

Russell Kelfer

Ismael and the All Things of Life

707-B

Series: God's Living Legends (Part 1)



DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.
INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

It seems to always come back to this: In virtually every study we undertake in God's word, sooner or later we come to a Romans 8:28 story. Sooner or later it comes back to the sovereignty of God and the principles of God's wonderful plan to use the "all things of life" for our good and for His glory.

We are there in this study. We have come to the place in Abram's life where suddenly everything seems to go wrong. Everything that is, but the sovereign plan of a wonderful God who takes even our mistakes and wrong choices and weaves them into the tapestry of His plan.

It is one thing to understand that God knits us together in our mother's womb and that He schedules every day of our lives even before we are born. It is difficult but we can somehow grasp that. It is likewise reasonable for us to understand that the perils of injustice that fall upon us can and will be used by a just God for our good. The hardest thing, however, for most of us to come to grips with is that *God can even use our stupid mistakes; our deliberate wrong choices; our acts of impulse that defy His absolutes*, to bring about a testimony of His grace. They aren't a part of His perfect plan; but they are a part of His incredible sovereign response that takes those hideous threads of disobedience and by surrounding them with the colors of His grace and love, make them the centerpiece of a whole new pattern, a pattern, which when seen from the distance of time, actually carves out a lifelike photograph of God Himself.

Such is the case in today's story. We have seemingly nearly deified Father Abram. Such a godly man was he compared to his nephew, Lot, and such a man of promise because of God's promises to him, that we cannot help but stand in awe that such a man of faith actually lived. But God wants us to be sure to understand that this spiritual giant was a man of like passions such as we are. When the heat was on and he reacted rather than responded, his mistakes had a far-reaching impact on the

history of man.

But God, in eternity past, knew about those wrong choices. He knew of those impulsive and weak decisions. And so, in His mercy and love, He redesigned the whole of history before it happened so that *even those failures would bring Him glory and ultimately bring in the kingdom*. We need to be reminded of that miracle almost daily, lest we limit the future by our mistakes and limit God by our frailties. Our God is sovereign. Oh, beloved, shout it! And all things *really do work together for good*.

With this principle as a backdrop, we will raise the curtain of history on another one of God's living legends. His name is Ishmael and the setting is familiar because the cast of characters is simply a continuation of the last lesson in this series about Lot. The two key figures are still Abram and Sarai. The time frame is also familiar. The story takes place just before and just after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The background of Ishmael's life will be one of rejection: the reality of it, the running from it and the reaping through it the "all things of life". As we mentioned, we are going to see a less glamorous side of Abram and Sarai in this lesson. We will begin in Genesis 16:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.

So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.

And He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.

And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the Lord judge between you and me." (Genesis 16:1-5 NAS)

It sounds like Eve, doesn't it? It's not my fault!

But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

(Genesis 16:6 NAS)

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

Now if you were ever tempted to self-pity that you were an unwanted child, you need to read this story very carefully. Abram and Sarai had been promised a child by God. However, Sarai's patience had run dry; and instead of waiting on God to keep His Word, they devised a plan to help Him out. What a dangerous thing that is for believers to do. Surely that is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he said, "For ye have need of patience that after you have done the will of God you might receive the promise." Oh, the times that you and I thwart the Will of God because we will not wait on the timing of God.

How slowly God moves. In today's modern society, where speed is synonymous with success, we cannot seem to fathom the slow and awkward ways of our God. He's not in a hurry. Not ever. He owns the clock. Should He choose, He can make the sun stand still. All of nature responds to His beck and call.

And God moves slowly for several reasons:

- 1- It creates dependence.
- 2- It develops faith.
- 3- It develops patience.
- 4- It allows the fruitlessness of man's self-sufficiency to run its course until his strength has been turned to weakness, thus allowing God's strength to shine like the sun.
- 5- It trains the focus of the eyes of man on a different perspective of life. It takes all that the flesh can do and brings it to nothing.

Don't ever confuse God's slowness with inadequacy. It is quite the opposite. He moves slowly because of His incredible strength. God delights in His children when the heavens are silent and still they wait patiently for Him to speak. Such was not the case with Abram.

Abram listened to Sarai. Now he *should* listen to her, but the word here means more than listen; it means "he gave in to her". He yielded to pressure like Adam did with Eve. He *knew* better. He had walked with God. He knew the mind of God. He knew the plan of God concerning a son. But, oh, how plausible the works of the flesh sound in moments of weakness. So Abram went into Hagar and she conceived. This was not the perfect will of God.

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

Enter Plan B and the “all things of life”.

This is the plan where God takes our mistakes, our impulsive acts, our weak judgments, and weaves them so into the tapestry of His plan until they actually appear to enhance its beauty. The works of the flesh do produce the fruits of the flesh, and this child conceived by unbelief now becomes the object of jealousy, contention, and bitterness. God ultimately even uses this for His glory. Sarai had wanted a child, but she didn't want *this* one, even though this one was the product of her own conniving. What a commentary on human nature. And what a commentary, as well, that once God gives us what we ask for and it's not what we want, we blame either Him or someone else.

Hagar was surely the innocent party. This child was not her idea. Yet she was the one who had to bear the child physically and ultimately bear the emotional rejection of both her mistress and the child's father. So Hagar hated Sarai, and she determined to put the heat on. Now Abram, once again the authority with the power to bring reconciliation, meekly refuses to stand up to his wife. His simple response may sound familiar. “Whatever you want to do, Dear, it's fine with me.” So Sarai makes life miserable for Hagar, and Hagar heads for the hills.

Now if you were to tune in on afternoon television in Sodom about this time, you would have probably seen a plot about like this. It might have been on a program called “*As the World Burns*”. Enter little Ishmael. He hasn't even come into the world yet and already he bears the distinction of being one of the world's most unwanted babies. Question. What chance does a child like that have in this world? Answer. A real good chance because God is weaving into Ishmael's life just enough hurt to create the building blocks in his life that he needs to survive. And He is creating a message in his life that is written just for him. Here we have the reality of the rejection.

Now look at Hagar running from that rejection:

Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.

(Genesis 16:7 NAS)

Look at the paradox of the Christian who is running from his circumstances. She is like Elijah, filled with self-pity. She is acting as though she was doing God a favor by running from the

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

very thing God is allowing to overtake her. But the angel of the Lord found her. (He never lost her.) He just waited for her to slow down long enough to listen. If you listen carefully, you will hear God's perpetual question to runaways. And if you are running from someone or something, thinking that you can outrun God's plan.

And He said, "Hagar, Sarah's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" (Genesis 16:8a)

What incredible questions God asks. "Where have you come from and where are you going?" Better translated, it might say, "Hagar, what in the world are you running from?"

Now the angel addresses Hagar by name as God promises to do to us in John 10. He also addresses her by ownership because ownership was a very important part of what He was about to do. He said, "Hagar, you are Sarah's maid, aren't you?" Now the first question was easy enough. "Where have you come from?" Hagar answered very quickly, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress, Sarah." It sounds a little like Elijah when he was fleeing from the presence of Jezebel. That was an easy question to answer. But, she had no answer to the second question. Hagar didn't know where she was going. Beloved, when you don't have a God-sent set of instructions as to where you are going, be careful before you run from the pressures you are under. God *may* catch up with you along the way as He did Hagar and give you the same instructions He gave her.

Then the angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority." (Genesis 16:9)

There is God's counsel to runaways who are outside of His will. "Go back home and submit to the last authority I placed you under." It is as if He is saying, "Hagar, I know about all the pressure. I know about all the problems. I know about all the prejudices. I know about all the persecution. It is part of My plan for your life. When I am ready Hagar, not only will I let you go, I will send you on your way. But for now, go home and submit." The angel of God does not send her home with no hope. He gives her a series of promises. Six of these promises are in this passage. Four more will be found in the next passage. Here are the first six promises.

1- I will multiply your descendants so that they will be so

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

many you will not be able to count them. Now that doesn't sound like such a strange promise until you consider He is talking to an insignificant servant girl with no husband.

2- You are with child. She knew this already. He said, "You shall bear a son." Now with today's modern medical technology, we can tell ahead of time whether or not it is going to be a boy or a girl. But guess what? God has been doing that for eternity. He told her she was going to have a boy.

3- You shall call his name, Ishmael, meaning "one that God hears" because the Lord has heard and given heed to your affliction. Can you imagine the load that must have taken off of this frightened woman? God knows about your son, Hagar, and *He has already named him.*

4- He will be a wild donkey of a man. At first this would seem frightening, but in Hagar's day this was actually a compliment. The wild donkey was a hunter's delight. It was a delicacy to eat. For a man to be called that meant that he lived with a rare kind of freedom and power and cunning.

5- His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him. He will be a warrior, but he will be a good one.

6- He will live to the east of his brothers. Oh, the accuracy of the prophecies of Scripture. She was told that Ishmael would be separated from his brothers and live to the east of them. His descendants still do.

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "Thou art a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?" (Genesis 16:13 NAS)

She had seen and heard the angel of the Lord. She had talked with God and lived to tell of it. So in verse 14 she named that well. It became her altar where she drove a stake in the ground and knew that God was not going to forsake her. Then Scripture records:

So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him. (Genesis 16:15,16 NAS)

Abe already had reservations at the Mamre Nursing Home. He had 86 years behind him, but now he had the son God had

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

promised him. Good thing. Time was running out. Wrong. It wasn't the son God had promised him; it was the son he had connived to produce because he and Sarai didn't believe God was going to come through. So the first two prophecies were fulfilled. Hagar had a boy and she called him Ishmael. Now I don't know what her pregnancy must have been like; but I can guarantee you, it wasn't fun. She had to go back home and submit herself to a woman she hated (who also despised her and the child she was carrying). Meanwhile, she had to serve the father of the child who had, in deference to his own wife, treated her with contempt, or disregard at best. It sounds like the plot for a sordid television script. Secular writers have no monopoly on the realities of the flesh. God's Word paints it just as clearly.

In chapter 17, God appears to Abram as Abram for the last time. The reason is, God was going to change his name and renew the promise of a son. It reads like this:

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.

Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

(Genesis 17:1-9)

Oh, how merciful God is. Abe and Sarai had fumbled the ball on the one-yard line. They had defied God's incredible plan and

short-circuited God's marvelous miracle by refusing to wait for God to act. Had we been God, we'd have said, "Tough luck, Abe, you had your chance." But God's ways are higher and God's heart is bigger than ours. Much bigger. God had made a promise. He knew long before He made that promise what a mess Abram would make of things. Now here is this 99 year-old saint who has messed up big time, and God appears to him and simply repeats the very promise He had made at the beginning. God's word doesn't change just because we reject it or ignore it. That's because God doesn't change.

What did change at this juncture were two names. Isn't that incredible? At the age of 99, God was going to change Abe's name. He already had all his printed checks. His stationery was engraved with his old name. Even his code name on the internet must have been in concrete. And what's wrong with Abram anyhow? Didn't God give him that name through his mother? What's in a name anyhow?

Do you know what your name means? You do know God gave it to you, don't you? God called you by that name. You may say, "Well, my parents weren't Christians so I don't think that God had anything to do with it." Not true. God placed in your parents' hearts the names that would depict the very character He wanted to create in you. Study the meaning of your name. If your name is Alfred, it means counselor. Alicia means truthful. Alan means cheerful. Barry means courageous. Carl means strong. Carolyn means joyful. Dolores means compassionate. Jerry means one appointed by God. Jill means a youthful heart. Joseph means increasing in faithfulness. Karen and Kathy and Kay mean pure. Monica means woman of wisdom. Norma means example of godliness. Randy means loyal. Sharon means princess. Stephen means crown. Every name has a distinct meaning. You ought to know the meaning of your name and your family's name. You may say, "I don't magnify that quality." You may even appear to be the exact opposite of the quality. Remember that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. That name is what God wants you to become. The "all things of life" are the sandpaper of life to get you there. Study what your name means.

A man or woman's name represents what God wants them to become. And now, having been on Medicare for 34 years, Abe is told to send his card back to the social security office and get one

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

that said “Abraham”. Abraham means “father of many nations”. God’s clock had run its course. The seemingly everlastingly slow sand in the hourglass of eternity had finally fallen, a drop at a time, into the hands of sovereignty, and God was ready to act. It would *have* to be a miracle now. No one but God could pull this off. Abe and Sarah were skeptical. Don’t be too hard on them. No one in the maternity room at Mamre General Hospital was expecting her to come wheeling in great with child.

In fact, God wasn’t through changing names. He turned to Abraham and said:

And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.

And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.

Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?

And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!

And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.
(Genesis 17:15-19)

So Sarai gets a new name, a name significant in the light of what God wanted do through her life once there was no way she could share the glory with Him. He changed her name to Sarah. Their names did not reflect major changes structurally, for God had named them thus in eternity past to prepare the way. But they represented major changes spiritually.

Abraham heard that God was still going to bless them with seed as numerous as the sand on the seashore. “Oh, I see, God,” he exclaimed. (after he finished laughing) “You’re going to populate the world through Ishmael.” He got the message and missed the point. Ishmael represented what God and Abraham *could do together*. Isaac would represent what God alone could do. Then came the “all things” verse. They had been disobedient, caused unnecessary confusion, bitterness, and despair to both Hagar and Ishmael. But God was going to use even that. He adds in verse 20:

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.
(Genesis 17:20)

Oh, the miracle of the sovereignty of God. Ishmael would yet fulfill the plan of God. His descendants would cause strife, enmity, suffering, and war. But God had a plan for Ishmael. He was not God's choice; he was Abraham and Sarah's bad decision. But God knew that. And God had a plan. *He always does.* And He has a plan for your life that includes that wrong choice, that gross mistake, that grievous trauma you may have even brought on yourself. His plan is called the "all things of life".

Now let the scene shift to Genesis 21. In this interlude we find the angel's visit to Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham has his unbelievable encounter with Abimelech, and Sarah is supernaturally delivered. Talk about a stupid decision. He panicked, and tried to pawn his wife off as his sister to save his own life. In Genesis 21:1-7 we read about the birth of the promised son, Isaac. In verse 8, we find as was the custom in those days, on the day in which the child was weaned from his mother, they had a feast. It was supposed to be a happy occasion. Now somehow I can picture in this case, here was Abraham and Sarah rolling along in their wheelchairs with this stroller between them. But it was a happy day for the old couple, marred by one incident which we read about in verse 9.

Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking.
(Genesis 21:9 NAS)

The word "mocking" here literally means ridiculing or making fun of. Ishmael was now 14 years old and apparently he had developed the personality of one who was insecure and rejected. He was aggressive and jealous over the attention shown his favored half-brother. He manifested his insecurity with ridicule. Poor Sarah couldn't handle it. In verse 10 Sarah gives Abraham another ultimatum. She tells him "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son, Isaac." Sarah with her short memory and her shorter temper can't even call Hagar by name, but simply calls her *this maid*. She then demands that Abraham send them away. In verse 11, broken-hearted Abraham is distressed greatly by the matter because of his son. In verses 12 and 13 God appears to Abraham and tells him not to worry, that He wants Abraham to do what

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

his wife says. God explains that the line of the Messiah must be separated from the line of Ishmael. God promised Abraham that *He* would take care of Ishmael. What a lesson we can learn from that one statement.

In verse 14 we see one of the saddest sights in all of Scripture. It begins with Abraham rising early in the morning. He always rose early in the morning, but the scene is different here because Abraham is at the edge of the village. He has Hagar and his 14 year-old son that he had waited more than 80 years for. He takes a loaf of bread and a skin full of water, sets it on Hagar's shoulder, points them toward the wilderness, and says good-bye.

...and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

And the water in the skin was used up, and she left the boy under one of the bushes.

Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, "Do not let me see the boy die." And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept.

And God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is."
(Genesis 21:14b-17 NAS)

It is interesting to take note here that Hagar was crying, but it was *the lad's voice* that God heard. God determined that Ishmael would be a man of prayer and God heard his every whimper. Verse 18:

Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand; for I will make a great nation of him.

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink.

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

And he lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.
(Genesis 21:19-21 NAS)

What a beautiful picture of the grace of God in the "all things of life." Here is an unwanted child thrown out of his father's house left to die in the wilderness. But God had a plan for him. God was to make of him a leader, one who was independent

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

and self-sufficient. He had a message to write to the whole world through Ishmael. All of God's promises to Ishmael came true. He became the father of 12 princes. He settled east of his brethren. He became a man of war and a leader of men. His descendants are major participants in the drama of life even today. Paul uses his life in Galatians 4:21-31 as an allegory to explain the difference of living under the law and under grace.

As we continue these lessons about God's living legends, you might want to play this game with me and write a tombstone title for each one of those in this study. I guess if we were to do that up to this lesson they might go something like this:

HERE LIES

Here lies Adam, we all need pardon
For this lazy rascal didn't tend to his garden.

Here lies Cain, what a price to pay,
He just wouldn't come to God, God's way.

Here lies Noah, builder of a boat,
The man whose faithfulness kept him afloat.

Here lies Abe, 'neath this sod,
He always rose early to be with God.

Here lies Lot, as his life unfurled,
one weakness appeared, he loved the world.

These are jokes, of course, but for the next lesson, you might write one for Ishmael's tombstone. But if we were to really find a life message for them in a more serious vein, they might read more like this:

- 1- For Adam it would be from Romans 6:23a,
For the wages of sin is death:
- 2- For Cain it would be in Proverbs 16:25,
There is a way that seemeth right to a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.
- 3- For Noah it would be II Chronicles 16:9,
The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show Himself strong on behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards Him.
- 4- For Lot it would be found in I John 2:15,

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world, for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life is not of the Father, but is of the world and the world passes away and the lust thereof, but he that does the will of God abideth forever.

5- For Ishmael it would be Romans 8:28,

All things work together for good to them that love Him and are called according to His purpose.

God wants us to identify with Ishmael's life as we confront and look back at the circumstances of our own lives. That way, we know we are not alone. We will deal with it in more detail when we get to Joseph. But you may say, "But you don't know the scars in my life. How can God use such things for His glory? My life message is marred." I may ask you what kind of things you are talking about. You may respond, "Well I was deserted as a child." My answer is, "What about Ishmael? What about Moses?" You may say, "But I have been unfaithful morally; can God still use me?" What about David? You may say, "But my childhood was different, I was raised with no father." What about Ishmael? You may say, "My dad wasn't a believer." Look at Timothy. You say, "My family played favorites." What about Joseph? You say, "But I was involved in a serious crime." What about Moses? What about Paul? You say, "But I was born late in my parents' lives." Later than Isaac? You say, "But you don't know, I have denied the Lord." Like Peter? "But God can't use me, I'm too short." Shorter than Zaccheus?

I do not believe there is a negative experience that God has not dealt with in the Word of God for His glory. It is all a part of the "all things of life." Even if you were unwanted and unloved and unappreciated, God, through that rejection, created the raw material for sensitivity, creativity, and determination. Even if you are the victim of divorce, emotional problems, spiritual problems, or physical problems, even if there is in your background deep moral impurity, attempted suicide, serious drug use, the question is not, "Can any good come out of such experiences?" The question is, "Have you submitted these experiences to the Master to work through them to develop the character of God in your life, thus giving you the capacity to minister to those who are hurting because they are passing through the same troubled waters?" You have something they need. You have been there. It was not God's design, perhaps, but since you have that

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

experience, oh, how He wants to use you to lift up others.

That is what Ishmael's life story was all about. He was the product of a broken home. He experienced jealousy, rejection, persecution, loneliness, even homelessness and starvation. These are experiences that normally produce a negative self-image, a bitter spirit, and rebellion. But God was the key ingredient that took the same hurts and turned them into assertiveness, resourcefulness, determination and leadership. That is the way God does it. He takes the negative traits that the pressures of life create in us and, through the Holy Spirit, turns them into positive qualities. He takes an over-sentimental spirit and creates compassion. He takes an overbearing spirit and creates confidence. He takes a stingy spirit and creates a frugal life that is able to conserve resources. He takes an extravagant spirit and creates generosity. He takes an insensitive spirit and creates objectivity. He takes an indifferent spirit and develops patience. Those "all things of life" work together to transform our lives.

Now what about your life? Have you ever acknowledged how God is trying to say something through your life that He can say through no one else? How the very things, the very people, and the very experiences that you resent the most in your past or in your life are His key building blocks?

No one else in the world has your message. It is a result of everything that has happened to you up until now, *even and especially those things which are the result of choices you made that, in retrospect, were choices you never should have made.* They and all the other "all things" are working together to create in you a message and a ministry no one else has. These are some of the forces that shape the message of your life. God uses each one as a building block. While He uses our blessings and our talents and our successes to shape our destiny, He uses our failures, our weakness and our traumas to shape our character. Thus He develops the whole man. Only God can turn weakness into strength. Only God can turn sorrow into substance. But then only God can give life any meaning at all.

That is the message of Ishmael: that God is the God of the "all things of life" and that He never, ever, makes a mistake. As you and I walk through life and make choices, some of those choices will break His precious heart. He will be grieved. There will be sowing and reaping. There will even be, on occasion, divine

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

discipline. But like Abraham and like Sarah and like Hagar and, yes, like Ishmael, *even those bad choices can become putty in the hands of a sovereign God*. They can, in fact, become the very clay God uses to fashion your testimony as He takes the ingredients from which failure is made and by adding one final ingredient, *grace*, He actually turns that which is a disaster in the making into spiritual blessings.

The key is in our recognizing His sovereignty along the way. Perhaps in your life, there have been some bad choices. Perhaps along the way, the bad choices others made have seriously affected you. You have two choices: You can 1) withdraw and internalize your bitterness and beat yourself for your mistakes or weep over your grief and anger over others' mistakes and how they affected you, or 2) you can begin to sing praises to a God who forgives, who cleanses, who overcomes, and who overtakes the heart of His children with unbridled love. You can begin to sing Romans 8:28 into your heart until those very issues you refused to accept become stepping stones to accepting and expressing the grace of God. Why not get alone with God today and thank Him that, though you may have made some mistakes, *He never has*. And thank Him that nothing that has ever happened to you can overtake His precious love. You may, like Ishmael, think you are dying of thirst in the wilderness. But beloved, God has an angel waiting to come and fill your cup anew and send you back into the race of life, renewed and restored.

As you do this, place yourself in the potter's hands. Ask Him to complete the message of your life in whatever way He chooses, because after all, it is His story. I believe that as you do that you will stand on the threshold of a whole new horizon of freedom in Jesus Christ. After all, He is the author of your life story, and He, after all, has already written a happy ending.

Questions for further discussion and application

1- In Genesis 16:1 we read that Sarai had borne Abram no children. God had made an incredible promise to Abram and Sarai. Humanly speaking, it appeared that there was no way this promise could be fulfilled. Have you ever had a promise from God that He seemed not to be answering? Have you ever been tempted to *help God out*? Why is this so dangerous?

2- Why does God so often wait so long to answer? When the heavens are silent and God seems not to be answering, what ought we to do? What do we do?

3- Is there something in your life right now that you are waiting on God for, and yet heaven seems to be shut up? Is there someone you have been praying over for years and yet nothing seems to be happening? Is there a struggle going on in your marriage or in your finances that seems to never end and God seems silent? Why not get alone with God this week and thank Him that He is taking so long. Thank Him that He is teaching you dependence, that He is teaching you faith, that He is developing patience. Thank Him that He is allowing your sufficiency to run its course until there is nothing left but Him. Ask Him to place in your spirit a quiet rest that while the heavens are silent, God is doing His greatest work of all.

4- When pressure mounts, do you tend to run away? Do you tend to change jobs, change churches, change relationships, rather than stay under authority and allow God to work? Memorize Gen 16:9 and insert your name. Ask God to bring it to your remembrance when you are tempted to flee the circumstances.

5- Seek to find the meaning of your name. Ask God to bring to fruition in your life the qualities that name implies.

6- If God could bring Isaac into the world when Abraham was 99, do you think He can still bring to pass the miracle for which you pray? Go to Him and thank Him that “nothing is too hard for thee”.

7- Hagar had given Ishmael up for dead. There was no hope. Then the angel came. Have you ever totally given your children or your mate to God? Do that this week. Sign the title back over to the one who owns them.

Ishmael and the All Things of Life

8- Study Romans 8:28 carefully this week. Look up the meaning of each word. Memorize it. Be prepared to explain what each phrase means and how it can personally be applied to your life. Find at least four people in Scripture whose life messages typify this passage.

dtm DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778
www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org • © Russell Kelfer

(03.05.15)