

The connection between these three points is obvious. Ishmael (1) lived before God and (2) was blessed by God, and (3) God heard and answered his prayers.

(4) *God was with Ishmael*. “God was with the lad,” Ishmael (Gen. 21:20), as He was, for example, “with” Abraham (22), Jacob (28:15) and Joseph (39:2, 3, 21, 23), just as Jehovah is “with” all of His elect and believing people. The word “with” is the preposition of God’s covenant fellowship with His saints in Christ and by the Holy Spirit.

Let us restate the four points made so far, emphasizing the prepositions. Ishmael (1) lived *before* God, (2) was blessed *by* God and (4) was *with* God. No wonder that we read twice that (3) God answered his prayers!

(5) *Ishmael was gathered unto his people at his death*. After his 137 years in this life, Ishmael “gave up the ghost and died; and was gathered unto his people” (25:17). The statements that, at death, an individual was “gathered to/unto his people” or a group were “gathered unto their fathers” are significant references in the early books of the Old Testament to the blessed life of God’s people beyond their deaths.

This terminology is first used of father Abraham. Dying at the age of 175, he was “gathered to his people” (25:8). Some 90 or more years before, the Lord had promised Abraham, “thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace” (15:15). The godly “people” and “fathers” to whom Abraham went at death include Terah, Shem, Noah, Methuselah, Enoch, Seth, Adam and Eve. Also like Ishmael, “Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people” (35:29), as did Jacob (49:29, 33).

Besides these three great patriarchs in Genesis, Ishmael was gathered unto his people like the two sons of Amram and Jochebed: Aaron (Num. 20:24, 26; 27:13; Deut. 32:50) and Moses (Num. 27:13; 31:2; Deut. 32:50). The faithful generation that conquered the promised land under Joshua was also “gathered unto their fathers” (Judg. 2:10).

Thus in Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Judges we have 13 occurrences of the phrase “gathered to/unto his people/their fathers.” These references include six believing individuals—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron and Moses, as well as Ishmael (who marks the second use of this terminology)—and one godly generation, that of Joshua.

At the death of God’s people, they are buried as to their bodies. As to their souls, believers are gathered unto their spiritual fathers and people by Jehovah in His infinite mercy through the crucified and risen Christ.

To sum up this article, we have looked at five key testimonies: two from Genesis 17, two from Genesis 21 and one from Genesis 25. Their united testimony is that Ishmael was saved. After all, in this world, (1) Ishmael lived before God; (4) God was with him, (2) blessed him and (3) answered his prayers. When he left this world, (5) God in love gathered Ishmael unto his people. What more could one want?

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Was Ishmael Saved?

Was Ishmael, the son of Hagar, saved? There are differences of opinion among orthodox Christians on this question, with some claiming that he was not a believer and others reckoning that he was a child of God.

In this article, I will give no less than five biblical arguments in support of the position that Ishmael was saved by God’s sovereign grace in Jesus Christ. I shall present the points in the order in which they arise in the first book of the Bible, from Ishmael’s thirteenth year (Gen. 17), to his expulsion from Abraham’s camp (Gen. 21) and to his death over a century later (Gen. 25).

(1) *Ishmael lived before God*. In answer to Abraham’s prayer, “O that Ishmael might live before thee!” (17:18), the Lord responded, “And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee” (20). Was Abraham merely asking God for the continuation of Ishmael’s physical life? There is no indication in the inspired narrative that Ishmael was sick or in danger of expiring. Instead, Abraham here prayed for Ishmael’s *spiritual* life. After all, the grand subject of Genesis 17 is the covenant of grace! Father Abraham was concerned here with Ishmael’s covenant life, that is, everlasting life in Jesus Christ. Jehovah answered this prayer for Ishmael lived before God as His covenant friend. This is the prayer of all godly parents, themselves the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham, regarding their children: “O that our sons and daughters might live before thee in Christ!”

(2) *Ishmael was blessed by God*. Jehovah’s response to Abraham’s prayer for his son is not only, “as for Ishmael, I have heard thee,” but also, “Behold, I have blessed him” (20). Surely, Ishmael is blessed by God (20) with the divine favour, as was blessed believing Sarah (16). Remember too that the blessings of Genesis 17 are *covenant* blessings in the coming Messiah!

This second point regarding Ishmael’s salvation reinforces the first. (1) Ishmael lived before God as (2) one blessed by God. In answer to Abraham’s prayer, “O that Ishmael might *live* before thee!” (17:18), the Lord responded, “And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have *blessed* him” (20).

(3) *God answered Ishmael’s prayers*. Genesis 21:17 states this twice and unambiguously regarding Ishmael: “*God heard the voice of the lad*; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for *God hath heard the voice of the lad*.” Here is the teaching of Scripture regarding whose prayers Jehovah answers: “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination” (Prov. 28:9); “Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth” (John 9:31).

Our question for this issue of the *News* is: "In Acts 24:25, when Paul 'reasoned' with Felix of 'righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come,' Felix 'trembled.' This man is viewed by many to be an unbeliever for, instead of believing the gospel that Paul shared with him, he sent the apostle away: 'Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.' How do we explain the *trembling* of this (apparently) unregenerate man apart from a gracious work of the Spirit, convicting him of his sins and bringing him to an acknowledgment that what he heard is the truth, though he rejected it? Surely unbelievers wouldn't have any concern for these things, for there is 'no fear of God before their eyes' (Rom. 3:18)?"

It would seem from Scripture that trembling before God and His Word is a mark of God's people, an evidence of repentance, of the true knowledge of God and even of humble gratitude for what God has done as Saviour (Ezra 9:4; Isa. 32:11; 66:2, 5; Jer. 33:9; Hab. 3:16; Mark 16:8; Acts 7:32). The wicked in Israel are commanded to repent and tremble before God in Jeremiah 5:21-22: "Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not: Fear ye not me? saith the LORD: will ye not tremble at my presence?"

Surely it is true that God's redeemed people tremble at the knowledge of their own sinfulness and of how near they were to eternal punishment in hell. Especially they tremble at the fact that they have sinned against God. They tremble when they see something of His glory and majesty, and when they behold the greatness of His salvation. Trembling is, for the believer, a mark of grace and of God's work of salvation in Christ.

However, it is also true that the ungodly can and do tremble before God. In Deuteronomy 2:25, God promised that the heathen Canaanite nations would tremble when they heard of Israel's victories east of the Jordan (and of their passage across that river into the land of Canaan). Jeremiah 10:10, looking ahead to the end, says that the nations will tremble at God's wrath: "But the LORD is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king: at his wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation." This is of the same nature as the trembling of Felix.

Many think that such trembling is an evidence of a common or preparatory grace of God, shown to those who are not yet regenerated or who may never be saved. This is wrong. Trembling before God is either an evidence of saving grace or only an evidence of unbelieving terror.

There is nothing in Scripture that suggests any change of heart or repentance on the part of Felix. That he knew something of the true God is likely for he was married to a Jewess (Acts 24:24) but this was no saving knowledge. That he knew something of the gospel is stated in Acts 24:22 and is no surprise, since he ruled the area where Christianity had its roots. His dealings with Paul show him to be wicked and unbelieving. He was interested merely in a bribe and in doing the Jews a favour (26-27). He trembled because Paul talked to him about righteousness, temperance and judgment, for he was

unrighteous, intemperate and under the judgment of God.

Was this the work of the Spirit? Was it a gracious work of the Spirit? Did it show some knowledge of, and conviction for, sin? That it was the work of the Spirit is without doubt, for all things are of the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit. This is not to say, however, that it is a *gracious* operation of the Spirit in the heart of Felix. How could there be any grace in it when it produced nothing of value and only made the suffering of Paul longer and greater? How could Felix's trembling be anything but terror before God, entirely lacking saving knowledge, for all he cared for was money and the opinions of men? There is nothing of a gracious operation of the Spirit in that. Indeed, the word translated "trembled" is a word that simply means "frightened." Felix was frightened, as the ungodly often are when God shakes them out of their complacency.

The most important passage that reflects on Felix's trembling is James 2:19: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble." The word translated "tremble" describes not the feeling of terror, so much as the shuddering and shaking that results from extreme fear. The devils shake at the thought of God but their shaking is neither a gracious work of the Spirit, nor evidence of conviction for sin.

The fear that unbelievers sometimes show and the knowledge (non-saving and not gracious) that they have of God is explained in Romans 1:18-32. God manifests Himself to them in their consciences and in the things that are made, the creation: "that which may be known of God is manifest in them" (19). The knowledge of God that they have does not have anything gracious in it. It only leaves them "without excuse" (20).

Thus this knowledge of God bears no good fruit in them. They do not glorify Him or show thankfulness to Him (21). They turn the truth of God into a lie, and worship and serve the creature more than the Creator (25). Their idolatry is not evidence of some felt need for God, that they all have a "God-shaped hole in their hearts," but is instead proof that they do not want to serve Him. What is more, turning from God, they fall into the vile affections which are so much a part of our society. Their unsaving and ungracious knowledge of God produces in them the sin of homosexuality (26-27).

Do they know God? Yes, they do. At least, they know His eternal power and divinity (20). Does that knowledge of God have any saving value? It does not. It only produces, in the righteous judgment of God, more wickedness. Is there any grace in that knowledge of God? There is not, for grace does not lead to the unnatural affections mentioned in Romans 1. Does God have His purpose in making Himself known to them? Yes, He does. He leaves them "without excuse" now and forever (20).

Romans 1 explains Felix's trembling, as does the Word of God in James 2:19. God did what Ezekiel 32:10 describes: He brandished His sword before Felix through Paul's testimony and Felix trembled for his life. What a difference between the trembling of Felix and that of Habakkuk, who said, "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble" (3:16). That is trembling by grace and with profit, trembling that finds rest in Jesus Christ.

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