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"Oh that Ishmael Might Live Before You!"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" If you look back to the commencement of Genesis 17, you will get something of the force of that exclamation.

"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am God Almighty (El Shaddai, the Lord all-sufficient); 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 the father of a multitude of nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram (exalted father), but thy name shall be called Abraham (father of a multitude); for the father of a multitude of 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 throughout 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 of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:1-8 A.R.V.).

And there is more like that later, from verse 15. But that is enough for the moment to give us the background of this exclamation, "*Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!*" (v.18).

After all that the Lord had said, the repeated assurances, the reiterated "I will", "I will", "I will", the great vista of Divine intention presented and opened up to Abraham, we might have expected

something rather different as Abraham's response. Such a vision and such a powerful assurance might have brought from him a very strong and wholehearted capitulation to the Lord, an embracing of the Divine intentions. Indeed, we should have been surprised if Abraham had not got very excited, taken hold of it all with great enthusiasm, but we find that this is the form of his reaction: "*Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!*"

Now, before we can get the full force of that, we must think just a little more widely, and remind ourselves of God's purpose with Abraham. That purpose with Abraham was all His purpose concerning His Son, the Lord Jesus, for Abraham had a link back with eternity past and the Divine counsels in that eternal purpose in Christ, and Abraham was himself a link between those counsels of God from eternity and the Lord Jesus Himself and all the realisation of those counsels in the ages to come. That purpose of God, as we well know, concerned a heavenly people living in the very fullness of God, and in relationship with God's Son governing spiritually in this universe. You find that Abraham is always linked in some way with the Lord Jesus and God's purpose in and through Him.

In the Gospels you have a fragment which issued from the lips of the Lord Himself, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). Abraham saw the day of the Lord Jesus and rejoiced. We are never told in the Old Testament exactly how, when, or where he saw that day, but there is the statement made by the Lord Jesus. No greater authority can be found for a statement. Then you pass into the book of the Acts and come to chapter 7, Stephen's great discourse, beginning with Abraham, "*The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham*". Then Stephen traces from that appearing of the God of glory to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, the whole course of Israel's history right up to the Lord Jesus and links Abraham and the Lord Jesus as the beginning and end of a Divine history. He points out that the whole of that history from Abraham onwards, had its consummation in Christ, and Stephen brought home to the Jewish rulers responsibility for the whole history. "*Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye*" (Acts 7:51), bringing home to them that God's history from Abraham onwards was all directed to the Lord Jesus, and found its fullness of meaning in Him, and they had slain Him. They were responsible for all that.

You pass from Acts into Romans, and you know what a large place Abraham has in the early chapters of Romans, especially chapter 4. There you have Abraham's faith on the basis of resurrection over against the impossibility of nature, issuing in righteousness which is the righteousness of Christ, and so linking a spiritual seed by faith with the Lord Jesus on the ground of absolute justification. You see Abraham there figuring again as the link with the Lord Jesus by faith for a spiritual seed in acceptance with God.

So you go on and you come to Hebrews. You know the place that Abraham has there in chapter 12. The point is that, beginning with Abel, faith is set forth in all, and in Abraham faith was related to God's end, God's great purpose in Christ. And faith is that which brings to God's end and its realisation. There is Abraham figuring largely in that again.

Now you see that Abraham is a very important link with God's full thought and purpose, which is heavenly, spiritual, and eternal. Unto that Abraham was called and all that was bound up with that and issuing from that of universal blessing and a people dwelling in the full light of the Divine favour and so much more, but that is enough for the present purpose. Now, unto all that, Abraham was called, for that he was chosen and apprehended of God. God came and said that to him, summed it

all up in a few sentences, with this repetition of assurance, "I will", "I will", "I will", "thou shalt". Abraham comes back on all that with "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You!*" Why? Why such a drop? Why such a depressing reaction?

I venture to say that that exclamation of Abraham's has had an echo in the heart of everyone who has been called in the way of Abraham, and I venture to say that it has found an echo in our hearts too at some time. Why? Because of the exceeding difficulty of that way to the flesh. All *that* had to be realised without any human hope of realisation, all *that* had to be accomplished without there being anything in nature to guarantee it. For its realisation and accomplishment, man who is chosen in relation to it will be stripped stark of everything that in himself could give any hope or help whatsoever and that is the difference between Ishmael and Isaac. You see, the situation is a very difficult one. Abraham is ninety-nine years old; Sarah, his wife, is aged. The situation is a hopeless one, a humanly impossible one. There is nothing in the whole realm of men that forms a precedent for such a thing. There is nothing known in the realm of man by nature which can justify any hope of this; that can form a basis for any assurance of this. It is out of man's hands, out of man's wisdom, outside of man's ability, mind, heart, will, spirit, soul, body. All is at an utter discount.

But Ishmael is something different; Ishmael is something that I can do. Ishmael is in my hands, Ishmael is something that I can see, that I can grasp with my senses, that I can understand. Ishmael, yes, is something which I can produce. This other - how unreal, how intangible, how uncertain, how impossible! Ishmael? There is not very much difficulty along the line of Ishmael. Ishmael is a fairly simple proposition. Ishmael's is a straight course, no tortuous, winding, labyrinthine way of spiritual experience in all mystery and bewilderment and strange dealings of God. None of that about Ishmael; it is straightforward and immediate, we can get through at once. That is only another way of saying: "Oh that I might be saved from this way of faith, this heavenly way of the unseen and the intangible and without any precedent. Everybody else goes the way of Ishmael. I am called to go a way so different from the way which everybody else is called. Mine is a way that no one else has ever been called upon to take!" Abraham might well have said all that; it would have been true. A strange way! So different from all the way that all others have gone! Surely it cannot be right? There is something about this that is not safe, is not sound. "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You!*", he is a fairly sound, solid proposition to human reason! That is the position.

It is in that way that this echo is found in the heart of those who are called into God's purpose with which Abraham is linked, for it is the same purpose. We are in exactly the same thing as Abraham was chosen for. It is that eternal purpose which is in Christ Jesus. Have we not all at some time in the way of faith's testing concerning God's call, God's apprehending of us, God's heavenly purpose, God's eternal, spiritual purpose - not in these words exactly, but in the same sentiments, said, "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You!*" "Oh, that I might be able to serve and work for God as the majority do! This is so different! Oh that I might be able to do that which will show something for my energy, for my life, something that I can have in hand now."

You remember what Paul said (and we missed Galatians when we were talking about Abraham). He puts his finger upon the principle, using the principle in this specific way, as law and grace: "*This Hagar is mount Sinai... the Jerusalem that now is*" (Gal. 4:25). The Jerusalem that now is, and when faith is tried, it is tried on the point of that which is not seen, which we do not possess now, that which calls for a faith that, although we may not see it in our lifetime, it shall be. But "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You!*" means, "Oh, to have something now, to have it now! This indefiniteness, this postponement, this call for patience in faith, steadfast endurance unto the end..." - "*after you have*

done the will of God, you have need of patience." And we come back under the pressure, "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You!*" "Oh that he might be acceptable to You! Oh, that this which is not such a difficult way might be the acceptable way of the Lord for me!" You know that you can put that in many ways.

One of the difficulties in this matter is that, whereas we might step out as Abraham did into the purpose of God in faith - and it may be a costly act, the very stepping out, the decision to move out on this basis with God in faith - it requires a very much stronger faith to occupy and to stand on the ground, than it does to step on to it. You can take a step in faith and find yourself somewhere that is not quite so difficult. It may be in a big crisis, it may be a great difficulty, it may mean a big change, but comparatively speaking, it is not so difficult to make the step with God as it is to hold that position indefinitely when once you have stepped on to it.

To step out on to a heavenly ground is one thing, and it may mean a big step, but then there are all the reactions which come back afterwards, all the people who are not on that ground and do not agree with that ground at all! They say, "Let us be doing something, let us be showing something!" "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You!*" They have their Ishmaels, and Ishmaels are real living propositions to the senses, and what have you got? Well, you have got a promise, and what have you got to guarantee it? Look at yourself, look at your circumstances, look at everything around you, look at all that there is from which you would naturally expect something to come. What have you got? Not only nothing, but no prospect. You have only got the Lord, you have only got the Word of the Lord. You have only got somewhere down deeper in you than perhaps you realise at present: the knowledge that the Lord told you so. When you come back to things, you have to ask, "Now, was it someone else? - was it other people? - where did it come from? No, it was the Lord, I can never go back on that. The Lord gave me that guidance, showed me that purpose." That is all you have got to go upon. That is just it. The Lord, and perhaps the Lord in our hearts by a word, an assurance, a call, a leading, a vision, over against everybody and every other way of doing the Lord's work, the Ishmael way. You see how important it would be to enlarge upon the difference between Ishmael and Isaac and what they represent. I am not going to do that now. You can go back to that.

We know, if we are going to turn in the direction of Ishmael, we shall have an Ishmael on our hands, that is, we will have to take responsibility for what we produce. Abraham found himself in a very awkward predicament over Ishmael. Ishmael was his alternative to a way of true faith in God; that was something of himself to help God out, and he had Ishmael on his hands, something for which he had to take responsibility. Isaac was never on Abraham's hands, he was on God's hands. God took responsibility there in a marvellous way. "*In Isaac shall thy seed be called*" (Gen. 21:12). My covenant is with Isaac. God is committed to Isaac, not to Ishmael, as to His eternal purpose.

Now, this has many ways of legitimate application. It is not our intention to try and make this application now, but to suggest a principle. Here are two things: the way of Ishmael and the way of Isaac, the way of the earthly and the way of the heavenly, the way of man and the way of God, the way of doing something for God and the way of God doing His own work through us. There is the way of the things seen and the way of the things unseen; the way of the possible to us and the way of the impossible to us. It is the way of liberty as to God's full purpose, for Ishmael is in bondage - that is Paul's word - "*This Hagar... is in bondage with her children*"; the way of full liberty in relation to God's ultimate purpose or the way of limitation, and we know it quite well. Praise God, some of us have been delivered out of that way, but as we look back we remember the awful limitation in spirit in the things of God when we were working in that organised realm of things in which the majority

of Christian people are doing something on the earth for God, running things for God. Oh yes, we had the Ishmael on our hands right enough! He was our responsibility, but oh! the sense of limitation and bondage spiritually. Whatever may be our sense of limitation now, it is not spiritual limitation. We have an open heaven; we have the universe of God opened to us. Our limitation now is only along the line of our imprisonment to the Lord, that we can only do what the Lord allows us to do and tells us to do; nothing of ourselves. We remember the Ishmael line, how we groaned and groaned against that line of things. God has set us free.

Well, here are two alternatives, two ways. Now, do you feel sometimes like that? Oh, this is a difficult way the Lord has called us to, an impossible way, and along this way few there are that agree with us, who understand, who believe that we can be right. The majority take the other way and strongly so. Do you sometimes feel, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You! Oh, that it might only be acceptable to God to take that way!" May the Lord strengthen our faith that we may not fail of the heavenly calling.