

Breaking With Ishmael

Chapter One

God's Silence Concerning Ishmael

The Goodness of God

Something that the church should understand about God is that He makes His rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). He is good to all men whether they deserve it or not. God will bless men based on His own goodness. This attribute can cause some people to come to wrong conclusions about the blessings that they receive from God. Many assume that He blesses them because He is pleased with them or particularly likes them. As a result, they mistakenly equate the blessing of God as Him sanctioning whatever they are doing, either in ministry or in day to day circumstances.

We need to learn the lesson of King Saul and of the Tabernacle at Shiloh, upon whom God's glory rested in power and authority. Both the Tabernacle and King Saul were blessed so greatly that it seemed as though they were both what God had intended for Israel all along, and that they would remain forever. However, in both instances God eventually withdrew His Spirit and presence, and all that was left of each of them were empty shells. Even though the Lord blessed each of these for a time, His glory did not remain on either of them. If the Tabernacle and King Saul were the Lord's original purposes for Israel, He would not have removed His blessing from them.

The lesson to be learned, then, is that God's "blessing" on what we do does not prove what we are doing is in line with His will and desires. God will bless what we do, but what He greatly desires is the thing that He intended from the beginning be brought forth. He blessed the Tabernacle at Shiloh with His presence even though it was only a shadow of the glorious reality that was brought forth in Zion.

One of the greatest instances of this principle that can be found in the Bible is the difference between Ishmael and Isaac. God had promised Abraham that He would bring forth a promised seed through Sarah (Genesis 18:10 & 14). As Abraham saw time slipping away, he felt compelled to help God's promise along, so he brought forth Ishmael through Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden (Genesis 16:2-4).

At Ishmael's birth God did not say to Abraham, "Ishmael is your son, and I will surely bless him. . . but he is not really the heir that I promised you." According to the Bible, God seemed to be silent concerning Ishmael. Abraham came to consider God's silence to be His consent and approval of Ishmael and of Abraham's union with Hagar. Ishmael

grew up in Abraham and Sarah's household as the beloved son that God had promised. Year after year passed without any rebuke from God, and so Ishmael began to fill the place in the heart of Abraham that only Isaac was supposed to take. However, God's heart never changed concerning the seed that He had determined would fulfill the Promise. With each passing day, Ishmael was growing unto maturity, yet God seemed to be silent on the subject.

Ishmael Is Alive In The Church

I fear that many in the Church love what they can produce in the earth more than what God gives us from above by promise. We christen our religious flesh as the Promised Seed and become convinced that God is pleased with all we do because there is no rebuke forthcoming. What helps to convince us of God's pleasure is that He continues to bless just like He blessed Ishmael (Gen. 17:20). God's blessing is taken as a sign of His approval, and so we build with the hands of Ishmael, minister with the words of Ishmael, and walk in the ways of Ishmael. Our human thoughts and strengths are deemed righteous, and our efforts are seen as "most holy".

But God knows that Christ, and Christ alone, is the Promised Seed (Galatians 3:16). He knows that whether Ishmael acts honorably or treacherously makes no difference – he is not the chosen Seed. The heart of God has never ceased to ring with His words to Abraham, "My covenant will I establish with the Seed" (Gen. 17:21).

Why does God not speak to us and correct us concerning Ishmael? Because correction should not be such a large part of our relationship with God as we assume it to be. Instead of waiting for God to correct us, we need to pursue a relationship of hearing and discerning His Word to us. We need obedient hearts. We need more patience and faith as we wait on God to fulfill His Word to and in us, and less anxiety to produce something in the flesh. Also, we need to not only hear His original Word to us but wait on the Lord until we understand it's meaning.

Another reason why He waits and says nothing is because it is not the appointed time to bring forth the Seed (Gal. 4:2). The appointed time is not based on our problems and failures but on the coming of the Lord. When the time comes for the Seed to come forth, then heaven and earth is moved. When God speaks, His meaning is clear: "This shall not be the heir. . . Sarah shall have a son. . ." (Gen. 17:16,19). The fact of the matter is that God's meaning was always clear. It was Abraham and Sarah who muddied the water.

Abraham's response to God's declaration was one of questioning and of surprise (Gen. 17:18). He was very protective of Ishmael and wanted God to bless him. It was as if Abraham wanted God to have the same heart toward Ishmael as Abraham had. However, this could never be the case. Throughout the history of the Church, God has blessed the works of many men's hands, but His eternal plan is wrapped up with one Son – Jesus Christ. This is the Seed that is to come forth in His people. This is the only One that God

will condone. All others are man's best attempts to please God apart from the life of His Son. It is the equivalent of branches trying to bring forth fruit without the life of the Vine filling them. How foolish!

Too many of God's people have not comprehended that to live by the resources of our own humanity is no different than living under the Law. We in ourselves are incapable of fulfilling what God wants, because what God wants is a person – Christ. Isaac alone represented this Promised Seed. God's relationship with Ishmael was meant to show us that only Christ can fulfill the New Covenant demands. The difference between the two covenants is not one of contrasting sinners and Christians. It is more of a contrast between those believers who seek the favor of God by their own resources, as opposed to those who believe the Promised Seed IS THEIR ONLY RESOURCE. Once we come to this reality, then we are able and prepared to renounce Ishmael instead of seeking God to bless him.

BREAKING WITH ISHMAEL

Chapter Two

Renouncing Ishmael

How Do We Relate To God?

"It is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman."

Galatians 4:22

The epistle to the Galatians is primarily given to the subject of two covenants and not to remedying the failures of sin. To discuss the two covenants, it is necessary to discuss the two viewpoints: the natural and the spiritual. Many see the sacrifice of Jesus as it relates to the putting away of sins only, but Jesus died as us in order to put away the flesh that produces sins. Even before Abraham offered up Isaac, he had to offer up Ishmael.

Consider Genesis 21:8-14 in light of the above statement. Of course, Abraham did not literally offer up Ishmael as a sacrifice, but Abraham had to give up any hope that God would consider this son as the Promised Seed. It was as if a death took place as Abraham became resigned to God's choice. That choice involved the New Covenant way of proceeding as opposed to the Old Covenant way. Some of us are trying to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God before we have sacrificed the flesh. The Promised Seed (Christ in you) can never take His rightful place until Ishmael is renounced and all hope in him is given up.

The natural is to be offered up so that the spiritual might be given full attention. As we see in Ishmael, the natural life will assert itself so that it may retain our full attention (Galatians 4:29). It does not mind being dealt with, prayed over, or resisted as long as death is not considered as a way of proceeding. If the emphasis is not on the life of the Son of God in us, our lives will be consumed with the removal of the flesh and gaining freedom from bondage. Our goal, however, is not to remove the flesh but to first come to a death in our hearts to God's blessing being upon it. That which is flesh is flesh, and God will never change His mind about it (John 3:6).

God did not want to be actively involved with Abraham in the raising and nurturing of Ishmael. The bondwoman and her seed were to be put out and removed from the scene (Galatians 4:30-31). This act by Abraham was not so much overcoming the flesh as much as it was removing it from the central focus and consigning it to a place outside the realm where God concentrates His attention. The Lord did not instruct Abraham to bring unruly Ishmael under control. The Lord does not expect us to control the flesh any more than He expected Abraham to control Ishmael. The flesh is to be removed. Furthermore, it is not to be removed from just anywhere; it is a specific removal out of the land of promise and into the wilderness (Gen. 21:15-19). There is only one heir and He is the one who will inhabit the Promised Land. The flesh, even if controlled, is not the heir.

After many long years of tinkering with the flesh and trying to improve ourselves, there finally comes a resignation that there is no hope for us outside of the nature and life of Christ within. It is at this point that the heart finally turns to the Lord (II Cor. 3:14-18), and our view shifts. The hopelessness that was worked in us keeps us from looking to ourselves again (Rom. 7:18). When we read the Scriptures, we now see how it applies to the Life of Christ. When we see failures in our flesh, we now look to the Life of Another. We no longer struggle with something that can never be accepted as the Promised Seed, even if it does something right. Christ (in us) becomes our only hope (Col. 1:27).

The Blessing of Barrenness

Sarah experienced a great blessing to which Abraham could not relate. She was barren. Abraham was very old, but he was not barren. He still had "something in him" that could produce something apart from God, but that was not the case with Sarah. If anything was going to come out of her, it would have to be supernaturally accomplished by God with absolutely no assistance on her part.

The promise from God about bringing forth a Promised Seed was not just to Abraham but to Sarah also. God declared that out of Sarah's womb would come the Seed. Do you know why it is that the Hagar's in the Church despise their mistress? (Genesis 16:4-5) It is because they can bring forth by natural means. They are capable of what Sarah is not: they can bring forth seed. However, Sarah is capable of what Hagar is not: she is the only one who is allowed by God to bring forth THIS PROMISED SEED. No one else can do that. Only the barren are chosen for this task.

To the barren are granted the blessing of laughter, The name "Isaac" means "laughter". There is a mocking laughter that Hagar possesses (Gen. 21:9), but it is a "mock laughter" -- a cheap imitation. It is not a laughter that is full of the Seed and of thankfulness, but of scorn and petty superiority. Oh, how unfulfilling is this laughter. But call to remembrance women such as Elizabeth, Hannah, Rebekah and others? In every case God considered the low estate of the barren. Throughout the scriptures, the line of the Promised Seed is continued on through those who were barren and unable to produce. Do we not recognize the blessing of the barren? Remember how Isaiah 54 tells us to "Rejoice, O barren" ?

Conclusion

In truth, we are all barren. Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). The work of the Spirit is to show each of us that the many fruitful things that we do for the Lord daily come out from Ishmael. We mean well, and are sincere, even as Abraham was sincere in wanting Ishmael to be what God wanted. However, the whole Church community has been overwhelmed with teaching that Ishmael is acceptable even though he is not!

There comes a time when some in the Church begin to realize that they are barren. This is not the end, as one might suppose, but the beginning. It feels so bad to be a failure. It is a tremendous distress to be mocked by the many Hagar's who look down upon you. They appear fruitful outwardly, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Instead of being brought to loathsome destruction, let this time bring you to faith. Faith in what? Faith in the original promise of God!

Ishmael was brought forth after God gave the promise to Abraham. In this way, he represents the Law and how it enters into our relationship with God after receiving Christ. As a picture of the Law, Ishmael represents the best attempts of man to love and honor God. But no sincere attempt on man's part can turn Ishmael into Isaac. Only God, by means of a supernatural bringing forth through the Spirit, can produce Isaac. THIS was the original promise. It takes patience. It takes time in God's Word. And it takes trust in God to do what He said He would do, and to do what ONLY He can do. It is time to stop considering your own condition and to now look only to God. Believe in His goodness and faithfulness, for when the heart turns to the Lord, the veil is rent (II Cor. 3:16).***

