

## INJUSTICE AND HOPE

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** [Genesis 21:8-21](#)

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** [Genesis 21:8-21](#)

### GENESIS 21:8-20

<sup>8</sup> The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. <sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, <sup>10</sup> and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

<sup>11</sup> The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. <sup>12</sup> But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. <sup>13</sup> I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”



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**<sup>14</sup> Early the next morning 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. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.**

**<sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup> Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.**

**<sup>17</sup> God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. <sup>18</sup> Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a**

great nation.”

<sup>19</sup> Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

<sup>20</sup> God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer.

## KEY TEXT

*God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”—Genesis 21:17–18*

# JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

## Unit 2: God: The Source of Justice

### LESSONS 5–9

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List key features of the relationships among the six individuals (including God).
2. Compare and contrast Abraham’s distress with that of Sarah and Hagar.
3. Write a prayer of praise for God’s presence during a difficult time of life.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

#### A. Deaf “Gods”

#### B. Lesson Context

#### I. The Last Laugh (Genesis 21:8–13)

##### A. What Sarah Saw (vv. 8–9)

##### B. What Sarah Said (vv. 10–11)

##### *The Wicked Stepmother*

##### C. What God Said (vv. 12–13)

#### II. A Lasting Promise (Genesis 21:14–20)

##### A. Hagar’s Wandering (vv. 14–16)

##### B. God’s Hearing (vv. 17–18)

### C. God's Help (vv. 19–20)

*I Hit My Knees, Hard!*

#### Conclusion

A. God Who Hears

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## HOW TO SAY IT

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Beersheba | Beer- <i>she</i> -buh.                  |
| Gerar     | <i>Gear</i> -rar (G as in <i>get</i> ). |
| Hagar     | <i>Hay</i> -gar.                        |
| Ishmael   | <i>Ish</i> -may-el.                     |
| Keturah   | Keh- <i>too</i> -ruh.                   |
| Paran     | <i>Pair</i> -un.                        |

## Introduction

### A. Deaf “Gods”

Isaiah 44:10–20 provides an incisive “mockumentary” of ancient Near East idolatry. Someone plants a tree and the rain waters it. Then someone cuts down that tree and uses half of it for firewood. Then a craftsman carves the other half into an image, claims it is a god, and asks it to save him. How, Isaiah wondered, could anyone in his or her right mind do such a thing? A block of wood does not have understanding. It neither sees nor hears, let alone acts in history to save.

Idolatry hasn't changed much over the centuries. And beyond that type of idol, people who have achieved fame are often idolized. Yet these people were once babies—utterly dependent on their parents for everything. But because a person is a household name, some hang on their every word, expecting inspiration that will put life on the right path. But these idols cannot save either.

The truth is, only God can hear, speak, and act to save. He hears the cries of his people and heeds the pleas of the oppressed. In today's passage, we see the God of Abraham listening attentively and offering a word of true hope.

### B. Lesson Context

The second part of the book of Genesis could be called personal history (see [Lesson Context](#) from [lesson 5](#)). It is about people who have purpose in the plan of God to bring the Messiah into the world at just the right time ([Galatians 4:4](#)). This section of Genesis begins with [Genesis 11:27](#). The focus is on the descendants of Abraham who continue through Isaac, Jacob, and the latter's 12 sons.

When God called Abraham and Sarah (then Abram and Sarai) to leave Ur, he promised to bring them to the land he would give them and to make Abraham's family a great nation ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). Abraham entered Canaan at age 75, and he was told that this was the land that God planned to give to Abraham's descendants ([12:7](#)). After Abraham and his nephew Lot went their separate ways, Abraham was again told that all the land he could see would be given to his descendants ([13:15](#)).

Yet Sarah was unable to conceive a child ([Genesis 11:30](#)). She sought to overcome her barrenness by asking Abraham to impregnate one of her slaves ([16:2–3](#)). Sarah's logic in this seems strange to us. Why would a wife willingly allow her husband to have an intimate relationship with another woman? This seems to be a recipe for disaster! But the logic of this practice, common at the time, went something like this: "If my slave produces a child, that child will be mine, just like his mother is my property." Sarah thought she could have a son in this secondary way and thus please her husband.

One of their slaves was an Egyptian named Hagar ([Genesis 16:3](#)). She presumably came into their household when the family sojourned in Egypt ([12:16](#)). Hagar was Sarah's personal attendant. When Abraham and Sarah's attempts to produce a child were unsuccessful, Sarah offered Hagar to Abraham (never asking the slave's consent), hoping this union would yield a child. This attempt to run ahead of God turned out to be a bad idea, as [Genesis 16:4b–6](#) shows.

When Hagar conceived, it created a rift between the two women. Hagar looked down on Sarah ([Genesis 16:4](#)), and Sarah retaliated with harsh treatment. When Hagar fled, God comforted her and encouraged her to return to Abraham and Sarah, with the promise that God would bless her offspring ([16:9–12](#)). The baby born to Abraham and Hagar was named Ishmael (see [21:17b](#), below).

Eventually God made it clear to Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son ([Genesis 18:1–15](#)). Isaac, the child of this miraculous conception, would become the heir to God's promise to Abraham. Yet with Ishmael still in the mix as Abraham's firstborn son, the situation was ripe for more conflict—which brings us to today's passage.

## I. The Last Laugh

([GENESIS 21:8–13](#))

### A. What Sarah Saw (vv. 8–9)

**8. The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.**

We are not told when exactly a baby was expected to be *weaned*. Much later in Israel, Hannah (another barren woman whom God enabled to conceive) entrusted her son Samuel into the care of Eli to be raised as a priest after he was weaned ([1 Samuel 1:22–24](#)). This likely did not occur before Samuel was 3 years old, perhaps closer to 4.



Visual for [Lesson 6](#). Allow one minute for silent personal reflection on this truth before discussing the questions associated with [verse 19](#).

Isaac's weaning was an event to be celebrated. He no longer depended on his mother's breastmilk for sustenance, which allowed him to spend more time with his father and the other men. This important rite of passage for any young boy was especially important for the child of promise, born in miraculous circumstances.

**9. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking,**

Referring to Ishmael as *the son [of] Hagar the Egyptian* emphasizes his relationship to his slave mother rather than to his father. Ishmael was 14 years older than his half brother Isaac (compare [Genesis 16:16](#); [17:25](#) with [21:5](#)), making Ishmael about age 17 when this event took place (see [21:8](#), above).

We are never told exactly what Ishmael said and/or did to draw the accusation of *mocking*. The Hebrew word is the same behind the name Isaac, which means “laughter.” The word can imply simple amusement, but other contexts reveal darker possibilities. The same word was used when Lot’s sons-in-law thought he was kidding around about the imminent destruction of Sodom ([Genesis 19:14](#)). The word also described the frivolity of the idolatrous Israelites with their golden calf ([Exodus 32:6](#)). The term further characterized how a husband and wife enjoyed romantic time together ([Genesis 26:8](#)), appropriate within a marriage but sinful in other contexts. The final possibility of inappropriate touch is most disturbing.

Sarah’s sensitivity to anything to do with Hagar or Ishmael may lead us to assume that she overreacted to a teasing insult to Isaac rather than molestation or abuse. Whatever was happening, it provoked Sarah to act decisively. Given her history with Hagar (see [Lesson Context](#)), Sarah was the worst person to witness Ishmael’s misbehaving.

## B. What Sarah Said (vv. 10–11)

### **10a. and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son,**

As God cast the first couple out of Eden ([Genesis 3:24](#)) and later drove Cain from the soil ([4:14](#); see [lesson 5](#)), so Sarah called *Abraham* to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their camp. We should hesitate to evaluate this action in a moral sense, given the fact of God’s approval ([21:12](#), below). With our knowledge that God worked through Isaac, we might be tempted to excuse Sarah’s request as a pragmatic change-of-address request.

We might ask ourselves, *Do the ends justify the means?* It was cruel to cast out the *slave woman and her son*—a son born because Sarah herself had willed Abraham to impregnate Hagar. Referring to Hagar and Ishmael in the third person rather than by name may have been Sarah’s way of depersonalizing them and distancing them as legitimate recipients of Abraham’s concern. Subjecting Hagar and Ishmael to starvation, exposure, and violence then seemed tolerable to Sarah in some sense.

#### *What Do You Think?*

How do you as an adult believer discern when to allow children to work out their own conflicts and when to step in to protect one child against another?

#### *Digging Deeper*

In the case of intercession, how do you demonstrate God’s love to the offending child?

**10b. “for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”**

When the law is later given at Sinai, it will be mandatory for the firstborn son to inherit a double portion of his father’s estate at the father’s death (see [Deuteronomy 21:15–17](#)). But Sarah was unwilling to see Ishmael even as an heir equal to her own *son*.

### *THE WICKED STEPMOTHER*

Fairy tales exploit negative stereotypes about stepmothers. These stereotyped individuals in story lines serve as foils for conflict and the ultimate triumph of children. Cinderella’s stepmother forced her to live as a servant in her father’s house. Hansel and Gretel’s stepmother sent them out of the house when food became scarce. While we might like to think that such characterizations are entirely imagined—that no adult, no matter her position, would mistreat children—we must admit that there is some truth here.

Disappointingly, Sarah sounds like the wicked stepmother here. Jealousy, pride, fear—all played a part in Sarah’s disregard for Ishmael. And yet God worked through Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael for his purposes. Be alert for how our Father, who watches the women and children this world rejects, may work.

—J. K.

**11. The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son.**

*Abraham* rightly loved *his son* Ishmael. The father was not naïve about the dangers that the boy and his mother would face if sent away. Perhaps Abraham thought both sons would share his inheritance; after all, when God specified that Abraham’s heir would be his own flesh and blood, Sarah was not mentioned ([Genesis 15:4](#)). And if Abraham understood that God intended for only *one* nation to descend from Abraham, then that man could be excused for thinking that his two sons would both contribute to that one people. Ishmael’s banishment would throw all these assumptions into disarray.

#### *What Do You Think?*

In conflicts between others, under what circumstances would you be a peacemaker? a problem solver? a silent bystander?

#### *Digging Deeper*

How do [Proverbs 26:17](#) and [Matthew 5:9](#) help inform your answer?

### **C. What God Said (vv. 12–13)**

**12. But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your off-**



spring will be reckoned.

We might conclude quickly that it's God's will for Hagar and Ishmael to move away. But recognizing three ways to speak of "God's will" is important. The first is that of God's *purposive will* (referring to God's desire and decision; examples: [Genesis 1:1](#); [Acts 2:23](#)). The second is that of his *prescriptive will* (referring to God's desire and human decision; examples: [Hosea 6:6](#); [Matthew 23:37](#)). The third is that of his *permissive will* (referring to human desire and God's permission; examples: [Acts 14:16](#); [James 4:13](#)).

The third of these three is in view here. In other words, God was willing to work within Sarah's desire as he moved his own plan forward. He would act in genuine partnership with Abraham and *Sarah*. Sometimes humans take initiative, and then God responds to their actions. This had been so in Abraham's case at least since Sarah decided to have a child by Hagar.

It is one thing to say that God wanted Sarah to cast away her servant and Abraham's son; it is another thing to say that God allowed it and saw it as a way to carry out his larger promises for his people. Those larger promises revolved around *Isaac*—not Ishmael. So God told Abraham to accept the will of his wife.

**13. "I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."**

In working with Sarah's decision, God did not ignore Hagar or become indifferent to Ishmael. Although God was always going to fulfill his promises through Sarah's child, he chose to also *make* Ishmael *a nation* because he too was Abraham's son (see [Genesis 21:18](#), below). Even so, Abraham left his entire estate to Isaac ([25:5](#)).

After Sarah died, Abraham had additional sons with Keturah ([Genesis 25:1–4](#)). These sons do not appear to receive the same blessing as Ishmael, but Abraham sent them away from Isaac's family with gifts before he died ([25:6](#)).

## II. A Lasting Promise

([GENESIS 21:14–20](#))

### A. Hagar's Wandering (vv. [14–16](#))

**14a. Early the next morning 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.**

In this instance, as in the story of Isaac's near sacrifice, Abraham's obedience to the Lord was seen in his immediate action *early the next morning* ([Genesis 22:3](#)). The only record we have of *Abraham* and Ishmael together after this is when Ishmael returned to help Isaac bury their father ([25:9](#)); whether Ishmael spent time with his dying father is unknown. There is no record of Hagar ever returning to see Abraham.

### **14b. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.**

*Beersheba* was in southern Canaan, west of Gerar, where Abraham had settled ([Genesis 20:1](#)). Later, the entire promised land could be measured from Dan in the north to Beersheba. Indeed, the phrase “from Dan to Beersheba” became a catchphrase in that regard ([Judges 20:1](#); [1 Samuel 3:20](#); [2 Samuel 3:10](#); [17:11](#); [24:2, 15](#); [1 Kings 4:25](#)). Hagar likely intended to return to Egypt and eventually did so ([Genesis 21:21](#)). Her wandering in the desert foreshadowed Israel’s own experience on their journey out of Egypt ([Deuteronomy 2:1](#)). Later Abraham would designate a well in the area by the name Beersheba ([Genesis 21:31](#)). Isaac and Jacob both had significant spiritual experiences in the area ([26:23–25](#); [46:1–4](#)).

### **15. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes.**

We are not told how long Hagar wandered in the desert before running out of provisions, though we would expect that Abraham had sent her and *the boy* away with as much as they could carry. *Put* in this verse is the same term used when Joseph was thrown into a well and left for dead ([Genesis 37:22, 24](#); see also [Exodus 1:22](#)). We can assume that for Hagar to be able to leave her teenage son *under one of the bushes*, he had no strength to change his circumstance.

### **16a. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away,**

Here a play on words measures this distance in terms of *a bowshot*, foreshadowing Hagar and Ishmael’s own near future (see [Genesis 21:20](#), below).

**16b. for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.**

The last time Hagar ran away, pregnant with Ishmael, God met her by a spring of water and promised that Ishmael would grow into manhood ([Genesis 16:7–12](#)). At that time, she called the Lord “the One who sees me” ([16:13](#)). It must have seemed to her that God was breaking this promise and refusing to see their current plight. Not giving a thought to her own likely death, she sobbed for her *boy*.

#### *What Do You Think?*

Without giving directive advice, how would you counsel someone who feels hopeless?

#### *Digging Deeper*

Under what circumstances would sharing [Romans 8:28](#) and/or [2 Corinthians 4:7–9](#) *not* be a good idea?

## **B. God’s Hearing (vv. 17–18)**

**17a. God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid;**

*The angel of God* opened a conversation with Hagar as “the angel of the Lord” had done previously: with a question about her status ([Genesis 16:7–8](#)). But this time the angel didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, the unanswered question is immediately followed by the command *not [to] be afraid*. Throughout the Bible, this command shows up dozens of times, often when humans encounter God or angelic beings (see [Joshua 8:1](#); [Matthew 28:5](#); [Luke 1:13, 30](#)).

Hagar would not have the language of God’s love driving out fear, but surely her experience confirms the apostle John’s words in [1 John 4:16–18](#). Because God loved both Hagar and Ishmael, the mother had no reason to fear for her child. When God calls his people to fear not, he calls them to love him and trust in his plans for them.

**17b. “God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.**

We may wonder why the angel told Hagar that God *heard the boy*, even though Hagar was the one weeping audibly in the previous verse. Nowhere in [Genesis 21](#) is Ishmael referred to by name, which is a combination of the Hebrew words that mean “God hears” ([Genesis 16:11](#)). By emphasizing that he heard the teenager, God showed Hagar that he was looking after her son personally. He proved her son’s name to be reassuringly true, even when it seemed that not even the boy’s mother had the capacity to listen to him any longer.

**18. “Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”**

God already had promised that Ishmael would become *a great nation* ([Genesis 17:20](#)), and God planned to keep his promise. The only other person to whom God made such a promise was Abraham ([12:1–2](#)). Ishmael would have 12 sons ([25:12–18](#)) as would Isaac’s son Jacob ([49:1–28](#)). These Ishmaelites show up in Joseph’s story (see [37:25–28](#)). They were nomadic people, generally living in northern Arabia.

### C. God’s Help (vv. 19–20)

**19. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.**

Why Hagar could not see the *well* before is not clear. Perhaps her exhaustion and dehydration prevented her from seeing what was right before her eyes. This *water* was enough to revive Ishmael and keep her hope alive. The God whom she previously declared to be the God who “sees me” ([Genesis 16:13](#)) had opened her own eyes.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What has to happen for you to “open your eyes” (physically or spiritually) more fully to God’s blessings?

#### *Digging Deeper*

### ***I HIT MY KNEES, HARD!***

On Saturday, January 13, 2018, the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency sent an alert to tens of thousands of Hawaii cell phones that warned of an inbound ballistic missile. The alert caused immediate panic in many who saw it. Only minutes later, relief came in a second message confirming that the first was a false alarm.

My friend Diana had been in Hawaii at the time. She told me she immediately fell to her knees when she read the text. “And when I got up, I asked the Lord for two things: help me be brave, and if I die today, please make it quick. Other than that, I knew that I was ready to go.”

Her testimony was short, but powerful. Hagar might tell a similar story. In her crying, the Spirit of God heard her and cared for her and her son. No matter how dire the situation, God hears and God loves.

—C. T.

#### **20a. God was with the boy as he grew up.**

God kept his promise to Hagar. His presence *with the boy* serves as a reminder that, though God looks after his chosen people in a special way, he also cares for people beyond that group (compare [Matthew 5:45](#)). Indeed, God set apart Abraham's family through Isaac precisely to bless all nations ([Genesis 12:3](#)). How great to serve a God who has always loved the whole world and chose to demonstrate it through his Son ([John 3:16–18](#))!

#### **20b. He lived in the desert and became an archer.**

Ishmael's becoming *an archer* completes the play on words from verse 16. More importantly, it also fills out some of God's original declaration about the boy's future. The last time God spoke with Hagar, he told her that Ishmael would become a wild man at odds with others ([Genesis 16:12](#)), a characteristic one might expect from a boy growing to maturity *in the desert* without a father to guide him or a community to mold him. Bows were the weapon of choice in Ishmael's time—for hunting ([27:3](#)) and waging war ([1 Samuel 31:3](#)). These skills undoubtedly contributed much to his survival and eventual prosperity.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. God Who Hears**

Hagar had a difficult life. But as Ishmael's name reminds us, God hears! Abraham's God, who loved both Isaac and Ishmael, is the Lord of all creation. He cares for all people, and he keeps his promises. He hears all cries of injustice, and he responds with a message of hope.

That message must be preached, taught, and lived by his people before the watching world, which is desperate for a better story than the divisions that so often define our lives. When *we* hear, the world might begin to believe that God also hears.

*What Do You Think?*

How will you resolve the principle or precedent in today's text that you have the most trouble with?

*Digging Deeper*

When will you start that process?

## B. Prayer

God who hears, we raise our voices to you. Strengthen our hope so the world may have hope in you through our faithful witness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## C. Thought to Remember

Call out to the God  
who hears.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

*Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

### Into the Lesson

Give each participant several self-stick notes on which to write different *kinds* of relationships, one per note. As they take no more than a minute to do so, draw a spectrum line across the board; write “adversity/tension” on one end and “peace/trust” on the other end.

Have volunteers stick their notes along the line, to indicate the general quality of their own relationships. When all those willing to post notes have done so, review them for trends. Follow this by asking participants to share why some types of relationships tend to be more tense or more peaceful.

*Alternative.* Invite participants to mention characters from books or movies who were underdogs. After each example, pose the following questions to the whole group: 1–What

made the underdog’s goal seem unattainable? 2–What made the difference and turned the story around?

After either activity, say, “Challenging relationships or situations can make us fearful and without hope. But today’s lesson has the cure.”

### Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Genesis 21:8–13](#). Then have three volunteers play the roles of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, each one taking turns telling this part of the story in “their own words” (it’s best to recruit these actors in advance). Allow opportunities for reactions and feedback. For whole-class discussion, ask how perspective and personal emotions affected the ways the characters saw and responded to this complicated situation.

Have a volunteer read [Genesis 21:14–20](#). Challenge participants to think of as many other examples as possible of God or an angel telling someone to “fear not.” As participants name these instances, list them on the left side of the board under a column titled *Example*. Then divide the class into small groups and assign one or two examples to each. Challenge them to find the book, chapter, and verse of the instance and read it in context. While groups work, add columns on the board headed *Reference* and *Reason Not to Fear*. Have each group choose a volunteer to come to the board to make appropriate entries under the headers. Do your own research in advance so you can mention instances that class members miss.

*Option 1.* Have participants choose a partner as you distribute copies of the “Relationship Dynamics” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. After pairs complete the exercise, reconvene for whole-class discussion.

*Option 2.* For deeper study and possible input for *Option 1*, distribute copies of the “Hagar and God” exercise from the activity page to complete together. Allow time for whole-group discussion and insights.

### Into Life

Write this phrase across the top of the board:

*Praise be to the God who ...*

Invite participants to think of a way to complete the phrase to describe their experiences with God. Have volunteers come forward and write their responses on the board.

Follow by asking why the meaning of the name *Ishmael* (“God hears”) is significant. Encourage participants to recall a difficult time they were able to endure, when all hope seemed lost. Challenge them to recall the presence of God during that time and how He

restored hope.

*Alternative.* Instruct participants to think about a difficult and seemingly helpless season of life and connect it with a hymn, Bible verse, etc., that strengthened them to walk through that time. Invite individuals to quote, read, or even sing the words that helped them as a testimony and act of praise to God for His faithfulness. Come prepared to do so yourself.