

Brothers  
Genesis 21:1–14, 15–21  
Sunday, June 14, 2026

Let us pray: Lord, as you heard the voices of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, let *us* hear *your* voice. Open *our* eyes and let us drink from the well of living water, in Jesus' name. Amen.

I read a story recently about a man named Walter McFarlane, who grew up in Hawaii in the 1940s and 50s. His best friend was a man named Alan Robinson. They met in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and bonded over the fact that they were both adopted. They played football together. They were always at each other's houses. They went to college and then Vietnam, and then they ended up back in Hawaii, where they each had families and then raised their children together. The families would go camping and diving together. They played cards and hung out at each other's houses all the time. They made plans to travel and enjoy retirement together. Lifelong best friends.

A few years ago, each of their families encouraged them to do DNA testing through *Ancestry* and *23 and Me* to try to discover more about where they came from. Neither Walter nor Alan knew that the other was doing this, but I'm sure you can see where it's going. These lifelong best friends discovered that they were actually *half-brothers* with the same birth mother. But the story gets even crazier, because a few months later, they discovered that Walter's nephew Tom (whom he had also known all his life) wasn't actually his nephew...he was *also* his half-brother! What started out as two best friends ended up with a family bigger than either of them could have imagined.

\*\*\*

Last week we started a new summer sermon series on the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the book of Genesis. These are the three great ancestors of our faith – scripture refers over and over again to “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” – so we are following their stories to see what we can learn from them about faith and what it means to call *their* God *our* God.

We started with God calling Abram (he wasn't Abraham yet) and telling him to leave his home and his father's house and go to the land that God would show him. So Abram journeys around 400 miles to the land of Canaan, which we know today as Israel, and he begins to settle there. But a famine breaks out in the land, and Abram is scared that he is going to starve to death, so he *leaves* the place God told him to go to and goes to Egypt instead. When he gets there, he tells his wife Sarai to tell everyone that she is his sister, because he's afraid that if the Egyptians find out she is his *wife*, they will kill him and take her. They take her anyway, and she becomes the wife of Pharaoh. But God sends all kinds of plagues upon Pharaoh, and Pharaoh realizes what has happened, so he gives Abram his wife back and sends them on their way.

We are jumping ahead nine chapters today, but a lot has happened since then. In her fear that she will never give Abram a son, Sarai tells him to sleep with Hagar, her Egyptian slave, so that *she* might give him a son. Abram doesn't seem to protest too much, and Hagar *does* get pregnant. But when she finds out that she is pregnant with Ishmael, she apparently flaunts it in front of Sarai (or at least Sarai *feels* like she is flaunting it). Like, "I gave him children when you couldn't!" So there is this ongoing tension between Sarai and Hagar.

But God promises to give Abram a son with Sarai, and then God changes Abram's name to *Abraham*, which means, "father of a multitude" in Hebrew. And God changes Sarai's name to Sarah, which means, "princess or noblewoman." They move to a new part of Canaan, where Abraham once again tells Sarah to say that she is his sister. She *does*, and then the king of this new place where they are living takes her for his own wife. (Abraham doesn't seem to be learning from his mistakes.) They get all of that squared away, and then as we heard earlier, Sarah *does* have a son with Abraham when she is 90 years old, and they name him Isaac.

And that is where we pick up the story today – with Ishmael and Isaac. Half-brothers who share the same father. But unlike the story of Walter and Alan, this is not a feel-good story. In fact, this story is the origin of so many of the problems that we see in the world around us today. This story is *still playing out* among us. Because Isaac went on to be the ancestor of Jews and later Christians, while Ishmael went on to be the ancestor of Arabs and later Muslims. So take your pick. The Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The Six Day War. The *current* manifestation of this conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The current conflict between the U.S. and Iran. The two Gulf Wars. September 11. *All of them* have their root in the story of Ishmael and Isaac.

\*\*\*

But the thing is, the *problem* was not between Ishmael and Isaac. We only get two glimpses of interaction between Ishmael and Isaac in all of scripture, and one of them is right here at the beginning of their story. Look at what they were doing in verse 8: “But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, *playing with her son Isaac.*” They were *playing* together. The ancestors of Jews, Christians, and Muslims were *playing together* in the exact land where they are fighting today. Right before this story, in chapter 20, it tells us that they were living in a place called Gerar. Do you know where that is? It’s in what we know today as the Gaza Strip. A place that the conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac has reduced to absolute rubble today. But they were *playing* there, together.

There was not conflict between *Ishmael and Isaac*. Nowhere does scripture tell us that there was ever conflict between these two. As far as they knew, they were just *brothers*. The conflict was between their parents. The contempt between Sarah and Hagar. Jealousy. Fear. “What if he loves *her* son more than *mine*?” Sarah sees them playing together, and she goes right to Abraham and says, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”

But God had *already promised them* that they didn't have to worry about this. In chapter 17, God promises Abraham that he will *bless* Ishmael and make him fruitful, the father of a great nation. "But," God says, "my covenant I will establish with *Isaac*." And then again, in today's reading, right after Sarah tells Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, God says to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of Ishmael and Hagar...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."

*God* does not establish the conflict between Ishmael and Isaac. God is very clear about this promise that is being made to Abraham. The *problem* comes about because in their fear, Abraham and Sarah *fail to trust God's promise*. God says multiple times, "Here's what's going to happen," but Abraham and Sarah worry that there is not enough blessing for both Ishmael *and* Isaac. So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away; gives them some bread and water and sends them out into the wilderness.

How do you think Ishmael and Isaac felt? These two brothers who played together, separated. In effect being told by their parents, "You aren't brothers anymore. *He* is a threat to you."

It's not long before the water runs out, and Hagar knows that she and Ishmael are going to die. She leaves him under a bush, because she cannot bear to watch her child die. She cries out to God as Ishmael is crying under the bush, and it says that God heard Ishmael's voice. An angel of the Lord comes to Hagar and says, "Do not be afraid. God has heard the voice of the boy. Lift him up and hold him fast, for I will make a great nation of him. And then God provides them with a well of water.

God *heard their cries*, just like God heard Abraham and Sarah.

God *provided* for them, just like God provided for Abraham and Sarah.

God *blessed* Ishmael, just like God blessed Isaac.

And in verse 20 it says that God was *with* Ishmael, just like God was with Isaac.

In God's mind, there is no conflict between the two. There is enough blessing for both of them. They are *both* sons of Abraham. They are *brothers*. They both *belong* to Abraham. And they *both* belong to *God*.

\*\*\*

The movie *Remember the Titans* is based on the true story of a black high school and a white high school that merged in the 1970s in Virginia. When the two *schools* came together, that meant the two *football teams* came together. So they had to find a way to make it work. And at first, the two star defensive players, Gerry (who was white) and Julius (who was black) hated each other. They were both stars, and there just wasn't room for *both* of them. And the *reason* they hated each other wasn't because they actually *knew* each other. It was because the people around them told them that they were *supposed* to.

But over time, they come together. They get to know each other. They develop respect for each other, and then that respect turns into a deep friendship. And at one point, Gerry says to Julius, "I was afraid of you. I only saw what I was afraid of. And now I know I was only hating my brother."

So many times in life, our *conflicts* are the result of our *fear*. Fear that there is not going to be *enough* for all of us. Enough money, food, land, political power, blessing; we do it with *all* of those. "I need to make sure I get *mine*, because if I don't, they're going to *take* it, and then there won't be enough left for me." And most of the time, that mindset is not the result of our actual *interaction* with others. It's the result of *someone else* telling us, "That person is a threat to you." In all of it, our *fear* comes from our inability to

trust God's promise to *be with us* and *provide for us* and *bless us*. And with *God* there is *always* enough for *everyone*. Enough food, enough land, enough money, enough blessing, enough love. It's *us* who, in our *fear*, take more than we need and create scarcity. But when we *do* that, all we're really doing is hating our brother, our sister.

Like Walter and Alan that I told you about at the beginning, like Ishmael and Isaac, we just need to realize that we are all part of the same family, and that we *all* belong to God. Because through Jesus Christ, we who were not originally descended from Abraham, have been made a part of the family of Abraham. And Isaac. And Ishmael. We have been brought into that story, that *covenant*. And God has promised *us* that there is enough blessing and love for *all of us*.

\*\*\*

I mentioned earlier that we only get two glimpses of interaction between Ishmael and Isaac in scripture. One is at the beginning of their story, when they are playing together as children. The other happens around 70 years later, when their father Abraham dies, and they come together to bury him in the cave of Machpelah, east of Mamre. Do you know where that is? It's in what we know today as the West Bank. A place where the conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac is raging today. They came together there to bury their father. They didn't fight about who *owned* the land he was buried on. They didn't fight about which one of their mothers he was buried with. They didn't fight about which customs or rituals they should use to bury him. They didn't fight about which one of them was chosen or loved more. They simply came together as brothers to bury the man that both of them loved (and who loved both of them).

If there was hope for Ishmael and Isaac, then there is still hope for us today.