

“PROMISES KEPT”

This chapter marks an important turning point in the story of Abraham. Up until this point, Abraham had been waiting for the fulfillment of the things that God promised him when he first called him to leave his country and his father’s house. Twenty-five years had passed since that day. And though the Lord had reiterated his promises on several occasions over those twenty-five years, Abraham was still waiting to be made into a great nation, to receive the land God had promised him, and to have a son through Sarah. But in this chapter, this begins to change. Here we see the beginning fulfillment of a number of the great promises that God had made to Abraham: the promise of an heir; the promise of being made into a great nation; the promise of having his name made great; and, most important of all, the promise that God would be with him. As we study this passage tonight, we will consider how its three episodes show us God’s faithfulness to his promises, and also how they direct our attention to Abraham’s faithful response to the faithfulness that the Lord showed to him.

In the first episode in chapter 21, the Lord “visits” Sarah so that she finally gives birth to a son. In the Bible, when the Lord “visits” people, it is for the purpose of intervening in their lives in a life-changing way. Sometimes the Lord visits people in judgment; sometimes he visits them in grace. In this context, it is clearly a gracious visitation, a visitation that emphasizes the miraculous nature of Isaac’s birth. Sarah was ninety years old, and Abraham was one hundred. Sarah had been barren all her days, and now she was past menopause. The only thing that made it possible for her to bear a child was this

visitation from God. He is the same God who had the power to shut the wombs in Abimelech's household in the previous chapter, and he had the power to open up the closed womb of an old woman. He has the power to bring life out of nothing. This is a principle that is fundamental to the Christian faith. The Lord is able to give life to those who have no life in themselves. We are all dead in our sins, and it is only by the mighty working of the Spirit of God, applying the redemption secured for us by Christ, that we can be born again to a living hope. Our only hope of salvation is to experience a visitation from God.

The account of Isaac's birth also places a strong emphasis upon God's faithfulness. Notice the wording that is used in verses 1-2: "The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him." It was all according to God's word; according to his promise; according to his plan. The point is being stressed: God keeps his word. The Lord keeps all of his promises, in his appointed time.

While the emphasis here is clearly upon God's faithfulness, we can also see the faith and obedience of Abraham and Sarah as they respond to the Lord's goodness to them. Abraham responds to God's faithfulness by his obedience. He names his son Isaac and he circumcises him on the eighth day after his birth, just as the Lord had instructed him earlier in Genesis. And Sarah responds to the Lord's faithfulness by joyfully giving thanks to him. Though she had previously laughed in unbelief at the idea that she would have a son in her old age, she now laughs in wonder at what God has done for her.

Again, though the emphasis of this passage is certainly upon God's faithfulness, the responses of Abraham and Sarah are instructive for us. We too should respond to the kindness and goodness and favor that the Lord extends to us with joyful gratitude and willing obedience.

The second episode in this chapter shows us how the Lord dealt with an obstacle that got in the way of the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham, an obstacle that was brought about by Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith. You will remember the circumstances that led to Ishmael's birth. When God's promise of a son seemed to be too slow in coming to fulfillment, Sarah took her servant Hagar and gave her to Abraham so that he might have a son through her. As we saw back in chapter 16, this resulted in a great deal of tension in Abraham's household: he now had two wives, one of whom was the servant of the other, and it was the servant who had given birth to his only child. It was a recipe for disaster. Well, the tension did not go away after Isaac was born. At the feast that was held to celebrate his weaning, which would have taken place when he was two or three years old, Sarah took offense at Ishmael's laughter, which must have been a mocking sort of laughter, directed at Ishmael and/or Sarah. And in her anger she made the same demand that she had made of Abraham years before: send Hagar and her son away. But it was not just anger that motivated her in making this demand. She had another reason for wanting to get rid of Ishmael. As Abraham's son, Ishmael would be entitled to a share of the inheritance, but Sarah wanted all of it for her son, for Isaac. Under the customs of that time, Abraham could be released from having to give any of his inheritance to

Ishmael if he granted him his freedom instead. This is exactly what Sarah was asking Abraham to do.

But Abraham did not want to send Ishmael away. Ishmael was his son, and he loved him. While Abraham's reluctance is certainly understandable, we need to remember that it was Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith that created this situation in the first place. If they had trusted the Lord to give them a son in his own time, they would not have had to deal with this difficult situation. Yet, once again, we see that the Lord will not allow his purposes to be thwarted by Abraham's failure. He tells Abraham to do as Sarah says, assuring him that, even though Ishmael will not be a part of the line of promise and share in the inheritance of the covenant people, God will still be with him to care for him and make a great nation out of him.

How did Abraham respond to the Lord's instructions? He did not argue, or protest, or complain. Even though it went against his own desires, Abraham obeyed the Lord. He sent Hagar and Ishmael away, even though it must have been an incredibly difficult thing for him to do. He responded to the Lord's faithfulness with the obedience of faith.

It was Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith that created this mess, but they could not mess up God's purposes for them. To be sure, their failure brought them a great deal of grief - Abraham had to send Ishmael away, knowing that he would have no share in the covenant promises; and Sarah had to deal with the jealousy and tension that resulted from sharing her husband with another woman. Our sins do bring consequences, and the Lord does not always spare us from having to face those consequences. Nevertheless, the Lord

did not allow their failures and sins to overcome his gracious purposes for them. This provides us with a great deal of comfort, though it should also serve as a stern warning against sin and unbelief. On the one hand, it tells us that our sins and our failures of faith will produce painful circumstances in our lives. Things would have gone much better for Abraham and Sarah if they had kept on trusting God instead of trying to produce the promised heir through Abraham's union with Hagar. And things will go much better for us if we live by faith instead of by pursuing our own notions of what will bring us happiness and fulfillment. Yet this passage also assures us that nothing that we do or fail to do can prevent the Lord from fulfilling his gracious purposes for us, as long as we continue to look to Christ with a living faith. As Robert Murray-M'Cheyne so powerfully put it, "His eye hath seen all your sins - the vilest, darkest, blackest hours you have lived, his pure eye was resting on you; yet he died for such, and invites you to come to him; and will in no wise cast you out." [*Sermons*, 37]

The third episode in this chapter might seem unrelated to the preceding ones, but it is related in the sense that it is another instance of how God began to fulfill his promises to Abraham. You will remember that one of those promises was to make Abraham's name great, and that is precisely what we see happening here. Abimelech saw that Abraham had become great. He was so drawn to Abraham that he wanted to enter into a treaty with him. He was impressed with Abraham, and he wanted to make sure that he would not have to deal with him as an enemy. And notice what it was that caused Abimelech to take notice of Abraham. He said, "God is with you in all that you do." When Abimelech

looked at Abraham's life, he saw a man who walked with God and enjoyed the benefits of a life lived in communion with God. And Abimelech's recognition of this led to the beginning fulfillment of yet another of God's promises to Abraham: the treaty between them resulted in Abraham being given the rights to a well in the land of Canaan. For the first time, Abraham now owned at least a small portion of the land that God had promised to give him and his descendants.

Now I have already said that the clear emphasis of this chapter is upon how the Lord is faithful to his promises. But it is also important to see that there is a connection between God's faithfulness and the response that his faithfulness engenders in his people. Abimelech was able to look at Abraham's life and see that God was with him. Abraham was far from perfect, as we have seen over and over in our study of Genesis, but it was still evident, even to a covenant outsider like Abimelech, that God was with him. Is this something that is evident to the people around you? This is a question that every Christian should regularly ask of himself: 'When the people around me look at my life, are they able to see that Christ is with me? Even if they disagree with me about matters of faith, is there still something about my character that is in some way appealing to them?' The Lord wants this to be true of all of his people. He wants us to be a winsome people, a people whose lives adorn the gospel, a people who make the gospel attractive to the people around us. Christ commanded us to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.

The Lord made many great promises to Abraham. And if we share in the faith of Abraham, we are the heirs of those very same promises. We have to wait patiently for the fulfillment of those promises, just as Abraham did. And we also have to own up to the fact that our sins and failures create barriers that get in the way of the fulfillment of those promises, as was the case for Abraham. Yet we can also be certain that God will not allow anything to frustrate his gracious purposes for his people. He will make good on all that he has said. As J. Gresham Machen once said, “The Christian trusts God because God has been pleased to reveal Himself as one whom it is reasonable to trust.” [*What Is Faith?*, 65] Over and over again, the testimony of Scripture is clear: God always keeps his promises. In the words of the apostle Paul, “all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ].” [2 Cor. 1:20]