Chapter fifteen of Genesis closes with God's covenant with Abram, wherein He reassured His child that He would give him the land of promise. Abram believed that God would give him a son; through that son a nation; to that nation the land of promise; and through that nation the Saviour. "He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (15:6).

And yet the opening words of the very next chapter tell us of another lapse of faith on the part of this "hero of faith." It is the tragic story of Abram, Hagar, and Ishmael, one of the saddest chapters in the life of this stalwart man of God.

It is our purpose today to follow this story to the end of the record in Genesis, as it is written in chapter sixteen and in portions of other chapters which follow. We need to get a complete picture of the consequences of Abram's unbelief and sin, in order to grasp the typical and spiritual message God has for us, as explained by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. For in the book of Galatians we read that God uses this tragic story to show how He makes "the wrath of man" to praise Him; and one of the clearest pictures of the difference between law and grace is that painted by the Spirit of God as He shows the relationship between Abram, Sarah, and Isaac, and between Abram, Hagar, and Ishmael.

**Abram's Effort to Help God**

The sorrow and tragedy that entered the patriarch's home came as the result of his heeding Sarai's suggestion that they try to help God bring His promise to pass. For ten years Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan (16:3), and
yet the promised son and heir had not been given. By this time Abram was eighty-five years of age; Sarai was seventy-five. Humanly speaking it was impossible for them to have a son; but they wavered in faith, not taking into account the miraculous power of God—and His never-failing Word! Therefore, we read in 16:1-3:

"Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife."

Now it was lawful in that day for a man to have more than one wife, though from the beginning it was not God's will. Abram had a right, according to the laws of the land, to take this woman to be his wife, of "an inferior, though not degrading" position. But the trouble was that he did it to help God out. He could not see that God could give him seed, and fill the face of the earth with a people, thus fulfilling all the covenant that He had given him, unless Abraham did something to help.

My friend, did you ever try to help God out? I suppose most of us do. It is so hard just to trust Him and let Him do things for us. I heard the other day of a little girl who came in from the garden, looking as though she had been doing something unusual. When her mother asked her what she had been doing, she replied, "I have been helping God." "And what have you been doing?" the mother asked further. "I have been helping God open the roses," the child explained. Well, you know how she had been helping God! We can not help God open the roses. God can do such things far better Himself; and if He does them, they will be done right.

I read the story of a woman who was given for her collection a cocoon of an emperor moth. One day she noticed that
the end of the cocoon was broken, and the insect inside was trying to get out. She watched it, as it struggled and struggled and struggled. Finally it got its little head out. And still it struggled, then rested and waited until its strength returned before it struggled again. It seemed to make no progress. Again she watched it for hours—for a couple of days; and it seemed as though it would never get out of the cocoon. So she took a little pair of scissors, and snipped that cocoon just a bit, only enough to let that beautiful emperor moth come out. It tried in vain to spread its wings, as it tumbled from one side to another. It was a poor pitiable thing that could not fly. A scientist told her, when she inquired about it, that all of that struggling was necessary to produce a beautiful moth. But those matchless wings were folded close to the body. There was no strength in them, and they had very little color. God meant for the light to get into those wings as the juices of the body were pressed out by the struggling. Strength and color would have been supplied; and by the time that moth had gotten out in God’s way, it would have been perfect. But the woman had spoiled the work of God!

My Christian friend, are you going through the furnace of affliction? Wait patiently for God to burn up the dross; and, like Job, you will “come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). If Abram and Sarai had not tried to help God, much suffering and anguish of soul might have been prevented throughout the years.

Doubtless Sarai had obtained Hagar for her handmaid during her sojourn with Abram in Egypt. We have already seen, in a former lesson, that Abram was out of God’s appointed place when he was in Egypt; and that he had to return to his own land and build an altar unto the Lord, in order to be blessed. Thus it is that all of the sad experience concerning Hagar and Ishmael was the outcome of that unhappy stay in Egypt. Otherwise, Hagar might never have been added to Abram’s household. If we could only learn that sinful man must surely reap what he sows!

And yet because Abram was “a sinner saved by grace,” he was abundantly pardoned. And God overruled his fail-
ures, teaching His children of all ages some searching and never-to-be-forgotten lessons.

**THE FRUIT OF UNBELIEF**

No sooner had Abram hearkened unto the voice of Sarai, than trouble arose. Read with me verses 4 and 5:

"And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid unto thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and thee."

Thus Hagar gloated over Sarai, and thus Sarai blamed Abram for the grievance she had brought upon herself. The human heart is much the same from generation to generation, full of frailty and weakness! But Abram placed the responsibility upon Sarai; Sarai mistreated Hagar, possibly with harsh words, possibly with blows; and thus one sin led to another and yet another. In verse 6 we read the tragic words:

"But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her she fled from her face."

Our hearts go out to Hagar. But God was good to her, and sought her in her grief.

**THE SEEKING LORD**

"And the angel of the Lord found her (Hagar) by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur" (verse 7).

Because His children had been doing wrong, God did not give them up, you see. God was still there. Anything that had to do with Abram was precious to the Lord, and God never gives up His people.

This is the first time the expression, "the angel of the Lord" appears in Genesis. Throughout the Scriptures this term refers to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity as He
appeared to man before His incarnation in human flesh. And what grace, that He should seek Hagar in this time of severe testing!

Evidently she was seeking to return to her own people, as "the angel of the Lord found her . . . in the wilderness . . . in the way to Shur." It was a sandy desert-wild between Palestine and Egypt, through which she was attempting a perilous flight. Without doubt she would have perished on the journey if God had not met her and taken care of her.

Because "the angel of the Lord" found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, we are reminded of the fact that He Himself was the Source of her refreshment in the wilderness of a cruel, bitter world. There, by the well, God revealed Himself to her; and Hagar was both grateful for and obedient to His voice.

"And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me? Wherefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi (i.e., 'The well of him that liveth and seeth me')" (verses 13, 14).

This is the first time we read of the "well" in Scripture. The second time the word occurs tells of how "God opened her (Hagar's) eyes, and she saw a well of water" for her son and for herself. Thus a second time God spoke words of reassurance and comfort to His suffering child. And so it ever is true of our seeking Lord. In love He came down "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). In love He seeks the despairing, broken heart, to utter words of hope and comfort and blessing to His own.

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:10).

By Jacob's well, many centuries after Hagar lived, the Son of God spoke pardon and peace to another woman in need of His redeeming grace. And to her He said:

"Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14).
God's Counsel to Hagar

"And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands" (verses 8, 9).

God reminded Hagar that she was still "Sarai's maid," and that her duty was to her mistress. Often the path of duty leads into ways that are hard, but God never fails to add His blessing to obedience on the part of His children. And to poor Hagar He promised blessing.

God's Promise to Hagar

"And the angel of the Lord said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction" (verses 10, 11).

How these words must have comforted broken-hearted Hagar! She was to become the mother of a great nation. God Himself named her child who was to be born—a beautiful name that means "God shall hear," because the Lord heard and had mercy upon her in her affliction!

Hagar returned to Sarai, and evidently was submissive to her treatment for another thirteen years. Whatever her sorrow may have been, she must have been upheld and strengthened throughout every trial by the reassuring words of the loving God who heard her cry. And surely she must have learned, through her bitter experience, not to "despise" and gloat over Sarai because she—and not Sarai—was to bear a son. When the sinner meets the Saviour, pride and haughtiness are cast away as an old garment, unworthy of the "sinner saved by grace," whose garments have been washed white in the blood of Calvary's Lamb. My Christian friend, may God help us to learn this lesson well!

Ishmael—Father of the Arabs

God said to Hagar yet further concerning the son she was to bear:

[6]
"And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" (verse 12).

Ishmael, the son born to Abram and Hagar, was the father of the Arabian race, and the Arabs have never been tamed. Practically the only part of the world that has not been subdued by the white man is the Arabian desert, full of wild Arabs. Men are afraid to enter it. God said centuries ago, two thousand years before Christ, "Ishmael . . . will be a wild man."

Moreover, God told Hagar that Ishmael should "dwell in the presence of all his brethren." Certainly this prophecy is still being literally fulfilled even unto this day as the Jews, who are the descendants of Isaac, and the Arabs, descendants of Ishmael, are contending for the land given by the Lord to Abram. We know that one day God will give Palestine completely to the Jews, the children of the son of promise. But today the Mohammedan Mosque of Omar, the shrine of the fanatical Arabs, stands on the site of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem—on Mount Moriah, where many centuries ago Abraham offered Isaac upon the altar, trusting God to raise him "even from the dead" (Heb. 11:19).

After Sarah died, as we shall see in Gen. 25:1-4, Abram married Keturah; and these two had six sons. Look at their names; compare them with a map of the peoples of ancient, Bible times; and you will see again how God's word to Hagar has been literally fulfilled, that Ishmael should "dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

It was Abram's lapse of faith that led him to hearken unto the voice of Sarai; and one sorrow after another followed. Today there are one hundred and fifty million Mohammedans in the world, many of them children of Ishmael. Abram had to wait for fourteen more years, after Ishmael was born, before the son of promise was given. They seem to have been years of broken fellowship with God. How often sin enters to break our fellowship—not to rob us of our
salvation, but to rob us of "the joy" of our salvation! (See Psalm 51:12.)

Yet Abram "believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (15:6). And as the Master Potter, God was molding the clay into a thing of beauty. Turn with me to Jer. 18:1-4, where God is speaking about His people, Israel. And the God of Israel is the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He is our God. His ways are ever the same. Israel's God is our God and our Father. And this is His message to us today, as to Israel of old:

"The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it."

God did not discard the clay. That is what He wanted to teach the prophet. God said, in substance, "I am not through with Israel because they have disappointed Me." In the olden days, when they fashioned a vessel, they put the clay on a small revolving shaft, and held it against the revolving wheel until it took on shape. But sometimes the plastic clay, as it was pressed against the wheel, contained a little lump that had not dissolved; and as the wheel struck that lump, it spoiled the vessel. Then the potter had to take the clay and knead it again and soften it and try to find yet other hard places, so that the vessel would not be marred again in his hands. But the lesson is that God does not discard the clay. He did not give up Abram because of what he had done.

My friend, have you disappointed God in your life somewhere? Well, praise God! He will never give you up. I know men in the ministry today who are not what God intended them to be. I know men who had a mighty ministry, whose service was broken and marred, and God made them
“again another vessel,” as it seemed good to the Potter to reashion them. But God never throws away the clay. Friend, believe that what God begins He will finish. Israel disappointed God. Israel went into idolatry, and God had to scatter them. Then God’s Son came, and Israel was guilty of refusing Him. Again Israel had disappointed God. The clay was marred. The vessel was marred in the hand of the Potter. But He will make it “again another vessel.” And He will for you. You feel this morning that perhaps years ago you should have given your life to the Lord, yet you did not yield. He has not given you up. God is trying to make you something that will glorify Him. It may not be the glorious thing that it might have been if you had yielded when you were sixteen or seventeen, when God first called you to give yourself to Him; but you are still in the hand of the Potter!

Many centuries ago Solomon wrote, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, saying:

“I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.” (Eccl. 3:14).

So God will do His work; God will accomplish His purpose. In spite of all the divisions of the day, God will finish the church and catch it up into the heavens. We are not afraid. We are not afraid for the church of God. We are not afraid for the world. Christ will come; and at the darkest moment He will take the reins of government into His hands and say, “Peace, be still.” Then there will be “a great calm.” Then the glory of the Lord will cover the earth “as the waters cover the sea.” (See Isa. 11:9.)

“God is working His purpose out, as year succeeds to year; God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God ‘As the waters cover the sea’.”
THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

“And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son’s name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael. And Abram was fourscore and six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram” (verses 15, 16).

God’s promise to Hagar began to have its fulfillment; and “Abram,” heeding the voice of the Lord, “called his son’s name . . . Ishmael.” Hagar had rehearsed the story of God’s grace to her. She had told Abram the name God had given the child before he was born. And in that home, in spite of the sin and pride and unkindness that had been, there was a son whose name was a constant reminder that “God shall hear.”

FURTHER PROMISE CONCERNING ISHMAEL

Thirteen more years passed—silent years in so far as Scripture is concerned. Then God appeared once more to Abram. The patriarch was “ninety years old and nine.” It had been at least twenty-four years since God had promised that he and Sarai should have a son; and still no son had been born to them.

In a future lesson we shall consider in more detail this appearing of God to Abram; but for our purpose here let us note, in passing, that at this time God told Abram several important details: He changed Abram’s name to Abraham; Sarai’s to Sarah; reassured Abraham concerning the covenant; established the rite of circumcision as a token of the covenant; and once more told Abraham that Sarah should have a son, the child of promise.

Then it was that Abraham, his faith still wavering, exclaimed, “O that Ishmael might live before thee!” (17:18). And then it was that God gave to Sarah’s son that was to be born “in the next year” (17:21) the name “Isaac,” reiterating His oft-repeated promise concerning this son and heir.

Nor did God fail to speak yet further words of blessing upon Ishmael, whom Abraham loved; for He added:

“And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation” (17:20).
Let us read to the end of chapter seventeen (verses 23-27) to note that Abraham obeyed the Lord’s command, circumcising Ishmael “and all that were born in his house.” Then let us turn to 25:12-18 to note what the Scripture says concerning the literal fulfillment of God’s promise in regard to Ishmael’s posterity. Here we read the names of the “twelve princes” who were the sons of Ishmael (25:13-15).

“These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names, by their towns, and by their castles; twelve princes according to their nations . . . And they dwelt from Havilah unto Shur, that is before Egypt, as thou goest toward Assyria” (25:16, 18).

Thus did God keep His promise to Abram concerning Ishmael, for God always fulfills His Word! But although salvation was not denied Ishmael and his posterity, yet the promised “seed” was to come through Isaac. Whether Ishmael received eternal life through the promised Redeemer we do not know. But certain it is that his descendants turned away from Abraham’s God, and became followers of the false prophet, Mohammed.

**CONFLICT BETWEEN ISAAC AND ISHMAEL**

The next thing we read about Ishmael is that he was “mocking” Isaac. How old Isaac was at this time we do not know, but we do know that Ishmael was at least fourteen years of age, possibly several years older.

By this time Abraham had come to know the Lord in a yet deeper sense. He had made intercession for Sodom, and had been recognized as “the friend of God.” He had witnessed the destruction of the wicked cities of the plain and Lot’s degradation and sin. He had once more known the consequences of his own lapse of faith at Gerar. And he had seen the fulfillment of the promise of twenty-five years; for Isaac had been born. Step by step God had been preparing Abraham for another severe trial—the sending away of Ishmael, whom he also loved.

“And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore
she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son" (21:9-11).

This new trouble arose because now Isaac was born. And what made all the trouble? Why, Abraham's trying to help God out. Ishmael caused all the trouble. When Isaac was born, Isaac was the heir; and Ishmael began to mock. Ishmael was the result of "the flesh"; Isaac was the work of "the Spirit"; and between the two the conflict is ever the same. God's work is of the Spirit; man's work is of the flesh. The flesh can never please God. Isaac was of faith; Isaac was born of promise; Isaac was the fulfillment of God's Word; but right away there was trouble.

Abraham loved Ishmael. We do love the flesh; we do love the natural things. It is not easy to put them aside, and it is harder still to put them out. Abraham was grieved "because of his son."

And today the conflict between Jew and Arab still rages!

"IN ISAAC SHALL THY SEED BE CALLED"

"And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice . . ." (21:12).

I suppose Abraham gloried in the fact that he was Sarah's "lord," and she called him "lord"; but God said, "Do what Sarah tells you." That was difficult for Abraham to do. Why? Because he had done what Sarah told him before. God always leads us on the path that we choose, until we learn our lesson. When the lesson is learned, God permits us to walk in His way.

". . . in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called."

Ishmael is not in the picture here at all. The nation through which the Saviour was to come was to be born through Isaac.

[12]
For God’s commentary on Sarah’s demand that Abraham “cast out this bondwoman and her son,” we turn to Galatians. There the Holy Spirit has for us a fundamental truth. If we can get this lesson this morning, we shall get a great deal. And what is it? It is the lesson of law and grace. It is the lesson of “the flesh” and “the Spirit.” It is the lesson of what man loves, but what God desires and accepts. It is the lesson of being saved by works or being saved by grace, and it is a lesson that everybody has to learn if he would be saved.

Let us begin reading from Gal. 4:21, although the entire Epistle to the Galatians should be read for a full understanding of this all-important subject. This is the question which Paul raised:

"Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?"

People who are clamoring for the law have never heard what the law has to say. Listen to what the law says. What is the word of the law? Condemnation!

"For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar (the Greek for ‘Hagar’). For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children” (Gal. 4:21-25).

Such is the commentary of the Holy Spirit upon the “allegory” of Hagar and Ishmael. Now an “allegory” is a symbolic message to illustrate a truth; and God uses this story to show forth the difference between law and grace.

“These are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai . . .”
That is law. Who is Mount Sinai? Why, the bondwoman and her son, Hagar and Ishmael. Why are they Sinai or the law? Because they are what the flesh can accomplish. Could the flesh bring Isaac? No, the flesh was dead when Isaac was born. Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, are what the flesh could produce. Does God accept it? Well, my friend, you had better learn this lesson. If any of you listening in this morning have been brought up in the law and have not been able to shake yourself free of the law, you had better wake up. This is a serious lesson. Oh, that people could learn it! God accepts one thing. God will save you; God will put all your sins away; God will give you eternal glory; He will take you to be with Himself; He will make you to look like the Lord Jesus Christ, the glory of the heavens; but He will do it only if you believe in Christ and renounce all that you do yourself. God demands that.

**SINAI AND BONDAGE OR CALVARY AND LIBERTY**

Let us read this again:

"But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar."

What does the law do? It binds you. The law has never set anybody free. It will make you a slave; it will keep you bound; and you will be lost in the end. It "gendereth to bondage."

"For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise" (Gal. 4:25-28).

"Children of promise!" Why are you saved, my Christian friend? Because God said that, if you believe in Christ,
He will save you. You are a child of promise. You are not a child of the flesh. You come for salvation, and God says, "Believe in Jesus." But if you say, "I am going to keep the law. I am going to do good. I am going to be the best that I can," then that keeps you in bondage, and you are never a child of promise. You are a child of the flesh; you are a child of the law. What are you this morning? I am a child of God because God said that, if I would trust the Lord Jesus Christ, He would save me, and make me His child. I have that promise; therefore, I am a child of promise. What are you? It is only the children of promise that get to glory.

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9).

"CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON"

Even as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, "mocking," perhaps claiming his father's inheritance because he was the elder son; even so "the flesh" wars against "the Spirit." On every hand there are those who ask, "What shall we do? Are we not to have the law to help us?" Well, let us see.

"Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son . . ." (Gal. 4:30).

What do "the bondwoman and her son" represent? The law, Sinai, "which gendereth to bondage." Well, Abraham, can you not keep the boy, Ishmael, in your house? Can you not somehow separate Isaac and Ishmael, and keep them separated so there will be no trouble? "No," God said; "you can not do that." But Abraham loved Ishmael, and it was "grievous" to him. Yet what did God say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son." They can not dwell in the same house with the freewoman and her son of promise.

Even so, God has nothing to do with those who try to keep the law for salvation. God is through with the law for salvation—and after salvation! Did they ever bring that bondwoman and her son back into Abraham's tent? Never! Some people say that after they are saved, they need the law. That is like bringing Ishmael back again. Ishmael went out
and became "a wild man." He lived in the fields; he became the father of the Arabian race; and the Arabs are still wild today.

According to Lowell Thomas, only about two white men have ever dared to cross the lower part of the Arabian desert, through the midst of the wild Arabs. Ishmael’s children have never been tamed, and God said they would never be tamed. "He will be a wild man." Ishmael and Hagar never went back into Abraham’s tent. Why? Because they represent the law. God is through with the law. And what are we? Children of promise!

"So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 4:31; 5:1).

"YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN"

There is a beautiful story that illustrates a very remarkable thing in the matter of the new birth, being born of the Spirit, a child of promise. A doctor who had lived a long and helpful life was dying, and became very much concerned about his sins. He sent for a minister; evidently he sent for the wrong one. He told the minister he was concerned about his sins, saying "I have diagnosed thousands of sick people; I know my own condition, and I am not going to live; but my sins are troubling me." To this the minister replied, "But you have lived such a helpful life. You have done good to so many people." And he tried to comfort the dying man. Still the doctor insisted: "That will not do. I know my sins. They are staring me in the face. I want to know what to do about my sins. Does the Bible not say something about being born again?" The minister agreed, "Yes, but you don’t need that. You have been such a good man. That might be for some people who are great sinners." Again the doctor replied: "You know I have brought great numbers of children into this world, and there is one thing that always filled my mind when a child was born: That child had a future, but it had no past. It seems to me that,
if I could be born again, all my past would be taken care of. Is there such a thing as being born again?"

Praise the Lord, my dear friend, there is! When you are born again, your past is all blotted out! God gives you a new life. God gives you something new, direct from the Holy Spirit. You have a future, but the past is all taken care of. You can not do that with the law. If you owe the grocer a bill, and you go to him and say, "I am sorry I owe you money. I am going to do the best I can to keep my bills paid from this time on," he will reply, "I am glad to hear that, but what are you going to do about the old bill?" It is all right to start with the law and try to do good, but what will you do about the past? The new birth takes care of your past, and you start anew with God. The past is dead and buried. God gives you a new life if you are a child of promise, if you accept what He says. But that is true only of those who trust the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation; who stand on the promise; who say, "God promised to do it. I believe that He will. I believe that He has kept His Word!"

"And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them" (Gal. 3:12).

"The law is not of faith." What does a "child of promise" mean? It means that you have believed the promise. In the law there is nothing to believe. In the law there is something to do that you can never do. "The man that doeth them shall live in them"; that is, if a man could possibly be saved by the works of the law, then he would have to keep every deed of the law. That is an impossibility for sinful man. Only the sinless Son of Man kept perfectly God’s holy law—for us who will accept His free gift!

"WHEREFORE THEN SERVETH THE LAW?"

Some will ask the question raised and answered by Paul:

"Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come . . ." (Gal. 3:19).

The law was given till Christ came, and then the purpose of the law was finished. The law should never have been
preached since Jesus came. God gave it to Israel to tide them over till Christ should come; and then He was through with it. He gave sinful man the law to show him how far short he has fallen of the glory of God, to reveal "the exceeding sinfulness of sin" (Rom. 3:23; 7:13).

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

"The Children of Promise"

"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus . . . Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise" (Gal. 3:26; 4:28).

Oh, I should like to ask everybody listening in this morning if you will trust Christ alone for salvation. Have you not found out that nothing you ever did since you were saved will help you to heaven? God may reward us for what we have done. May it be our great joy some day to receive from the pierced hand of the Son of God rewards for service! But nothing we have done since we were saved is helping us to get to heaven. Jesus died to take us to heaven; and if we will trust Him, we shall surely get there! We are children of God. No child of God, born again by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, will ever be in hell.

God's Provision for Hagar and Ishmael

Now let us return to the story in Genesis. It would have been better if Abram and Sarai had not tried to help God out, but God overruled to teach these searching lessons. And He took care of Hagar and Ishmael. Having told Abraham to "cast out this bondwoman and her son"; having said to him, "For in Isaac shall thy seed be called," God added this further promise:

"And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed" (Gen. 21:13).

"And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent
her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba” 21:14).

Jamieson-Fausset-Brown tell us that it was customary for fathers in Abraham’s day to send their sons of about seventeen out “with only a few days’ provisions in a bag,” to make their own way in the world. The “bottle of water,” we are told was “the entire skin of a lamb or a kid sewed up, with the legs for handles, usually carried over the shoulder.” And without doubt Abraham trusted God to care for the lad, for had He not promised to make of him a great nation?

Perhaps Hagar and Ishmael lost their way as they “wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.” At any rate, the desolate mother had evidently forgotten God’s promise; for in the very next verses we read:

“And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink. And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran (i.e., ‘Arabia’): and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt” (21:15-21).

In spite of the tragedy of it, the story is beautiful—God’s provision for the lad, the mother’s love, her very great need met by the God who always keeps His Word, whether our faith remains strong or not. Hagar may have found a wife for Ishmael from among her own people; in this she took the place of a father to the youth.
Years passed. Abraham was called to go through the fires of testing, offering Isaac upon the altar. The death of Sarah; the choosing of a bride for Isaac; Abraham's marriage to Keturah, and the coming of their six sons—all these and doubtless many other events in the life of the patriarch must have filled the passing years to overflowing. And yet it is probable that, when he gave unto the sons of his concubines gifts, he did not forget Ishmael (25:6). And when Abraham died at the age of "an hundred threescore and fifteen years," "his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah," which Abraham had "purchased of the sons of Heth" (25:7-10).

Therefore, the hand of affection between Abraham and Ishmael must have remained unbroken, even unto the close of the father's life.

Thus ends the Bible record of this tragic, yet beautiful story. And how thankful we are for the lessons it teaches us, especially the doctrinal lesson on the meaning of law and grace! How thankful we are that we are "children of promise," not under the bondage of the law! Let us "stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1). For we are "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17).

"Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!"
(II Cor. 9:15).