

STUDY EIGHT — GENESIS 21  
GOD'S PROVISION

# P R O M I S E

— GENESIS 12 - 25 —

GOD'S GRACIOUS INITIATIVE  
IN THE LIFE & TIMES OF ABRAHAM

## OVERVIEW

**Genesis 21:1-7** – At age 100, it had been 25 long years since Abraham had first set out from Harran with the promise that he would be made into a great nation (12:4). Now finally, God’s promise of offspring was finally coming to fruition.

Isaac’s name recalls the initial response of Abraham and Sarah at the prospect of having children in their old age (cf. 17:17-19; 18:12-15). Yet upon Isaac’s birth, his name more fittingly describes their sheer joy at God’s gift. Abraham and Sarah thus now know more than ever before that God’s promises are as good as done, for he has delivered on what he promised, and done what he said he would do (21:1).

**Genesis 21:8-21** – Three years was the traditional time for weaning a child (Hughes, 294. Cf. 1 Sam 1:23ff). Due to high infant mortality rates, a feast was usually held at such a time to celebrate and thank God for the survival of the child. Yet what stands out is sixteen year old (cf. 17:21, 25) Ishmael’s mocking laughter<sup>1</sup> in sharp contrast to joyful laughter *with* Sarah and Abraham (v 6). Galatians 4:29 casts Ishmael’s response in terms of persecution. Though Isaac’s birth bore testimony to the power and promise of God, Ishmael does not respond with faith and stands in the line with the mockers who are at odds with the faithful and righteous (c.f. Ps 1:1).

What follows is a heart wrenching separation between Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar. Whilst Sarah’s response appears harsh, God confirms this to be the appropriate course of action, ‘for the sake of the promise, Abraham had to commit himself fully to Isaac (v 12)’ (Duguid, 134). God allays Abraham’s fatherly concerns by promising to richly bless Ishmael (1:13, 18). Furthermore, just as God later intervenes to save the life of Isaac (22:11), he also speaks to save the life of Ishmael (21:17). Our God is the one who sees all, and hears the cries of the distressed (cf. 16:11,13) and has compassion on the fatherless (Deut 10:18; Ps 10:14; Jer 49:11 etc). The tangled knots of by sin are weaved together by God’s grace to bring blessing to all.

**Genesis 21:22-34** – Though Abraham was once timid before Abimelech (ch 20), he is so no longer. Though he once feared that there was no ‘fear of God in the land’ (20:11), Abraham is now able to dwell in the land for a long time (v 34). Indeed, he plants a tamarisk tree as a sign of faith that he and his descendants will be in the land for a long time. Indeed, as will the tamarisk tree, Abraham’s seed of faith has grown in stature over 25 years of joys, pains, failures and successes. This strength of this faith will be seen in Genesis 22.

<sup>1</sup> In the Hebrew, the verbal form of Isaac’s name is used to describe Ishmael’s response. In its intensive form, the verb is rightly translated by the NIV as ‘mock’. The narrator thus forms a jarring contrast between Sarah’s laughter and Ishmael’s ‘laughter.’

## PROMISE+FULFILMENT UNLIKELY CHILD

Through the Old Testament, God blesses barren women with children born for a special purpose. Think of Rebekah (with Jacob and Esau), Hannah (with Samuel) and Samson’s mother. This is also the case with Sarah and Isaac.

In each of these instances God makes it clear that it is *he* who is the one who has provided these special individuals for his covenant people, thus demonstrating his power and love.

Longman (p 276) thus goes on to insightfully write,

*‘It is on this [Old Testament] background that we should read the story of Jesus’ birth.*

*According to the Gospels (e.g., Matt 1:18-25), Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus.*

*Read against the background of the narratives of barren women giving birth to important children in redemptive history, Jesus’ birth story stands out with its message that this child was truly special, far surpassing the importance of Isaac or any of the children born to barren women.’*

Jesus is the most unlikely of children, raised up for the most important of purposes.

If Ishmael’s fortunes rose and fell on the basis of his response to the promised son, how much more so do we on the basis of our response to the long awaited son of God. Will we trust in him and so become part of God’s covenant people, or will we reject him and so be separated from God?

## GETTING STARTED

1. What is the longest wait you've ever had for something you were longing for?

## INTO THE TEXT

### Read Genesis 21:1-7

2. How long had Abraham and Sarah waited for this child? Briefly recount some of the ups and downs that had taken place over this period of time.
3. What is the point being stressed in verse 1?
4. What is the meaning and significance of Isaac's name? (cf. 17:17-19; 18:12-15)
5. Read 2 Corinthians 1:20. God's promises are trustworthy. What are some promises in Scripture that you have found particularly precious in your walk with Christ?

### Read Genesis 21:8-21

6. What is so problematic about Ishmael's mocking laughter (as opposed to Sarah's joyful laughter)? (cf. Gal 4:29)
7. Was Sarah right to respond to Hagar and Ishmael the way that she did?
8. What do we learn of God's character in the way that he responds to Hagar and Ishmael?
9. Why is it problematic when people respond to God's ultimate promised son with mockery? What wisdom have you gained in knowing how to faithfully respond to those who mock Jesus?

### Read Genesis 21:22-33

10. What evidences do we see in these verses of Abraham's growing trust in God?

## TAKEAWAY

11. As you reflect on your own journey, have you seen God graciously working all things together to grow your faith? Can you see growth in other members of your group?