

Prayers of Approach

Blessèd are you, Creator of all things;
the heavens adore you.

Let the whole earth worship you.

Let all peoples proclaim you.

Let us serve you in love and in peace.

[Silence]

Come, Lord, and rule.

Come into our hearts
and fill them with love.

Come, Lord, and rule.

Come into our minds,
and fill them with peace.

Come, Lord, and rule.

Come into our lives
and fill them with light.

Come, Lord, and rule.

Come into our days
and fill them with glory.

Come, Lord, and rule.¹

[Genesis 21:8-21](#)

My paternal grandfather was one of eight siblings. There were six brothers and two sisters. When their father died, his will revealed that he had left his estate entirely to the boys. The girls received nothing.

My grandfather thought this was unfair. He said to his brothers that they should give a share to their sisters.

But they refused, and they ostracised my grandfather. My grandfather, grandmother, and my own father, who was a little boy, were kicked out of the house where they were living and had to move to a new house, bringing the only possessions they could take with them loaded in just a wheelbarrow.

To this date, we have no contact with that branch of our family. All our contact is through my grandmother's side, not my grandfather's.

You may understand, therefore, why the story of Abraham and Sarah kicking Hagar and Ishmael out hits a nerve for me. And if a mixture of greed and prejudice led to my father and grandparents being thrown out of their home, what caused the problem we read about in today's story from Genesis?

It starts with unbelief. Abraham and Sarah had found it hard to believe God's repeated promise to them that they would have a son in their old age, through whom God would bless the nations.

Now it's not surprising they found it difficult to trust that God would deliver such an audacious promise, but what they did with their unbelief was to take matters into their own hands. They tried to bring about a fulfilment by their own actions. In what sounds like an ancient form of surrogacy, Sarah urges Abraham to sleep with their servant Hagar. And although that was culturally common in those days, it was tantamount to rape or at the very least sexual abuse. And in terms of Genesis chapter 2, where marriage is defined, it was also adultery.

Before we even get to today's story, there is an incident where Hagar taunts Sarah over her childlessness, and then we come to the event we read about, where Ishmael mocks Isaac. The weaning in those days didn't happen until the child was in their third year, so let's say Isaac is about two and a half, and Ishmael is a few years older. We know how cruel children can be in taunting others, and Sarah erupts. Not only does she want to protect her own son, this taps into all the unhealed hurt and jealousy she has been carrying for some years.

This puts Abraham in a painful quandary, because both Isaac and Ishmael are his sons. But if ever someone had made a rod for his own back, Abraham had done that here. That desire to take control rather than trust God some years before has now come back to haunt him. Sin comes home to roost.

What we have here is a terrible human mess that is not dissimilar from some of the broken families we encounter today. We see single parents heroically bringing up children alone, without the support of a spouse. There are of course so many reasons for this. Sometimes, one or both of the couple brings unresolved damage from their own upbringing into the relationship. Other times a couple just can't handle a tragedy that affects them both. For some, selfishness gets in the way of love in a whole variety of ways. At worst, our women's refuges bear testimony to some of the most horrific stories.

But in our story, God is involved. And this narrative doesn't end in broken lives, even though it threatens to. What difference does God make in the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael?

It's simple. It can be summed up in one word, one of the most beautiful words that Christians use. Grace.

But what is grace? I saw a church document recently that defined grace simply as God's unconditional love towards people. But that's far too bland. It's more than unconditional love: it's *unmerited* love. It is the love and favour God gives to us, even though we don't deserve it, due to our sin. Therefore, it's forgiveness, but it's more. It's also the invitation into his family. It's the way he chooses to use sinners and broken people in his purposes. It's the delight he takes in us, even though we have failed him and we continue to fail him.

You may have heard me give a mnemonic for the word 'grace' before. If you haven't, here it is: GRACE stands for God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Grace is God's abundant love to us, despite our sin, obtained by Christ's death on the Cross. It is more than mercy, where we are spared the judgment we deserve. Grace is where we positively receive good things from God that we don't deserve.

How does that play out in Genesis 21? Let's take Abraham and Sarah for starters. God has not rejected them from his plan when they took matters into their own hands, despite the disastrous consequences. In his grace, God has stuck with them. That doesn't mean that God is a soft touch, because there are still painful consequences to work through. But if anyone watching this thinks that they have committed an unforgivable sin and God has thrown them on the rubbish heap, I say to you, look at God's dealings with Abraham and Sarah. There is a way back. There is another chance. There is hope. God's love does not run out after we make one failure, even a terrible one.

And then look at Hagar and Ishmael. While God's overall purposes don't change, in that Ishmael is not the son of the promise, nevertheless God still blesses them. He has compassion on them in the desert, and we might think especially about that today as we conclude Refugee Week. Here is God looking after refugees.

And God still blesses Ishmael, by promising to make him into a great nation. Traditionally, Ishmael is regarded as the father of the Arab peoples. Israel may have been the covenant nation and God worked out his saving purposes for

the world through them, but he still blessed the children of Ishmael. God did not leave Ishmael and Hagar to die in the desert: he enabled them and their descendants to prosper.

So if you feel like you aren't at the centre of God's purposes and you don't feel like you're one of the most favoured people, I say to you, look again at Ishmael. And if you feel your life has taken all sorts of bad turns because you have been the victim of other more powerful people, I say to you, look at how mercifully God dealt with Hagar. Take heart. God is for you, not against you.

Let me invite you to discover God's grace. There is nothing more beautiful.

I began with that awful story about what happened to my father and my grandparents. I've no idea whether anyone in the branch of my family with which we have no contact has ever discovered grace, but I know for sure that my grandparents did, and so did my father and my aunt.

I only have time to talk about one of them, so I shall tell you about my grandmother. She found grace as life took different paths from what she had hoped. In her youth, she had wanted to travel abroad as a Christian missionary, but health considerations had prevented her. So she turned to supporting missionary work around the world, and particularly the work of one friend. You may have heard of her friend. Her name was Gladys Aylward.

Then in the nineteen thirties, when the Depression compounded the precarious financial situation the family was in, my grandmother was to be seen on her knees, praying for food, only for someone anonymously to drop off a food parcel at the front door. She knew grace.

So I repeat: I invite you to discover the beauty of God's grace. Speak to God either out loud or silently in your mind. Tell him about the pain you've been carrying, or the pain you've caused others. Ask him to bring his merciful love more deeply into your life through Jesus.

And then see what happens. Contact me if you want to know more.

Prayers of Intercession

For the whole church that it may be one,

Hear us, good Lord.

For all who work for peace, unity and concord,

Hear us, good Lord.

For the work of the United Nations and peace-keeping forces,

Hear us, good Lord.

For those who maintain the law and administer justice,

Hear us, good Lord.

For all who influence our future,

Hear us, good Lord.

For all in government and positions of authority,

Hear us, good Lord.²

Our Father ...

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shades lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then Lord, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, one God for ever. **Amen.³**

God the Father, who created you,
God the Son, who redeemed you,
God the Spirit, who sanctifies you,
bless and keep you, now and evermore.⁴

¹ David Adam, *The Rhythm Of Life*, p93.

² *Ibid.*, p96.

³ *Ibid.*, a prayer of Cardinal John Henry Newman.

⁴ *Ibid.*