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Old Testament

Genesis 21:8-21

Context: Today's scripture follows the long-awaited birth of Isaac. What begins as a family celebration quickly becomes a story of jealousy, fear, and separation. Yet even in the wilderness, where Hagar and Ishmael seem abandoned, God hears their cries and provides hope for the future.

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL SENT AWAY

The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.

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."

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

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.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 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. 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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

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.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

OVERVIEW

Genesis 21:8–21 recounts the expulsion of Hagar and her son Ishmael from Abraham's household after Isaac is weaned. Sarah sees Ishmael, Abraham's older son through Hagar, and fears he may share in Isaac's inheritance. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Though distressed, Abraham follows God's instruction.

Sent into the wilderness, Hagar and Ishmael run out of water and face death. At their lowest moment, God hears the boy's cries, reassures Hagar, reveals a well of water, and promises that Ishmael will become a great nation. The story is both painful and hopeful. Human beings create division, but God remains present even with those who have been cast aside.



BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before: Genesis 21:1–7

The preceding passage celebrates the **miraculous birth of Isaac**. After decades of waiting, God fulfills the promise made to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah laughs with joy, recalling the laughter of disbelief she once expressed when first hearing the promise. The birth of Isaac creates the central tension of today's story. Once there is a legitimate heir, questions about inheritance and family status become unavoidable.

Today's Passage: Genesis 21:8–21

Three major movements occur:

1. **Sarah's Demand (vv. 8–10)**
 - a. Sarah sees Ishmael and becomes concerned.
 - b. She demands Hagar and Ishmael be expelled.
2. **Abraham's Distress and God's Guidance (vv. 11–14)**
 - a. Abraham loves Ishmael and is troubled.
 - b. God reassures Abraham that both Isaac and Ishmael have a future.
3. **God's Care in the Wilderness (vv. 15–21)**
 - a. Hagar and Ishmael face death.
 - b. God hears their cries.
 - c. Water is provided.
 - d. Ishmael survives and prospers.

Immediately After: Genesis 21:22–34

The next section shifts to Abraham's treaty with Abimelech.

The contrast is striking:

- Hagar searches desperately for water.
- Abraham later negotiates ownership rights to a well.

The placement reminds readers that survival, land, and water were among the most precious resources in the ancient world.

Broader Narrative in Genesis

Genesis repeatedly tells stories about:

- Siblings in conflict
- Inheritance disputes
- Favoritism
- Exile and return
- God's faithfulness despite human failure

Examples include:

- Cain and Abel
- Isaac and Ishmael
- Jacob and Esau
- Joseph and his brothers



Genesis consistently shows flawed people making flawed decisions while God continues working through imperfect situations.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Family Structures

In the ancient Near East, wealthy households commonly included:

- Multiple wives
- Concubines
- Servants
- Children of varying status

Inheritance rights could become highly contested. Sarah's concern would have been understandable within that culture. She feared that Ishmael, the older son, might challenge Isaac's position.

Hagar's Position

Hagar occupies a unique social category:

- Female
- Foreigner (Egyptian)
- Servant
- Single mother
- Socially powerless

In many ways, she represents one of the most vulnerable figures in Genesis.

Modern scholars often note that God's attention toward Hagar is remarkable because ancient literature rarely centered the experiences of marginalized women.

Water and Wilderness

The wilderness of Beersheba was harsh and unforgiving.

Running out of water was a genuine life-or-death crisis.

To ancient listeners, Hagar's situation would not have seemed merely inconvenient—it would have appeared hopeless.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Traditional Biblical Timeline

Event	Approximate Date
Abraham leaves Haran	c. 2000–1900 BC
Promise to Abraham	c. 2000–1900 BC
Birth of Ishmael	c. 1880 BC
Birth of Isaac	c. 1865 BC
Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael	c. 1863 BC

These dates are approximate and debated.



Composition of Genesis

Most scholars believe Genesis reached its final form between: 6th–5th centuries BC (while preserving much older traditions and oral histories.)

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language

Genesis was written primarily in Biblical Hebrew. Several Hebrew terms carry deeper meaning than English translations easily capture.

“Cast Out”

Often translated:

- Drive away
- Expel

The word is strong and forceful. It is the same root used elsewhere for driving people from land or territory. Sarah is not merely asking for separation; she is demanding removal.

“God Heard”

Means:

- Hear
- Listen
- Pay attention
- Respond

This is more than hearing a sound. God actively notices suffering and responds.

Ishmael’s Name

Meaning: “God hears.”

This becomes the theological center of the story. The boy whose name means “God hears” survives because God hears him.

Translation History

- Hebrew manuscripts (1000–500 BC traditions)
- Septuagint Greek translation (3rd–2nd century BC)
- Latin Vulgate (4th century AD)
- Wycliffe (1380s)
- Tyndale (1520s–1530s)
- King James Version (1611)
- RSV (1952)
- NRSV (1989)
- NRSVue (2021)

Modern translations increasingly emphasize Hagar’s humanity and emotional experience.



SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Many contemporary scholars see this story as speaking to experiences of exclusion and survival.

Hagar represents those pushed to society's edges.

The wilderness symbolizes moments when life falls apart:

- Job loss
- Illness
- Divorce
- Grief
- Financial hardship
- Rejection

The well represents unexpected grace.

The story suggests that God's care often appears not before the crisis, but within it.

Modern-Day Context

Many people feel pushed aside:

- Aging workers
- Single parents
- Immigrants
- Refugees
- The poor
- Those who feel forgotten

Genesis 21 asks: **Who are today's Hagars and Ishmaels?**

And perhaps more importantly: **Do we notice them?**

Grant County Context

This passage can resonate strongly in Grant County.

Many families have experienced:

- Factory closures
- Economic transitions
- Addiction crises
- Family fractures
- Financial uncertainty

Sometimes people feel left behind while others move ahead.

The story reminds us that God does not only stand with those who are successful, secure, or powerful. God is also present with those who feel abandoned, overlooked, or forgotten.

In a farming community, the image of discovering water in a dry place carries particular power. Life depends on resources that cannot always be controlled, and survival often depends on help beyond ourselves.



HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

This scripture encourages us to:

1. Notice the Forgotten
 - a. The people most easily overlooked are often the people God notices first.
2. Avoid Creating Unnecessary Exclusion
 - a. While boundaries are sometimes necessary, we should examine whether fear or self-protection is causing us to push others away.
3. Trust God in Wilderness Seasons
 - b. Most people eventually experience a "wilderness" period.
 - c. The story reminds us that despair is rarely the end of the story.
4. Listen Like God Listens
 - a. God hears Ishmael.
 - b. Followers of God should become people who hear others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Was Sarah correct?*
2. *Why was Abraham distressed?*
3. *Why does God save Ishmael?*
4. *What is the central message?*

COMMENTS

This is one of those passages that can surprise people. At first glance, it feels like a story about family drama and inheritance rights. But once you sit with it for a while, it becomes a story about who gets seen, who gets heard, and whether God's promises are big enough for people outside our preferred circle.

Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 form a fascinating pair. In both stories:

- Hagar is sent away.
- She ends up in the wilderness.
- An angel or messenger of God appears.
- God makes a promise about Ishmael.
- Water becomes central to survival.

It's almost as if Genesis wants to make absolutely sure readers understand that Ishmael was not forgotten. Isaac is the child of the covenant promise, but Ishmael is still a child of God's concern.

Isn't this where Islam starts?

Historically, yes, Islam traces its ancestry through Ishmael and Abraham.

Biblically, however, Genesis is less interested in founding Islam than in showing that God's blessing extends beyond a single family line.



Gospel

Matthew 6:25-34

Context: In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches His followers not to let worry become their master, but to trust God's care and seek God's kingdom first.

DO NOT WORRY

"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

"Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

"And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

"But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

"Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the gentiles who seek all these things, and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

"So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

OVERVIEW

Matthew 6:25–34 is one of Jesus' most comforting — and most challenging — teachings.

Jesus says: "Do not worry about your life..."

But He is **not** saying:

"Do not care."

"Do not plan."

"Do not work."

"Do not grieve."

"Do not feel anxious."

He is warning against a kind of worry that takes over the soul — the kind that makes us believe everything depends entirely on us. Jesus points to birds and lilies, not because life is easy for birds and flowers, but because creation itself bears witness to God's care. The point is not that nothing bad ever happens. The point is that fear should not be the foundation of our lives.

This passage asks a deep question:

Will we live as if scarcity is the final truth, or as if God's care is deeper than our fear?



BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before: Matthew 6:19–24

Right before this passage, Jesus teaches about treasures, eyes, and masters.

He says: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...”

Then: “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

So, when Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry,” the “therefore” matters.

He is connecting worry to misplaced trust.

The issue is not money itself. The issue is when money, security, status, possessions, or control become the thing we trust most.

Jesus is saying:

When our treasure is in the wrong place, our worry will be in the wrong place too.

This Passage: Matthew 6:25–34

Jesus uses three examples:

1. **Birds of the air** — they do not sow or reap, yet God feeds them.
2. **Lilies of the field** — they do not labor or spin, yet they are clothed with beauty.
3. **Tomorrow** — it has trouble of its own, so do not borrow tomorrow’s fear today.

This is not a call to laziness. Birds still search for food. Flowers still grow from soil, rain, and sun.

Jesus is teaching dependence, not passivity.

Immediately After: Matthew 7:1–6

After this, Jesus says:

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”

That is interesting. Worry and judgment often live close together. When we are anxious, we may become more controlling. When we are afraid, we may become more critical. When we feel insecure, we may compare ourselves with others. So, Jesus moves from worry to judgment because both can come from a heart trying to control what only God can hold.

Broader Context in Matthew

Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s story — a new Moses, teaching from a mountain, forming a people who live by God’s kingdom values.

The Sermon on the Mount is not just private advice. It is a vision of a different way to live.

Matthew’s Gospel repeatedly asks: **What does life look like when God is truly king?**

In this passage, the answer is: A kingdom-shaped life is not ruled by fear, status, or scarcity, but by trust, mercy, and faithful action.



HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Jesus spoke these words in first-century Galilee, under Roman occupation. Most people were not wealthy. Many lived close to subsistence. Food, clothing, taxes, debt, crop failure, sickness, and political instability were daily realities.

So, when Jesus says, “Do not worry about what you will eat or drink or wear,” He is not speaking to people with overstuffed closets and full pantries. He is speaking to people who may have genuinely wondered where tomorrow’s bread would come from.

Jesus is not offering shallow comfort. He is speaking directly into economic vulnerability.

The Roman Empire created social pressure through taxation, land control, military presence, and class hierarchy. Many peasants lost land through debt. Wealth and honor were concentrated among elites.

So, this teaching has a quiet political edge. Jesus is saying that Rome, wealth, and social status do not define reality. God does.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Approximate timeline:

- **Abraham and Sarah:** traditionally placed around 2000–1800 BC
- **Moses and Exodus tradition:** often placed around 1400–1200 BC
- **Davidic kingdom:** around 1000 BC
- **Babylonian exile:** 586 BC
- **Return from exile:** late 500s BC
- **Roman control of Judea/Galilee:** beginning in the first century BC
- **Life and ministry of Jesus:** approximately 4 BC–AD 30
- **Sermon on the Mount setting:** during Jesus’ Galilean ministry, likely late AD 20s
- **Gospel of Matthew written:** commonly dated around AD 70–90

Matthew’s community likely knew what it meant to live with uncertainty, social tension, religious conflict, and imperial pressure. So, this passage would have spoken both personally and communally.

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language and Dating

Matthew was written in **Greek**, the common Greek language of the eastern Roman Empire. Jesus Himself likely taught primarily in **Aramaic**, with Hebrew used in Scripture and synagogue settings. The Gospel writer gives us Jesus’ teaching in Greek for a wider audience. Matthew is commonly dated to the late first century, often around **AD 70–90**.

“Do not worry”

This can mean to be anxious, troubled, divided, or pulled apart by concern. So, Jesus is not condemning normal concern. He is warning against the kind of anxiety that divides the heart.

A helpful paraphrase might be: **Do not let worry split your soul in pieces.**

“Life”

This can mean life, soul, self, or inner being. So “do not worry about your life” is deeper than “don’t worry about staying alive.” It also means: Do not let anxiety define your whole self.



“Seek first”

This means actively seek, desire, pursue, or strive for first. It is not passive. Jesus is not saying, “Sit back and wait.” He is saying:

Make God’s kingdom your first pursuit.

“Kingdom”

This does not only mean a place called heaven. It means reign, rule, authority, or way of life under God. So “seek first the kingdom of God” means: Live now as if God’s love, justice, mercy, and faithfulness are the truest reality.

“Righteousness”

This can mean righteousness, justice, right relationship, covenant faithfulness. So, this is not just private moral purity. It includes living rightly with God and neighbor.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT
Metaphorically, this passage is about what we allow to become ultimate.

Birds and lilies become teachers.

They do not represent a carefree fantasy world. They represent a created world that receives life as gift.

Jesus invites us to notice that life is not sustained by anxiety.

That is a hard lesson for us here in Grant County, Indiana.

People worry about crops, factory jobs, hospital bills, school funding, inflation, aging parents, adult children, church attendance, politics, violence, and whether the next generation will be okay.

Those are real worries.

Jesus does not mock them.

But He asks us not to build our identity around them.

In rural Indiana, “seeking first the kingdom” may look like:

- checking on a neighbor,
- feeding a family,
- listening before arguing,
- refusing to let politics replace compassion,
- supporting local ministries,
- forgiving slowly but honestly,
- trusting God enough to do the next faithful thing.

This passage does not say: “Everything will be fine.”

It says: God is still God, even when everything is not fine.

That is a much deeper promise.



HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

We should not use this passage to shame anxious people.

That would miss Jesus completely.

A person with anxiety, grief, depression, trauma, financial stress, or medical fear does not need someone saying, "Well, Jesus said don't worry."

That can become spiritual cruelty.

Instead, this passage invites us to ask:

What is my worry teaching me?

What am I trying to control?

Where have I confused planning with fear?

Where have I confused responsibility with carrying the whole world?

We should act by doing the next faithful thing.

Not every faithful step is dramatic.

Sometimes it is:

- Making the phone call.
- Paying the bill.
- Going to the doctor.
- Asking for help.
- Praying honestly.
- Letting tomorrow stay tomorrow.
- ***Choosing kindness today.***

Jesus does not ask us to pretend there is no trouble.

He says: "Today's trouble is enough for today."

That may be one of the most realistic lines in Scripture.

Faith does not erase trouble.

Faith keeps trouble from becoming our god.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What is the difference between healthy concern and unhealthy worry?*
2. *Does this passage mean Christians should not plan for the future? Why or why not?*
3. *What kinds of worries are most common in our community today?*
4. *How can this passage be comforting without becoming dismissive of real anxiety?*
5. *What does it mean to "seek first the kingdom of God" in everyday life?*
6. *How might worry lead us to judge, control, or fear other people?*
7. *What is one faithful thing we can do today instead of being overwhelmed by tomorrow?*



COMMENTS

This one pairs with Genesis 21:8–21. At first glance they seem very different, but they’re actually asking a similar question:

- **Genesis 21:** Hagar is in the wilderness; certain all hope is lost. God sees, hears, and provides.
- **Matthew 6:** Jesus tells His listeners *not to be consumed by fear because* the God who sees the birds and flowers also sees them.

In Genesis, God’s provision comes in the middle of a crisis. In Matthew, Jesus reminds us that God’s provision is present even before the crisis arrives. Many people trust God after they can see the well of water. Jesus is inviting us to trust before we can see it.

Is our reaction, “Well, that’s easier said than done.” That’s actually the point, because the passage isn’t really about eliminating fear. It’s about deciding what gets the final word—our fear or God’s faithfulness.

Chicken Little’s Fear Realized





Addendum

The Abraham Family Soap Opera

1. **Sarah could not conceive for many years.**
2. Following a common ancient practice, Sarah gave her servant **Hagar** to Abraham so Abraham could have a child through her.
3. Hagar became pregnant and gave birth to **Ishmael**.
4. Years later, despite their old age, Sarah gave birth to **Isaac**.
5. Sarah then became concerned that Ishmael, as Abraham's firstborn son, might share in Abraham's inheritance.
6. She demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away.

Note: **Ishmael is older than Isaac.**

According to Genesis:

- Abraham was **86** when Ishmael was born (Genesis 16:16).
- Abraham was **100** when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5).

That makes Ishmael about **14 years older than Isaac.**

Why Was Sarah So Concerned?

In the ancient world, the firstborn son often had significant inheritance rights.

Sarah's concern was likely both:

- **Practical** (protecting Isaac's inheritance)
- **Emotional** (jealousy, fear, family tension)

Most scholars think it was probably a mixture of both.

Did Abraham Have Other Children?

Yes. After Sarah died, Genesis says Abraham married **Keturah** and had six more sons (Genesis 25:1-2):

1. Zimran
2. Jokshan
3. Medan
4. Midian
5. Ishbak
6. Shuah

What About Other Concubines?

Genesis 25:6 also mentions Abraham's **concubines** (plural), though it doesn't provide many details. This suggests Abraham may have had additional children beyond the ones specifically named.

The text says: *"To the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living, he sent them away from his son Isaac..."*

Notice the pattern? It's remarkably similar to what happened with Ishmael. Isaac remains the primary heir, while the other sons receive gifts and are settled elsewhere.



Did Abraham Have Any Daughters?

The Bible never explicitly names any daughters of Abraham. That doesn't necessarily mean none existed. Ancient genealogies often focused on male descendants because inheritance and tribal identity passed through sons.

Many scholars think daughters almost certainly existed but were not recorded.

An Interesting Observation

One of the recurring themes in Genesis is that **the "obvious heir" is often not the one God chooses.**

Examples:

- Abel instead of Cain
- Isaac instead of Ishmael
- Jacob instead of Esau
- Joseph instead of his older brothers
- Ephraim instead of Manasseh

Ancient readers would expect the firstborn to inherit prominence.

Genesis repeatedly overturns that expectation.

If someone were inventing a religion to make its heroes look good, they would never write Genesis this way.

Think about the "heroes" so far:

- **Adam and Eve** disobey God.
- **Cain** murders his brother.
- **Noah** gets drunk.
- **Abraham** twice passes Sarah off as his sister.
- **Sarah** laughs at God's promise and then drives out Hagar and Ishmael.
- **Lot** is... well... Lot.
- **Jacob** deceives his father.
- **Esau** sells his birthright for stew.
- **Joseph's brothers** sell him into slavery.
- **Judah** becomes involved in a scandal with Tamar.

Genesis reads less like a collection of saints and more like a family reunion where nobody wants the stories told after dessert. Yet the theological message is powerful: **God keeps working through imperfect people.**

Not because they're perfect.

Not because they deserve it.

But because God's purposes are bigger than their mistakes.

It doesn't stop there!

When we get to Jacob and Esau, we may find ourselves saying: "If you think your family has issues, let's spend a few weeks in Genesis."



One other thing to appreciate: many scholars see Genesis intentionally showing that the ancestors of Israel were **not chosen because they were morally superior**. They were chosen because God chose to work through them. That's a very different message than "our ancestors were better than everyone else."

Which, honestly, may be one of the most humbling themes in the entire Old Testament.

When we first read Genesis, especially in church settings, we often absorb the stories as:

- Abraham = good guy
- Sarah = good guy
- Isaac = good guy
- Hagar = supporting character
- Ishmael = supporting character

Then one day we read it again and think: *"Wait a minute... Abraham got Hagar pregnant because Sarah suggested it, and now Sarah wants the mother and child thrown out into the desert because she's worried about inheritance?"*

And suddenly the story feels very different. That's often the moment when Genesis becomes less of a children's Bible story and more of a human story.

One thing I've learned from our Sunday School adventures is that many people have heard these stories dozens of times but have never really slowed down to ask the obvious questions. The moment someone in class says: *"Hold on. Ishmael is Abraham's son too, right?"*

That's Bible study. In fact, I suspect one of the reasons Genesis has survived for thousands of years is that it refuses to flatten its characters into cardboard saints. The text doesn't hide the awkward parts.

If this story happened today, and you were serving on the jury in a family court case, whose side would you be on? Not because there is a right answer, but because we will immediately sympathize with different characters:

- Some will defend Sarah.
- Some will defend Hagar.
- Some will feel sorry for Abraham.
- Almost everyone will feel sorry for Ishmael.

Maybe Genesis wants us to understand all of them before deciding who is correct.

And one more thing that might produce an "ah-ha" moment: **The hero of Genesis 21:8–21 may not be Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, or Ishmael.**

The hero may simply be God.

Every human in the story is acting out of fear, insecurity, grief, jealousy, self-preservation, or desperation. Yet God is the only one who sees the whole picture and refuses to abandon anyone.