

• *The fulfilment of God's promise - God's grace and mercy*

**1. Everything connected with Isaac reminds us of the joyful grace of God**

• *A miraculous birth*

• *Laughter*

• *Circumcision – obedience to God's ruling*

**2. Events connected with Ishmael remind us of self-effort and 'the flesh'**

• *Isaac's death underlined the 'Ishmael mistake'*

• *How will grace relate to flesh?*

**3. The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other**

The birth of a child to Abraham and Sarah is entirely from God's grace; it is achieved by the miraculous working of God's Spirit; it is entirely a matter of God's mercy. The previous story proves it. Abraham has just disgraced himself again! He has just shown his utter weakness and his erratic wanderings from the pathway of wisdom and godliness. Yet it is at such a time God chooses to fulfil the promise.

1. **Everything connected with Isaac reminds us of the joyful grace of God.** At precisely such a time of human fallibility, Yahweh visited Sarah miraculously and sovereignly <sup>□1</sup>. The phrase 'Yahweh visited Sarah' speaks of a miracle. God stepped in. In the case of Ishmael, he was born according to the flesh. It required no special visitation for Ishmael to be born. But the birth of Isaac is miraculous and God's special 'visitation' is needed.

As promised and exactly on time the child is born <sup>□1</sup>. He is given the name 'Isaac' <sup>□2</sup>. It reminds us of the various times when there had been laughter about Isaac. Abraham laughed with joy when he first received God's promise about Sarah <sup>□3</sup>; Sarah's laughter was more in scepticism <sup>□4</sup>. The laughter will continue. People will chuckle with amusement at the thought of the elderly couple having such a late addition to the family! The couple will continue laughing with joy at the thought of the purpose of God going forward through the boy. And the boy himself – it is hoped – will be a happy child bringing laughter and joy to his parents. God likes laughter! Everything about Isaac expresses the joy of God's graciousness.

The boy was circumcised <sup>□1</sup>, in obedience to God's ruling <sup>□2</sup>. Circumcision marks out Abraham's community through which there will be worldwide blessing. Genesis reminds us of the great age of Abraham <sup>□3</sup> and the wonderment of Sarah <sup>□4</sup>.

2. **Events connected with Ishmael remind us of self-effort and 'the flesh'.** There were perhaps two people who would have found it difficult to join in the general jubilation at the time of Isaac's birth – and they were Hagar and her teenage son, Ishmael. Ishmael had long been Abraham's much-loved favourite. Now the miraculous birth of Isaac makes it clearer than ever that Abraham's liaison with Hagar was a mistake. Abraham had at that time tried to get the promise of a child fulfilled in his own way. Now the birth of Isaac showed what God had been intending, a stunning miracle, in which God would 'visit' Sarah and produce the child. 'Through Isaac a seed shall be called into being', said God. It was now happening, and the previous attempt with Hagar was more than ever shown up for what it was.

The question now is: how will grace relate to flesh? How will the child who reminds everyone of the grace of God relate to the child who reminds everyone of a carnal incident in Abraham's life-story?

3. The answer soon becomes clear. **The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other.** For some time (perhaps two or three years) the child Isaac feeds at the breast. The day when he is about to be taken away from breast-feeding altogether is made into a special day <sup>□1</sup>. But Ishmael (who must be at least seventeen years old) is often

mocking and ridiculing baby Isaac (21:9, 'playing' or 'laughing at' is

□1 21:1

□1 21:2  
□2 'He Laughs', 21:3

□3 17:17

□4 18:12

□1 21:4  
□2 17:10  
□3 21:5  
□4 21:6-7

□1 21:8

not a strong enough translation; the verb here has the sense of malice and insult).

• Sarah asks that Hagar and Ishmael are sent away

At this time Sarah requests a separation between the two children, and asks that Hagar and her son Ishmael should be sent away<sup>1</sup>. Abraham is unhappy about it but agrees to her request<sup>2</sup>. God promises that personally Ishmael will be blessed by God<sup>3</sup>. The two are sent away<sup>4</sup>. Hagar soon loses her way. The water runs out while they are travelling through the wilderness, and soon Hagar is convinced that her son is about to die<sup>5</sup>. God hears her cry of distress<sup>6</sup> and renews His promise to Ishmael<sup>7</sup>. She is guided to water and they survive. Ishmael grows up to be a rough but capable warrior and marries a girl from his mother's homeland<sup>8</sup>.

- 1 21:10
- 2 21:11
- 3 21:12-13
- 4 21:14
- 5 21:15-16
- 6 21:17-18
- 7 21:17-18
- 8 21:19-21

• Ishmael a rough but capable warrior

• Flesh and Spirit are always in opposition

The story is used by Paul to illustrate the fact that the Spirit and the flesh are always in opposition. The privileges and blessings that were bestowed on Isaac only caused jealousy and dislike on the part of Ishmael. So 'the flesh', impatient, self-seeking, unbelieving human nature, is always irritated by and opposed to the Spirit, the miracle-working, kindly, gracious working of God.

• Mutual hate

Ishmael despised Isaac. The flesh hates the Spirit. The world hates the church. Jealousy hates laughter.

• The fact of opposition has to be accepted

The opposition has to be accepted. To follow the Spirit involves resisting the flesh. The malice of the world towards those who truly live lives of spirituality and godliness has to be accepted as a reality.

• Flesh is preoccupied with law



One aspect of the flesh is preoccupation with law. 'Cast out Hagar!' said Paul – meaning throw away trust in self-centred and self-confident law-keeping as a way of reaching into the heights of godliness.

• In himself – Ishmael was an object of God's mercy

If we leave aside Ishmael as a picture of 'the flesh' and consider him in and of himself, we have to say he was the object of God's mercy. When he was desperate God stepped into his life and had mercy on him. He may not have had a place in God's covenant as Isaac did. He may have **symbolised** the impatience and carnality of Abraham, but in himself, he and Hagar experienced God's mercy. For the sake of Abraham God blessed him.

• When we cry to God – he will hear us!

We may be rough characters, with no great central place in the purpose of God, but when we cry out to God in distress – as Hagar and Ishmael did – God will hear us no matter who we are!

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible</i> (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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