

September 07, 2008 – SERMON SUMMARY

Loving our Neighbors [Muslims] as Ourselves (Gen.16:1-16, 17:15-21, 21:1-21; Mt.5:43-48)

Introduction: Do you love your enemy? If we would be sons of our Father who is in heaven, we must be willing to learn to love even our enemy! Our opinions of others are often based on stereotyped views, prejudices, & superficial evaluations, using “labels” to categorize people. We Christians often fall back on fleshly patterns, rationalizing our lack of love because of someone’s cultural or other differences, especially when it comes to Muslims.

- During this Islamic month of Ramadan, when most of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims spend their days fasting & trying to become better Muslims, we are urged to pray for the Muslim world. But we won’t take that exhortation seriously if we don’t love Muslims as ourselves. Perhaps by remembering some “Arab ancestors” in the Bible we can find reasons & motivation for loving Muslims as ourselves.

1) The most important Arab ancestor mentioned in the Bible is, of course, Abraham, whom Jews, Muslims, & Christians all claim as their “father”! So our many historical conflicts really amount to a terrible, extended family quarrel. After Abraham, the most important Arab ancestor is his firstborn Ishmael, about whom Christians sometimes have strange unbiblical notions. The story of his conception & birth is one of those “anomalies” in biblical history that sometimes make us ask, how could this happen? It’s the kind of evidence that speaks of the authenticity of the Bible, telling it “like it is,” with no cover-ups!

- Abraham’s wife Sarah couldn’t have children. If we believe in God’s sovereignty, we have to recognize that God was the ultimate Engineer of those circumstances; Sarah attributed her condition to God’s doing (Gen.16:2). God was ultimately responsible for shutting Sarah’s womb, until the time was “ripe” for her to give birth through supernatural intervention.

- We often blame Abraham & Sarah for their lack of faith when they decided to have Abraham sleep with Sarah’s handmaid. But Sarah acknowledged God’s sovereign control over the circumstances of her life, & she reasoned the best she could with the information she had; she thought God must intend to give Abraham his promised posterity through some other means. Even though her reasoning wasn’t in accord with God’s plan, it was in harmony with the social practices of the time, & they had no revelation from God to the contrary. Instead of blaming them, we should identify with them & their dilemma.

- It wasn’t easy for Sarah to acknowledge her barrenness (a disgrace in her society), but she was 75 yrs old! Even more difficult for her was to jeopardize the uniqueness of her relationship with her husband by allowing another woman to sleep with him; this was a last resort to try to secure children for Abraham (she thought it was her responsibility): she would “build a family” through Hagar (16:2); her proposal was not void of faith! What it ultimately illustrates is that human ways of appropriating God’s blessings will always fall short of divine supernatural provision (Rom.3:23), & may even generate complications that only a sovereign God is able to use for His decreed purposes.

- So it was God who sovereignly shut Sarah’s womb & opened Hagar’s; therefore, we shouldn’t see Ishmael’s life as a “mistake.” God knew that Abraham & Sarah would try to take matters into their own hands; He allowed their lack of information & allowed them to act on what they thought according to the customs of the times (even though those customs also fell short of God’s glory). So in effect, we can say that God intentionally allowed Ishmael’s natural birth just

as surely as He planned & carried out Isaac's supernatural birth. Theologically, this means that God didn't disdain to incorporate the wrong-headed, short-sighted notions of Abraham & Sarah into His good long-range sovereign plan for the nations; & God will do the same with you & me!

2) When Hagar became pregnant, she experienced a "status shift," & conflict between the two women became inevitable; the tension & jealousy were too much for them to deal with properly: Hagar became defiant, Sarah abusive (a vicious cycle).

- Consequently, the slave woman fled & became a fugitive in the desert. Hagar lost her home, Sarah lost her handmaid, & Abraham lost his expected firstborn. Reduced from slave to refugee status, Hagar wandered in the desert with no place to go & no hope; her situation was life-threatening. But God did not simply "wipe His hands" of Hagar; He came to meet her need. Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, received a personal vision of the Lord, the 1st birth announcement in the history of Israel, & promises parallel to those of the patriarchs. Her offspring wouldn't be the chosen race for bringing salvation to the world, but they wouldn't be neglected, forgotten, or accursed.

- The angel of the Lord ("Messenger of Yahweh" = God Himself) called her by name (Gen.16:8), implying personal knowledge of her situation. Hagar confessed she was "running away" from her mistress. Trying to run away from a problem or difficulty usually just means having to go back & face the same problem. The Lord gave her specific orders to go back to her mistress & submit: there were lessons she needed to learn there, & her child was to be raised in Abraham's household.

- The Lord gave her significant promises: multiplication of her descendants (v.10); a son whom she should name "Ishmael" ("God hears," v.11, pointing to the Lord's sympathy toward the socially disfavored); & 3 characteristics of her son (v.12): **a)** he would be "wild donkey of a man" (that may not sound like a compliment in your culture, but we misinterpret many elements of the biblical message because of our cultural blinders) – animal imagery was often used in the nomadic culture of patriarchal times, & the wild donkey was valued & admired in the ancient Near East for its strong-will, ability to survive adversity, free spirit, & nomadic lifestyle (Ishmael would not be a slave like his mother); **b)** "His hand against everyone, everyone's hand against him," predicting his ability to fight against all who would subdue him: Ishmael's descendants would have a nomadic lifestyle & would know how to preserve their freedom as desert nomads; **c)** "He will live in hostility..." = a bad translation; the Heb. "*al-pené*" means literally "before the face of, in front of"; Ishmael would live alongside the sons of Isaac, because God wanted Ishmael's descendants to receive a witness from Israel, & He still wants the sons of Ishmael to receive a witness from the new Israel!

- So this powerless slave mother, fleeing from her mistress, could feel encouraged by the Lord's promise: a son who would be free, powerful, dwelling in a land designated for him by God in the presence of his kin. After this personal encounter with God, Hagar was so moved that she gave God a name (only woman in the Bible to do so!): "the One who sees me" (*El Roi*); God became personal to her, so she was able to return to her mistress with the strength to submit, serve, & persevere; so she did for the next 18 yrs. in Abraham's house, where Ishmael was born & raised under the tutelage of Abraham & Sarah, learning about the Lord, experiencing the influence of godly parents, learning to pattern his life after their ways.

3) When Ishmael was 13, his parents received a new revelation: God came to renew the covenant with Abraham & to reveal His specific plan to give Sarah a son who would be the one to carry forward God's covenant promises in history. When Abraham heard this news, he fell down laughing (17:17); how could he and Sarah have a child at ages 100 and 90?!

▪ Abraham had believed for 13 years that Ishmael was the son of the promise, reinforced by Hagar's account of the vision & promises she had received. But Isaac's unexpected & inexplicable birth set the pattern that would ultimately be fulfilled in the virgin birth of Christ. Even as God confirmed His covenant plan for Isaac, He reassured Abraham that He would bless Ishmael, make him fruitful, multiply his numbers, & make him into a great nation. The fact of Isaac's election to administrate God's kingdom purposes in history did not alienate Ishmael from God's spiritual & material care.

▪ However, as long as Ishmael was present in Abraham & Sarah's household, there would be a natural rivalry over home & inheritance privileges. So another confrontation became inevitable. The occasion was the time of Isaac's weaning (Gen.21), which according to Near Eastern custom would've been at age 3. A big feast was held to celebrate the event, & during the festivities, the biblical text says that Sarah saw "the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham" (she had distanced herself from this son by now); he was "mocking" (the Heb. term "*metsakhêq*" was not historically viewed as a negative word; elsewhere in the O.T. translated "joking"; LXX, "playing"). The basic meaning was that this 17-yr-old son finally had a little brother, now 3, & the two boys were playing together as if on an equal footing. Sarah perceived how Ishmael would become more & more a threat to Isaac's inheritance, & this led her to conclude that the slave woman & her son must go. Whatever we think of Sarah's reaction, God's sovereignty could use even her jealousy to fulfill His purposes for Isaac as the sole inheritor of the covenant promises & to move Ishmael on toward the fulfillment of God's purposes for him.

▪ The biblical writer evidently doesn't go into the whole argument that surely ensued between Abraham & Sarah. Abraham was not pleased with Sarah's demand, but God reassured Abraham that He would take care of this son according to His promise. So the next day, Abraham gave Hagar food & water & sent her off into the wilderness with her son Ishmael. Once again she was an exile, wandering without destination in the desert, & was soon exhausted with despair. When their water ran out, she left Ishmael in the shade of some bushes & withdrew some distance away; both Hagar & Ishmael were weeping at this point, having lost everything, thinking this was the end, ready to give up. But again the messenger of the Lord spoke to her: "What's the matter, Hagar? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy's crying...." The God who sees & hears us in our need met Hagar again: the God who responds to our affliction with mercy, who makes provision even for lowly & despised outcasts. Then Scripture says that God opened Hagar's eyes & she saw a well of water somewhere nearby, a fountain of hope, a sign that they would survive after all! The text goes on to say that "God was with the boy as he grew up" living in the desert, demonstrating God's continued interest in & care for Ishmael & his descendants!

▪ So in Hagar's wilderness there was a well of water hidden from her eyes, but divine grace made it visible to her. In your wilderness there is also a well of water, if only you'll ask God to open your eyes & bring you near so you can drink from it & find refreshment for your soul! That well of water is Jesus the Lord, the God who sees & hears you & knows you by name; He will meet you in your need.

Conclusion: God would teach us many lessons through these Arab ancestors in the Bible & His loving kindness toward them! What does that say about our attitude & treatment of Muslims today? If we would follow Christ, we must humbly confess that we don't know how to love our neighbor as ourselves, much less love our enemies, & we desperately need the Lord Jesus to teach us how, to break our spirit of self-righteousness, to open our eyes & lead us to the well of His living water, pouring out on us His sacrificial Spirit of love.

[For a further discussion of Ishmael's descendants in the Bible and in the history of Israel, see

Tony Maalouf's *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2003.]

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