

Genesis 21:1-34

by John Calvin

The sermon explores the miraculous birth of Isaac, God's faithfulness to His promises, and the implications for the Church and believers today.

Scripture: Genesis 21:1-33, Galatians 4:21

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Covenant Theology"

Description

John Calvin preaches about the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His promises to Abraham and Sarah, highlighting the miraculous birth of Isaac as a result of divine visitation. He emphasizes the importance of obedience to God's commands, as seen in Abraham's circumcision of Isaac. Calvin also delves into the allegorical significance of Ishmael and Isaac, representing two kinds of people in the Church. The covenant between Abraham and Abimelech is explored, showing Abraham's humility and willingness to maintain peace. The sermon concludes with Abraham's establishment of worship and a settled life in Beer-sheba, symbolizing rest and gratitude for God's faithfulness.

Transcript

1. And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken.
1. Porro Jehova visitavit Sarah, quemadmodum dixit: et fecit Jehova ipsi Sarah, quemadmodum loquutus erat.
2. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.
2. Itaque concepit et peperit Sarah ipsi Abraham filium in senectute ejus, in tempore quod illi dixerat Deus.
3. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac.
3. Et vocavit Abraham nomen filii sui, qui natus erat ei, quem peperit ei Sarah, Ishac.
4. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him.
4. Et circumcidit Abraham Ishac filium suum, filium octo dierum, quemadmodum praeceperat ei Deus.
5. And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him.

5. Abraham autem erat centum annorum, quando natus est ei Ishac filius suus.
6. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.
6. Et dixit Sarah, Risum fecit mihi Deus: omnis qui audierit, ridebit mihi.
7. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age.
7. Et dixit, Quis nuntiasset Abrahae lactare filios Sarah? quia peperit filium in senectute ejus.
8. And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.
8. Et crevit puer, et ablactatus est: et fecit Abraham convivium magnum in die qua ablactatus est Ishac.
9. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.
9. Et vidit Sarah filium Hagar Aegyptiae, quem peperit ipsi Abraham, ridentem.
10. 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.
10. Et dixit ad Abraham, Ejice ancillam hanc et filium ejus: quia non haereditabit filius ancillae hujus cum filio meo, cum Ishac.
11. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.
11. Et displicuit res valde in oculis Abraham, propter filium suum.
12. 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; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.
12. Et dixit Deus ad Abraham, Ne displiceat in oculis tuis super puero, et super ancilla tua: in omnibus quae dixerit tibi Sarah, audi vocem ejus: quia in Ishac vocabitur tibi semen.
13. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.
13. Et etiam filium ancillae in gentem ponam, quia semen tuum est.
14. 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 Beersheba.
14. Diluculo igitur surrexit Abraham, et tulit panem, et utrem aquae, et dedit Hagar, et posuit super humerum ejus, et puerum: et dimisit eam, et perrexit, et erravit in deserto Beer-sebah.
15. And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.
15. Et defecerunt aquae de utre, et projecit puerum subter unam arborum.

16. 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.

16. Et abiit, et sedit e regione, elongando se quantum est jactus arcus: quia dixit, Non videbo quando morietur puer: et sedit e regione, et elevavit vocem summa, et flevit.

17. 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

17. Et audivit Deus vocem pueri, et clamavit angelus Dei ad Hagar de coelis, et dixit ei, Quid tibi Hagar? ne timeas: quia audivit Deus vocem pueri ex loco ubi est.

18. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.

18. Surge, tolle puerum, et tene manu tua eum: quia in gentem magnam ponam eum.

19. 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.

19. Tunc aperuit Deus oculos ejus, et vidit puteum aquae, et perrexit et implevit utrem aqua, et potum dedit puero.

20. And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.

20. Et fuit Deus cum puero, et crevit, habitavitque in deserto, et fuit jaculator sagittarius.

21. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.

21. Et habitavit in deserto Param, et accepit ei mater ejus uxorem de terra Aegypti.

22. And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phicol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God is with thee in all that thou doest:

22. Deinde fuit tempore illo, dixit Abimelech et Phicol princeps exercitus ejus ad Abraham, dicendo, Deus tecum est in omnibus quae tu facis:

23. Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.

23. Nunc itaque jura mihi per Deum hic, si mentitus fueris mihi, et filio meo, et nepoti meo: secundum misericordiam, quam feci tecum facies mecum, et cum terra, in qua peregrinatus es.

24. And Abraham said, I will swear.

24. Et dixit Abraham, Ego jurabo.

25. And Abraham reprov'd Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away.

25. Et increpavit abraham ipsum Abimelech propter puteum aquae, quem rapuerant servi Abimelech.

26. And Abimelech said, I wot not who hath done this thing: neither didst thou tell me, neither yet heard I of it , but to day.

26. Et dixit Abimelech, Non novi quis fecerit hoc, neque etiam tu indicasti mihi, neque etiam ego audivi praeterquam hodie.

27. And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant.

27. Et accepit Abraham pecudes et boves, et dedit ipsi Abimelech, et percusserunt ambo foedus.

28. And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.

28. Et statuit Abraham septem agnas pecorum seorsum.

29. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What mean these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves?

29. Et dixit Abimelech ad Abraham, Quid sunt septem agnae istae, quos statuisti seorsum?

30. And he said, For these) seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I have digged this well.

30. Et dixit, Quia septem agnas capies e manu mea: ut sit mihi in testimonium, quod foderim puteum hunc.

31. Wherefore he called that place Beersheba; because there they sware both of them.

31. Idcirco vocatus est locus ipse Beer-sebah: quia ibi juraverant ambo.

32. Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines.

32. Percusserunt ergo foedus in Beer-sebah: et surrexit Abimelech, et Phicol princeps exercitus ejus, et reversi sunt in terram Pelisthim.

33. And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God.

33. Et plantavit nemus in Beer-sebah, et invocavit ibi nomen Jehovae Dei saeculi.

34. And Abraham sojourned in the Philistines' land many days.

34. Et habitavit Abraham in terra Pelisthim dies multos.

1. And the Lord visited Sarah . In this chapters not only is the nativity of Isaac related, but because, in his very birth, God has set before us a lively picture of his Church, Moses also gives a particular account of this matter. And first, he says that God visited Sarah, as he had promised. Because all offspring, flows from the kindness of God, as it is in the psalm,

'The fruit of the womb is the gift of God;' (Ps 127:3;)

therefore the Lord is said, not without reason, to visit those, to whom he gives children. For although the foetus seems to be produced naturally, each from its own kind; there is yet no fecundity in animals, except so far as the Lord puts forth his own power, to fulfill what he has said, Increase and multiply. But in the propagation of the human race, his special benediction is conspicuous; and, therefore, the birth of every child is rightly deemed the effect of divine visitation. But Moses, in this place, looks higher, forasmuch as Isaac was born out of the accustomed course of nature. 433 Therefore Moses here commends that secret and unwonted power of God, which is superior to the law of nature; and not improperly, since it is of great consequence for us to know that the gratuitous kindness of God reigned, as well in the origin, as in the progress of the Church; and that the sons of God were not otherwise born, than from his mere mercy. And this is the reason why he did not make Abraham a father, till his body was nearly withered. It is also to be noticed, that Moses declares the visitation which he mentions, to be founded upon promise; 'Jehovah visited Sarah, as he had promised.' In these words he annexes the effect to its cause, in order that the special grace of God, of which an example is given in the birth of Isaac, might be the more perceptible. If he had barely said, that the Lord had respect unto Sarah, when she brought forth a son; some other cause might have been sought for. None, however, can doubt, that the promise, by which Isaac had been granted to his father Abraham, was gratuitous; since the child was the fruit of that adoption, which can be ascribed to nothing but the mere grace of God. Therefore, whoever wishes rightly and prudently to reflect upon the work of God, in the birth of Isaac, must necessarily begin with the promise. There is also great emphasis in the repetition, "The Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken." For he thus retains his readers, as by laying his hand upon them, that they may pause in the consideration of so great a miracle. Meanwhile, Moses commends the faithfulness of God; as if he had said he never feeds men with empty promises, nor is he less true in granting what he has promised, than he is liberal, and willing, in making the promise.

2. She bare Abraham a son . This is said according to the accustomed manner of speaking; because the woman is neither the head of a family, nor brings forth properly for herself, but for her husband. What follows, however, is more worthy of notice, In his old age, at the set time, which God had predicted: for the old age of Abraham does, not a little, illustrate the glory of the miracle. And now Moses, for the third time, recalls us to the word of God, that the constancy of his truth may always be present to our minds. And though the time had been predicted, alike to Abraham and to his wife, yet this honor is expressly attributed to the holy man; because the promise had been especially given on his account. Both, however, are distinctly mentioned in the context.

3. And Abraham called the name . Moses does not mean that Abraham was the inventor of the name; but that he adhered to the name which before had been given by the angel. This act of obedience, however, was worthy of commendation, since he not only ratified the word of God, but also executed his office as God's minister. For, as a herald, he proclaimed to all, that which the angel had committed to his trust.

4. And Abraham circumcised his son . Abraham pursued his uniform tenor of obedience, in not sparing his own son. For, although it would be painful for him to wound the tender body of the infant; yet, setting aside all human affection, he obeys the word of God. And Moses records that he did as the Lord had commanded him; because there is nothing of greater importance, than to take the pure word of God for our rule, and not to be wise above what is lawful. This submissive spirit is especially required, in reference to sacraments; lest men should either invent any thing for themselves, or should transfer those things which are commanded by the Lord, to any use they please. We see, indeed, how inordinately the humours of men here prevail; inasmuch as they have dared to devise innumerable sacraments. And to go no further

for an example, whereas God has delivered only two sacraments to the Christian Church, the Papists boast that they have seven. As if truly it were in their power to forge promises of salvation, which they might sanction with signs imagined by themselves. But it were superfluous to relate with how many figments the sacraments have been polluted by them. This certainly is manifest, that there is nothing about which they are less careful, than to observe what the Lord has commanded.

5. And Abraham was an hundred years old . Moses again records the age of Abraham the better to excite the minds of his readers to a consideration of the miracle. And although mention is made only of Abraham, let us yet remember that he is, in this place, set before us, not as a man of lust, but as the husband of Sarah, who has obtained, through her, a lawful seed, in extreme old age, when the strength of both had failed. For the power of God was chiefly conspicuous in this, that when their marriage had been fruitless more than sixty years, suddenly they obtain offspring 434 . Sarah, truly, in order to make amends for the doubt to which she had given way, now exultingly proclaims the kindness of God, with becoming praises. And first, she says, that God had given her occasion of joy; not of common joy, but of such as should cause all men to congratulate her. Secondly, for the purpose of amplification, she assumes the character of an astonished inquirer, 'Who would have told this to Abraham?' Some explain the clause in question, 'will laugh at me,' as if Sarah had said, with shame, that she should be a proverb to the common people. But the former sense is more suitable; namely, 'Whosoever shall hear it, will laugh with me;' that is, for the sake of congratulating me.

7. Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck ? I understand the future tense to be here put for the subjunctive mood. And the meaning is, that such a thing would never have entered into the mind of any one. Whence she concludes, that God alone was the Author of it; and she now condemns herself for ingratitude because she had been so slow in giving credit to the angel who had told her of it. Now, since she speaks of children in the plural number, the Jews, according to their custom, invent the fable, that whereas a rumor was spread, that the child was supposititious, a great number of infants were brought by the neighbors, in order that Sarah, by suckling them, might prove herself a mother. As if, truly, this might not easily be known, when they saw Isaac hanging on her breast, 435 and as if this was not a more clear and distinct proof, that the milk, pressed out by the fingers, flowed before their eyes. But the Jews are doubly foolish and infatuated, as not perceiving, that this form of expression is of exactly the same import, as if Sarah had called herself a nurse. Meanwhile, it is to be observed, that Sarah joins the office of nurse with that of mother; for the Lord does not in vain prepare nutriment for children in their mothers' bosoms, before they are born. But those on whom he confers the honor of mothers, he, in this way, constitutes nurses; and they who deem it a hardship to nourish their own offspring, break, as far as they are able, the sacred bond of nature. If disease, or anything of that kind, is the hindrance, they have a just excuse; but for mothers voluntarily, and for their own pleasure, to avoid the trouble of nursing, and thus to make themselves only half-mothers, is a shameful corruption.

8. And the child grew, and was weaned . Moses now begins to relate the manner in which Ishmael was rejected from the family of Abraham, in order that Isaac alone might hold the place of the lawful son and heir. It seems, indeed, at first sight, something frivolous, that Sarah, being angry about a mere nothing, should have stirred up strife in the family. But Paul teaches, that a sublime mystery is here proposed to us, concerning the perpetual state of the Church. (Ga 4:21.) And, truly, if we attentively consider the persons mentioned, we shall regard it as no trivial affair, that the father of all the faithful is divinely commanded to eject his firstborn son; that Ishmael, although a partaker of the same circumcision, becomes so transformed into a strange nations as to be no more reckoned among the blessed seed; that, in

appearance, the body of the Church is so rent asunder, that only one-half of it remains; that Sarah, in expelling the son of her handmaid from the house, claims the entire inheritance for Isaac alone. Wherefore, if due attention be applied in the reading of this history, the very mystery of which Paul treats, spontaneously presents itself.

And Abraham made a great feast . It is asked, why he did not rather make it on the day of Isaac's birth, or circumcision? The subtle reasoning of Augustine, that the day of Isaac's weaning was celebrated, in order that we may learn, from his example, no more to be children in understandings is too constrained. What others say, has no greater consistency; namely, that Abraham took a day which was not then in common use, in order that he might not imitate the manners of the Gentiles. Indeed, it is very possible, that he may also have celebrated the birthday of his son, with honor and joy. But special mention is made of this feast, for another reason; namely, that then, the mocking of Ishmael was discovered. For I do not assent to the conjecture of those who think that a new history is here begun; and that Sarah daily contended with this annoyance, until, at length, she purged the house by the ejection of the impious mocker. It is indeed probable, that, on other days also, Ishmael had been elated by similar petulance; yet I do not doubt but Moses expressly declares that his contempt was manifested towards Sarah, at that solemn assembly, and that from that time, it was publicly proclaimed. Now Moses does not speak disparagingly of the pleasures of that feast, but rather takes their lawfulness for granted. For it is not his design to prohibit holy men from inviting their friends, to a common participation of enjoyment, so that they, jointly giving thanks to God, may feast with greater hilarity than usual. Temperance and sobriety are indeed always to be observed; and care must be taken, both that the provision itself be frugal, and the guests moderate. I would only say, that God does not deal so austere with us, as not to allow us, sometimes, to entertain our friends liberally; as when nuptials are to be celebrated, or when children are born to us. Abraham, therefore, made a great feast, that is, an extraordinary one; because he was not accustomed thus sumptuously to furnish his table every day; yet this was an abundance which by no means degenerated into luxury. Besides, while he was thus liberal in entertaining his friends according to his power, he also had sufficient for unknown guests, as we have seen before.

9. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar . As the verb to laugh has a twofold signification among the Latins, so also the Hebrews use, both in a good and evil sense, the verb from which the participle מְצַחֵק (metsachaik) is derived. That it was not a childish and innoxious laughter, appears from the indignation of Sarah. It was, therefore a malignant expression of scorn, by which the forward youth manifested his contempt for his infant brother. And it is to be observed, that the epithet which is here applied to Ishmael, and the name Isaac , are both derived from the same root. Isaac was, to his father and others, the occasion of holy and lawful laughter; whence also, the name was divinely imposed upon him. Ishmael turns the blessing of God, from which such joy flowed, into ridicule. Therefore, as an impious mocker, he stands opposed to his brother Isaac. Both (so to speak) are the sons of laughter: but in a very different sense. Isaac brought laughter with him from his mother's womb, since he bore, -- engraven upon him, -- the certain token of God's grace. He therefore so exhilarates his father's house, that joy breaks forth in thanksgiving; but Ishmael, with canine and profane laughter, attempts to destroy that holy joy of faith. And there is no doubt that his manifest impiety against God, betrayed itself under this ridicule. He had reached an age at which he could not, by any means be ignorant of the promised favor, on account of which his father Abraham was transported with so great joy: and yet -- proudly confident in himself -- he insults, in the person of his brother, both God and his word, as well as the faith of Abraham. Wherefore it was not without cause that Sarah was so vehemently angry with him, that she commanded him to be driven into exile. For nothing is more grievous to a holy mind, than to see the grace of God exposed to ridicule. And

this is the reason why Paul calls his laughter persecution; saying,

'He who was after the flesh persecuted the spiritual seed.' (Ga 4:29.)

Was it with sword or violence? Nay, but with the scorn of the virulent tongue, which does not injure the body, but pierces into the very soul. Moses might indeed have aggravated his crime by a multiplicity of words; but I think that he designedly spoke thus concisely, in order to render the petulance with which Ishmael ridicules the word of God the more detestable.

10. Cast out this bondwoman . Not only is Sarah exasperated against the transgressor, but she seems to act more imperiously towards her husband than was becoming in a modest wife. Peter shows, that when, on a previous occasion, she called Abraham lord, she did not do so feignedly; since he proposes her, as an example of voluntary subjection, to pious and chaste matrons. (1Pe 3:6.) But now, she not only usurps the government of the house, by calling her husband to order, but commands him whom she ought to reverence, to be obedient to her will. Here, although I do not deny that Sarah, being moved by womanly feelings, exceeded the bounds of moderation, I yet do not doubt, both that her tongue and mind were governed by a secret impulse of the Spirit, and that this whole affair was directed by the providence of God. Without controversy, she was the minister of great and tremendous judgment. And Paul adduces this expression, not as a futile reproach, which an enraged woman had poured forth, but as a celestial oracle. But although she sustains a higher character than that of a private woman, yet she does not take from her husband his power; but makes him the lawful director of the ejection.

11. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight . Although Abraham had been already assured, by many oracles, that the blessed seed should proceed from Isaac only; yet, under the influence of paternal affection, he could not bear that Ishmael should be cut off, for the purpose of causing the inheritance to remain entire to him, to whom it had been divinely granted; and thus, by mingling two races, he endeavored, as far as he was able, to confound the distinction which God had made. It may truly seem absurd, that the servant of God should thus be carried away by a blind impulse: but God thus deprives him of judgment, not only to humble him, but also to testify to all ages, that the dispensing of his grace depends upon his own will alone. Moreover, in order that the holy man may bear, with greater equanimity, the departure of his son, a double consolation is promised him. For, first, God recalls to his memory the promise made concerning Isaac; as if he would say, it is enough and more than enough, that Isaac, in whom the spiritual benediction remains entire, is left. He then promises that he will take care of Ishmael, though exiled from his paternal home; and that a posterity shall arise from him which shall constitute a whole nation. But I have explained above, on the seventeenth chapter (Ge 17:1,) what is the meaning of the expression, 'The seed shall be called in Isaac.' And Paul, (Ro 9:8,) by way of interpretation, uses the word reckoned, or imputed. 436 And it is certain that, by this method, the other son was cut off from the family of Abraham; so that he should no more have a name among his posterity. For God, having severed Ishmael, shows that the whole progeny of Abraham should flow from one head. He promises also to Ishmael, that he shall be a nations but estranged from the Church; so that the condition of the brothers shall, in this respect, be different; that one is constituted the father of a spiritual people, to the other is given a carnal seed. Whence Paul justly infers, that not all who are the seed of Abraham are true and genuine sons; but they only who are born of the Spirit. For as Isaac himself became the legitimate son by a gratuitous promise, so the same grace of God makes a difference among his descendants. But because we have sufficiently treated of the various sons of Abraham on the seventeenth chapter, the subject is now more sparingly alluded to.

12. In all that Sarah hath said unto thee . I have just said that although God used the ministry of Sarah in so great a matter, it was yet possible that she might fail in her method of acting. He now commands Abraham to hearken unto his wife, not because he approves her disposition, but because he will have the work, of which he is Himself the Author, accomplished. And he thus shows that his designs are not to be subjected to any common rule, especially when the salvation of the Church is concerned.

For he purposely inverts the accustomed order of nature, in order that he may prove himself to be the Author and the Perfecter of Isaac's vocation. But because I have before declared, that this history is more profoundly considered by Paul, the sum of it is here briefly to be collected. In the first place, he says, that what is here read, was written allegorically: not that he wishes all histories, indiscriminately to be tortured to an allegorical sense, as Origin does; who by hunting everywhere for allegories, corrupts the whole Scripture; and others, too eagerly emulating his example, have extracted smoke out of light.

And not only has the simplicity of Scripture been vitiated, but the faith has been almost subverted, and the door opened to many foolish dotings. The design of Paul was, to raise the minds of the pious to consider the secret work of God, in this history; as if he had said, What Moses relates concerning the house of Abraham, belongs to the spiritual kingdom of Christ; since, certainly, that house was a lively image of the Church. This, however, is the allegorical similitude which Paul commends.

Whereas two sons were born to Abraham, the one by a handmaid, the other by a free woman; he infers, that there are two kinds of persons born in the Church; the faithful, whom God endues with the Spirit of adoption, that they may enjoy the inheritance; and hypocritical disciples, who feign themselves to be what they are not, and usurp, for a time, a name and place among the sons of God. He therefore teaches, that there are certain who are conceived and born in a servile manner; but others, as from a freeborn mother.

He then proceeds to say, that the sons of Hagar are they who are generated by the servile doctrine of the Law; but that they who, having embraced, by faith, gratuitous adoption, are born through the doctrine of the Gospel, are the sons of the free woman. At length he descends to another similitudes in which he compares Hagar with mount Sinai, but Sarah with the heavenly Jerusalem. And although I here allude in few words to those things which my readers will find copiously expounded by me, in the fourth chapter to the Galatians Ga 4:1; yet, in this short explanation, it is made perfectly clear what Paul designs to teach.

We know that the true sons of God are born of the incorruptible seed of the word: but when the Spirit, which gives life to the doctrine of the Law and the Prophets, is taken away, and the dead letter alone remains, then that seed is so corrupted, that only adulterous sons are born in a state of slavery; yet because they are apparently born of the word of God, though corrupted, they are, in a sense, the sons of God. Meanwhile, none are lawful heirs, except those whom the Church brings forth into liberty, being conceived by the incorruptible seed of the gospel.

I have said, however, that in these two persons is represented the perpetual condition of the Church. For hypocrites not only mingle with the sons of God in the Church, but despise them, and proudly appropriate to themselves all the rights and honors of the Church. And as Ishmael, inflated with the vain title of primogeniture, harassed his brother Isaac with his taunts; so these men, relying on their own splendor, reproachfully assail and ridicule the true faith of the simple: because, by arrogating all things to themselves, they leave nothing to the grace of God.

Hence we are admonished, that none have a well-grounded confidence of salvation, but they who, being called freely, regard the mercy of God as their whole dignity. Again, the Spirit furnishes the consciences of

the pious with strong and effective weapons against the ferociousness of those who, under a false pretext, boast that they are the Church. We see that it is no new thing, for persons who are nothing but hypocrites to occupy the chief place in the Church at God. Wherefore, while at this day, the Papists proudly exult, there is no reason why we should be disturbed by their empty and inflated boasts.

As to their glorying in their long succession, it just means as much as if Ishmael were proclaiming himself the firstborn. It is, therefore necessary to discriminate between the true and the hypocritical Church. Paul describes a mark, which they are never able, with their cavils, to obliterate. For as large bottles are broken with a slight blast; so by this single word, all their glory is extinguished, 'the sons of the handmaid shall not be eternal inheritors.' In the meantime their insolence is to be patiently borne, so long as God shall loosen the rein to their tyranny.

For the Apostles, formerly, were oppressed by the Jewish hypocrites of their age, with the same reproaches which these men now cast upon us. In the same way, Ishmael triumphed over Isaac, as if he had obtained the victory. Wherefore, we must not wonder, if our own age also has its Ishmaelites. But lest such indignity should break our spirits, let this consolation perpetually occur to us, that they who hold the preeminence in the Church, will not always remain within it.

14. And Abraham rose up early . How painful was the wound, which the ejection of his firstborn son inflicted upon the mind of the holy man, we may gather from the double consolation with which God mitigated his grief: He sends his son into banishments just as if he were tearing out his own bowels. But being accustomed to obey God, he brings into subjection the paternal love, which he is not able wholly to cast aside. This is the true test of faith and piety, when the faithful are so far compelled to deny themselves, that they even resign the very affections of their original nature, which are neither evil nor vicious in themselves, to the will of God. There is no doubt that, during the whole night, he had been tossed with various cares; that he had a variety of internal conflicts, and endured severe torments; yet he arose early in the morning, to hasten his separation from his child; since he knew that it was the will of God.

And took bread, and a bottle of water . Moses intimates not only that Abraham committed his son to the care of his mother, but that he relinquished his own paternal right over him; for it was necessary for this son to be alienated, that he might not afterwards be accounted the seed of Abraham. But with what a slender provision does he endow his wife and her son? He places a flagon of water and bread upon her shoulder. Why does he not, at least, load an ass with a moderate supply of food? Why does he not add one of his servants, of which his house contained plenty, as a companion? Truly either God shut his eyes, that, what he would gladly have done, might not come into his mind; or Abraham limited her provision, in order that she might not go far from his house. For doubtless he would prefer to have them near himself, for the purpose of rendering them such assistance as they would need. Meanwhile, God designed that the banishment of Ishmael should be thus severe and sorrowful; in order that, by his example, he might strike terror into the proud, who, being intoxicated with present gifts, trample under foot, in their haughtiness, the very grace to which they are indebted for all things. Therefore he brought the mother and child to a distressing issue. For after they have wandered into the desert, the water fails; and the mother departs from her son; which was a token of despair. Such was the reward of the pride, by which they had been vainly inflated. It had been their duty humbly to embrace the grace of God offered to all people, in the person of Isaac: but they impiously spurned him whom God had exalted to the highest honor. The knowledge of God's gifts ought to have formed their minds to modesty. And because nothing was more desirable for them, than to retain some corner in Abraham's house, they ought not to have shrunk from

any kind of subjection, for the sake of so great a benefit: God now exacts from them the punishment, which they had deserved, by their ingratitude.

17. God heard the voice of the lad . Moses had said before that Hagar wept: how is it then, that, disregarding her tears, God only hears the voice of the lad ? If we should say, that the mother did not deserve to receive a favorable answer to her prayers; her son, certainly, was in no degree more worthy. For, as to the supposition of some, that they both were brought to repentance by this chastisement, it is but an uncertain conjecture. I leave their repentance, of which I can see no sign, to the judgment of God. The cry of the boy was heard, as I understand it, not because he had prayed in faith; but because God, mindful of his own promise, was inclined to have compassion upon them. For Moses does not say, that their vows and sighs were directed towards heaven; it is rather to be believed, that, in bewailing their miseries, they did not resort to divine help. But God, in assisting them, had respect, not to what they desired of him, but to what he had promised to Abraham concerning Ishmael. In this sense Moses seems to say that the voice of the boy was heard; namely, because he was the son of Abraham.

What aileth thee, Hagar? 437 The angel reproves the ingratitude of Hagar; because, when reduced to the greatest straits, she does not reflect on God's former kindness towards her, in similar danger; so that, as one who has found him to be a deliverer, she might again cast herself upon his faithfulness. Nevertheless, the angel assures her that a remedy is prepared for her sorrows if only she will seek it. Therefore in the clause, What aileth thee? 438 is a reproof for having tormented herself in vain, by confused lamentation. When he afterwards says, Fear not, he invites and exhorts her to hope for mercy. But what, we may ask, is the meaning of the expression, which he adds, where he is? 439 It may seem that there is a suppressed antithesis between the place where he now was, and the house of Abraham; so that Hagar might conclude, that although she was wandering in the desert as an exile from the sanctuary of God, yet she was not entirely forsaken by God; since she had him for a Leader in her exile. Or else, the phrase is emphatical; implying, that, though the boy is cast into solitude, and counted as one forsaken, he nevertheless has God nigh unto him. And thus the angel, to relieve the despair of the anxious mother, commands her to return to the place where she had laid down her son. For (as is usual in desperate circumstances) she had become stupefied through grief; and would have lain as one lifeless, unless she had been roused by the voice of the angel. We perceive, moreover, in this example, how truly it is said, that when father and mother forsake us, the Lord will take us up.

18. Arise lift up the lad . In order that she might have more courage to bring up her son, God confirms to her what he had before often promised to Abraham. Indeed, nature itself prescribes to mothers what they owe to their children; but, as I have lately hinted, all the natural feelings of Hagar would have been destroyed, unless God had revived her, by inspiring new confidence, to address herself with fresh vigor to the fulfillment of her maternal office. With respect to the fountain or "well," 440 some think it suddenly sprung up. But since Moses says, that the eyes of Hagar were opened, and not that the earth was opened or dug up; I rather incline to the opinion, that, having been previously astonished with grief, she did not discern what was plainly before her eyes; but now, at length, after God has restored her vision, she begins to see it. And it is worthy of especial notice, that when God leaves us destitute of his superintendence, and takes away his grace from us, we are as much deprived of all the aids which are close at hand, as if they were removed to the greatest distance. Therefore we must ask, not only that he would bestow upon us such things as will be useful to us, but that he will also impart prudence to enable us to use them; otherwise, it will be our lot to faint, with closed eyes, in the midst of fountains.

20. And God was with the lad . There are many ways in which God is said to be present with men. He is present with his elect, whom he governs by the special grace of his Spirit; he is present also, sometimes, as it respects external life, not only with his elect, but also with strangers, in granting them some signal benediction: as Moses, in this place, commends the extraordinary grace by which the Lord declares that his promise is not void, since he pursues Ishmael with favor, because he was the son of Abraham. Hence, however, this general doctrine is inferred; that it is to be entirely ascribed to God that men grow up, that they enjoy the light and common breath of heaven, and that the earth supplies them with food. Only it must be remembered, the prosperity of Ishmael flowed from this cause, that an earthly blessing was promised him for the sake of his father Abraham. In saying, that Hagar took a wife for Ishmael, Moses has respect to civil order; for since marriage forms a principal part of human life, it is right that, in contracting it, children should be subject to their parents, and should obey their counsel. This order, which nature prescribes and dictates, was, as we see, observed by Ishmael, a wild man in the barbarism of the desert; for he was subject to his mother in marrying a wife. Whence we perceive, what a prodigious monster was the Pope, when he dared to overthrow this sacred right of nature. To this is also added the impudent boast of authorizing a wicked contempt of parents, in honor of holy wedlock. Moreover the Egyptian wife was a kind of prelude to the future dissension between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites.

22. And it came to pass at that time . Moses relates, that this covenant was entered into between Abraham and Abimelech, for the purpose of showing, that after various agitations, some repose was, at length, granted to the holy man. He had been constrained, as a wanderer, and without a fixed abode, to move his tent from place to place, during sixty years. But although God would have him to be a sojourner even unto death, yet, under king Abimelech, he granted him a quiet habitation. And it is the design of Moses to show, how it happened, that he occupied one place longer than he was wont. The circumstance of time is to be noted; namely, soon after he had dismissed his son. For it seems that his great trouble was immediately followed by this consolation, not only that he might have some relaxation from continued inconveniences, but that he might be the more cheerful, and might the more quietly occupy himself in the education of his little son Isaac. It is however certain, that the covenant was not, in every respect, an occasion of joy to him; for he perceived that he was tried by indirect methods, and that there were many persons in that region, to whom he was disagreeable and hateful. The king, indeed openly avowed his own suspicions of him: it was, however, the highest honor, that the king of the place should go, of his own accord, to a stranger, to enter into a covenant with him. Yet it may be asked, whether this covenant was made on just and equal conditions, as is the custom among allies? I certainly do not doubt, that Abraham freely paid due honor to the king; nor is it probable that the king intended to detract anything from his own dignity, in order to confer it upon Abraham. What, then, did he do? Truly, while he allowed Abraham a free dwelling-place, he would yet hold him bound to himself by an oath.

God is with thee in all that thou doest . He commences in friendly and bland terms; he does not accuse Abraham nor complain that he had neglected any duty towards himself, but declares that he earnestly desires his friendship; still the conclusion is, that he wishes to be on his guard against him. It may then be asked, Whence had he this suspicion, or fear, first of a stranger, and, secondly, of an honest and moderate man? In the first place, we know that the heathen are often anxious without cause, and are alarmed even in seasons of quiet. Next, Abraham was a man deserving of reverence; the number of servants in his house seemed like a little nation; and there is no doubt, that his virtues would acquire for him great dignity; hence it was, that Abimelech suspected his power. But whereas Abimelech had a private consideration for himself in this matter; the Lord, who best knows how to direct events, provided, in this way, for the repose of his servant. We may, however, learn, from the example of Abraham, if, at any

time, the gifts of God excite the enmity of the men of this world against us, to conduct ourselves with such moderation, that they may find nothing amiss in us.

23. That thou wilt not deal falsely with me 441 Literally it is, 'If thou shalt lie;' for, among the Hebrews, a defective form of speech is common in taking oaths, which is to be thus explained: 'If thou shouldst break the promise given to me, we call upon God to sit as Judge between us, and to show himself the avenger of perjury.' But 'to lie,' some here take for dealing unjustly and fraudulently; others for failing in the conditions of the covenant. I simply understand it as if it were said, 'Thou shalt do nothing perfidiously with me or with my descendants.' Abimelech also enumerates his own acts of kindness, the lore effectually to exhort Abraham to exercise good faith; for, seeing he had been humanely treated, Abimelech declares it would be an act of base ingratitude if he did not, in return, endeavor to repay the benefits he had received. The Hebrew word חֶסֶד (chesed) signifies to deal gently or kindly with any one. 442 For Abimelech did not come to implore compassion of Abraham, but rather to assert his own royal authority, as will appear from the context.

24. And Abraham said, I will swear . Although he had the stronger claim of right, he yet refuses nothing which belonged to the duty of a good and moderate man. And truly, since it is becoming in the sons of God to be freely ready for every duty; nothing is more absurd, than for them to appear reluctant and morose, when what is just is required of them. He did not refuse to swear, because he knew it to be lawful, that covenants should be ratified between men, in the sacred name of God. In short, we see Abraham willingly submitting himself to the laws of his vocation.

25. And Abraham reproved Abimelech . This complaint seems to be unjust; for, if he had been injured, why did he not resort to the ordinary remedy? He knew the king to be humane, to have some seed of piety, and to have treated himself courteously and honorably; why then does he doubt that he will prove the equitable defender of his right? If, indeed, he had chosen rather to smother the injury received, than to be troublesome to the king, why does he now impute the fault to him, as if he had been guilty? Possibly, however, Abraham might know that the injury had been done, through the excessive forbearance of the king. We may assuredly infer, both from his manners and his disposition, that he did not expostulate without cause; and hence the moderation of the holy man is evident; because, when deprived of the use of water, found by his own industry and labor, he does not contend, as the greatness of the injury would have justified him in doing; for this was just as if the inhabitants of the place had made an attempt upon his life. But though he patiently bore so severe an injury, yet when beyond expectation, the occasion of taking security is offered, he guards himself from fixture aggression. We also see how severely the Lord exercised Abraham, as soon as he appeared to be somewhat more at ease, and had obtained a little alleviation. Certainly, it was not a light trial, to be compelled to contend for water; and not for water which was public property but for that of a well, which he himself had digged.

27. And Abraham took sheep . Hence it appears that the covenant made, was not such as is usually entered into between equals: for Abraham considers his own position, and in token of subjection, offers a gift, from his flocks, to king Gerar; for, what the Latins call paying tax or tribute, and what we call doing homage, the Hebrews call offering gifts. 443 And truly Abraham does not wait till something is forcibly, and with authority, extorted from him by the king; but, by a voluntary giving of honor, anticipates him, whom he knows to have dominion over the place. It is too well known, how great a desire of exercising authority prevails among men. Hence, the greater praise is due to the modesty of Abraham, who not only abstains from what belongs to another man; but even offers, uncommanded, what, in his own mind, he regards as due to another, in virtue of his office. A further question however arises; since Abraham knew that the

dominion over the land had been divinely committed to him, whether it was lawful for him to profess a subjection by which he acknowledged another as lord? But the solution is easy, because the time of entering into possession had not yet arrived; for he was lord, only in expectation, while, in fact, he was a pilgrim. Wherefore, he acted rightly in purchasing a habitation, till the time should come, when what had been promised to him, should be given to his posterity. Thus, soon afterwards, as we shall see, he paid a price for his wife's sepulcher. In short, until he should be placed, by the hand of God, in legitimate authority over the land he did not scruple to treat with the inhabitants of the place, that he might dwell among them by permission, or by the payment of a price.

28. And Abraham set seven ewe-lambs of the flock by themselves . Moses recites another chief point of the covenant; namely, that Abraham made express provision for himself respecting the well, that he should have free use of its water. And he placed in the midst seven lambs, that the king being presented with the honorary gift, might approve and ratify the digging of the well. For the inhabitants might provoke a controversy, on the ground that it was not lawful for a private man, and a stranger, to dig a well; but now, when the public authority of the king intervened, Abraham's peace was consulted, that no one might disturb him. Many understand lambs here to mean pieces of money coined in the form of lambs, but since mention has previously been made of sheep and oxen, and Moses now immediately subjoins that seven lambs are placed apart, it is absurd, in this connection, to speak of money.

31. Wherefore he called that place Beer-sheba . Moses has once already called the place by this name, but proleptically. Now, however, he declares when, and for what reason, the name was given; namely, because there both he and Abimelech had sworn; therefore I translate the term 'the well of swearing.' Others translate it 'the well of seven.' But Moses plainly derives the word from swearing; nor is it of any consequence that the pronunciation slightly varies from grammatical correctness, which in proper names is not very nicely observed. In fact, Moses does not restrict the etymology to the well , but comprises the whole covenant. I do not, however, deny that Moses might allude to the number seven 444

33. And Abraham planted a grove . It hence appears that more rest was granted to Abraham, after the covenant was entered into, than he had hitherto enjoyed; for now he begins to plant trees, which is a sign of a tranquil and fixed habitation; for we never before read that he planted a single shrub. Wherefore, we see how far his condition was improved because he was permitted to lead (as I may say) a settled life. The assertion, that he called on the name of the Lord, I thus interpret; he instituted anew the solemn worship of God, in order to testify his gratitude. Therefore God, after he had led his servant through continually winding paths, gave to him some relaxation in his extreme old age. And he sometimes so deals with his faithful people, that when they have been tossed by various storms, he at length permits them to breathe freely. As it respects calling upon God, we know that Abraham, wherever he went, never neglected this religious duty. Nor was he deterred by dangers from professing himself a worshipper of the true God; although, on this account, he was hateful to his neighbors. But as his conveniences for dwelling in the land increased, he became the more courageous in professing the worship of God. And because he now lived more securely under the protection of the king, he perhaps wished to bear open testimony, that he received even this as from God. For the same reason, the title of the everlasting God seems to be given, as if Abraham would say, that he had not placed his confidence in an earthly king and was not engaging in any new covenant, by which he would be departing from the everlasting God. The reason why Moses, by the figure synecdoche , gives to the worship of God the name of invocation , I have elsewhere explained. Lastly, Abraham is here said to have sojourned in that land in which he, nevertheless, had a settled abode; whence we learn, that his mind was not so fixed upon this state of repose, as to prevent

him frown considering what he had before heard from the mouth of God, that he with his posterity should be strangers till the expiration of four hundred years.

Footnotes

432

Vel, si fefelleris, aut infideliter egeris.

433

Calvin here adds, "Nam communis gignendi ratio, et vis illa quam Dominus hominibus indidit, in Abraham et ejus uxore cessaverat."

434

"Quod quum ultra sexaginta annos sterile illis fuisset conjugium, effoetis jam et semimortuis, subito nata est prolis."

435

It is here added, "Ac non clarior, et in promptu fuerit demonstratio, si lac digitis expressum ante oculos fluxisset."

436

"Ponit verbum λογισθαι, hoc est, censi vel reputari."

437

"Quid tibi est Agar?"

438

"Ergo in particula, 'Quid agis?' objurgatio est." The expression, "Quid agis," does not occur in the text, but is only another form in which Calvin puts "Quid tibi est?" -- Ed

439

"God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is." English version. Calvin has it, "ex loco ubi est."

440

Ver. 19. "God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water." "Quod ad fontem pertinet," are Calvin's words; but in his version it stands, "puteum aquae," a well of water. -- Ed

441

"Si mentitus fueris mihi." -- "If thou shalt have lied unto me." In the margin Calvin gives, "Si fefelleris, aut infideliter egeris." -- "If thou shalt have deceived, or have acted unfaithfully." See margin of English version. -- Ed

442

"Secundum misericordiam quam feci tecum facies tecum," is Calvin's version; and the comment is, "Misericordiam facere cum aliquo Hebraeis significat clementer et benigne eum tractare." -- Ed

443

"Num pro eo quod dicunt Latini, Pendere vectigal vel tributum, et Gallice dicimus, Faire homage, Hebraei dicunt Munera offerre."

444

As the word ■■■■ means both an oath and the number seven, room is left for this difference of interpretation. Calvin seems, however, to allude to a notion not uncommon among learned men, that as oaths were often made before seven witnesses, which perhaps the seven lambs represented, Abraham might have this number as well as the oath in his mind, when he called the well Beer-sheba. -- Ed

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