

# “To Give a Blessing”

Genesis 27:27-38; Ephesians 1:3-5; story based on Genesis 16: 1-16; 21: 8-21 <sup>1</sup>

“My step-father has moved out again,” she 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.” Rather than use her real name, let me call her Susan. 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 wasn’t very successful.

As we talked with Susan, I wondered to myself what it’s like to find yourself uncherished, in the way, and alone. When Susan was in our home, I was especially aware that our family offered a place to belong that she seldom experienced elsewhere. I was also aware that there were many other “Susans” in the town in which we lived then . . . as well as in our town now.

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—Cain—was such an emotional orphan (Genesis 4:1-12). Noah’s grandson, Canaan, also found himself decidedly “unblessed” (Genesis 9:25). But more painful than either of these is the story of Ishmael, who had the misfortune of being perhaps the most unwelcome and uncherished child in all the patriarchal narratives.

As you may remember, God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son—a son through whom all the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Years passed, though—ten years—and there was no son, so Abraham and Sarah devised their own plan: Abraham would have a child by Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant, Hagar.

But rather than solving the problem, 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*” (Genesis 16:4). In a reversal of Adam’s blaming of Eve, Sarah blamed Abraham for this unexpected misery, and she treated Hagar poorly.

Abraham apparently did his best to treat Ishmael as his son. But as much as Abraham tried to cause it to be otherwise, Ishmael knew from his earliest years that Sarah cared little for him, and that he 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 as a teen Ishmael saw that his aged step-mother had finally become pregnant, he knew that the end was near. As he watched Abraham rejoice over little Isaac, Ishmael must have cried out in his heart with the anguish Esau would echo after him after Jacob stole his birthright: “*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!’*” (Genesis 27:34).

Several years later, the family conflict became so bad that Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael from the clan once and for all. 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 (Genesis 21:21). The record shows that Abraham did in fact leave Ishmael entirely “out of his will,” (Genesis 25:5), but that Ishmael was still gracious enough to help Isaac bury their father (Genesis 25:9).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on June 16, 2013, Father’s Day.

We know that Ishmael was 137 years old when he died (Genesis 25:17), and that his descendants “*lived in hostility toward all their brothers,*” as they do to this very day (Genesis 25:18). It is Ishmael’s rejection that underlies the hatred between Arabs and Jews, and this rejection may also be the root of a great deal more pain in our world than we know.

But you may be wondering what the story of Ishmael has to do with Susan’s story. Here’s the connection. These two teens, one male, one female, both experienced the absence of a parental blessing. Ishmael and Susan shared the circumstance that no parent truly delighted in either of them. In order to understand 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, though, it’s hardly possible to overstate the changes and stresses that the birth of a child visits upon a family.<sup>2</sup>

From the birth of one’s 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 work through the sharing of unforeseen duties and reorganized routines.

The tasks and adventures of parenting cause most parents to discover unexpected tensions within themselves. New parents often discover that they’re at once able to love this little person more intensely than they’ve ever loved another being before; yet 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 pregnancy 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 beginning of their lives. Other children begin life as welcome and treasured, only to find themselves later evicted 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 to feel about themselves by their parents’ reactions to them. They have no other guide, no other mirror that 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 admit that, when it comes right down to it, none of us is equal to the task. Becoming parents is an act of faith.

One of the most important things children gain from their parents is self-esteem. 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*” (Zephaniah 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Committed Marriage* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 190. Several of the images that follow are also from this excellent book.

If a child's parents have received the blessing of being treasured from their own parents, then they're generally able to pass this blessing on to their own children. If parents have not been so treasured, they attempt to draw blessing for their own children from an empty well. It's chiefly by this mechanism that "*the rich get richer and the poor get poorer*," as Jesus said. (Matthew 25:29). Parents who have The Blessing, give The Blessing. Parents who are unbled themselves give their children stones when they ask for bread (Matthew 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 world offers plentiful evidence that the sins of the parents are indeed visited upon the third and fourth generations following (Exodus 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 in us (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 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" (Matthew 5: 13-14).

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*, and that which we may become *in fact*—the redeemed, holy, chosen, beloved 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's first available to our children through us.

Gary Smalley and John Trent have suggested that parents may communicate 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 to fulfilling this blessing.<sup>3</sup> Let's look at these briefly.

First, **touch**. That bumper sticker is not merely cute that 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.<sup>4</sup> Loving touch is a key component in the communication of care. You and I 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 always required, and patterns of touch need to change as children grow older; yet our human hunger for such blessing is unending.

<sup>3</sup>Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

While we hunger to be touched, touching does not communicate The Blessing in all of its power. A blessing becomes so only when it is **spoken**.<sup>5</sup> Providing a safe, secure, welcoming, Christian home for our children is an enormous gift, but 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 whom God brings to us, crying out in a multitude of ways to be blessed.

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 still available to us! God has placed “high value”—indeed, *incredible* value—upon each human person. Every child, every youth, every adult, who visits our church—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 persons have been able to bless them, we are able to do so, in our Father’s Name.

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—and teens, and adults—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 either they or we dare to believe.

We *commit* ourselves to the arduous task of plowing, planting, watering, weeding, and waiting, as The Blessing takes root and begins to grow. We keep on keeping on, even—no, especially—when we’re tempted to wish that these unblessed Ishmaels and Susans would choose some other church to attend, because God is faithful, and “*at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*” (Galatians 6:9).

As we care for others with the care that we ourselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 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 a younger 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 falling apart.

Ken Medema spoke powerfully 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?<sup>6</sup>

BLESS ME! BLESS ME, TOO! . . . .

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Medema, “If This Is Not a Place . . .” (Waco: Word Music, 1977), cited in Smalley and Trent, *Blessing*, p. 195.