

# Ishmael & Isaac

## ISHMAEL

*GAL.4:22-24, 30-31 (22) For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one of the maidservant and one of the free woman. (23) However the one of the maidservant was born according to the flesh, but the one of the free woman was born through promise. (24) These things are spoken allegorically, for these women are two covenants, one from Mount Sinai, bringing forth children unto slavery, which is Hagar. (30) But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the maidservant and her son, for the son of the maidservant shall by no means inherit with the son of the free woman." (31) So then, brothers, we are not children of the maidservant but of the free*

**Born of Hagar unto Slavery** Ishmael was born of Hagar, Abraham's concubine, as a result of Abraham's accepting a proposal from his wife, Sarah. Ishmael was rejected by God because he was born of Abraham according to the flesh, that is, by man's natural strength, the strength of the flesh, and not by God's grace (Gen. 17:18-19). Hagar the maidservant signifies the covenant of law, which brings forth children unto slavery (Gal.4:22,24). Ishmael, who was born of Hagar into slavery, could not inherit Abraham's possessions with Isaac, who was born of Sarah, the free woman. This signifies that those who keep the law by their self-effort are in slavery and are born of the flesh, and they cannot be heirs of God with the believers, who are born of grace (Gal.4:30); that is, they cannot inherit God's promised blessing—the all-inclusive Spirit.

**Cast Out by Sarah and Denied the Inheritance** When Isaac grew and was weaned, Ishmael mocked him (Gen.21:9). Sarah, unable to tolerate Ishmael's mocking of Isaac, asked Abraham to cast out both Hagar and Ishmael, for she would not allow Ishmael to be heir along with Isaac (Gen.21:10). Abraham obeyed God and cast out both Hagar and Ishmael, as he was told by Sarah (Gen.21:12-14). This signifies that the law and those who keep the law by their self-effort are cast out by grace from the inheriting of grace and are unable to enjoy grace as their inheritance (Gal.4:30-31; 5:4).

## ISAAC

*Gal.4:28-31 But you, brothers, in the way Isaac was, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the maidservant and her son, for the son of the maidservant shall by no means inherit with the son of the free woman." So then, brothers, we are not children of the maidservant but of the free woman.*

God's aim in calling Abraham was to accomplish His purpose, which was to establish a kingdom that He might rule on the earth and express His glory. In order to have a kingdom, seeds were needed. Therefore, God promised Abraham that he would beget a son by his wife Sarah (Gen.17:19) to be his heir.

**Born of Sarah** Isaac was the son born of Abraham by his wife Sarah, and he became the unique seed who inherited all the riches of his father (Gen.17:19; 21:2-3; 25:5). Sarah, the free woman (Gal. 4:22b), symbolizes the new covenant of grace (Gal. 4:24a), which has the proper position in God's economy to bring forth children as God's heirs who will inherit what is of God. Therefore, Isaac represents the New Testament believers, who are born to be sons of God according to His grace and are His heirs who will inherit His possessions (Gal. 4:28, 30-31).

**Born according to Promise** When Abraham had become old and as good as dead, and Sarah had become out of function (Rom.4:19), according to God's promise and at the appointed time, the time of life (Gen.17:21, lit.), the time when the effort of the natural life ceases, Isaac was born. Therefore, Isaac was not produced by the natural strength, the strength of the flesh (Gal.4:23), but by God's strength in grace. He was born not of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the effort of the flesh (John 1:13), but according to the Holy Spirit (Gal.4:29), who is God reaching man (cf. Gen.17:21—21:1). Therefore, Isaac represents the New Testament believers, who are born according to the grace of God's promise—those who are not born of the flesh but of the Holy Spirit.

**Inheriting and Restfully Enjoying the Father's Riches** Isaac lived a life of inheriting and restfully enjoying all his father's riches. He was born of grace, grew up in grace, and became the heir in grace (Gen.21:9-12), inheriting all that his father had (Gen.25:5). Furthermore, he inherited God's promise to his father, especially the promise concerning Christ, in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen.26:3-5).

His entire life was a resting and enjoying life. He was always resting. At a time when he had lost his mother, did not yet have a wife, and his servant had gone away from him, he was not troubled. Rather, he went to the field to meditate (Gen.24:63). When he encountered the trouble with the Philistines over the wells, he remained restful and did not contend with them (Gen.26:18-22). He was not merely resting; he was also enjoying. His father and his father's servant did everything to prepare a bride for him (Gen.24:61-67). During his whole life, he never suffered thirst. Wherever he went, even when he went downward, going south to the land of the Philistines, there was always a well for his enjoyment. Whenever he sowed in the land, he received a hundredfold. He became great and continued to grow greater until he became very great (Gen. 26:12-14). When he was old, he still asked Esau to go out to the field to get some venison for him and make him savory meat, which he loved (Gen.27:1-4). Throughout his whole life he did not do anything by his own effort. From the beginning to the end, he was a man who inherited his father's possessions (Gen. 25:5) and restfully enjoyed all his father's riches. Isaac represents the New Testament believers, who do not need to strive to accomplish something and who need only to inherit the grace in Christ and enjoy the unlimited grace of God (1Cor.15:10).

**Inheriting God's Promise First** God gave the promise to Abraham, Isaac's father, saying that He would make him a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Later, He gave the same promise to Isaac to confirm in him what He had promised to Abraham (Gen. 26:3-4). The focus of this promise was Christ in God's economy, in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gal. 3:16). The blessing that Christ gives to all the nations of the earth is the Triune God, who is embodied in Him. This Triune God in Christ, through Christ's becoming the all-inclusive Spirit, is received and enjoyed as the greatest blessing in the universe by all those on earth who have believed into Christ (Gal.3:14).

**Persecuted by Ishmael** According to Genesis 21, after Isaac had grown up and was weaned, Ishmael began to mock him (v.9). This means that Ishmael persecuted Isaac. God considered this persecution the beginning of the four-hundred-year persecution of His people, the Israelites (Gen.15:13; Acts7:6). Isaac was born according to the Holy Spirit and through the promise, whereas Ishmael was born according to the flesh and through the natural strength. As it was then, that he who was born according to flesh persecuted him who was born according to Spirit, so also it is now (Gal.4:29). Therefore,

Isaac's suffering of Ishmael's persecution signifies that the believers, who are born according to the Spirit of grace in the New Testament, will suffer persecution from those who are born according to flesh (Gal.4:29).

**Offered as a Burnt Offering and Experiencing Death and Resurrection** After Isaac had grown up, in order to test Abraham, God told him to bring Isaac to the appointed mountain and to offer him as a burnt offering. By faith Abraham offered Isaac. After Isaac was laid upon the altar on the wood, as Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay him, God prepared a ram as Isaac's substitute (Gen.22:2-13). In this way, Isaac was offered as a burnt offering and thus experienced death and resurrection. This signifies that the New Testament believers also must be offered as a burnt offering and experience death and resurrection. When the New Testament believers, constrained by the Lord's love, present their bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom.12:1), a sacrifice of resurrection and life, they experience co-crucifixion with Christ (Gal.2:20a). Thus, they live a crucified life by being conformed to Christ's death, and thereby know and experience Christ and the power of His resurrection (Phil.3:10). Eventually, they will attain to the out-resurrection from among the dead (Phil.3:11).

**Having No Maturity in Life** As a historical figure in the Bible, Isaac, like Abraham, does not represent a complete, spiritually mature man. He represents only a part of the experience and life of a spiritually mature person, which includes the inheriting of grace, not using one's own effort, and the restful enjoyment of the riches of Christ. When he was old, he blessed Jacob blindly (Gen.27:1-29). This proves that he was not sufficiently mature in his spiritual life and that he was not a complete, spiritually mature person, but can be considered only a part of such a person, just as we saw previously concerning Abraham.

## QUESTIONS

1. Briefly state the spiritual significance of Ishmael.

2. Briefly state the spiritual significance of Isaac's birth.

3. Briefly state the characteristics of Isaac's entire life, and their significances.

4. Briefly state the promise of God inherited by Isaac.

5. Briefly state the spiritual significance of Isaac's being persecuted by Ishmael.

6. Briefly state the spiritual significance of Isaac's being offered as a burnt offering and thereby experiencing death and resurrection.

7. Give some examples to prove that Isaac did not have the maturity in the spiritual life.