

# GENESIS

## Chapter 21

### *The Birth of Isaac*

**The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” 7 And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”**

**21:1** *visited Sarah as he had said.* When God draws near, it is in mercy or in judgment. He drew near to Sarah in mercy and the blessing He had promised. (TLSB)

*did to Sarah what he had promised.* With elaborate detail, Moses sketches God’s fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and Sarah. By inverting the Hebrew word order of the first sentence he emphasizes that this was the God of the covenant acting in absolute independence<sup>4</sup> but also in absolute constancy. (PBC)

**21:2** *he had promised* – God’s powerful Word gives Abraham (and Sarah) the strength to bring forth a child in their old age. (TLSB)

With elaborate detail, Moses sketches God’s fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and Sarah. By inverting the Hebrew word order of the first sentence he emphasizes that this was the God of the covenant acting in absolute independence but also in absolute constancy. The long awaited son was born at just the time God had said he would be, and received the name God had selected. (PBC)

*Abraham circumcised him* – At eight days Isaac received circumcision, the sign of the covenant, the seal of the righteousness his great Descendant would earn and which Isaac received by faith. (PBC)

**21:5** Abraham, in fulfillment of the promise made to him (see 17:16), miraculously became a father at the age of 100 years (see 17:17). (CSB)

It had been 25 years since the promise was made. Cf 12:2; Rm 4:18–20. (TLSB)

**21:6** *laughter ... laugh.* Sarah’s laughter has been changed from disbelief to joy. Cf Heb 11:11. (TLSB)

As she held her infant son in her arms Sarah not only expressed her joy, but she also showed that her repentance was genuine. Recalling her earlier laughter of unbelief at God’s promise, she looked lovingly at her little Isaac (whose name means “laughter”) and said: “God has really given me something to laugh about. Everyone who hears what great things God has done will laugh with me.” (PBC)

**21:1–7** Twenty-five years after the promise was given, a child is born to Abraham and Sarah. His name is Isaac, “he laughs,” calling to mind the past laughter of his parents and describing their joy upon his birth. The parents needed patience and faith as those 25 years came and went. How impatient we can become

when things do not go as we think they should, even over short periods of time, even when God has clearly promised that all things will work together for good. But God is faithful, even when our patience and faith fall short. He has delivered the greatest of His promises, to give salvation and everlasting life to all who believe in the Lord Jesus. • Heavenly Father, keep us patient and faithful while You carry out Your plan for our lives and our salvation. Amen. (TLSB)

*God Protects Hagar and Ishmael*

**8 And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. 10 So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” 11 And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. 13 And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. 5 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” 19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. 20 And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.**

**21:8** *weaned.* At age two or three, as was customary in the ancient Near East. (CSB)

Weaning was celebrated as an early rite of passage. Everything associated with Isaac was an occasion for celebration. (TLSB)

**21:9** *the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne.* Ishmael, who was in his late teens at this time (see 16:15–16). (CSB)

*laughing.* Or “at play.” In either case, Sarah saw Ishmael as a potential threat to Isaac’s inheritance (v. 10). (CBS)

This was not just an older brother innocently teasing his younger brother. St. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians describes Ishmael’s actions as persecuting the young heir of the promise (Gal. 4:29). (PBC)

**21:10** *cast out this slave woman.* See Gal 4:21–31. Driving them out would have had the effect of disinheriting Ishmael. (CSB)

Sarah noticed that and told her husband to send Ishmael and his mother away from the household. (PBC)

Ordinarily, the oldest son becomes the heir. Sarah wanted to prevent Ishmael from taking Isaac’s inheritance. (TLSB)

**21:11** *was very displeasing.* Both love and legal custom played a part in Abraham's anguish. He knew that the customs of his day, illustrated later in the Nuzi tablets (see chart on "Ancient Texts Relating to the OT"), prohibited the arbitrary expulsion of a servant girl's son (whose legal status was relatively weak in any case). (CSB)

**21:12** *do as she tells you.* God overruled in this matter (as he had done earlier; see 15:4), promising Abraham that both Isaac and Ishmael would have numerous descendants. (CSB)

Though Sarah's motives may have been mixed, God approved of her counsel. (TLSB)

When Abraham hesitated, God made it clear that her demand did not flow from petty jealousy. Over the years Sarah had noticed that Ishmael had no appreciation for God's covenant promise, but instead made fun of it. He therefore posed a threat to Isaac's inheritance and didn't belong in the same household with Isaac. (PBC)

*through Isaac shall your offspring be named.* See Ro 9:6–8 and Heb 11:17–19 for broader spiritual applications of this statement. (CSB)

The true spiritual descendants and the messianic Seed, or Offspring, were to be found in the line of Isaac. Cf. Gal. 3:16. (TLSB)

God reaffirmed that it was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that Abraham's true descendants would be counted. It was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that all nations on earth would be blessed. (PBC)

This scene provided St. Paul with the features for his well-known comparison in Galatians 4:21-31. There the apostle contrasts Ishmael, "born in the ordinary way" and as a result of earthly-minded planning, with Isaac, "born as a result of a promise." There are not, there cannot be two ways of being saved, one by human merit and the one by faith in God's promise. The true heirs of Abraham are heirs according to the promise. (PBC)

**21:13** *make a nation* – To make Ishmael's dismissal easier, God reminded Abraham of His promise regarding this son. (TLSB)

To make it easier for Abraham to expel his older son, God restated His promise to build Ishmael's descendants into a nation. (PBC)

**21:14** *Early in the morning.* Though Abraham would now be separated from Ishmael for the first time, he responded to God's command with prompt obedience. (CSB)

Ishmael was now c 14 years old (cf 16:16; 21:5). (TLSB)

*putting it on her shoulder* – Hagar carried the provisions. (TLSB)

**21:15** *one of the bushes.* When Ishmael collapsed in the heat and thirst, Hagar left him to die in the shade of desert brush. (TLSB)

**21:17** *God heard ... God has heard.* A pun on the name "Ishmael." (CSB)

Ishmael groaned but likely also prayed. (TLSB)

**21:19** God in His providence had guided Hagar to this well and permitted her to see it. (TLSB)

**21:20** *God was with the boy* – Because Ishmael was a son of Abraham, God watched over him as he grew and blessed him with possessions and success. (TLSB)

**21:21** *wilderness of Paran*. Located in north central Sinai. (CSB)

Moses supplies additional information about Ishmael's descendants in Genesis 25:12-18. For us the most significant feature of Ishmael's line is that it lost all spiritual kinship with Abraham. (PBC)

*his mother got a wife for him from Egypt*. Parents often arranged their children's marriages (see ch. 24) (CSB)

**21:8–21** When Sarah becomes alarmed at Ishmael's behavior toward Isaac, Abraham determines to dismiss Ishmael and Hagar from his household. Despite clear promises from God, we also become overly concerned about matters in our lives that irritate us or cause us to doubt His promises. But as with Abraham and Sarah, God takes our human weakness into consideration. God has promised to forgive us and adopt us as His children for the sake of Christ's sacrifice. Through faith in Him, we are the children of promise, the children of God. • Heavenly Father, thank You for adopting me in Your only-begotten Son, Jesus. Teach me patience and compassion toward others. Amen. (TLSB)

*A Treaty with Abimelech*

**22** At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do. **23** Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.” **24** And Abraham said, “I will swear.” **25** When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, **26** Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” **27** So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. **28** Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. **29** And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?” **30** He said, “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well.” **31** Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. **32** So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. **33** Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. **34** And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.

**21:22-34** The placement of this incident after 21:8-21 presents an interesting thematic parallel. Both 21:8-21 and 21:22-34 describe a scene of conflict – conflict over a boy and over a well. Abraham is the loser in both instances. Ishmael is banished and Abraham's well is seized by another. In 21:8-21 Sarah is the one who expresses a grievance and Abraham is an innocent bystander and Ishmael's provider. But in 21:22-34 Abraham's role is switched and he becomes the one who expresses a grievance. Abimelech replaces Abraham in his role as the innocent bystander and provider. Both times Abraham gives provisions or gifts to another: bread and water to Hagar and Ishmael; sheep and cattle, and ewe lambs to Abimelech. Referring to 21:22-34 as a buffer passage between 21:8-21 and 22:1-9, R. Alter says that “the tale of a dispute over a well in the desert reinforces this network of connections, for it involves obtaining a source of life in the wilderness (as explicitly happens in the Ishmael story) and it concludes with Abraham's making a covenant meant to guarantee peace and well-being for his progeny. (Hamilton)

**21:22** *Phicol*. Either a family name or an official title, since it reappears over 60 years later (25:26) in a similar context (26:26). (CSB)

The name is neither Hebrew nor Egyptian but may derive from a region of the Aegean or Asia Minor, indicating early settlement of Sea Peoples in Canaan. This would explain the reference to the Philistines in vv 32, 34. (TLSB)

It is not clear why Abimelech was joined by Phicol, the commander of the king's army, on this occasion. One of the Alalakh Tablets (54:16-18) describes a sheep sacrifice in connection with the sale of a city by Irkabtum to Ammitakum as follows: "the neck of a sacrificial lamb was cut in the presence of PN the general. (Hamilton)

*God is with you* – This was clear to them from Isaac's miraculous birth and Abraham's prosperity. (TLSB)

Abimelech's statement also provides a parallel with the one made just a few verses earlier about Ishmael (v. 20). Both Abraham and Ishmael are vulnerable for both are away from home – one in a wilderness, one in Philistine country – but God is with both. (Hamilton)

**21:23** *swear to me ... by God.* Phrases commonly used when making covenants or treaties (see vv. 27, 32). "Kindness" as used here refers to acts of friendship (cf. v. 27; 20:14). Such covenants always involved oaths. (CSB)

In light of the presence of Elohim in his life, Abraham's behavior should be predictable and above reproach. People with whom God dwells should not engage in false, devious practices or conduct. Nonetheless, Abimelech requests Abraham to bind himself by oath to a covenant relating to Abimelech's own person and that of his posterity primarily because he does not trust Abraham. The verb and preposition used here – saqar l – do not mean "tell a lie" but rather "deal falsely, break a covenant," as can be seen in Ps. 44:18. (Hamilton)

Abimelech's use of the root sqr and his invitation to Abraham to swear off any activity of this type are ironical. Abraham had just perpetuated on Abimelech a perfect instance of seqer ("falsehood"), although the word was not used there, when he led the Philistine king to believe that his female companion was only his sister (20:1-17). Will their relationship in the future, asks Abimelech, be determined by seqer, "falsehood," or by hesed, "loyalty"? It appears that Abimelech is asking for a favor rather than imposing terms or dictating agenda. In an earlier relationship with Abraham, Abimelech was clearly the superior party who treated Abraham fairly nevertheless (20:15). Now the roles are reversed. Abimelech still has the authority of the crown and some military muscle, but he also knows that a powerful God had worked through Abraham's intercession to bring healing to his people, and the impact of the intercession on Abimelech surfaces only in 21:22. (Hamilton)

Hence, Abimelech's appeal to Abraham for hesed is based solely on the hesed he had extended earlier to Abraham. He argues not from his position but from precedent. By hesed Abimelech means behavior which is appropriate to a covenant relationship. That God is with Abraham does not mean, however, that Abraham has a two-to-one majority over Abimelech. It means that others' expectations of him increase. (Hamilton)

Abimelech wished to preserve friendly relations with Abraham by a covenant. Covenants always involved oaths. (TLSB)

Although this is highly unusual, it's also understandable. It must have been awesome to know a man whom God was so obviously supporting in everything he did – giving him a smashing victory over

invading armies, providing abundant food supply in a land of sparseness, delivering him for the consequences of his own stupidity, and miraculously granting him a son in his old age. (PBC)

King Abimelech reminded Abraham that in the past he had shown him kindness, faithful love. He had permitted Abraham, an alien, not only to live in his land and to move about freely, but also to plant crops, to graze his cattle, to dig wells. His request strikes us as reasonable: Sweat that you will show the same kindness to me and to my children and to my descendants.” The proposed alliance between Abimelech and Abraham would also bind their descendants. Abimelech would enjoy the security of a nonaggression pact, and Abraham would continue to enjoy squatter’s rights. Abraham was willing to enter into the alliance and to confirm it with an oath. (PBC)

**21:24** *I will swear* – Such oaths would carry much weight in a society without itmes like court records and verbatim testimony. (Hamilton)

**21:25** *well of water* – Before proceeding with the covenant ratification, Abraham happened to mention that a well of his had been taken over by Abimelech’s servants. After securing his sole right to use the well (v. 30) Abraham joined in the covenant ceremony. (PBC)

Interestingly, the conclusion to this issue is not mentioned. Does Abraham get his well back? It the crisis resolved to everybody’s satisfaction? We never find out. The narrative never presses on to announce a legal resolution, but only to lay the groundwork for that resolution, that is, a mutually binding covenant. (Hamilton)

**21:27-28** It is Abimelech who initiated the action, inviting Abraham to join him in a nonaggression pact (v. 23), but it is Abraham who presents a gift to Abimelech, gifts of sheep, cattle, and seven ewe lambs. The Bible has instances in which an individual in a perilous position attempts to save himself from one stronger than he with what amounts to a bribe. Compare Jacob’s “gift” to Esau (32:20-21), and Ahaz’s offer of cash to Tiglath-lieser for protection against Rezin and Pekah (2 Kings 16:5-9). Scripture also has illustrations of a weaker power offering a gift to the stronger power in hopes of cementing their pact as much as possible. Compare Asa’s gift of silver and gold to Ben-hadad so that both nations may unite in a league against Baasha, king of Israel (1 Kings 15:16ff.), and Hezekiah’s gift of silver and gold to Senacherib (2 Kings 18:13ff.). In at least one instance a more powerful king (Mero-dach-baladan) sent a gift to a king who was much less powerful(Hezekiah; 2 Kings 20:12), an action on Hezekiah’s part that Isaiah did not accept with glee (2 Kings 20:14ff.). (Hamilton)

In the instance cited from Kings, the giving of gifts is a means of opening negotiations in instances of international diplomacy, hardly the point in Genesis 21. Rather than seeing Abraham’s gifts as either bribes or diplomatic ways of commencing negotiations with a potentially hostile, non-sympathetic individual, one should understand them to be a gift to cement a pact of friendship. Abraham has lost a well to Abimelech’s servants, but this seizure must not be allowed to put distance between Abraham and Abimelech. Abraham has no interest in terminating his friendship with Abimelech over the well. One might also note the covenant Between David and Jonathan; Jonathan gave his personal garments and weapons to David to symbolize the finalizing of the covenant (1 Samuel 18:3-5). The explicit purpose of Abraham’s gift to Abimelech, at least the seven ewe lambs, will be made clear in verse 30. (Hamilton)

**21:27** *sheep and oxen*. Probably to be used in the treaty ceremony (see 15:10). (CSB)

**21:28** *seven ewe lambs* – The relation of the creatures mentioned in v. 27 (“sheep and oxen”) to those mentioned in v. 28 (“seven ewe lambs”) then appears to be this: the “sheep” of v. 27 include the “ewe lambs” of v. 28. This difference in the use of these creatures, apparently, must be established: those mentioned in v. 27, apart from the ewe lambs, are to be used to be used to be slaughtered to establish the

covenant; cf. 15:9-11 and our remarks on this passage. Then the ewe lambs constitute a special friendly gift, not usually made in connection with covenants; for Abimelech asks (v. 29): “What mean these?” Abraham’s explanation is that this gift shall serve as “witness” (feminine, ‘edhah, German Zeugin), that he has digged the well. (Leupold)

**21:29** *what is the meaning* – Abraham’s actions are not self-explanatory, and hence Abimelech presses Abraham for clarification. As a matter of fact, as far as Abimelech is concerned, hardly anything Abraham does or says is self-explanatory! For whatever reason, Abimelech is not eager to accept Abraham’s benevolence. The king’s curiosity is naturally around by the fact that Abraham isolated the seven ewe lambs from the rest of the animals and set them off by themselves (l badd hen, in 28), literally, “in their separation”; l baddana HERE IN V. 29). His strange action provokes Abimelech’s question, just as his earlier puzzling action provoked a question from Abimelech (20:9-10). (Hamilton)

**21:30** Abraham wished to protect the well by a gift and an oath, in case the Canaanites would claim the well in the future. (TLSB)

Abraham clarifies his motives and actions in the gift of the ewe lambs. In accepting them, Abimelech becomes involved in a legal transaction which binds him as a witness to the fact that Abraham is the legitimate owner of this particular well. The lambs are to be a witness (or “proof,” eda). (Hamilton)

No sacrificial activity is involved, nor is there any covenant meal. The parties swear to the pact simply in words. In accepting the lambs Abimelech releases rights over the well and concedes ownership to the patriarch. In other words, Abimelech is challenged to accept the reliability of Abraham’s word, “I dug this well,” and to side with him in any future altercation. Of course, in an incident not too far removed from this one, Abraham’s earlier word to Abimelech had been anything but reliable. If Abraham can cheat on the truth about Sarah, can he do the same with the truth about a well? (Hamilton)

**21:31** *Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath.* For a similar pun on the name see 26:33. Beersheba, an important town in the northern Negev, marked the southernmost boundary of the Israelite monarchy in later times (see, e.g., 2Sa 17:11). An ancient well there is still pointed out as “Abraham’s well” (see v. 25), but its authenticity is not certain. (CSB)

Abimelech chooses to believe Abraham, for both of them swore an oath. To the site Abraham gives the name Beer-sheba, “well of seven,” a reference to the seven lambs. Now, the Hebrew words for “seven” and “oath” are the same (saba). (Hamilton)

**21:33** *tamarisk.* A shrub or small tree that thrives in arid regions. Its leafy branches provide welcome shade, and it is probably the unidentified bush under which Hagar put Ishmael in v. 15. (CSB)

Two significant actions of Abraham after the king and his commander had left are recorded. He acknowledged his indebtedness to the Lord, first by planting a memorial tree and then by publicly worshiping “the Lord, the Eternal God.” Unlike the little, limited, local deities of the surrounding heather, Abraham’s God had promised blessings for all people for all time. (PBC)

*Everlasting God.* The Hebrew is *El Olam*, a phrase unique to this passage. It is one of a series of names that include *El*, “God,” as an element. (CSB)

Luther: “Whenever this little statement is made – that the patriarchs called or cried out in the name of the Lord, or that they build an altar – it denotes that a certain place is to be preserved, there must be some pious prince to provide quarters for it and grant it room and peace, so that the doctrine and the Word of God can be spread” (AE 4:489).

**21:22–34** Abraham agrees to a covenant and works out his differences with the government so that he might live in peace. Good and orderly government is always helpful for the mission of the Church, and God's people are required to support their government with proper citizenship. At the same time, the salvation God provides does not depend on good governments like that of Abimelech, for God will continue to save His elect by the power of Gospel preaching and Sacraments, at times despite evil governments. • O Lord, give good government throughout the world so that the Gospel of Christ's cross may be preached without obstacle or persecution. Amen. (TLSB)