

JOY AND SORROW

Genesis 21:1-13

In the account of the birth of Isaac two things are said of God. First He visited, then He did. His action is preceded by His presence. He Himself came to visit first. After He had come to visit He put forth His power. He does not do anything in our hearts until He has first come into them. His acts of blessing come because He has promised them. He fulfils His Word, and "what He has promised He is able also to perform."

The thing of great importance is the fulfilment of God's Word. Notice the repetition in verse one: "And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken." God has never said anything for which He has been sorry. He has never promised to do anything that He did not want to do when the time came. He promised Abraham certain things, and Abraham sinned against the Lord and made himself entirely unworthy, but God did not repent for what He had said. God does the things that He said He would do even though they look impossible to us. God made a promise to Abraham that as far as the latter could see was impossible of fulfilment. But could God do it? Abraham had to believe that He could. He had to believe that God was Almighty. Have you ever been in a place where it seemed there was no way out, and God said to you, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" It is a wonderful thing to learn that God is able. When we get to the end and cannot see any way out, we get to God's opportunity, and it was so with Abraham. God let him get to be one hundred years of age. When he was ninety-nine and had been in the land twenty-four years, God spoke to him and said, "Now, Abraham, do you really believe that I am the Almighty?" When we learn the lesson that God is Almighty, we come to understand that nothing is too hard for Him.

At last the Word of God was fulfilled, and Sarah received the long-promised son. Barrenness was turned into fruitfulness, as it always is, by the life-giving touch of the Lord. The Lord's action was in strict accordance with His Word. He simply did as He had spoken.

The birth of Isaac marked a pivotal point in the outworking of God's eternal purpose. The coming of this son to Abraham and Sarah was the second great step toward the fulfilment of God's plan. This purpose and plan was to have a people of His own, separate from the surrounding nations; a people to whom should be entrusted the Holy Scriptures; a people through whom the Saviour was to be born; a people who should ultimately become the medium of blessing to all the earth. In the realization of this plan and purpose the first great step was the selection of Abraham to be the father of the chosen nation, the call which separated him from the idolatrous people among whom he lived, and the migration unto the land which God promised to give him.

At the set time of which God had spoken Isaac was born. Thus we learn that God, Who is the Lord of time, is in no hurry in the working out of His plans. Man may fret and fume, hurry and bustle, but God has all eternity at His disposal and works with due deliberation. We also note God's Almightiness. Nothing can thwart the outworking of His purpose. Abraham was old and Sarah was barren, but these facts did not present any barrier to God because He was infinite in power. Abraham sought to obtain an heir through Hagar, but God's plan could not be foiled. God had determined that Sarah's son should be Abraham's heir and not Ishmael. Behold, too, the faithfulness of God. He had said that Sarah would have

a son, and what He promised He performed. God's promise may seem unreasonable and impossible to the carnal mind, but His word is sure.

From this incident we also learn how faith is tested and tried. This is in order to display its genuineness. A faith that is incapable of enduring trial is no faith at all. Remember, too, that God has a set time for the accomplishment of His will and the fulfilling of His Word. Nothing is left to chance. Nothing is contingent on the creature. Everything is fixed by the Almighty One. "For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken."

Isaac was the child of promise. God took great interest in the birth of this boy. More was said about him before his birth than about any other birth except that of Jesus Christ. God first made promise to Abraham: "As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her." The response of the aged patriarch is recorded in the next verse: "Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed." Later, the promise was renewed in the hearing of Sarah, "And He said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son." Then we are told, "Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?" Reason ever opposes the promises of God. Whereas the laughter of Sarah was that of unbelief, that of Abraham was worshipful joy.

Isaac was the child of miracle because Abraham was old and Sarah was both barren and aged. Ere she could conceive a supernatural strength had to be given to her. In this, of course, we discover a foreshadowing of the miraculous birth of the Lord Jesus. The birth of Christ was foreshadowed by that of Isaac in various ways. First, Isaac was the promised seed and son (Genesis 17:16); so also was Christ (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 7:14). Second, a lengthy interval occurred between God's first promise to Abraham and its realization. So also there was a lengthy interval between God's promise to send Christ and the actual fulfilment of it. Third, when Isaac's birth was announced his mother asked, "Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?" To her came the reply, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" The striking analogy is seen in the fact that when the angel of the Lord made known unto Mary that she was to be the mother of the Saviour, she asked, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" To this query was given the answer, "With God nothing shall be impossible." In both cases God's omnipotence was affirmed following the announcement of the birth of a child. Fourth, Isaac's name was specified before he was born: "And thou shalt call his name Isaac" (Genesis 17:19). Compare this with the words of the angel to Joseph before Christ was born: "And thou shalt call his name Jesus." Fifth, Isaac's birth occurred at God's appointed time. So also in connection with the birth of Christ we read, "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law." Sixth, just as Isaac's birth required a miracle to bring it about, so also was it with the incarnation of Christ. Seventh, the name Isaac, which means laughter, declared him to be his father's delight; so also was the One born at Bethlehem, for the Father said of Him when He was baptized, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Isaac brings before us in time the great experience of regeneration. Before Isaac was born the power and activities of nature were ended. Abraham and Sarah had come to the end of themselves. Abraham's body was "dead", and Sarah's was too old for child-bearing. In order for Isaac to be born

that which was dead had to be quickened by God. This is a very humbling truth; one which is thoroughly distasteful to man; one which nothing but the grace of God will enable us to receive. The state of the natural man is far worse than he imagines. It is not only that man is a sinner, both by nature and by practice, but that he is "alienated from the life of God." In other words, the sinner is dead in trespasses and sins. This is a solemn reality. What the natural man needs first and foremost is not education or reformation, but life. It is because the sinner is dead that he needs to be born again. This truth is not emphasized as it should be today. Sinners will never be brought to see their need of a Saviour until they realize their lost condition, and they will never discover their lost condition until they learn that they are dead in sin.

The sinner may be alive manward, that is physically, mentally and morally, but he is dead Godward or spiritually. That is why the new birth is called a "passing from death unto life." The natural deadness of Abraham and Sarah foreshadowed spiritual truths. They had to be quickened by God before Isaac could be born, so has the sinner to be quickened by God into newness of life before he can become a child of God. Before Isaac could be born God had to perform a miracle. But what was beyond the reach of nature's capacity was fully within the scope of divine power. Before any of us could be born again God had to work a miracle. Make no mistake about it, regeneration is the direct result of the supernatural operation of God. It is the impartation of the divine nature to us as human beings.

The naming of the child "Isaac" and his circumcision were two prompt and definite proofs of Abraham's thorough trust in God. Sarah then laughed the laugh of joy and satisfaction. The fulfilment of the promise was almost too good to be true; and yet it was true, as she showed by her joyous surprise. She doubtless remembered her former laugh of unbelief as well as Abraham's laugh of faith and hope. Sarah was now able to share her husband's triumphant joy. He rejoiced at the promise, and she rejoiced at the performance. She said, "All that hear will laugh with me." The believer's joy is contagious. If we can show our joy and explain its source, the Holy Spirit will enable us to communicate it to others, so that they too may be enabled to rejoice in the Lord.

It is to be noted that the birth of Isaac into Abraham's household aroused opposition and created a conflict. Up to the time of Isaac's birth Ishmael occupied the foremost place in the life of Abraham, but now he had to give place to Isaac. The disappointment to a growing and wild lad must have been keen, and we are not surprised to read of his mockery of the little child. From Ishmael's point of view Isaac's arrival meant that he was robbed of his former position.

In the midst of the joy of Abraham and Sarah she saw Ishmael mocking or persecuting Isaac. Sarah was quick to resent it. It was her turn to do what Hagar had done. She permitted jealousy, anger and malice to bear their sad fruit. Sarah at once demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out of the home. Sarah insisted that Ishmael should not be heir with her son, as though Abraham had any idea of the two boys being co-heirs. She had either forgotten, or else distrusted God's definite promise about Isaac's sole heirship.

It is no surprise that this was a source of great grief to Abraham. After all, Ishmael was his own child, and for seventeen years had been the joy and light of his life. But when Abraham was thus brought very low God

appeared unto him and brought him counsel in his perplexity and comfort to sustain him in his sorrow. He was not to grieve unnecessarily over Hagar and Ishmael; he was to accede to Sarah's request, for it was in Isaac that the Messianic line ran; and he was assured that Ishmael, too, would become a mighty man "because he was Abraham's seed."

Sarah and Hagar -- the two mothers -- represent grace and law respectively. Isaac and Ishmael -- the two sons -- represent the two natures in the child of God. "He that was born after the flesh" typifies the old man which we are to put off. "He that was born after the spirit" represents the new man which we are to put on. Just as there were two sons in Abraham's household, the one the product of nature and the other the gift of God and the out-working of divine power, each standing for a totally different principle, so in the believer there are two natures which are distinct and diverse. The old and the new natures in the believer are in open antagonism the one to the other.