

ABRAHAM AND ISHMAEL

Presented by

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If I were to ask you to write down the names of ten people whom you consider to be among the most important individuals in the Old and New Testaments, what names would you place on your list? Surely you would include as the first person in that list Jesus Christ, since, after all, the entire Bible revolves around Him. But what other names might be found on your list? Would Noah's name be there? Or what about Moses? Would the names of Joseph, David, Deborah, and Esther be there? What about Mary, Paul, Peter, John, or Luke? I suspect that many of you would have placed most of those names on your lists.

But what name is conspicuously missing from all the individuals I have listed above? Think about it for a moment. What single individual in biblical history played a crucial role in the origin of the Jews, as well as the eventual arrival of the Messiah? That man's name, of course, is Abraham—the father of the Jewish nation. Abraham's story starts late in Genesis 11, where we see his father Terah and the rest of his family migrating from Ur of the Chaldees to the flourishing trade center of Haran several hundred miles to the northwest. While living in Haran, Abraham received a call from God to go to an unknown land that God would show him. Genesis 12:1-3 explains how the Lord promised Abraham that He would make him “a great nation.” At the time such a promise must have seemed quite astonishing to Abraham because, as Genesis 11:30-31 points out, he and his wife Sarah were old and childless.

By the time we get to the events of Genesis 15, we see that Abraham and his extended family have left Haran and have arrived in the Promised Land of Canaan. Yet Abraham and Sarah still had no children. In Genesis 15:5 God said to Abraham, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be.” Abraham's response—recorded in Genesis 15:2-3—was as follows: “What will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no offspring; indeed, the one born in my house will be my heir!” God, however, had a different plan in mind. In Genesis 15:4, in speaking of Abraham's servant Eliezer, God said, “This one shall **not** be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.”

God promised Abraham and Sarah that He **would** give them a son. But Sarah grew impatient, and instead of trusting God to do what He had said He would do, she decided to take matters into her own hands. Genesis 16:1-15 explains that Sarah asked Abraham to have a child with her Egyptian maid, Hagar. Abraham should not have listened to Sarah, but instead should have trusted in God's promise. Yet for some reason he agreed to have a baby with Hagar. Genesis 16:11 tells us that the child born to Hagar was a boy whom she named Ishmael, and that Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born.. Genesis 16:4-6, however, informs us that once Ishmael was born, Sarah became very bitter toward Hagar and began to treat her badly.

Five chapters later, in Genesis 21:1-3, we find God fulfilling His original promise to Abraham and Sarah. “And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac.” Genesis 21:5 tells us that Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. Genesis 12:4 tells us that Abraham had been 75 years old when he left Haran to go the land that God had promised to give him. In other words, it had taken God **25 years** to keep His promise to Abraham. But God **had** kept His promise—because “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18). It is interesting that many years later the writer of the book of Hebrews would speak of Abraham as “he who had received the promises.”

Unfortunately, this story has a sad ending. Genesis 21:9-14 tells us that Sarah’s bitterness toward Hagar and Ishmael continued to grow. Eventually Sarah said to Abraham, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son Isaac” (Genesis 21:10). The next verse tells us that “this matter was very displeasing in Abraham’s sight because of his son [Ishmael].” Poor Abraham. If he had believed and trusted in God, then none of the mess in which he found himself would have occurred. Yet, as Genesis 21 goes on to tell us, Abraham ended up losing his son Ishmael because he had not trusted completely in the promises of God. Genesis 21:14 says that “Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and water; and...gave them and the boy [Ishmael] to Hagar, and sent her away. So she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba.”

In a prophecy that God gave to Hagar in Genesis 16:12, He told her that Ishmael would grow up to be “a wild man,” and that “his hand would be against every man, and every man’s hand against him.” And this is exactly what happened! Ishmael became the father of the Ishmaelites, a nomadic people from whom modern-day Arabs descended. Even today the Arabs who came from the seed of Ishmael are constantly at odds with many other nations around the world, not the least of whom are the Israelites who descended through Abraham’s other son, Isaac. Just think about how many of the world’s problems could have been avoided if Abraham and Sarah had simply trusted in the promises of God, and had been willing to wait patiently for Him to keep His word.

In the story of Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac we find at least two important lessons for those of us today. First, we, too, must learn to trust God, “who cannot lie” (Titus 1:2)—knowing that if God has said that He will do something, then He **will** do it. Second, we need to realize that even if we try to interfere with God’s plans, we will not succeed. As the prophet Isaiah observed, “The Lord of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?” The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3:4, “Let God be true, but every man a liar.” For our part, we need to learn to **never** doubt God, but instead to trust Him absolutely and obey Him completely. If we will do that, we will not have to experience the types of pain and heartache that Abraham endured—which makes me wonder: If Abraham had it all to do over again, what choice do you think he would have made **the second time around**?