers of his day.

[8:26] And he said, speaking of Ishmael, at that time the son born in the ordinary way, that is Ishmael, persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.

So Ishmael is put into that line, that group of people who are confident in themselves and who they are. And they persecuted. And so he persecuted Isaac.

And Sarah saw it, and that was it. You can imagine the brewing family relations over the years, and now this is the final straw. She said to Abraham, get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance of my son Isaac.

Sarah says, get rid of him. Get rid of him. And it's very interesting. In the Hebrew, the word get rid of is only used three times in Genesis.

The first time it's used is to say when God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden. He drove them out of the garden. The second time it's used is when God drove Cain into wandering after killing Abel.

[9:33] And now here is the third time. Ishmael mocks Isaac. And Ishmael is forced out, made to wander into the wilderness. And so I think what we're seeing here is more than just Ishmael losing his place in Abraham's family, as bad as that is, but we're seeing God's judgment on Ishmael.

Ishmael mocked God's promised seed, and now Ishmael is on the outside looking in. So how did he get to the outside? Why is he on the outside of God's saving purposes?

Well, partially the answer is through his own pride, through his own unbelief, through his own self-confidence. And here's where we want to stop.

And we want to learn a lesson. And children, this is a lesson especially for you, but it's a lesson that we all need to hear again. And this is the lesson that it's not enough to grow up to be in a Christian family.

It's not enough to be going to church. That will not save you. Ishmael was the son of Abraham.

[10 : 48] He was in the very family of Abraham, and he was pushed out. So once upon a time, there was a little girl who had a Christian mom and a Christian dad.

And she grew up in the church. She was just like you, boys and girls. She went to Sunday school, and she knew her Bible. She even tried to obey it.

And when she was a teenager, she was baptized. And she spent her whole life in church, going to church, taking the Lord's Supper. And when she died, God sent her to hell.

And she said, but Lord, didn't I go to church? Wasn't I a Christian? Weren't my parents Christians? Didn't I do all these good things for you? Didn't I? Wasn't I with you?

Didn't I know you? And he said, away from me. I never knew you. It's not enough to be in a Christian family. It's not enough to be a member of a Christian church.

[11 : 58] Ishmael was part of the original family of Abraham. And so the all-important question, the question is not, do you attend church? Are you a part of the right group?

The question is, what is your attitude towards God's chosen seed? For Ishmael, it was Isaac. What was his attitude going to be towards Isaac?

Would he submit himself and humble himself before Isaac? Would he die to himself in his place, in his self-confidence? Would he take the lower place so that Isaac could take the place of greatness? To let Isaac be first. So for Ishmael, it was Isaac. But for us, the question is, will we do that for Jesus?

God does not say based on church membership. He does not say based on membership in a Christian family. Heaven and hell is not decided by whether you're a good person or you're a part of the right group.

[12 : 58] But what is your attitude towards Jesus Christ? So, are you celebrating Him? Are you exalting in Him?

Have you put you on the cross so that Christ could live in you? Have you said, whatever was to my gain, now I count it as loss so that I might know Jesus Christ and be found with His righteousness on.

And are you saying, I must become less so that He may become more? If you are, then you're on the inside.

And if you are not, then you are on the outside. Ishmael went from the inside to the outside of Abraham's family because of his unbelief. Now secondly, we see the other reason that Ishmael is on the outside.

He's on the outside because of his unbelief, but he's on the outside because of God's own sovereign purposes. In verses 11-13, we see that more is going on here than just Sarah's anger and Ishmael's unbelief.

[14 : 07] God is at work. He has sovereign purposes. He's carrying out his plan and he's carrying it out in the middle of this family conflict, in the middle of this family upheaval and this party gone wrong.

So Sarah says, get rid of him. Verse 11, Abraham is greatly distressed. Parents, can you imagine how you would feel? He's probably upset with Ishmael.

He's probably upset with what Sarah wants him to do and Sarah's reaction. He loves his son. This is why he's so distressed because it concerns his son. He loves his son.

He doesn't want to get rid of him. His heart is against it. Custom is against it. In the legal terms of that day, Ishmael wasn't a second-rate son. Ishmael was considered to be a son of Abraham.

And so not only getting rid of him would not only be going against his heart and his love, but it would be going against the legal and the normal customs of his day. And so you can imagine the turmoil and the conflict in his own heart as he goes to bed that night as he thinks about this.

[15 : 19] And what do you do when your heart is in a raging storm? Don't you cry, God, show me what to do. I don't know what to do. Show me. Help me.

And in verse 12, God answers the storm in Abraham's heart. He sees that distress and he speaks. But God said to him, Do not be distressed about the boy and your maidservant.

Listen to whatever Sarah tells you because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I'll make Ishmael into a nation because I love you because he's your son. But my promises and my purposes will be carried out in Isaac. Now what does that tell us? It tells us besides Ishmael's unbelief, God has his own sovereign purposes that he is carrying out. This is part of God's will. And so dads and moms, do you ever wonder why this child is saved and this child is so hard?

[16 : 32] Well, we don't know and we can't tell always what is going on. But a partial answer is that God is carrying out his sovereign purposes even within your family.

That doesn't make it easier. And I'm not saying that it should or it does. But it does focus our thoughts on God.

It puts us in the position where we can humble ourselves and submit to Him. It does give us a transcendent, a divine, although limited, perspective on our families.

God is at work. God's will is being carried out. God's choice is being carried out. And that's exactly how the Apostle Paul read this passage.

Listen to Romans 9. And I'm going to read an extended portion of Romans 9 because I want you to see the full force of what Paul saw in Genesis 21 in what we just quoted.

[17 : 37] He said this, It's not as though God's word had failed for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.

On the contrary, here's the quote from our passage tonight, It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. In other words, it's not natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

So that's one incident. Ishmael and Isaac. Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac.

Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad in order that God's purpose in election might stand not by works, but by him who calls, she was told, the older will serve the younger.

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.

[18 : 50] It does not therefore depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. Why is Ishmael on the outside and Isaac is on the inside?

It's because of God's sovereign purpose that his purpose and election might stand. You'll notice it wasn't because Isaac was a good boy and Ishmael was a bad boy.

They were both sinners. God had saving mercy on one and not the other. So let me ask you, does that mean that Ishmael could complain?

Did he have a right? Did he have an argument? Could he complain? No, because if God is giving justice to someone, then no one can complain about getting justice. God doesn't owe anyone salvation.

God doesn't owe me salvation. And so God says to Abraham, do what Sarah says. Do what she says. Get rid of the son.

[19 : 55] And to help Abraham, God gives him a promise. He says, don't be too distressed. I'll make him into a nation. I'll look after him. I'll bless him.

But despite the promise, this is hard. This is a hard thing to do. But look at what Abraham does in verse 14. This is one of the most remarkable things about this passage.

Verse 14. Abraham, early the next morning, Abraham took some food and skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He got up early the next morning and he obeyed.

He did what God said right away. Now, parents, can you imagine how hard that would be for Abraham? Abraham.

And we can learn just two more lessons here. The first is that submission and obedience is the only way to respond to God's sovereign purposes.

[21 : 00] You can imagine how hard this was for Abraham and maybe you're living through the very thing now where you're seeing the sword at work in your family. How are you responding?

How should you respond? Well, Abraham doesn't fight God. Abraham doesn't wait to figure it all out.

He doesn't complain or argue. Abraham obeys right away. So are you in a hard place? Are you living in a difficult providence where everything is murky and black and things are hard?

There is only one response. Submit and obey. Now, the second lesson here is that painful trials prepare us for greater obedience. Painful trials prepare us for greater obedience. God calls Abraham to do something very hard here to get rid of his son. And Abraham gets up early and he does it.

[22:02] He does exactly what God says. But in the next chapter, God is going to tell Abraham to do something even harder. Abraham, take your son, your only son, the son you love, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

In Genesis 22.3, early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. This incident with Ishmael prepared Abraham for a greater obedience.

This test of faith prepared him for a greater test of faith. And this is something that I think we need to learn and get some perspective on our trials and on our difficulties and what God wants from us. Sometimes we want greater things. We want greater opportunities. We want more influence. We want to do more and better and greater things for God.

And we wonder why we can't be more useful. Well, maybe instead of wondering about why he hasn't given me those opportunities, maybe we need to be asking, am I obeying in the difficult trials that he's putting me in right now?

[23:10] So are you going through something hard now? Don't chafe under it. Humble yourself under God's mighty hand. Submit and obey.

God is doing something good. He's preparing you for greater works, greater obedience. obedience. Now, we come to our third point.

We've seen the first two points of why Ishmael's on the outside. He's on the outside because of his own unbelief. He's on the outside because of God's sovereign purposes. And now our third point and what this passage is driving for and through the main point, we see God's compassion on Ishmael.

We've seen why he's on the outside. But here we get something so surprising. We see God's compassion. How does God treat the now outside Ishmael?

Well, look and see. Verse 14, Abraham gets up. He gets food and water just enough basically to get him down the road. Not a lot.

[24:18] And he sends Hagar and Ishmael away. And in a day or two, not very long after, they are wandering in the desert.

They are lost apparently. They get turned around. And they're wandering until their water is gone. So again, parents, it's almost in a situation that you can't imagine.

But imagine that. Imagine the horror as Hagar is feeling the water bottle getting lighter and lighter until there's nothing in it.

And the sun is beating down on them. And everywhere she looks, it's just desert. It's just wilderness. There's no civilization. There's no... She doesn't even know which way to go.

So what do you do? What do you do? She had come to the place where she thought, this is the end.

[25:16] So she puts Hagar... Hagar puts the boy under the bush and walks far enough away so she doesn't have to see her son die. Her one and only son. The son whom she loves.

And she sits down and she begins to sob. This is the end. Everyone has abandoned her. There's no help.

There's no hope. Her son is dying. She is dying. No one can save her. And then Ishmael begins to cry.

Remember, what does Ishmael mean? Why did Hagar give him that name in the first place?

Ishmael means God hears.

And when this boy cries, God hears. Ishmael begins to cry. The Lord heard his cry and out of the heavens, out of thin air, as it were, the angel of the Lord calls to Hagar, what is the matter, Hagar?

[26:23] What is the matter? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift him and take him by the hand for I will make him into a great nation.

And the Lord opened her eyes and she saw a well of water and they were saved. God had compassion on them. And God was with the boy as he grew up.

Isn't that an interesting verse? God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the wilderness. Remember, he was going to be a wild donkey of a man, a free man. No one was going to be his master just as God had promised.

And that's what he was. He became an archer out of the hardness of the wilderness and the desert. He eked out a living. His mom got him a wife from Egypt.

And then God did exactly what he said he was going to do for Ishmael. Genesis 25 tells you about it. We're not going to ever preach this, so let me just tell you what happens.

[27:21] Genesis 25, Ishmael had 12 sons. Do you know anyone else that had 12 sons? And they had 12 sons and those 12 sons became tribal leaders.

The 12 tribes of Ishmael. He became the unbelieving opposite of Israel. He lived 137 years and he died at a good old age.

He breathed his last. And the last word that we get about Ishmael and his nation is this. And they lived in hostility toward all their brothers.

There was no miraculous reunion. There was no coming back and seeking mercy. Ishmael and his family line lived in opposition to God's chosen line, in opposition to Isaac, but to the rest of Abraham's children and sons.

And what I want us to take away from this is that in despite of that opposition, for Abraham's sake, Ishmael was blessed.

[28:31] God had compassion on him. God was gracious to him. Did he ever save him in the spiritual sense? Well, I don't think so. But nevertheless, God was good to him.

That age-old conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, it lived on in Ishmael's family. And so, God's goodness.

So even though that conflict lived on in their family, they lived their whole lives still under God's goodness and compassion. God heard him when he cried.

He blessed him and he took him from rags to riches, from nothing to a nation. God's rain fell on his ground. His grass grew for his animals.

God blessed him with children. He blessed Ishmael with life and breath for a long time. And he lived and he died outside of God's purposes, outside of his saving purposes, but not outside of his blessing.

[29:38] And what we should take away from that, brothers and sisters, is if that's how God loves his enemies, then how should our love be?

Jesus said, be perfect. As your Father in Heaven is perfect. We can't contain our love to a narrow group of people. A narrow group of people that are just with us.

Now, are we especially called to love God's people, God's family? Yes, for sure. But that doesn't mean we can hate and despise those who are on the outside, who oppose us.

Israel, the first hearers of Genesis, needed to hear that, didn't they? Yes, they were God's chosen people, special people, but did that mean that they could hate the Gentiles who were on the outside?

Just because they were on the outside and we are on the inside. No, God blessed Ishmael. And though Ishmael was on the outside of God's saving purposes, God blessed him.

[30:44] Now, that tells us what kind of love we should have. Not a narrow love, but a broad love. What else can we take away from this story? This, if God heard those who were outside of his saving purposes, how much more will he hear you?

How much more will he hear you? You. If Hagar and Ishmael cried out and God heard them, if you, child of God, cry out to him, how much more will he not hear you?

You're the apple of his eye. You are his own special treasured possession. For you, Jesus Christ, God's one and only son, the son whom he loved, laid down his life.

And he sweated great drops of blood and he was beaten and mocked. The Ishmaels of his day mocked him. And so are you in the desert?

Cry out. God will hear you. He loves you. His ears turn towards you. If he heard the mocker, will he not hear the mocked?

[31:52] For Abraham's sake, God heard Ishmael. And brother or sister, you have one greater than Abraham at God's right hand. Who has secured his ear, his blessing, his favor, his love for you.

And so don't be discouraged. Are you in the desert? God hears. Now as we end, let me ask you, who do you relate to in this story?

Which character do you relate to? Do you relate to Abraham? Maybe God is doing some painful tearing in your life, cutting in your life.

some of the things that you love or maybe one of those things that you really love, you've poured your life into, you've invested in, a child, a ministry, a project, some plan, and it feels like God is tearing that out of your life and sending it away into the desert and you can feel Abraham's pain. Is that you? If so, look at what God did for Abraham in this passage. He took away Ishmael, but he left in Isaac. God's best may cost us dearly, but behind that tearing and that cutting work that we find so painful, God is doing good.

[33 : 18] He's up to good. Maybe you relate to Ishmael. Maybe you feel like Ishmael on the outside and you know you're on the outside and how do you get to the inside?

How do you find your place in God's family? The simple answer is to come to Christ. The way into God's family is through Jesus Christ.

No one becomes a son or daughter of God without first joining themselves to Jesus. And so my encouragement to you is to kiss the son. Bow before him and say, whatever you say, I'll do.

Whatever you tell me to believe, I will believe. I am a sinner. Save me. Don't be like Ishmael whose pride and his self-confidence lost him his place in the family of God.

The way is open. humble yourself and come in repenting and believing. Ishmael should have celebrated Isaac.

[34 : 37] And if you're going to be saved, you must come and come to the Father's feast and celebrate Jesus Christ, God's chosen seed. And so you do that by repenting and believing and rejoicing and all that Jesus is for sinners.

And you can do that even as we sing our closing hymn. It's hymn 694. Okay.