

The Uncherished Child: A “Modern” Wilderness of the Heart

Genesis 16: 1-16; 21: 8-21

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*“The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing”
(Zephaniah 3:17).¹*

“My step-father has moved out again,” Susan said, as she joined our family around the dinner table. “It looks as though they really will divorce this time. We may have to sell our house and move back to an apartment.” Susan (a pseudonym) is a friend of our fourteen-year-old daughter, Anna. Later in our conversation, Susan added, “My real dad hasn’t written to me in more than six months.” Susan tried to be brave as she spoke. She tried to hide her sadness and her fear . . . but she was not very successful.

As we talked with Susan, I wondered to myself what it is like to find yourself uncherished, in the way, and alone. When Susan is in our home, I am especially aware that our family offers a place to belong that she may seldom experience elsewhere. I am also aware that there are many other “Susans” in our town . . . and in yours. What are we to do?

On NOT Being the Child of Promise

Modern-day Susans are multiplying, but unblessed, uncherished children are by no means a new phenomenon. There is evidence that the very first child whose birth is recorded in scripture—Esau—was such an emotional orphan (Gen. 4:1-12). Noah’s grandson, Canaan, also found himself decidedly “unblessed” (Gen. 9:25). More painful than either of these, however, is the story of Ishmael, who had the misfortune

ⁱ “The Uncherished Child: A ‘Modern’ Wilderness of the Heart.” *Review & Expositor*, 91:3 (Summer, 1994), 393-400.

of being perhaps the most unwelcome and uncherished child in all the patriarchal narratives. Let's look at Ishmael's story

God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son—a son through whom all the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; cf. 15:4; 17:16, 19, 21; 18:10, 14). Years passed, though—ten years, and there was no son. Abraham was losing patience with God (Gen. 15:2), and may have felt less than charitable toward Sarah, also, since he likely blamed her for their barrenness. As Abraham became more difficult to live with, Sarah must have increasingly felt responsible for their dilemma.² She proposed a plan.

Sarah's plan—which Abraham found promising—was that Abraham would have intercourse with Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian maidservant, and perhaps beget a son who could be counted as Sarah's own (Gen. 16:2). While this arrangement seems strange indeed to us, such begetting was a culturally acceptable practice in those days, and need carry no moral stigma for us. The real point is that Abraham and Sarah had given up on God's fulfilling the promise, and decided to tend to it themselves.³

Rather than solving the problem, however, this plan soon resulted in the first "love triangle" in the Bible. Though their prior relationship had been strong, as soon as Hagar "knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress" (Gen. 16:4). In a reversal of the Eden account, Sarah blamed Abraham for this unexpected misery, and Abraham agreed to collude with Sarah in her subsequent abuse of Hagar (Gen. 16:6).

Scripture gives no indication of Hagar's age, but she was likely in her late teens or early twenties. Finding herself powerless and punished for her obedience, Hagar decided to do what many other pregnant and abused young women have chosen since—she became the first biblical "runaway," and headed for Egypt . . . and for home. The road home led through the desert, and the journey must have been terrifying for a young, pregnant woman, alone. Hagar was courageous and

resourceful, however, for by the next verse she had traveled nearly half-way home, to the “Oasis of the Desert of Shur,” not far from the northeast border of Egypt.⁴

Though Abraham and Sarah seemingly cared little about Hagar’s fate, and were similarly unconcerned about her unborn child, God’s attitude was more caring. “The angel of the LORD” met Hagar at the oasis, a theophany which we may understand as the very presence of God’s own self in human form (Gen. 16:7).⁵ The angel spoke four times, in an emotional crescendo which climaxed in a birth announcement.⁶ Hagar was told that she was going to have a son, whose name was to be Ishmael. “Ishmael” means “God hears,” or perhaps, “May God hear.”⁷ In either case, Ishmael’s very name represented a prayer that God would care for Abraham and Sarah’s unblessed son.

As if in response to this plea, the angel did offer a pre-natal blessing to Ishmael:

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 (Gen. 16:12).

Although this blessing seems rather “backhanded” to us, it may in fact represent a solid blessing which the desert-dwellers would have valued.⁸ While Ishmael’s blessing may have been vigorous and virile, there was no mistaking the fact that this was not the “primal promise.”⁹ Ishmael would live outside the Sacred Story.

Hagar returned to Abraham’s household, as the angel directed, and Abraham apparently did his best to treat Ishmael as his son-in-fact. When Ishmael was thirteen, Abraham circumcised him with the rest of the males in the household (Gen. 17:23-26), as a sign of the divine covenant of promise. When God spoke again to Abraham about the Son of Promise yet to be born, Abraham cried out on Ishmael’s behalf, saying, “If only *Ishmael* might live under your blessing!” (Gen. 17:18, italics added).

As a perceptive teen, Ishmael could not have missed the three strangers who came to camp not long after the circumcisions, nor would he have failed to note the strange effects these men had on his father and on his step-mother (Gen. 18: 1-33).

As hard as Abraham had tried to cause it to be otherwise, Ishmael had known from his earliest years that Sarah cared little for him, and that he really was *not* the child of promise. Ishmael chafed under the curse of being uncherished, of being in the way, of being a reminder of failed dreams and collapsed hopes. It was unfair!

When it became clear to Ishmael that his aged step-mother was pregnant, he knew that the *denouement* was near. The contrast between his own name and that of this half-brother—“Isaac,” “laughter”—was all too clear. As Ishmael watched Abraham rejoice over Isaac, he must have uttered in his heart the anguished cry which Esau would echo after him: “When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, ‘Bless me—me too, my father!’” (Gen. 27:34).

Later, when Isaac was weaned (usually about the age of three), Abraham held a great feast. Like another famous elder brother after him (Luke 15:28), Ishmael found himself unable to celebrate. Ishmael knew that he was nothing more than a “son of a slave woman” to his step-mother, and that this would never change (Gen. 21:10). Ishmael was at least fifteen, and perhaps as old as seventeen by this time, and as he tried to deal with the awful burden of rejection that he felt, he “mocked” Isaac . . . and Sarah saw it happen (Gen. 21:9).

This was the “last straw” for Sarah. To paraphrase Ezekiel’s words, “the *mother* ate sour grapes, and the *son’s* teeth were set on edge” (Eze. 18:2). Sarah insisted that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away, “giving them their freedom” from servitude—and removing their claim to inheritance. Abraham was greatly distressed at this demand, because he genuinely cared for Ishmael. Abraham had a more difficult time with this decision than with Sarah’s first demand for Hagar’s banishment. Gerhard von Rad observed that Abraham was “a man torn between conflicting loves and rent by the rival claims of what society and law permitted and what righteousness seemed to demand.”¹⁰

Abraham might not have acquiesced to Sarah this second time, had God not spoken to him and reaffirmed divine care for Ishmael. After God spoke, “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” (Gen. 21:14). Divine promise or not, this was precious little provision for the rejected—and dejected—pair. With their departure, Abraham added “failure to pay child support” to the list of his sins.

In the wilderness once more, Hagar cried bitter and despairing tears, convinced that she and Ishmael were going to die. Once again, God heard Hagar in the desert (“Ishmael”; “God hears”; Gen. 21:17), and God delivered mother and son in a striking parallel to that which Isaac would later experience (Gen. 21:19; 22:13). God provided for the “unblessed child.”

Ishmael appears only briefly in the rest of the Genesis account. We learn that he grew up in the Desert of Paran in the central Sinai peninsula, and that he took a wife from Egypt, with his mother’s encouragement (Gen. 21:21). The record shows that Abraham did in fact leave Ishmael entirely “out of his will” (Gen 25:5), but that Ishmael was still gracious enough to help Isaac bury their father (Gen. 25:9). We know that Ishmael was 137 years old when he died (Gen 25:17), and that his descendants “lived in hostility toward all their brothers” (Gen. 25:18), as the angel had foretold.

As the Twig is Bent . . .

By now you may be wondering what the story of Ishmael has to do with Susan’s story. These two teens, one male, one female, both experienced the absence of a parental blessing. A surface-level comparison might indicate rather different dynamics in their families; at a deep level, however, Ishmael and Susan share the circumstance that no parent truly delights in either of them. In order to understand more fully how this may have happened, we must consider the experience of parenthood itself.

Every child has the fundamental right to be born into a family where she or he is wanted and welcome. We may perhaps dare to believe that in most instances, this is,

in fact, the case. Even granting such welcome, however, it is hardly possible to overstate the changes and stresses which the birth of a child visits upon a family. As Elizabeth Achtemeier observed, “Heaven knows it is never wholly convenient to have children! From the moment of their conception, until the day we die, they change our lives drastically.”¹¹

From the birth of their first child onward—for the better part of twenty years, *at least*—unfettered days, undisturbed nights, and unplanned trips are at an end. The arrival of a child renders a family’s financial situation immediately more precarious, and stresses multiply as the mother and father negotiate the apportionment of unforeseen duties and reorganized routines.

The tasks and adventures of parenting cause most parents to discover unimagined polarities within themselves. New parents often discover that they are at once able to love this little person more intensely than they have ever loved another being; at the same time, these very same parents are amazed—and sometimes frightened—to note the strength of the hostile emotions they experience toward this child in the wee hours of the morning! The relative proportion of these conflicting emotions is rooted in such dynamics as the extent to which this child was planned, in how pleasant or difficult the pregnancy and delivery were, in whether or not the child is the hoped-for gender, in the parents’ individual personality structures, and in the subtleties of the parents’ relationships with their own parents and with each other.

As a result of the interplay of these variables, some children who grow up unblessed and “in the way” experience this curse from the very genesis of their lives. Other children begin life as welcome and treasured, only to find themselves later ejected from their parents’ affections. The fortunate children, of course, live in the warmth of blessing always.

From the very beginning of their consciousness, children discover what kind of persons they are and how they feel about themselves by their parents’ reactions to them. They have no other guide, no other mirror which reflects what kind of persons

they are and whether or not they are valuable and lovable. If such a prospect seems frightening to us as parents, we must acknowledge that, when it comes right down to it, none of us is equal to the task. Becoming parents is an act of faith.

Although the central psychospiritual need of children has sometimes been called “basic trust,” or even “adequate object-relations,” it is probably sufficient to identify this need as “self-esteem.” Robert Schuller has written that our hunger for self-esteem grows out of our yearning for “the divine dignity that God intended to be our emotional birthright as children created in his image.”¹² At the deepest level, self-esteem must be rooted in our valuing ourselves as God values us. Zephaniah exulted that “[God] will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17); but we never dare to believe this unless this divine valuing is mediated by another person, one “with skin on,” most fundamentally our parents.

If a child’s parents have received the blessing of being treasured from their own parents, then they generally are able to pass this blessing on to their own offspring. If parents have not been so treasured, they attempt to draw blessing for their children from an empty well. It is chiefly by this mechanism that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (Mat. 25:29). Parents who have the blessing, give the blessing. Parents who are unblessed themselves give their children stones when they ask for bread (Mat. 7:9).

Ishmael and Susan both got stones. Abraham and Sarah and Susan’s parents were too caught up in their own careers, in their own efforts to be significant, in their own efforts to secure their lives against chaos, in their own desperate attempts to establish durable marriages, to have any enduring blessing to offer to their children. Ishmael and Susan were not children of promise. They were children who were “in the way.”

The Root of Blessing

The world offers plentiful evidence that the sins of the parents are visited upon the third and fourth generations following (Exod. 20:5), but is this, must this be, the

final word? Where is the word of reversal? Where is the word of healing? Where is the word of redemption?

The word of redemption is this: God loves us while we are still sinners, while we are still rebels, while we are under a multitude of curses, and offers us the Blessing which is God's delight (Rom 5:8; Eph. 2:5; 1 John 4:19). While we are still timid, still uncertain, still virtually faithless, Jesus tells us, "You *are* the salt of the earth. . . . You *are* the light of the world" (Matt. 5: 13-14, italics added). What does this mean? The witness of scripture is that God's blessing—once we receive it—sets us free to dare to envision what we are in possibility, that which we may become in fact—the redeemed children of God.

On a human level, this suggests that we as parents may learn to bless our children, whether or not we have received the blessing of our biological parents, since the blessing of our heavenly Father is available to us "pressed down, shaken together and running over" (Luke 6:38). While God's blessing may—mercifully—come to our children through others, it is first available to our children through us. Even as God loves us with an everlasting love, drawing us toward redemption (blessing) with loving-kindness (Jer. 31:3), so, too, may we offer an unmerited blessing to our children which leads them toward Hope. Gary Smalley and John Trent have suggested that parents may communicate this blessing to their children in five ways: (1) through meaningful touch; (2) through a spoken message; (3) through attaching "high value" to the one being blessed; (4) through picturing a special future for the one being blessed; and (5), through an active commitment on our part to fulfill this blessing.¹³

That bumper sticker is not merely cute which asks, "Have you hugged your kid today"? Whenever a person is blessed in the scriptures, meaningful touching provides a caring background to the words that are spoken.¹⁴ Loving touch is a key component in the communication of care. We are so made that "our skin gets hungry," and we deeply desire to be touched and blessed in this way. While mothers and fathers may find it easy to touch and to caress their infants and young children,

meaningful touch often becomes more scarce as children reach puberty. This is especially true of fathers and daughters. Many are those young women who lament, “After I was thirteen, my daddy never hugged me anymore.” Mutual respect is required always, and patterns of touch may need to change as children grow older; yet our human hunger for such blessing is unending. (These principles of blessing work just as effectively when offered to aging parents!)

While we hunger for the blessing of touch, touching does not communicate the Blessing in all of its power: “A blessing becomes so only when it is spoken.”¹⁵ Providing a safe, secure, welcoming, Christian home for our children is an enormous gift. Unfortunately, such a benevolent atmosphere alone is unable to offer blessing at the core of our being. How many times have I heard grown men and women say through their tears, “My daddy *never* told me he loved me”! Priceless indeed are the simple words, spoken from the heart, “I *love* you. I’m *glad* you are a part of my life.”

Three dimensions of the Blessing remain: “high value,” “special future,” and “active commitment.” While Smalley and Trent rightly relate these last elements to the parental blessing, these three concepts also suggest a shape for the church’s ministry to those uncherished children who come to us, crying out to be blessed.

I was Unblessed, and You Blessed Me

The metaphor of a family is representative of God’s relationship to us in both the Old Testament and the New, eventually taking shape as the *oikoV tou qeou*, the “household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6, 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5, 4:17). Furthermore, entry into God’s family is by *adoption*, not by biological birth. Paul wrote that “In love [God] predestined us to be *adopted* as his [children] through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:4b-5a, italics added; cf. Ps. 2:7). And John rejoiced that “to all who received [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent . . . but born of God” (John 1:12-13).

The Good News for us all is that, no matter how well or poorly our earthly parents have been able to bless us, God’s Blessing is available to us! Because “Christ

died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring [us] to God” (1 Peter 3:18), God has placed “high value”—indeed, *incredible* value—upon each human person. Every child, every youth, who visits our churches—no matter how unruly, no matter how unblessed—is a person within whom God has placed eternal value. Whether or not the parents of these children and youth have been able to bless them, we are able, in God’s Name, to do so.

Just as Jesus did, we can meet these persons where they are, mired in the muck of their own attempts at securing a blessing, and we can begin the slow process of bringing “beauty” from the “beast,” through God’s grace. This transformation is accomplished as we, by faith, place a higher value on uncherished children than others have been able to do. We see them, little by little, through our Father’s eyes.

Because of this inner *valuing*, we find ourselves able to communicate care and blessing through appropriate *touch* and through sensitive *speaking*. We envision a brighter *future* for these despairing ones because God’s possibilities within their lives are far grander than we dare to believe. We *commit* ourselves to the arduous task of planting, watering, weeding, and waiting, as the Blessing takes root and begins to grow. We keep on keeping on, even (especially) when we are tempted to wish that these unblessed Ishmaels and Susans would choose another church to attend, because God is faithful, and “at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).

As we care for others with the care which we ourselves have received from God (2 Cor. 1:3-4), we come alongside young parents, encouraging and blessing them, that they may have the fruit of blessing to give to their children. We offer caring attention to older children who fear that the blessing is about to be transferred to another sibling forever. We create a caring place where adolescents can talk about changes in their parents’ abilities to bless the persons they are becoming. We do not fail to communicate the five dimensions of blessing to children and youth when their own nuclear families are experiencing destructive fission and fusion.

As we struggle in our churches with the insidious temptations of bigger crowds, bigger buildings, and bigger budgets, to which the uncherished seem able to contribute little, we need to be reminded that “benevolence from the sidelines is not an option” for us.¹⁶ God’s supreme valuing of us in the Cross “will not let us live in peace and wholeness unless we affirm there that we are brother [and sister] to all the broken ones.”¹⁷ Ken Medema spoke poignantly for the uncherished Susans and Ishmaels in our lives when he wrote,

If this is not a place, where tears are understood,
 then where shall I go to cry?
 And if this is not a place, where my spirit can take wings,
 then where shall I go to fly?¹⁸

BLESS ME! BLESS ME, TOO!

¹All scripture quotations are from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978).

²G. Henton Davies, “Genesis,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), p. 180.

³Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James Luther Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 151.

⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed. The Old Testament Library, ed. G. Ernest Wright, John Bright, James Barr, and Peter Ackroyd (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 192.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁶Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 152.

⁷R. Lansing Hicks, “Ishmael,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 747.

⁸von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 194.

⁹Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 152.

¹⁰von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 156.

¹¹Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Committed Marriage*, Biblical Perspectives on Current Issues, ed. Howard Clark Kee (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 190.

¹²Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), p. 15.

¹³Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁶David Woodyard, *Beyond Cynicism: The Practice of Hope* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 85.

¹⁷Myron Madden, *The Power to Bless: Healing and Wholeness through Understanding* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 155.

¹⁸Ken Medema, “If This Is Not a Place . . .” (Waco: Word Music, 1977), cited in Smalley and Trent, *Blessing*, p. 195.