

Genesis 21:8-21 ⁸ The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.¹ ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. ¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

“What's in a Name? Ishmael”

What's in a name? One's name, particularly the first name, is important. There are those who say the name a person is given will shape their character throughout life. So, I thought I'd do a little research on our names and see what turns up. First, me; Randall is an English variant of Randolph which means wolf shield, a shield against wolves. Dana is a variant of the Hebrew name Daniel which means God is my judge. William comes from Wilhelm – a helmet for the will, protection. Mary and Marie come from Latin meaning star of the sea. Alex means defender or warrior. Peter comes from Greek and means rock. Nann is a variant of Ann which means grace. Arno is old German and means eagle-wolf. Merle comes from Gaelic meaning shining sea. Carolyn comes from Charles which means free man. Allan means precious. Doreen depending on the source means gift or brooding. Ted is short for Theodore and mean God's gift. Jackie ultimately roots in Jacob which means one who supplants. Michael means one who resembles God. Victoria means victory and has roots in God gives us victory. Zamina from Iranian could possibly mean soil or ground. Nolan means champion; Stephen, crown; and Stacey, resurrection. Doug means black river. Faith goes without saying; David, beloved; Helen, shining light; John, the Lord is gracious; Elizabeth, God is my oath; Gabe, God's able-bodied one; Laszlo, glorious rule; Richard, powerful leader; Russ, little red; Barb, foreign woman; and I'll end with Myrtle, an evergreen shrub that was sacred to the Greek goddess Venus, a symbol of love.

In the Bible and particularly in the Book of Genesis, peoples names are significant. Let me

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give you a few examples. *Adamah* is the Hebrew word for ground. It is a feminine noun. *Adam* is its masculine counterpart. *Adam* you know is the name of the first human in the Bible and God made him from the dust of the ground. *Adam* comes from *Adamah*. Eve is the anglicized version of the Hebrew word *chavah* which means living for she is the mother of all who are living. Their children were named Cain and Abel. The name Cain is rooted in the Hebrew word *qanah* which means to bring forth, to produce, to be productive. When Eve gave birth to Cain in a statement of great surprise she said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.” Abel, on the other hand, comes from the Hebrew word *hebel* which means vapor, or worthless, or vanity. Cain worked the land and produced food. Abel herded sheep. When Cain murdered Abel, Abel's namesake came to fruition. His life was made worthless. Abraham which means father of nations was originally named Abram, or great father. Sarah which means the Princess was originally named Sarai, my princess. God changed both of their names when he made the promise to Abraham. Their son Isaac is the anglicized version of *yitzchac* which means 'he laughs'. If you remember Sarah laughed when she overheard the messengers of God telling Abraham that she would bear him a child in her 80's. Getting closer to our text today, Hagar means to flee. Earlier in Genesis when Sarah learns that Hagar is pregnant by Abraham, Sarah becomes jealous and deals harshly with her, so Hagar flees into the wilderness.

And so we come to Ishmael. What's in his name? Ishmael means “God has heard”. In our passage here, Hagar left young Ishmael when the water ran out in the midst of their wanderings after being cast out by Abraham. She left him and she went a little ways away and began to call out rather self-interestedly, “Do not let me see the death of the child.” Then the angel of God came to her and told her that God had heard the crying out of the boy as opposed to her own. God heard the crying of Ishmael. This is something very spectacular when you consider how Ishmael is portrayed in Scripture and throughout history. He is not the child through whom God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. In fact he is the child of Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith. He is the outcome of Abraham and Sarah trying to make God's promise to Abraham come about by their own efforts. As chapter 16 of Genesis accounts Sarah does not trust the word of God that she will have a child in her old age. So she sends her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to Abraham so that the girl could bear a child for Sarah. When Hagar flees she heads back to Egypt, but the angel of the LORD stops her and sends her back telling her to name the child Ishmael because God has heard of her misery. The angel also described to her a bit of what Ishmael's character would be. “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.” Throughout history, the Israelites have been quite prejudiced against the Ishmaelites. In the Bible, the Ishmaelites are regarded as just another group of Canaanites and they bear the odious burden of being the ones who carried Joseph away to Egypt to sell him into slavery to Pharaoh. This prejudice is even evident here in chapter 21 where the son of Hagar is never addressed by name. He is just “the boy.” This prejudice and hostility continues even to today. The Arab peoples trace their lineage back to Ishmael and Islam goes as far as to say that God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled through Ishmael rather than Isaac. There is a lesson to be learned here that even with Ishmael and the Ishmaelites being portrayed so negatively and with such prejudice, his name is still Ishmael, God hears, and God does indeed hear his crying, his misery and harkens to it. God still blesses Ishmael and makes him to be a great nation. Yet, that is only half of the promise. Ishmael did not get the land nor was it through Ishmael that salvation would come. Ishmael stands as a corrective to all those religious people that proudly say, “We are God's

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people and you are not. God hears us and not you. We are the holy and you are the heathen. God is on our side, not yours. God will not hear and bless you because you are not one of us.” God hears the crying of the outcast. He sees the misery of those who have to flee because of injustice and even if they aren't of the “right religion” God still hears them and will and does act to bring them justice. Ishmael reminds us that God still gives ear to those who are wild donkeys of human beings and who mock the promise and faithfulness of God to his people. Ishmael reminds us that there is lack of faith and cruelty even among God's people and that God will look out after the good of those to whom we have been wicked. God help us.

But, having said that, the deepest message in Ishmael and the meaning of his name is that no matter how cut off from God we may feel God still hears our crying. It doesn't matter if you think you have not lived a life worthy enough to have God hear and answer your prayers. He still hears your cries and he still answers with blessing. It doesn't matter if you have lived a life of mocking God and the people of God or even a life of unbelief. God still hears your cries and will answer with blessing. The steadfast love of God and his faithfulness to unfaithful humanity, to us, truly is overwhelming. When we are in the midst of the deepest and most hurtful dung life can through at us, the sort of things that make us say with utter sincerity that there is no God or if there is then he or she or it is utterly arbitrary and unloving, even in those moments when we are shaking our fist towards heaven and telling God to get away because he has seemed so utterly and undeservedly unfaithful, even then God still hears us and works to bless us. Even when life has thrown us dung and our response was to join in with the dung beetles, God still hears the sound of those deep cries within us that we do our best to smother. He hears them and causes them to well forth so that we can know that we are crying and in knowing that we are crying out to God we can know that he hears and answers. Friends, it does not matter how unworthy you may think yourself to be, God hears you. Amen.