

WHAT MUST GO?

A Five-Day Devotional from Genesis 21

Abraham, 9\13\26 | Pacific Church of Irvine

There are things in our lives that need to go. Not bad things, necessarily. Sometimes the most complicated things to let go of are the ones we have come to love, the ones we have defended and protected and built a life around. The ones whose departure would cost us something real.

Abraham knew this feeling. In Genesis 21, God asks him to send away Hagar and Ishmael, and the text says it distressed Abraham greatly. He loved Ishmael. He had raised him. He had watched him grow from a newborn into a teenager. And letting him go was one of the hardest things God ever asked him to do.

This five-day devotional follows the story of that sending away, and then asks a question that is much closer to home than it might first appear: what is the Hagar or the Ishmael in your life that God has been asking you to release?

DAY ONE

Drama

Genesis 21:8–11 “The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son.”

REFLECTION

This is not the beginning of the tension, this is something that has been building up. Sarah and Hagar had been in the same camp for over a decade, two women in an impossible arrangement, and a history that made peaceful coexistence fragile at best. And for years, somehow, they had managed.

Then Isaac was born. And as Isaac grew, and as the attention and the celebration and the promise all settled visibly on this new child, Ishmael's resentment found an outlet. He began mocking his little brother. And Sarah, watching, finally reached the end of what she could absorb.

Get rid of the slave woman and her son.

It is a hard sentence. Sarah does not soften it. And what makes it complicated is that she is not entirely wrong. The New Testament will later confirm that what she was reading in the situation was spiritually accurate. The son of the flesh and the son of promise could not share the same inheritance. Something had to give.

But knowing something is necessary does not make it painless. The text says the matter distressed Abraham greatly. He had loved Ishmael for years. He had watched him grow, celebrated him, called him son. And the idea of sending him away was not a decision he could make quickly or easily or without grief.

There are situations in our lives that have been simmering for a long time. Arrangements that worked, more or less, until something shifted. A relationship pattern, a habit, a way of operating that co-existed with our faith for years and then one day began to produce obvious conflict. The

recognition that something has to go is often not sudden. It arrives slowly, through accumulating tension, until it finally becomes undeniable.

And the distress Abraham felt when he heard the sentence is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that he genuinely loved what he was being asked to release. The things God asks us to let go of are rarely things we were indifferent about. They are usually things that have mattered to us. Things we have built our lives around in ways we did not fully realize until the moment we were asked to reconsider them.

QUESTIONS

— Is there something in your life, a relationship, a habit, a pattern, a way of thinking, that has been simmering as a source of tension between who you are and who God is calling you to be? How long has it been simmering?

— Abraham was distressed because he loved Ishmael. The hardest things to release are usually things we love. What are you holding onto that, if God asked you to release it, would cost you something real?

— The situation in Abraham's camp had been managed for years before it finally became undeniable. What are you managing right now that may need something more decisive than management?

DAY TWO

Obedience

Genesis 21:14–16 “Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.”

REFLECTION

Early the next morning.

Abraham did not delay. He did not spend the next week working through his feelings or looking for a way to soften the outcome or finding a middle path that would let him keep Ishmael while appearing to comply with what God had said. God spoke in verse 12. By verse 14 Abraham was up before dawn, packing food and water, and doing the thing he had been told to do.

That kind of immediate obedience, when the thing being obeyed costs everything, is one of the more remarkable things in Abraham's story. He did not want to do this. The text made that clear. But the wanting and the doing are separate things, and Abraham understood that.

And then the scene shifts to Hagar.

She is in the desert with a teenage son and a skin of water that is going to run out. She has been sent away from the only source of provision she knew. And when the water is finally gone, she does

what any mother would do. She finds the only shade she can find and she puts her son in it. And then she walks a short distance away, because she cannot watch him die, and she sits down, and she sobs.

This is not a triumphant scene. It is a broken one. That brokenness is not Hagar's alone. Some of it belongs to the decisions that were made years earlier, decisions by Abraham and Sarah that set this whole sequence in motion. The consequences of those earlier choices have now traveled forward in time and landed on a woman and her son in a desert.

Obedience to what God asks is sometimes like this. The right thing to do produces pain. Not because God is cruel, but because we live in a world where the consequences of our past choices do not evaporate when we finally decide to do what we should have done earlier. Hard obedience is still obedience. And it is still the right thing, even when it produces grief.

Abraham obeyed early in the morning. He did not wait for it to feel better. Sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is exactly that: act before the feeling catches up, trust that what God has said is good, and walk forward into the hard thing without the comfort of knowing yet how it resolves.

QUESTIONS

- Abraham obeyed early the next morning, before there was any resolution of his grief. Is there something God has made clear to you that you have been delaying because you are waiting for it to feel less costly? What would it look like to obey early in the morning?

— Hagar's situation in the desert was shaped in part by decisions made years earlier by other people. Are you living with the consequences of past choices, yours or someone else's, that have made the present moment harder than it should be? How does that affect the way you relate to God right now?

— Obedience sometimes produces pain rather than relief. When has doing the right thing cost you something real? What did you discover about God in that season?

DAY THREE

Answered

Genesis 21:17–20 “God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy as he grew up.”

REFLECTION

Hagar has no record of praying. She has no record of calling out to God, of believing in him, of being someone who had any kind of faith relationship with the God of Abraham. She is sitting in a desert, certain that her son is going to die, sobbing with the particular grief of complete hopelessness.

And God heard the boy crying.

God heard, and God acted, and God showed up at the lowest point of a life that had very little visible claim on his attention.

The angel does not rebuke her. He does not rehearse the ways she contributed to this situation. He asks what is the matter, and then he answers her fear before she can even articulate it. Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying. Lift him up. Take him by the hand.

And then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

That sentence raises a question that the text leaves deliberately open. Was the well there before and she could not see it, her vision narrowed by despair and exhaustion? Or did God create a well where there had not been one? Either way, the theological point is the same. She could not find what she needed on her own. She had looked and found nothing. And when God opened her eyes, it was there.

God was with the boy as he grew up. That sentence is the summary of everything that follows for Ishmael. He was sent away from Abraham's camp. He built his life in the desert. His mother found him a wife. He became the ancestor of a great nation, as God had promised. His story was not over when it looked most finished. God was with him in the desert the same way God had been with Abraham in Ur, in Haran, in Canaan. The initiative was always God's.

There is a word in this for anyone who has ended up somewhere they did not choose, in a desert season partly of their own making and partly of someone else's, wondering whether God sees them and whether his care extends to the places where they feel most forgotten. The answer of Genesis 21 is direct. God heard the boy crying. He hears. He sees. He opens eyes to wells that were invisible

a moment before. And he is with people as they grow, even when the growing happens in the hardest terrain.

QUESTIONS

— God took the initiative with Hagar before she asked, before she prayed, before there was any visible faith on her part. Have you experienced God showing up in a season where you had not been particularly faithful toward him? What did that reveal about his character?

— God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well that she had not been able to see before. Is there something God may be trying to show you right now that your current despair or exhaustion is making invisible? What would it look like to ask him to open your eyes?

— The story of Ishmael does not end in the desert. God was with him as he grew up. Is there a season in your past that looked like an ending but turned out to be the beginning of something? What does that history teach you about the season you are in now?

DAY FOUR

Ishmael

Romans 6:12–13 “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.”

REFLECTION

When Paul uses Hagar and Ishmael as an allegory in Galatians 4, he is making a theological argument about two kinds of people. But the same image works at a more personal level, inside the life of a single believer. There is an Isaac nature and an Ishmael nature operating in all of us simultaneously. The new birth has happened. The Spirit-born life is real. And the old nature, the Ishmael, is still in the tent.

The theological term for the sin that keeps returning is besetting sin. A besetting sin is not just a sin you have committed. It is a sin pattern you keep returning to, the one that feels most native to you, the one you have the most elaborate justifications for, the one you could win an argument about if someone pushed you on it. We all have one. Some of us have a few.

Paul is not gentle about what to do with it. Do not let sin reign. Do not offer any part of yourself to it. Offer every part of yourself to God instead. This is the same decisive language Sarah used when she told Abraham what needed to happen with Hagar and Ishmael. Get rid of it.

Colossians 3:5 “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

Put to death. That is strong language. And the reason it is strong is that the besetting sin does not want to go. It has been in the tent for years. You have defended it, protected it, found reasons why your version of it is not as bad as it looks, convinced yourself that you have it mostly under control. The same way Abraham defended and loved Ishmael right up until the moment God said he had to go.

What makes besetting sins so difficult is that they often have a history that explains them, if not excuses them. The anger that comes from old wounds. The control that comes from old chaos. The numbness that came from years of pain looking for a way out. The pattern makes sense, in a way. And that sensibility is exactly what makes it so hard to let go. We understand why it is there. We have almost made peace with it. And God is saying the same thing he said to Abraham: this has to go.

The Lord sees things in us that we are not fully aware of. We protect and defend and justify them. And in faithfulness, at some point, he says what he said in Genesis 21. Get rid of that. The comfort is the same comfort God gave Abraham. This is not the end. There is a better life ahead of what you are releasing.

QUESTIONS

- What is the Ishmael in your life right now, the sin pattern you have the most elaborate justifications for, the one you have been managing rather than addressing? What would it mean to stop managing it and do something more decisive?

— Paul's language in both Romans 6 and Colossians 3 is decisive and physical. Do not let sin reign. Put to death. What does that kind of intentionality look like practically in your specific situation? What concrete steps would a more decisive approach require?

— Abraham loved Ishmael, which is what made letting him go so hard. Is there something about your besetting sin that you love or benefit from in ways that make it difficult to release? What would you lose if it were gone, and is that loss actually a loss?

DAY FIVE

Mothers

Galatians 4:28–31 “Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.” Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”

REFLECTION

Paul is making a specific argument in Galatians 4, and the argument is about something that could not matter more. He is asking: how were you born? By what means did your spiritual life begin?

Hagar represents the slave woman. She represents the kind of life that is produced by human effort. Sarah represents the free woman. She represents the kind of life that is produced by the promise and power of God. Ishmael is what human effort produces. Isaac is what God produces.

The allegory maps directly onto two ways of approaching God. There are people who are living the Hagar life, trying to earn their standing before God through what they do. The religious résumé. The good behavior, the church attendance, the volunteer hours, the moral record they are quietly keeping and presenting to God as evidence that they qualify. This is the Ishmael approach. Born of human effort. It looks productive. It produces something real. But it is not the thing God promised.

And then there is the Isaac approach. Born not of what we can produce but of what God promises to those who come to him by faith. The righteousness that is not our own but is given. The standing before God that is not earned but received. The inheritance that belongs not to those who worked for it but to those who were born into it, born again, of the Spirit.

Are you trying to get to God through what you can produce? Or are you receiving what God has already provided?

This distinction matters because the Hagar life, however sincere, is exhausting. There is always more to do, always more to earn, always the quiet anxiety that what you have produced might not be quite enough. The Isaac life, born of promise and grace, has a different quality. It is the life that Sarah laughed with in Genesis 21. Not the laugh of someone who earned something. The laugh of someone who received something so much better than what they could have produced that the only reasonable response was joy.

We are not children of the slave woman, Paul says. We are children of the free woman. That is not a sentence about effort. It is a sentence about birth. And the birth that matters most is not the one that happened in a hospital. It is the one Jesus described to Nicodemus. The one that happens not

by human decision or human effort but by the Spirit of God, doing in us what we could never do in ourselves.

QUESTIONS

— Honestly, which approach more accurately describes your relationship with God right now: the Hagar approach, trying to earn standing through what you produce, or the Isaac approach, receiving what God has already given by grace? What does your answer reveal?

— The Hagar life is exhausting because there is always more to earn. Have you experienced the exhaustion of trying to earn what can only be received? What does it feel like to lay that down?

— Looking back across all five days of this devotional, from the drama that finally boiled over, to the hard obedience, to God showing up in the desert, to the besetting sin, to this final question about how we were born: what is the one thing God has been saying to you specifically this week? And what are you going to do with it?