

“GOD’S WAY OR THE HIGHWAY” **(Genesis 21:8-21)**

How many of you have someone in your life that insists on doing things their way? How many of you are the person who insists that others do things your way? Most of us can relate to having a boss or a co-worker or a family member that has a very specific way of doing things and if you don’t conform to their way, you can hit the highway. In most cases there is more than one way to do something – it’s a preference – but in some cases there truly is only one right way. When a street sign says “One Way,” you don’t get to choose which direction you drive. When you’re mixing chemicals in a lab, there are certain chemicals that can be mixed together and some that cannot. Deviating from the right way could be hazardous to your health.

The Bible speaks of two ways to live life – our way and God’s way. Living our way – with limited understanding and perspective – is hit and miss at best, and we can never be sure if our way is the right way. Sometimes we might be deadly wrong. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” Appearances can be deceiving – a way that seems to be right – and the majority of people think is right – may lead to disaster. But when you live life God’s way you can be assured 100% of the time that it is the right way. Psalm 18:30 says, “As for God, his way is perfect: The LORD’s word is flawless; he shields all who take refuge in him.”

As our creator God knows what’s best for us, and every law, command, instruction, and admonition is given for our good so that we can thrive and flourish. And since all of us like sheep have turned to our own way, God has also made a way of salvation. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life – no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:16). Jesus is the exclusive way – the only way – for sinful people to be brought back into a relationship with God. The early church was so identified with Jesus being the way of salvation that they were known as “The Way.” Who are those people meeting at that house down the street? They are members of “The Way.” Once you believe in Christ as the way of salvation, you submit your life to doing things His way.

Throughout our study of the life of Abraham we’ve seen God communicate over and over His plan and will for Abraham’s life. For the most part Abraham followed God’s will, but there was one notable time he didn’t and today we see the fallout of that decision. I’ve entitled today’s message: *God’s Way or The Highway*. This title will make sense as we move through the passage and see the ripple effects of going our own way. On the positive side we will also see that God’s way is always the right way and the best way.

In our last study in Genesis, we saw in the first seven verses of chapter 21 that Sarah finally gives birth to the son God promised to her and Abraham. After twenty-five years of waiting, the joy they feel is indescribable – God kept His promise and His plan to bless the world through Abraham’s descendants stays right on course. But their joy is soon replaced with grief as an old problem resurfaces.

I want to begin by going through these verses – verses 8-21 – so that we see the whole story, and then go back and learn two major truths that emerge from this passage. Verse 8 says, “The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.” Weaning was a huge event in the ancient world, largely due to the fact that many children did not survive infancy. When a child made it through these vulnerable years and was strong enough to eat on their own – around two or three years old – it was cause for great celebration. Isaac is strong and healthy and Abraham throws a big party to celebrate.

Verse 9... “But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking.” Here an old problem resurfaces. Back in chapter 16, you’ll remember, Sarah gets tired of waiting for a child and decides to take matters into her own hands. She says to Abraham, “I’m not getting any younger, and God has not given us the child he promised – why don’t you have a child with my maidservant Hagar, and her child will be our child.”

Sarah does things her way, not God’s way. God’s way, which He clearly laid out, was for the promised child to come exclusively through her body and Abraham’s body, and nobody else’s. But Abraham goes along with Sarah’s plan and conceives a child with Hagar.

It doesn’t take long for Sarah to regret her decision. As soon as Hagar becomes pregnant, she begins to look down on and act superior to Sarah. She’s carrying Abraham’s child while Sarah is barren, and she doesn’t hesitate to let Sarah know. Although Hagar didn’t ask to be part of this family drama, she dishonors the woman God chose to give birth to the child who would inherit His covenant promises.

Sarah responds to Hagar’s mistreatment of her by mistreating Hagar, and the tension between the two becomes so great that Hagar runs away. She makes her way back to Egypt, where she’s from, but the Lord appears to her in the wilderness and tells her to return to Sarah, submit to her, and place herself under God’s covenant blessing. The safest place to be is in God’s will.

Hagar returns and has a son that Abraham names Ishmael. As we fast-forward to chapter 21, Ishmael is now a teenager – about 16 or 17 – and at the feast held for Isaac, Sarah catches Ishmael mocking her son. You might remember the prophecy given about Ishmael before he is born back in 16:12... “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”

Ishmael reminds me of Cain and later Esau – all three are cut from the same cloth – they all live life their way – strong, independent, and untamed – like a wild donkey that’s not restrained. Because he does his own thing, Ishmael doesn’t get along with others – it’s his way or the highway. As his little brother is being honored with a feast, Ishmael seethes with resentment – “I should be the one being honored – I should be the one to receive my father’s inheritance” – and he takes his hostility out on little brother and mocks him. Sarah sees this and all her old feelings of resentment come to the surface.

Verses 10-11... “And she said to Abraham, ‘Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son.” Ishmael’s mocking of Isaac is the last straw, and Sarah insists that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael on their way... “There’s no way the son of that woman – that slave woman – is sharing the inheritance with my son.” Abraham views Ishmael much differently – Ishmael is his own flesh and blood – the boy he has raised for the past 16 years. He loves Ishmael and can’t bear the thought of sending him away.

Verses 12-13... “But God said to him, ‘Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.’” As He has done so many times before, God reiterates that Isaac is the son who will receive the covenant blessing – and because Ishmael opposes God’s will, he must be sent away. God says, “You must send him away, but because he is your son I will bless him with his own nation – but the covenant nation will come through Isaac and no one else.”

Verses 14-16... “Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, ‘I cannot watch the boy die.’ And as she sat there, she began to sob.”

What a sad picture. Just like 16 years earlier, Hagar finds herself in the desert and she runs out of water. You can only survive a few days without water, but out in the burning heat of the desert, death comes much sooner. Sensing that their death is imminent, Hagar leaves Ishmael under a bush – what little shade there was – and goes a bowshot away... an interesting expression meaning she wanted to get far enough away – about the distance of a bowshot – so that she doesn’t hear the agonizing cries of her son as he dies. She sits down and begins to sob.

Verses 16-19... “God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.’ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.”

Just as He had done years earlier, God comes to the aid of Hagar in the desert and says, “Do not be afraid.” How many times do we read that phrase in the Bible? “God has heard your cry.” David wrote in Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” How many times in scripture do we see God coming to the aid of the outcast? God cannot help those who are arrogant and self-reliant, but He seeks out those who are lonely and desperate, who are out in the desert and have little hope for a future – He hears their cry and comes to their aid.

When Hagar is down to her last sip of water and cries out in desperation, God hears her and opens up her eyes so that she sees a well of water. It’s a wonderful picture. Later when God’s people are exiled in a foreign land, Isaiah the prophet encouraged them by saying, “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19). In the bleakest, most barren land, God will provide a way out and make streams to flow in the desert. God does His greatest work when we are humble and cry out to him, and He hears every cry and responds in His time and His way.

Verses 20-21... “God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.” Because of Abraham, God blessed Ishmael and made from him a great nation, but it would not be the covenant nation. Ishmael enjoyed the blessings of being Abraham’s son, but he was not part of God’s covenant promise. This is illustrated by the fact that he lived in the desert – outside the Promised Land – and away from the covenant blessing. Ishmael would go on to have twelve sons, and his descendants – the Arab people – would become adversaries of Israel until this very day – further illustrating the long-lasting consequences of not following God’s way.

As with every story in the Old Testament, we have to ask: Why did God see fit to have this story included in His holy Word? What does He want us to know? I think two major truths emerge from this passage, and both relate to the theme of God’s way or the highway.

Truth number one is this: **Disobeying God's will results in pain and suffering**. Every person in this story suffers for a sin committed 16 years earlier. What you can't help but notice in these verses are all of the emotions that are expressed, and they're all painful – starting with Ishmael. Ishmael had nothing to do with Abraham's sin, but he reaps the consequences of being born into a divided home. He's the firstborn and feels entitled to the privileges of being born first. When he sees Isaac receiving all the attention, he feels jealousy and resentment – kind of like the older brother in the prodigal son story. "I'm the firstborn – what about me?" And in his pain, he lashes out at Isaac.

Sarah also feels pain. All of the hurt and anger and jealousy from the past bubbles up when she sees Ishmael mocking her son, and the mama bear in her comes out, and she unleashes all of her pain on Abraham. Abraham feels pain as he watches this rift take place in his home and is heartbroken at the thought of sending his son away. Hagar feels the pain and despair of being a single mother stranded in the wilderness and watching her only son slowly die.

So much emotion, and each emotion is results from not doing things God's way. Ishmael would not accept that God's covenant promises were made to Isaac and not him. Sarah became impatient and devised her own plan instead of trusting God. Abraham gave into Sarah's plan and stepped outside the covenant bond of marriage. And Hagar failed to honor Sarah as the mother God chose to give birth to the son of promise.

This is why following God's way is so important. As our creator God knows what's best for us, and His will is designed for us to thrive and prosper. Psalm 128:1 says, "**Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways!**" Living life God's way does not mean that everything will be roses, but it puts you under the umbrella of God's blessing and protection and provision. No matter what happens you can have peace and confidence that God will work all things together for good.

All this brings on special relevance as we watch the moral foundations of our nation erode and God's ways being tossed aside in alarming fashion. It's no coincidence that as God's structure for the family and for morality is being torn down, the percentage of people contemplating suicide has doubled, and a record number of people are being treated from anxiety, depression, and a host of mental health problems. God's laws and commands are designed to protect us and help us flourish as His creation. When God's ways are abandoned, we pay the price.

God does not force us to live according to His ways, but when we don't, He allows us to reap the natural consequences of our choices. God will not be mocked, whatever we sow, that shall we also reap. The good news is that we also reap good from following God's way –because God's way is perfect and right – and is for our good.

That's why we must be intentional about knowing and doing His will. Romans 12:2 says, "**Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.**"

Every day the world pounds you with messages that are at war with God's will, and demands that you walk in lockstep with their thinking. You stay aligned with God's will by continually renewing your mind with what God says in His Word – and when God's Word controls your thinking, you will know what His good and pleasing and perfect will is. The more you read and mediate on God's Word, you will be able to sift right from wrong, truth from error, and stay on His path of blessing.

The second major truth we find in this passage is: **Rejecting God's plan of salvation results in being cast out.** One of the surprising parts of this story is the fact that God validates Sarah's request to have Ishmael sent away. God says to Abraham, "Do what Sarah tells you," and He gives the reason he must do so... "For it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, all the promises God made to Abraham will be fulfilled through Isaac, and anything that opposes God's way must be removed.

This brings up a natural question: Why is Isaac the son of promise and not Ishmael? This becomes an important theme in the book of Galatians where the Apostle Paul confronts Jews who believed they were saved simply by being descendants of Abraham. Paul says, "Not so," and contrasts Isaac and Ishmael to make his point. In Galatians 4:28-31 he says, **"Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.' Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."**

Paul says, "It's not enough to be a physical descendent of Abraham, you have to be a spiritual descendant of Abraham – you have to be born by the power of the Spirit." That is how Isaac was born. Abraham and Sarah were physically incapable of having children – the only way they could was by a divine miracle. God waited until Abraham and Sarah were way old – Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 – to provide the miracle of a child. It was 100% a work of God. Ishmael, on the other hand, was born according to the flesh – he was born by human power as Abraham and Sarah tried to help God fulfill His promise.

This distinction is vital to our understanding of salvation because in John 3:3 Jesus says, **"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** Jesus said this in response to a question by Nicodemus – a devout Jew who believed he was saved by being a physical descendant of Abraham. When he hears Jesus say he must be born again, he's confused. "Born again? How do you do that? You can't just go back in your mother's womb and be born a second time!" Jesus said, "I'm talking about a spiritual rebirth – where your sins are forgiven and your heart is transformed."

All of us, the Bible says, are born as sons and daughters of Adam and Eve – we're born with a sin nature and our sin alienates us from a holy God. But God in His love made a way for us to be reconciled to Him by sending His Son – the direct descendant of Abraham and the ultimate fulfillment of all of God's promises to Abraham - God sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin. When you trust in Jesus as your Savior from sin, you are born again.

Being born again, Jesus said, is like the wind – you can't see it, but you can see its effects – you can see it rip the roof off a barn. When you believe in Christ for salvation, you become a new creation and begin a lifetime of transformation. What's more, you become a child of God and a part of His heavenly family. So Paul says in Galatians, "Anyone who has been born again by the Spirit is like Isaac – you were not saved by human effort by God's grace through faith."

This explains why Ishmael is sent away – it's because he opposes God's promise of salvation which will come through Isaac. Instead of accepting Isaac as God's way, Ishmael mocks God's way – and because he is not willing to submit to God's way, he is cast out.

Because he was the son of Abraham, Ishmael received temporary blessings – God blessed him with many descendants – but because he opposed God’s plan of working through Isaac, he did not receive the eternal blessings of God’s covenant with Abraham. In the same way, unbelievers enjoy God’s common grace and goodness – rain, sunshine, medicine, etc. – but because they do not accept God’s plan of salvation through Christ, they will not enjoy the eternal grace and goodness of heaven.

Jesus talks about this very thing in Matthew 8:10-12 when He addresses Jewish people who did not accept Him as the way of salvation... “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Those who are born again through faith in Christ will inherit all the promises God made to Abraham and will sit as members of Abraham’s family at the feast in the coming kingdom. But those who did not trust Christ as their Savior will be cast out into everlasting darkness and torment. In our age of diversity, it’s common to hear people say that there are many ways to heaven, and regardless of what way you chose, we’ll all end up in heaven. But Jesus says otherwise – it’s His way or the highway. He's being straight up with us – there is only one way to the Father in heaven and that is to be born again by faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus said in John 6:37, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (ESV). That’s good news. The question is: Do you want to sit at the table with Abraham or do you want to risk being cast out of God’s presence forever?

You will never go wrong with God’s way. It is the right way, the best way, and the only way – even when you can’t understand His ways or the rest of world does not walk in His way – you can trust that His ways lead to blessing – both in this life and the life to come.