

Message #12
Abraham: A Model of Faith

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GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES GENESIS 21

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We live in a world full of promises. When we turn on the TV or the radio or the computer, we are deluged with ads which promise us that if we buy this product we will feel better, look better, and have more fun. If we buy the right pillow, we will have a better night's sleep. If we hire the right injury lawyer, we will have a better settlement. Family, friends, teachers, and government make promises to us. At school we are promised that if we study hard, we can go to college and get a good job.

Of course it is an election year. So we are hearing many promises from politicians. Right now the focus is on the presidential election. But soon we will see promises made by candidates running for Congress and for state positions.

My wife has struggled with health problems for most of her adult life. Well meaning friends have occasionally pointed her to products with the promise that they will make her feel better. Occasionally we have been directed to health professionals with the promise that they will know how to solve her health challenges. Generally the results have been minimal.

In the religious realm and in the church we also have to deal with promises. In the last week or two a pastor and his wife in Colorado were charged by the Colorado Securities Commissioner with selling \$3.2 million in worthless cryptocurrency to hundreds of Christians. Pastor Eli Regalado told his online followers last year **“It was last October that the Lord brought this cryptocurrency to me. He said, ‘Take this to my people for a wealth transfer.’ It has been confirmed a hundred times since.... Part of the making way for His people is to really train them up and teach them how finances work in the Kingdom because many of you very soon are going to have more money than you’ve ever had in your life by participating in this crypto.”**

According to the civil lawsuit **“[their] INDXcoin was illiquid and practically worthless; investors lost millions; and Defendants dissipated investor funds to support their lavish lifestyle.”** This pastor and his wife allegedly spent \$1.3 million on a Range Rover, jewelry, luxury handbags, cosmetic dentistry, boat rentals, snowmobile adventures, home renovations, and an au pair. Investors are unlikely to get much of their money back. (*Christian Post*, 1/24/2024)

The fulfillment of promises is ultimately dependent upon the ability of the promiser to fulfill them and that person's integrity. The Bible also contains many promises. Being religious people, we want to know if we can depend upon these promises. We want to know if the author of these promises is able to fulfill them.

These issues were of vital interest to Abraham. As we have seen from our study of this Old Testament patriarch, God had promised to make of him and his wife a great nation and to give their descendants the land of Canaan. They had waited 25 years to have one child from their union. They were old people by now. Would God, could God, keep His promise?

I.

In our passage today in Genesis #21 we are going to find that God does indeed keep His promises. First, in vv. 1-7 we shall find that GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE OF PROVIDING A SON FOR ABRAHAM AND SARAH. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE...) Notice in the first two verses the author three times stresses that God keeps His promises: **“The Lord visited Sarah as he had said (#1), and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised (#2). 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him (#3)...”**

The promise of a son had first been made to Abraham 25 years earlier, as recorded for us in Genesis #12. Abraham’s faith had waned in the midst of difficult tests. The promise was repeated and further explained in #13, #14, #17, and #18. All of the time God was cultivating and developing Abraham’s faith.

Finally, as the Apostle Paul points out in Romans #4 in the New Testament, Abraham was so old that his body was as good as dead, and Sarah’s womb was dead. Verse 5 of our passage says that Abraham was 100 years old, and we know that Sarah was ten years younger. The only possible way for that promise to be fulfilled was for God to intervene in a supernatural way. But the faith of Abraham and Sarah had been developed to the point that they believed that God would do it. And He did. Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son. God kept His promise. This miraculous birth and conception was to be a type, a forerunner, of a later miraculous conception and birth of another boy who would be the fulfillment of the promises of God, a birth which we celebrate in the Christmas season.

The son promised to Abraham and Sarah was named “Isaac,” which means “laughter” in Hebrew. That naming was done in accordance with the Lord’s command. The circumcision on the eighth day was also done in obedience to the Lord’s revealed will.

Isaac was a source of great joy to Abraham and Sarah. In v. 6 Sarah says, **“God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.”** The Lord originally named Isaac when Abraham and Sarah laughed in unbelief. But now his name would be a reminder of God’s faithfulness, of His doing that which was supernatural.

II.

In vv. 1-7 God kept His promise to Abraham and Sarah concerning the birth of Isaac. Now in vv. 8-21 we find that GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE OF PROSPERING ISHMAEL. (II. GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE...) Children were usually not weaned in that day until they were three years old or even older. Then a feast was held

Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born through Hagar, their Egyptian slave woman. So now Ishmael must be around seventeen years old. For fourteen of those years Ishmael had been Abraham's only son, He had grown up in Abraham's home. Unless and until another son came along, he would have been regarded as the heir of Abraham's estate. Abraham must have developed a strong attachment to his only son.

Earlier there had been a rivalry between Sarah and her maid servant Hagar. Sarah had made things so difficult that Hagar had left home for a time. But at God's command she had returned with Ishmael. So for fourteen years Ishmael had been in the family spotlight.

Now Isaac enters the picture. Ishmael's position of prominence is threatened. Ishmael also becomes a potential threat to Isaac. For two or three or four years they lived together. At the time of this feast when young Isaac began to eat solid food only, Sarah saw some kind of behavior from Ishmael that upset her.

Verse 9 in our ESV translation says, "**But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.**" The original Hebrew verb translated here as "laughing" can mean that. It is occasionally translated as "playing" or "joking." It may have a negative connotation of "mocking" or "making fun of" or "treating lightly."

But then in over half of this verb's usages in the Old Testament, especially in this verb form, the word has sexual connotations. For example, In Genesis #26 v. 8 (GENESIS 26:8) the text says, "**Now it came about, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down through a window, and saw them, and behold, Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah.**" Whatever this behavior was, it was behavior that made it clear to the Philistine king that Rebekah was Isaac's wife.

In Genesis #39 v. 17 (GENESIS 39:17) Potiphar's wife makes a false accusation against Joseph saying, "**The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me...**" The context makes clear that the woman's claim is that some kind of sexual assault has taken place.

About three centuries before the time of Jesus Jewish rabbis went to Egypt to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Their translation of v. 9 (LXX TRANSLATION) includes a clause not found in the standard Hebrew translation. It says, "**Sarah noticed that he [Ishmael] was playing with her son Isaac.**"

So it is possible that Sarah was so upset in our passage because she saw Ishmael molesting Isaac. The evidence is not conclusive. We can understand how early translators might have avoided that translation and interpretation. Whatever it was that Rebekah witnessed, it was very upsetting to her. In the New Testament in Galatians #4 v. 29 the Apostle Paul speaks about Ishmael and Isaac (GALATIANS 4:29). He writes, "**But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.**"

Whatever happened, Sarah went right to Abraham and demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be kicked out of the house. (CODE OF HAMMURABI) The Code of Hammurabi was written a couple of centuries after this. It may well have reflected the customs of the entire region. At one point it said that the sons of a slave wife should share equally with the sons of a free woman, providing that the father had accepted the sons of the slave woman as his own. If the father did not accept the sons of the slave woman as being equal to the sons of the free woman, the slave woman and her sons were to be freed. That is what seems to happen here.

(CODE OF LIPIT-ISHTAR) The Code of Lipit-Ishtar which came from the part of the world where Abraham and his family originally lived, and which was closer in time to Abraham's day, said that the children of a slave woman could give up their inheritance in order to be freed. Thus it appears that Sarah wanted Abraham to give Hagar and Ishmael their freedom so that they would have to renounce their claim on the family estate.

Verse 11 says that Abraham was greatly distressed. (PROJECTOR OFF) His predicament was partly a result of his failure of faith years earlier when he chose to have this child by Hagar outside of the declared will of God. But that was history. Now he had to make a decision. His distress was not about the legality of the choice that Sarah was asking him to make. It was about morality and about his love for Ishmael. Maybe he did act inappropriately toward Isaac. But some of us have had wayward kids, and their actions do not mean that we love them any less.

While Abraham was considering his options, God intervened. In v. 12 He tells Abraham to listen to his wife. Ishmael and Hagar do need to go. If Ishmael remains in the home, he will share in Abraham's inheritance. God's will is that Isaac is to be the son of promise. He is to be the sole heir of Abraham's inheritance. Ishmael will do well. In fact, God says in v. 13 that he will also make of Ishmael a great nation.

Abraham's obedience was prompt. Early the next morning he sent Ishmael and Hagar away. How does he explain to Hagar and Ishmael that they must go because Isaac is the child of promise? Is Ishmael going to understand? Will he still see Abraham as a loving father?

We are not given the details of the interactions within this family. My guess is that Hagar headed back toward her homeland in Egypt. Perhaps they got lost in the wilderness. Abraham would have been generous in providing them with supplies. But eventually their water ran out. Their lives were in danger.

But God keeps His promises. Back in #16 v. 10 the angel of the Lord had promised Hagar that He would make of Ishmael a great nation. Hagar must have told Abraham about that. But in v. 13 of our chapter the Lord told him about this directly, **"And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring."** Now in a state of apparent helplessness God again intervenes. He shows Hagar a well. He also repeats the promise to make of Ishmael a great nation.

Verse 20 affirms that God was with the lad. (PROJECTOR ON--- PARAN WILDERNESS MAP) We are told that he grew up in the wilderness of Paran. His mother eventually found a wife for him from Egypt. In the Paran wilderness Ishmael grew to become the father of the Arab people. God kept his promise in preserving Ishmael and making of him a great nation. The rivalry between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac continues 4000 years later. God keeps His promise to Ishmael.

III.

In vv. 22-34 we find that GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE OF PROSPERING ABRAHAM. (III. GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE...) According to v. 22, **“At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, ‘God is with you in all that you do.’”** There is no evidence that Abraham at this time is doing anything that is spectacular or miraculous. He is just living his life as a chieftain and a shepherd. He is apparently prosperous. But Abimelech observes his neighbor and sees evidence of God’s blessing. That is the kind of reaction we wish to see from our neighbors, isn’t it?

Abraham’s family has again moved, (BEERSHEBA MAP) This time they have drifted about eighteen miles to the southeast of Gerar to the area of Beersheba. There Abimelech makes a covenant with Abraham. Why does he want a formal agreement? A few years earlier Abraham lied to Abimelech about the status of his wife. So Abraham’s integrity has been in question. A formal treaty would help to ensure integrity, from Abimelech’s perspective.

In making this agreement the king of Gerar is treating Abraham as an equal. Abraham has become a prominent and important person, even though he is a wanderer. God has thus kept His promise to Abraham to prosper and bless him.

IV.

(IV. THE APPLICATIONS) Consider then THE APPLICATIONS that we can derive from this chapter. There are three that stand out to me. The first is that TRUE COMMITMENT MEANS SELF-DENIAL. (IV. THE APPLICATIONS A. TRUE COMMITMENT MEANS SELF-DENIAL) Abraham loved his son Ishmael. For about fourteen years he was his only son. Now at about age 17 the Lord was asking Abraham to send Ishmael away from his home along with his mother. The Lord had good and important purposes in doing this. But it was difficult for Abraham.

The Lord also wanted Abraham’s faith to be developed to the point that he had absolute confidence in Him. This call for self-denial is a preparation for the greatest test of faith that Abraham will face. For we will see next week in #22 that the Lord will ask Abraham to give up the child of promise.

True discipleship for the Christian also means self-denial. (MARK 8:34) Jesus said, according to Mark #8 v. 34, **“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up**

his cross and follow me.” Jesus Christ desires to have the top priority in our lives. That doesn't mean that we are to mistreat or neglect our kids, or our parents. But it means that Jesus is to have first place.

The area where we lived in Connecticut had a lot of Jewish people. During our time there we saw a few come to faith in Christ. One of them was a gal from an orthodox background. She was a single woman with a young daughter. Her parents and family members were very upset when she identified herself as a follower of Jesus and started going to a church. They perceived that commitment as a denial of their heritage and her faith and her family. Because of financial circumstances mom and daughter lived with her parents. At one point life became so difficult that we had them come and live with us for several months. For this woman and her daughter commitment to Jesus meant self-denial and a kind of rejection of family.

Sometimes family members and friends don't understand what makes us tick. They don't get it. Our commitment may be perceived by them as rejection. That makes us feel bad. Thus commitment to Jesus may mean a kind of self-denial.

B.

The second lesson that comes out of this story is that **TRUE COMMITMENT MEANS LIVING BY FAITH, NOT BY LAW.** (IV. THE APPLICATIONS A. B. TRUE COMMITMENT MEANS...) The Apostle Paul makes reference to our story in the New Testament Book of Galatians, which we recently studied. If you have a Bible, you might want to turn to Galatians, which is p. 974 in the black Bibles. Hopefully many of you will remember that the problem which the Apostle Paul was addressing in the letter was this: Some Jewish Christians were telling the believers in Galatia in Asia Minor that in order to grow as Christians they needed to follow the Old Testament law. They had to be circumcised and to learn the system of sacrifices and food laws. In this way they could earn acceptance from God.

In #4 beginning at v. 21 Paul says, **“Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. 23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh...”** Abraham and Sarah's effort to have a child through Hagar was their own attempt apart from the will of God to fulfill God's promise and to have the child that they so much wanted.

“...while the son of the free woman was born through promise. 24 Now this may be interpreted allegorically...” Paul is not saying that Genesis #21 teaches this point directly. Rather he sees in this story an illustration of the point that he is making.

“... these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.” Jerusalem is the center of the Jewish system of worship. Jerusalem and Hagar and Sinai all have an

association with the Old Testament law and with a human attempt to achieve salvation by works.

Verse 26: **“But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written, ‘Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;/ break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more/ than those of the one who has a husband.’ 28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.”**

Ishmael persecuted Isaac. The false Jewish teachers at Galatia persecuted the Christians. And today some who call themselves Christians but who pursue a salvation by works--- of being accepted by God by being good enough--- persecute us who follow a gospel of grace through faith alone in Christ.

Verse 30: **“But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.’ 31 So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.”**
Chapter 5 v. 1: **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”**

Abraham was commanded to expel Ishmael, whom Paul sees as a symbol of the law and salvation by works and self-righteousness. Isaac is the child of promise. He symbolizes the gift of God’s grace.

Paul’s lesson to the Galatians and to us is this: Don’t fall into legalism. If you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior, you have already received God’s approval. You have been justified. You have received eternal forgiveness. There is no more acceptance from God for you to earn. Instead your motivation for living a holy life ought to be love for a God who has already saved you.

We need to be reminded of this occasionally because we live in a world that often tells us that we are accepted only if we meet a certain standard of behavior or conduct or achievement. We may be inclined to think that our good works will somehow earn us more acceptance from God. The truth is that we have been accepted. Our salvation was by grace through faith alone, and our living the Christian life ought also to be based upon grace through faith alone.

C.

The third lesson that stands out to me in Genesis #21 is simply that GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES. (IV. A. B. C. GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES) He is faithful to do what He said that He will do. He told Abraham that he would have a special son by Sarah. Abraham had to wait 25 years for that promise to be fulfilled. But at the appointed time-- - at the right time determined by God--- Isaac, the child of promise, was born. So also at the right time a later child of promise would be born.

God promised Hagar that Ishmael would become the father of a great nation. When it seemed like death was inevitable for Ishmael, God rescued him and his mother and made sure that His promise came true. Today the Arab people are the living testimony to the fulfillment of that promise.

At the end of the chapter we see that Abraham has become a powerful and influential leader. This is evidence that God has been faithful to His promise to bless Abraham. Today Israel is in the land of promise.

In each of these cases there were trials and sufferings for the recipients of the promises. It is evident that the Lord didn't always give quick fulfillments. It seems that He wanted to develop the faith of these people, and He wanted them to see that it was only by His divine working that His promises were fulfilled.

God keeps His promises. He has given us Christians many promises in the Bible. We ought to trust Him. The fulfillments don't always come when we want them to come. Often we are tested. Often we must wait. But God wants our faith to be developed, and God often wants us to realize that it is only by His working that the promise is fulfilled. But at the right time--- at the appointed time His promises will be fulfilled.

God keeps His promises. As William Carey (WILLIAM CAREY), the Father of Modern Missions, declared, "We can expect great things from God; we can attempt great things for God." William Carey took the command to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth seriously. He also believed the promise that Christ would be with him and that Christ would build His church.

Carey had a great ability and gift to pick up languages. When he went to India, he quickly began to learn the Bengali language. He was soon speaking to groups of Indians about Jesus. They were curious, but none responded that year. The next year he learned Hindustani. He spoke to Indians also in that language about Jesus. None responded. The next year he began studying Sanskrit. Carey could attract a crowd of two or three hundred people, and he could hold their attention for hours. But still there was not one convert to Christ. Seven years went by, and Carey did not see one convert. But shortly before Christmas in 1800 two Indians expressed their desire to become followers of Jesus. Then the church began to take root and grow. God was faithful to His promise. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Consider again the first two verses of Genesis #21: **"The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him."**

In Galatians #4 v. 4 (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 4:4) the Apostle Paul writes, **"But when the fullness of time had come--- at the right time, at the time predetermined by God, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,**

5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” That’s the Christmas story.

Both of those promises were made in the past and fulfilled in the past. Consider then a third promise whose fulfillment is yet future. In Acts #1 (ACTS 1:11) the two angels who were present at Jesus’ ascension into heaven said, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”** He who kept His promise concerning Abraham and who kept His promise concerning the coming of the Messiah is certain to keep His promise concerning the return of Jesus.

The question and the challenge which Jesus issued to His disciples, and to us (LUKE 18:8), is found in Luke #18 v. 8: **“... when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”** When the Son of Man returns, will He find His people believing in His promises? Will God’s people be trusting in His promises in the face of often difficult circumstances?