

Foundations: Child of the Promise
By Jason Huff
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Romans 4:18-25; Hebrews 11:11-16; Genesis 21:1-21

Our final Scripture reading for today is Genesis 21:1-21. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.” 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. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob. 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.” 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. God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.”

It’s easy to be cynical about promises. I searched this week for an anecdote to include in the sermon about keeping promises. No matter how I worded the search, the top results were all about politicians, almost all of which were about campaign promises that were broken. Didn’t matter which party or country we were talking about. We’re used to being lied to by politicians.

I thought about it, and I realized just how often we feel betrayed by broken promises. When someone tells you in a movie, “I’m a man of my word,” it almost certainly means they’re going to lie. I remember in the movie *Jerry Maguire* how a young football player’s dad makes a handshake deal with Jerry, saying, “You know I don’t do contracts, but what you do have is my word. And it’s stronger than oak.” We know how that turned out. In 1990, a huge men’s movement called Promise Keepers was designed to help Christian men live lives of integrity. It went from having over 600,000 men at the National Mall in Washington, DC to fizzling a few years later. Apparently, we weren’t as interested in being promise keepers as we thought.

That's why today's passage is so very important to us. In the last few months, as we've walked through the story of Abraham, we've heard God make promises to Abraham. In fact, God gave Abraham all sorts of specific details of how He would make Abraham's people into a nation after their captivity in Egypt, and how this people would come from a son he would have with his wife Sarah – not through Abraham and Sarah's practical but foolish plan to give Abraham an heir through her maidservant Hagar.

God made Abraham very wealthy through his travels, and he became a well-known tribal leader throughout the land of Canaan. But for twenty-five years, the promise of an heir for Abraham through Sarah was just that – a promise. And because of their ages, it seemed a truly impossible promise to keep. Yet, in today's passage, the impossible happens. The promise is fulfilled.

Let's take a look at the opening phrase of this passage: "Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised." The way this is worded, we're meant to pay attention to it. In English, when we want to emphasize something in writing, we might put it in bold type or add an exclamation point to a sentence. In Hebrew, you can tell there's an emphasis when the same thing is said twice in slightly different language. Many weeks I use a benediction that says, "The Lord look upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you and give you His peace." It's the same thing, essentially, with just some minor differences.

Same thing here. We're supposed to be paying the most attention to the fact that God kept His promise to Sarah. We get lots of details about what happened that show Sarah's joy. Isaac's name is very similar to the word "laughter" in Hebrew, and Sarah uses it as a play on words to show her wonderful laughter at finally having a child. We know that the child was circumcised as God had commanded, and there was a great feast to celebrate. All those give us the sense of just how overjoyed they were that Isaac had arrived.

But the great emphasis is on God's promise and on the miracle God had provided. The concept of promise is raised three times, and so is the fact that Abraham was old – 100 years old, in fact. That's the core truth, and here's how it applies to us: *we trust in Jesus' promise to save us in the here and now and in the future because we have seen God's miraculous promises kept in the past.* The repetition here is not for show. The details of the birth and Sarah's comments are beautiful, but first and foremost in our minds should be the fact that God kept His Word over a span of twenty-five years, doing something that even modern medicine four thousand years later cannot duplicate.

This is the reason why we must be faithful readers of not just the New Testament but the Old Testament. The Old Testament lays all the background for us. The Old Testament is where we see God making and keeping His promises over and over again. It's in the Old Testament where God faithfully makes a way for Abraham's people to come out of Egypt wealthy and then become the nation of Israel. It's the Old Testament where we see the promise of a Savior who is coming to rescue God's people. It's the Old Testament where we see that the Messiah will be from the line of David, where we get countless other details about the Prince of Peace who will release us from the captivity of sin, which Jesus utterly fulfills.

I believe because of the promises God has already kept. Because what we often don't say but we should acknowledge is that the work of Christ is done, but the promises that will come true because of Christ's work haven't all occurred yet. The resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting are truths we believe and trust in, we confess them in the creeds of the church, because we believe and trust in Jesus, but those things haven't come about yet in their fullness. Until we die or Jesus comes again, we have promises.

And like our Scriptures from the New Testament tell us, the people of God have lived and died trusting in the promises, often times seeing their fulfillment far off and rejoicing that they would one day come true. This isn't a spoiler, but Abraham will die having one heir and having seen his two grandsons reach the age of 15. That's it. Abraham never sees a people greater than the sands on the seashore or stars in the sky. But Abraham knows those things will happen because God kept His promise to give him a son through Sarah, even though it was impossible and he would later be described as "as good as dead."

Our faith in Jesus is not misplaced. We believe based on a striking amount of logical evidence spread out over two thousand years, a huge cloud of witnesses, and an untold number of encounters and proofs. But all of that goes back to Abraham and the proof here that God can and will do the impossible to keep His promise and to bless His people.

If someone says to you, "I don't believe in man-made religion," I can honestly tell them, "I don't either." I don't believe in human philosophies of goodness or in a system of karma. I believe in God who preserved His story through Scripture, who revealed Himself to so many different people throughout the ages, who keeps His promises over and over again. I believe in Jesus because He is the logical and literal fulfillment of promises made by the promise-keeping Father. I believe we who believe have the Holy Spirit because Jesus promised the Spirit was coming to us.

I believe in life after death and the resurrection of the saints and eternity spent with God in the new heaven and the new earth because you can trust someone's patterns. Liars lie. Cheaters cheat. A faithful and perfect God faithfully and perfectly fulfills His promises. And so when I see Isaac, I don't just see a little baby miraculously born to a couple that by our standards should be long dead. I see the start of a long, long line of promises being kept. Do I believe in Jesus because of Isaac? In part, yes. Because God has proven trustworthy.

Science is good as far as it goes. I do trust that God has blessed us enough to have some scientific solutions to a few of life's problems. But science can't make up its mind. Scientists can't decide exactly how old the dinosaurs were, when life actually began looking like it does now on the planet. Scientists keep changing their minds on what foods we should eat – in the almost fifty years I've been alive, I've been told a lot of different things about what I should have on my plate. Famously, theologian R.C. Sproul had conversations with astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan and asked him, "What happened before the big bang?" And Carl Sagan answered, "I don't want to go there." As author Lee Strobel has said, I don't have enough faith to be an atheist! I have faith in the God who has proven Himself over and over again in real time, in real history, to real people with problems and sins who look a lot like me.

Speaking of people with problems and sins like mine, let's look now at the second half of this passage. If the first half is joyful celebration at the birth of the child of promise, the second half is disturbing and easily misunderstood. But digging into it might make us rethink what's going on here.

When Isaac was weaned, Abraham throws a great feast. This is when Sarah sees Ishmael mocking Isaac. This spells trouble. What the text doesn't stop to remind us is that there is a fourteen year age difference between Ishmael and Isaac. It's hard to say in an ancient culture when exactly Isaac was weaned, but the best guess is, Ishmael is now 16 or 17.

And he is not a shrinking violet. Back near his birth, in Genesis 16, the angel of the LORD said, "He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers." This is not a childhood taunt from the kindergarten bully who will shrink back at the first sign of pushback. This is a dangerous young man with a vicious streak who sees the potential of his firstborn status being threatened, living in an ancient culture before the rule of law. As long as Ishmael is in the picture and seen as an heir of Abraham, Isaac is in danger. From the earliest days of Cain and Abel, fratricide was a very real possibility.

We might ask how Sarah, who has been shown great mercy by God in the gift of Isaac, could be so merciless to Hagar and Ishmael. It's a fair question. But let us also remember back to Genesis 16. The first time Hagar was exiled, it was because once she got pregnant, she despised her mistress. For the better part of twenty years, Sarah waited while Hagar and Abraham doted on Ishmael, a boy who was difficult to handle in the best of times, who is now openly reviling his brother. This is not just about a bad decision that created a twenty year rivalry or wounded pride and hurt feelings. This is about a threat that could pull Abraham's entire community, his entire life, apart. Sarah may seem heartless, but she sees the danger, and she knows the truth that was promised to her – Isaac is the child of the promise, not Ishmael. So she goes to Abraham and tells Abraham what he himself can't or won't see – Ishmael and Hagar need to be exiled so that there is no threat to Isaac, the rightful heir that God promised.

Abraham is distressed about this, like he has been over Ishmael in the past. We feel for Abraham; he loves his son and wants to be a good father. He wishes it would not come to this. But God speaks to Abraham and tells him to do what Sarah says, because Isaac is the child through whom all the promises will be kept. And even though it was not part of the original promise, God will still make a nation out of Ishmael, because he is Abraham's child. God will watch over Ishmael in spite of the way he has disrespected his father by disrespecting his son Isaac. So, reluctantly, Abraham provides provisions for them and sends them on their way.

You might remember from the sermon a couple of weeks back, we talked about how insanity is doing the same thing multiple times and expecting different results. Well, guess what? Hagar does the same thing she did before, only this time, she has a teenager in tow. I do not understand why with a limited amount of water you would decide a desert is your best bet, and yet that's where she lands, the desert just south of Beersheba, twice. And unfortunately, her many years with Abraham have taught her little. It was in this desert that she was told Ishmael would be made into a nation. They're dying and she's heartbroken, yet she doesn't turn to God.

Yet God is faithful to her. The angel of the LORD speaks to her and reiterates the promises made to her. God points her to water. And by the end of the passage, while we'll not see Hagar or Ishmael again in the story, we know that God has watched out for them, that he will indeed have a family and, by the grace of God, will have a people himself.

There are so many discussions we could have around this, far too many for the time we have remaining this morning. So I'm just going to think about it from this perspective: *do not underestimate what God will do for His people who love Him*. What is so striking here is that Hagar and Ishmael don't seem to have any particular regard for God that God would honor them. By his description, Ishmael sounds like a man of violence. Ishmael is not the child of the promise. Yet because of their relationship to Abraham, the man of faith, they are spared twice. They are blessed. Ishmael, by some accounts, would become the father of the Arabic peoples, so we're not talking some small tribe but an enormous people group. All of this God did because of His lovingkindness and faithfulness to Abraham.

Most of the time, we are clueless what our prayers bring about. We pray for healing and the doctors go to work and when we're better, we assume the doctors did things right. We pray for a job for someone and they get a job and we think, "Well, good for them, they got that job." Or we pray for someone and they *don't* get it and we think, "God, couldn't you please answer me?" We pray for Tonia and Gracie each week, and Tonia has aged out of the program; we haven't heard from Gracie because of the limited contact available in Peru due to the pandemic being so overwhelmingly bad there. We don't know any results of those prayers. We pray for our missionaries and we really rarely know any specifics of what might be going on.

And yet, because of this story, we know that God does things for His people we don't know about or even ask for. God kept Lot safe, Hagar safe, Ishmael safe, all because of Abraham. We may not know when God has acted in grace to someone else because of us; we rarely know it when God has been graceful to *us* because of *someone else* and *their* prayers! But it happens all the time. God shows incredible loyalty to His people and works whether or not we're looking for Him to show up. I am convinced that while there are many heartaches and tragedies and troubles in this life, I believe many steer clear of us because God is watching out for the faithful. And when those trials do come, God allows them for the ultimate strengthening of His people and our faith.

So the next time you wonder to yourself, "Is it really worth my time to pray?," set it aside and just pray. You don't know what to pray for – no problem, because God knows. You're not worthy to pray? Abraham had a child by his wife's maidservant with her approval, then threw his wife under the bus to save his own skin – twice! And yet despite his sins, he trusted God and God protected him and those he loved. God will hear your prayers when you come to Him in humble faith. Why would God listen to you, protect you and yours, care for you and yours? God has a habit of picking out nobodies throughout history with little to recommend them and choosing them as His people. *Do not underestimate what God will do for His people who love Him*.

In the few weeks we have left before the Advent season, we'll conclude much of Abraham's story, including the biggest test of faith Abraham will ever face. But hopefully we'll remember this week's message, because while Isaac may be the first child of the promise God gives, he's certainly not the last. Jesus will come fulfilling all the promises of God, and His birth is cause for a far greater celebration than the feast of Isaac. In the meantime, may we remember just how good God is, which we have seen in His fulfilling all His promises. May we remember to come to Him with everything in faith, for He watches over His people and His hand is on those we bring to His throne in prayer.