

Gen. 21:1-14; Gal. 4:21-31; Ishmael and Isaac I. The Two Sons Born II. The Two Covenants Signified
Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, sibling rivalries can be a constant source of conflict within the home. As each child tries to outdo the other; to gain respect or preferential place within the home. Which one is better seems to be motivated by a desire to be loved and accepted. But can you imagine the rivalry of having not just 2 sons- but the rivalry to having two wives? Thankfully this practice of polygamy is no longer acceptable- and rightly so. But in our text, the sibling rivalry is complicated by their mother's rivalry. We will see this again with Rachel and Leah in a few weeks. Rightly have men been warned against a woman scorned. So this evening we are going to consider the rivalry of Ishmael and Isaac. And in order to avoid confusion, we are going to refer to Isaac's parents as Abraham and Sarah- even though God changes their names during this same period- we are going to be consistent in using the same names- Abraham and Sarah. So this evening we consider this theme: Isaac, the son of the promise, points us to the greater child of the promise who mediates the covenant of grace.

I. The Two Sons Born

In our first point, we consider these two sons and the context of their birth. Remember that Abraham and Sarah are very old by this time. Abraham was 86- can you imagine being 86 and becoming a father? Up to this point, the LORD had promised a child to Abraham when he was 75 years old. So he had waited over a decade for this child that God had promised back in Gen. 12. To your offspring I will give this land- the LORD had promised. Well, after waiting over 10 years, both Abraham and Sarah had not offspring and they became impatient. So in Gen. 16 Sarah comes up with a plan to fix this situation. Sarah is convinced that she is and will remain barren, so she is going to take her Egyptian servant and give this servant to Abraham as a wife. Sarah was planning on getting a child by way of this servant- making Sarah a surrogate mother of sorts. Abraham simply listens and goes along with his wife- doing what his wife suggested and he took Hagar and they had a son together. So Abraham has a son with this Egyptian servant- after the normal ways of mankind. Now Hagar starts to show contempt for Sarah- as

Hagar's place in the family is rising while Sarah's inability to produce a child puts her in a difficult situation. In fact, Hagar starts to show her disdain and disrespect. So Sarah starts mistreating and abusing Hagar so that she flees. But God sees and God hears the cry of Hagar. In fact, that is what the name Ishmael means- God hears. After running away, the LORD sends this mother and her soon to be born son back to Abraham's home. Here in Abraham's camp, Ishmael grows up for the next 13 years when suddenly he has brother! A younger sibling added to the family- this time born of Sarah. So there are two sons and two mothers. One a slave and the other a free woman. It seems like the contempt and disdain passes on to the next generation, and Ishmael makes fun of the little boy Isaac in Gen. 21. This raises the ire of Sarah- so that Hagar and Ishmael will be removed from the household of Abraham after this event. The LORD will still watch over Hagar and Ishmael- and because of Ishmael's connection to Abraham, he will still grow into a mighty nation. In fact, Ishmael is going to be a wild man- Gen. 16 tells us. He will be against everyone else- he will resist the yoke of other nations as well. Although not the child of the promise, he would grow into a mighty nation. 12 nations would come from him. These 12 nations would be a direct contrast to the 12 tribes that Israel will grow into. In fact, to this day, the descendants of Ishmael remain a largely nomadic people- the Arab nations in the Middle East tie their history to Ishmael. Although it is not abundantly clear that this is biologically true- the present-day Muslims still claim Ishmael as their forefather. It is interesting that the religion of Islam means submission- while the prophecy concerning Ishmael is that he would submit to no one! And the Islamic faith, in many ways, stands in the starkest contrast to the Christian faith as we will see. Next, we consider the birth of the younger son- Isaac. Now the name, Isaac, means "laughter" as both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the prospect of having a son so late in life. When Isaac was born, Abraham was 100 and Sarah as past her prime at 90. It is this child that would be the fulfillment of the promise that God made some 25 years earlier. And although it was Sarah's idea to involve Hagar, and it was Sarah who would be offended and insist that this slave woman and her son be cast out; the fact remains that

God is going to use Isaac to bring about His promised blessings upon the world- and not Ishmael. Ishmael would become many great nations- but through Isaac the promised seed would come! Although they laughed at first, this couple does learn to trust in God's promise- and the child of faith is born. But later, this faith in God would be tested. It is instructive to note that in Gen. 22 when Abraham is going to sacrifice his son Isaac, Isaac is called Abraham's only, beloved son. In a stirring reminder of what God the Father would do at the incarnation, Abraham's son is identified as the only, beloved one. So when Abraham is instructed to sacrifice his beloved son, Abraham's faith is being tested. How will God carry out His promise and fulfill His word? But as Heb. 11:17 states, Abraham believed and obeyed. He acted in faith- even trusting that God could raise his son from the dead if need be. So Isaac will come to represent the miraculous birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But at the last moment, Isaac's life was spared as a substitute ram takes his place. So it will be through Isaac that the promise of blessing, descendants and land would be fulfilled. And the descendants of Isaac would become 12 tribes- one of whom would produce the Christ child Himself. Unlike Ishmael whose descendants would avoid captivity to men, the children of Isaac will be captive to many different people groups. Although Ishmael was the son of an Egyptian slave- it would be Isaac's children who would be enslaved in Egypt for 400 years.

II. The Two Covenants Signified

Now that we have considered the two sons and their unique births, in our second point we consider how these two sons come to represent two different covenants. Paul in Gal. 4:24 tells us that Hagar and Ishmael can be interpreted allegorically- and that Sarah and Isaac become symbolic of something deeper. The two covenants are the old and the new. The Old Covenant misrepresented as now taught by the Jewish people- the Judaizers in Paul's day. These were sinful in their rejection of Jesus Christ's sufficiency- trying to add man's works to the gospel of grace. Those who refuse to accept the grace that was offered to them freely- these take on the place of Ishmael. Consider what Paul says about the

Jewish people who refuse to believe. Although they are in fact the biological children of Abraham- as Ishmael was- they have become removed from the true blessing of the covenant of grace. So like Hagar, the Jewish people were returning to slavery. They come to be known as the earthly Mt. Zion, all law without grace. Earthly and physical- fleshly- as they base their hopes on works of obedience and not grace. Ishmael comes to represent the old way- slavery. Human wisdom and effort. The way of the fallen man- first birth with its natural beginning and which leads to death. This was the way that the Galatians were returning to. Enacting laws based on elementary principles and works. So the Jewish people who forsook the gospel of grace- who refused to believe in Jesus- are being compared to Ishmael. Built on the Law alone which leads to slavery. Typified in the earthly Mt. Zion- the Law written on stone. Fleshly and worldly- stuck in the first circumcision. Still worshipping at the old temple in the city of Jerusalem. Now to be clear- this is not to say that the OT is bad or that the Law is bad- rather the Jews twisted the Law and hoped in the flesh when the Law was designed to point them to Christ. In contrast to this, we find Isaac! Instead of trusting in the world of the flesh and human obedience to the law, salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ! So Isaac becomes a picture of freedom- he being the child of the promise who came not by human effort but as a gift of grace! Isaac represents the New Covenant- the circumcision of the heart- baptism. The way of freedom- being saved by grace through faith! Not the passing and temporary temple in the city of Jerusalem- rather true worship at the lasting temple in the heavenly Jerusalem. The issue is this- what kind of child of Abraham are you? The Jews maybe the physical descendants of Abraham- but these are not the true Israelites! No, those who are joined to Christ by faith are in fact the true children of Abraham! Our birth is not of this earth- but of the spirit- being born again! So the contrast is striking as it now become clear. Two sons and two covenants. One flesh the other spiritual. One works the other by faith. One earthly and the other heavenly and spiritual. The contrast is between what man can do and what God has freely given. The distinction is between being a Jew and being a Christian! As Gen. 17:19 says- it is not with Ishmael but

through Isaac that I will establish my covenant! And through Isaac the promised line will come- the promised seed by whom all nations will be blessed. Like Isaac, the arrival of this promised child will be miraculous! A virgin shall conceive and give birth to a Son! He was the only begotten one of the Father in heaven! The one whose arrival was foretold millennia before- through whom the nations would be blessed.

Before we close, there is one more application to find in our text from Gal. 4. As we saw last week, there is a conflict between the two sons that is taking shape! The seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. So in Gal. 4:28 we read, you are children of the promise- like Isaac. But just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac when he laughed at him- so those who are off this world and fleshly will persecute those who are born from above! In other words, the antithesis continues to be evident- even today! The world may poke fun of us for our faith- but the truth is, it is they who have no part in God's promised inheritance! So do not be surprised if this world hates you, for Ishmael hated Isaac all those years ago!

To conclude, the contrast between these two sons is the contrast between law and grace. Trying to be saved by works- as Sarah's plan to secure a son by human means- will always lead to conflict and destruction. But if you wait upon the LORD- if you would but trust in the promised Son and are saved by grace through faith- then all the covenant blessings and inheritance belong to you! With Ishmael, one son is a product of works that leads to slavery. With Isaac, the arrival of the promised son is an arrival of grace that leads to the blessings of life everlasting! Isaac, the son of the promise, points us to the greater child of the promise who mediates the covenant of grace. As Sarah represent the Jerusalem above, so those who trust in Christ by faith are truly free and forever blessed as a citizen in the country above!