

## Genesis 21

This chapter contains two very distinct stories. The first is the birth of Isaac and the second is the completion of the confrontations between Abraham and Abimelech.

The story begins with its roots in God's promise to recreate, or bless, humanity through the lineage of Abraham. God, as we read earlier in Genesis, will not only bless Abraham but will bless all the families of the earth through him. To this point, while there had been numerous stories of God blessing Abraham (with slaves, wealth and military victories), the reality of blessing the world was still waiting; waiting on Abraham and Sarah to have a child through whom that blessing would come. This missing piece of the blessing puzzle is finally put in place by Isaac's birth; a birth that should never have happened because Abraham and Sarah were beyond the age of procreation. This reality, a miraculous birth, tells the reader that the blessing, or recreation, of humanity is not something ordinary human beings can do on their own, but is completely in the hands of God.

The chapter continues with sin once again rearing its ugly head. Just as in the Cain and Able story, where jealousy causes Cain to kill his brother, so here too jealousy moves toward the same end; the death of Abraham's maid, Hagar, and their son, Ishmael. Sarah, having waited so long for Isaac, desires that he, and he alone, be the recipient of the blessing of God. When she sees Isaac and Ishmael playing together, as if they were equal contenders for the blessing, she becomes enraged and pushes Abraham to send Hagar and Ismael into the desert to die. Not sure what to do, Abraham is told by God to send the pair into the wilderness, but is assured that they will not die. In fact, they will be blessed because God will make of Ishmael a mighty nation. Though, "the blessing" does not continue through Ishmael (who does indeed become the father of a great nation), he is still blessed by God because he is Abraham's son.

The chapter ends with the conclusion of the Abraham and Abimelech confrontation. In the previous chapter, Abimelech desired Sarah, Abraham gave her to him (claiming that she was his sister) and then God made sure she was returned. In this chapter, the conflict is not over a woman but over land. Abraham, as we are constantly reminded, is an alien in the land. Though God has promised land to Abraham, he has yet to receive it. This receiving of the land will have to wait another four-hundred years for its fulfilment. In the meantime, Abraham must deal with the socio-political realities of his environment. This means that he must strike a bargain and make a covenant with Abimelech for the use of a well from which Abraham's family can draw water. Though Abraham now has a well and plants a tree to mark his territory, he knows that he is only a temporary resident.

**Reflection:** This chapter is a reminder of the great Biblical theme that humanity cannot save itself. The blessing of humanity, the recreation of humanity, will be a gift of God and not the creation of individuals or governments. In the Western World, there has been this belief in the slow but steady progress of democratic ideals; that we can fix it ourselves. Scripture argues that because sin is in even the best of our intentions, that only God can provide the solution. This is one reason for scriptures miraculous birth stories (Isaac, Samuel and Jesus). They remind us that when our best laid plans do not work out, God is still working to deliver us. Even so, we, like Abraham all have our parts to play.

Questions:

1. Where do you see God's blessing of humanity in the world around you?
2. Where do you see sin getting in the way of that blessing?
3. Where do your story and Abraham's story link up?