

Ishmael must Go!

by Ray C. Stedman

Our new life in Christ begins with an initial period of joy and gladness, frequently with fruitful activity and observable changes. I always question the conversion of someone who doesn't soon experience some changes in his life, because the very purpose for which Christ enters our life is to redeem us, to buy us back out of uselessness into usefulness. This initial period is almost always a period of great joy. We recognize that we have found the secret of life, that all the empty cisterns from which we have been trying to satisfy our thirsty soul are no longer of any avail and we turn to the fountain of living water. The result is always an experience, varying to some degree by the personality involved, of genuine gladness in the soul.

Also our conversion is almost always followed by a period of failure and frustration, alternating with times of peace and joy and victory. This constitutes a problem to many young Christians. They believe they are going to continue on that initial level of gladness, triumph, and victory, and are very disturbed at first when failure, frustration and defeat come into their lives. They will struggle on through that and come into a time of renewed peace and victory, and then experience another failure. This sometimes goes on for years and years. It doesn't need to go on that long, but it often does.

I think many waste years trying to recapture the first love they had and the joy they first experienced when they came to Christ. But this is a mistake, and Christians need to realize that these periods of frustration and failure are part of the divine plan of God. When we fail to see that, we become

like those Galatians to whom Paul wrote saying, "Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Gal 3:1 {RSV}). Are you going to be able to work this out in your own strength, having begun in the energy of another? Thus he corrects them and this is what we need to learn. The periods of failure are simply designed to teach us how to live the new way of life.

We have two centers of being from which we can operate:

- What we were in ourselves, and
- What we are now in Christ who is given to us.

Whenever we operate from self, it results in failure. Whenever we depend upon Christ, it results in victory. The Lord simply lets us experience this truth until we finally learn the difference. We are not to depend upon self! Victory comes only through total dependence on Christ and him alone! As we gradually begin to learn this lesson, there are increasingly frequent times of victory, peace, joy, effectiveness and fruitfulness in our life, and there comes at last the long promised era of continuous fruitfulness. One morning we take a good look at our lives and notice what is happening. That nature, that disposition which we have long been trying to achieve – love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, patience, meekness, and self-control – is beginning to manifest itself more and more regularly in our life. That first long-promised joy has begun to be fulfilled.

Ishmael must Go!

This is the place to which we come in the life of Abraham. At the beginning God promised him a son who would bring joy to his heart and begin the long line of descendants which would finally be more numerous than the stars in the sky. This is the picture of fruitfulness that is promised to the believer. **The promised joy** was long delayed in Abraham's life. He went through many trials and failures in which he learned much about himself in terms of defeat and folly; and he learned much about God in terms of victory and fulfillment. But now he has begun to walk so consistently in the Spirit that the continual fruit of love, joy and peace begin to appear. This is what is symbolized by the birth of Isaac here; when Isaac is born, Abraham's joy is fulfilled:

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (Gen 21:1-7 {RSV})

This is the picture of the joy of fulfillment. At last we have two sons of Abraham living side by side, Isaac and Ishmael. We don't need to wonder what this means in the life of faith, because in the letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us. He says that Isaac is a picture of that which is born of the Spirit and Ishmael is a picture of that which is born of the flesh {Gal 4:22-23, 28}. Isaac is the result of a life controlled by the Spirit. What does that mean to us? Well, in that same letter he tells us, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control," (Gal 5:22-23a {RSV}). These are the *Isaacs* for which we have been waiting. Ishmael, on the other hand, stands for the works of the flesh that are outlined in that very same chapter {Gal 5:19-21a}.

Notice how that is confirmed in this passage:

- First of all, *Isaac's birth was supernatural*. He was not born until Abraham and Sarah had reached an advanced age. Sarah was 90 years old and Abraham was 100. It occurred at the set time, some 30 years after God had first promised to give Abraham a son. In Romans 4:19a, Paul referring to this time says, "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old." This was a supernatural birth. God quickened the natural processes again and a child was born, but it was a supernatural quickening. Rather amazing, isn't it?

Do you see now why God waited all this long time to fulfill the promise to Abraham? He was waiting until the ability and forces of natural man had ceased, so his promise could definitely be a supernatural fulfillment. This is exactly what God says to us about the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. It will never come from the flesh. It will never come from self-effort, nor by positive thinking, nor by perpetual trying. Love, joy, and peace, those wonderful gifts of God, never come from any attempt on our part to imitate them. You can imitate them, but they will never be anything but an imitation. You cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit by the flesh, because that fruit is the supernatural gift from the life lived in the power of the Spirit of God, born as Isaac was here. It comes simply by appropriating the life of Jesus Christ.

- The second principle about this new life is *circumcision*. Abraham set upon Isaac the sign of God's ownership, which is the picture of what the Christian does when he recognizes that the love, joy, and peace in his heart is not given for his own private enjoyment, but to share with others. God doesn't make you easier to live with simply to clear up some of the problems in your home, but to demonstrate through your life the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. And you are to use it for blessing for others.

When I was a boy in Minnesota, we had a neighbor woman with a large family who was regarded in the neighborhood as a religious fanatic. We'd hear stories about how she would take her Bible and go out into the fields and spend all day in a haystack. The result was

that she neglected her own household; her children were always running around without proper direction in very dirty clothes, her house was always filthy, and her husband was always complaining about the situation. Nevertheless, she would come into the church meeting and stand up and testify about what a wonderful experience she had had out in the haystack, and what a joy and ecstasy had come into her heart. She may well have had those experiences (we have to take people at their word in this respect), but it was an uncircumcised joy and love. It was not devoted to the purpose for which God had sent it. It did not bear the mark of God's ownership. It wasn't used in the way God intended it to be used.

But when Isaac is born in Abraham's household, he is circumcised.

- The third principle in this account is *the reality of a satisfying experience*. Isaac means "laughter," and when this son was born, the whole household was beside itself with ecstasy. I wish we could have seen Sarah, ninety years old, with that little babe in her arms, her face radiant with the delight of the long-awaited fulfillment of the promise of her heart. What a picture this is of the joy that Christ brings into the human heart. Sometimes language almost seems extravagant when we try to describe this, but if you have ever known what Christ means to the heart, you know that all language is inadequate. The song writer has said:

Heaven above is softer blue,
earth around is sweeter green,
Something lives in every hue,
Christless eyes have never seen.
Birds with gladder songs o'er flow,
Flowers with deeper beauties shine
Since I know as now I know.
I am his and he is mine.

This is the experience of those who have Christ dwelling in their hearts. Have you ever had an *Isaac experience*, when after a long period of struggle in your Christian life, you discovered the secret of walking in the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit became evident in your life? What a day of glad release this is when you have put away all the self-centeredness and begun to manifest that wonderful fruit of Christ-centered love, joy, and peace.

Now this is not the whole story. A **sharp contrast** appears in the next section:

And the child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 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." And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the lad and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." 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. (Gen 21:8-14 {RSV})

Now if Isaac represents the gladsome fullness of the fruit of the Spirit in the life, then Ishmael represent some pet manifestation of our self-life in which we find comfort and delight and which we do not want to surrender. You see how perfectly this is pictured here in this story – some value which we have long suspected is not what God would have, but which we were reluctant to give up. Perhaps it is some long-standing habit that we have been defending, such as smoking, or overeating. I am not making any lists of forbidden things; I am merely saying there can be habits or values in our lives which are really some form of self-indulgence. God may allow them for a time, but the time comes when he says, "Now, these have to go." It can be anything:

- It may be some pet doctrine you have been insisting upon, which has been causing division and separation among the brethren. You've gained a reputation in this field as an authority and you are not going to give it up.
- Maybe it is an insistence on a particular mode of baptism, a matter of tithing, some partisan

Ishmael must Go!

political view – something that separates – which you hold as distinctive.

- It may be some friendship, or membership in some lodge or club.
- It can be anything that rises from self-indulgence which we defend, protect, justify and delight in, just as Abraham defended, protected and delighted in Ishmael – until the time came when he had to make this choice.

Notice some things about this:

First of all, this was *a distressing matter* to Abraham. He had to go through an agonizing reappraisal when the word came from the LORD, “Ishmael must go.” He loved this boy – though he had often grieved over his arrogance and hasty ways – and he didn’t want to give him up. I think he was angry with God for bringing the matter up. He probably said to God, as we frequently say, “Oh, this is really nothing, it is such a trivial thing. Why bring it up, why bother with it? Let’s go on the way we were. We have been getting along for quite awhile with Ishmael, why change now?” But the agony of his heart showed that it was not a trivial matter. If it had been a light matter, he could easily have dismissed Ishmael. But it was not; it was something that would cost him deeply.

I remember a telephone call from a lady who had been at a class I had previously held. She said, “I’ve been thinking so much about what you said in class about God asking us to turn away from things in our life that are hindering us: I have a problem, and I don’t know what to do about it.” She named what it was, and said she had heard testimonies from people about what God had done for them when they became Christians and how they had had problems with smoking or drinking or sex or some other habit that God had laid it on their hearts to stop. She said, “They tell me God just takes the desire away and they don’t ever have the desire to do this again. I feel that God would definitely have me turn from this particular problem in my life, but he doesn’t take the desire away. What should I do?” I said to her, “Well, God does sometimes deliver us by taking the desire out of our hearts, but in most cases, I think, God leaves the desire right there and tells us to obey anyhow – even though it costs us some heartache and anguish.” I quoted

this story of Abraham to her, of how he obeyed when it hurt, when it caused anguish to his heart to say good-bye to Ishmael, but this was what God said was harming him, and he obeyed God and sent him away.

I want you to notice that this was *a delayed judgment*. Ishmael was fourteen years old at this time, and Abraham had known from the beginning that Ishmael was not God’s choice. He had come from Abraham’s deliberate choice of self-indulgence. Since God had not chosen this boy, he would not be Abraham’s heir. Yet God permitted him to stay, saying nothing to Abraham about it, until Isaac came along.

When we come to choices like this and the Spirit of the LORD speaks to us about a matter, we tend to think God is very harsh, very cruel, and very demanding when, in reality, he has been patient, forbearing, and tender. For fourteen years Ishmael was allowed to stay in the house without a word, but when Isaac came, then Ishmael had to go at last. He never takes away an *Ishmael* until he has given an *Isaac*!

Because this is so, we need to be very careful about judging others. We may see *Ishmaels* in their lives and want to root them out, saying, “You must get rid of this habit.” But when God takes away an *Ishmael*, he first gives an *Isaac*. In other words, he never tells us to give up some manifestation of self-indulgence until he has first given us some fruit of the Spirit of grace to take its place in satisfying that longing of the heart. However, when he does give us that manifestation of grace and blessing, then the self-indulgence has to go.

When we first become Christians, there are some obviously evil things in our lives brought over from the old days that have to go immediately. But there are others that appear more innocent which God permits, allowing us to struggle and fight until we learn to walk in the Spirit. Then the fruit of the Spirit begins to appear and these things have to go.

A friend of mine was telling me about a prominent evangelical leader who had been given a great opportunity, and he was looking forward to the fulfillment of it as the greatest occasion of joy that he had ever experienced. Others had been praying for this man for a long time, because they saw some *Ishmaels* in his life. One day as he was looking forward to moving in on this opportunity, a friend sat down with him and, in a painful time,

Ishmael must Go!

faced him with some of the things in his life. It was the voice of God to him. The friend told him that he was trying to be a big shot, always wanting to run things himself. He had to learn to let others step in. He put his finger on a personal habit, a bad temper, and told him that the next time he displayed that temper as he had recently been doing, he would find his opportunity gone. He just laid it on the line with him, and said, “Now that this opportunity has come, these things must go.” This man, in relating the incident to someone else said, “I realized that this was the Spirit of God speaking to me.” And he responded to it and faced the things, recognizing that they must go. This is always a distressing time, but it also represents the faithfulness and patience of God, who has allowed this *Ishmael* until we are ready to give it up.

Notice the last part – *it is decisive*: When God speaks, there can be no dilly-dallying any longer. It is imperative that Ishmael goes. This is what our Lord Jesus was speaking about in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away,” {Matt 5:29a RSV}. “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away,” {Matt 5:30a RSV}. If you are going to walk in the power of the Spirit, you cannot walk in the power of the flesh. You cannot have both – one must go.

Now, observe the following: God says definitely that Ishmael could never share in the inheritance with Isaac. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,” (John 3:6 {RSV}). When the time comes for us to stand before our Lord at the judgment seat of Christ, our lives will be classified into two areas: Those that are wood, hay, and stubble, which are of the flesh; and those of gold, silver and precious stones which are of the Spirit (See 1 Cor 3:10-15). The Lord says to us as he says to Abraham, “Ishmael must go.” If you refuse to expose, to examine and remove that which is born of the flesh, even though you know God has said that it hurts you, and even though he had shown you the peace, joy, and love which is the fruit of the Spirit, then you must face this choice as Abraham did. Ishmael must go.

I recall reading an article about Dr. Barnhouse and was struck by evidences of this very choice in his experience. He said, “Early in my ministry, I

had the idea that I must strike out against all error wherever I saw it. I hit Christian Science, Unitarianism, Romanism, and if error was in some fundamental leader with whom I was in 95% agreement, I swung hard at the 5%.” This made Dr. Barnhouse a highly controversial figure, often unmercifully sharp and dogmatic. This zeal for truth within him became an *Ishmael* in his life. Then he tells how there came a time when the Spirit of God taught him to love and he faced the choice – *Ishmael* had to go. He had to learn to be more understanding and more tolerant of some of the variant views of others. He wrote, “Some time ago, I published a New Year’s resolution expressing regret that I had had differences with men who are truly born again. The results of that resolution were astounding. In the years which followed its publication, my ministry has been transformed. I need to know all who have been redeemed by Christ, for I will never know my Lord fully until I see him in every individual whom he has redeemed and saved by the outpouring of his life for us all upon the cross. This,” he says, “is true fellowship.” It was wonderful to see in the life of Dr. Barnhouse the removal of an *Ishmael*. The closing years of his life show much of his mellowing and of the sweetness of the fruit of the Spirit in one who before had been so harsh, critical, and demanding.

I don’t know what form *Ishmael* may be taking in your life, but I know there are times when God says to us, simply, “This must go; no longer may it be permitted. There can be no manifestation of the life of the Spirit any longer until this is dealt with.”

You know how Abraham obeyed. Early in the morning, he got up and took bread and a skin of water and though it cost him heartbreak to do it, sent Hagar and Ishmael out, so that he might have the fullness of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Prayer:

Our Father, we know these things are written not merely to amuse us, that these strike deeply into our hearts and reveal basic fundamental issues and there are things, Lord, that you see in us that are hurting us of which we are not even aware. We are protecting, defending, excusing, justifying, and trying to find all kinds of ways to

Ishmael must Go!

permit them to continue, but we thank you, Lord, that there comes a time when with faithfulness, you say to us, "This must go. Cast out the bond woman and her son for it is a threat to the inheritance, and cannot have any part in it." Lord, we would pray that if we would sincerely and earnestly

long to be a full and completely yielded vessel of your joy and strength and peace among men, we will have the grace to cast out Ishmael and find the fullness and joy of Isaac. For we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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