

Part21: A Promise Better than Isaac

Tyler Velin | Genesis 21:1-7, 22:1-19

December 11, 2022

The minivan my family owns is promised to have the ability to stop from 60mph in 130 feet. My wedding ring is promised to break and not pull or crush my finger if it were to get caught in a saw or snagged on a moving part. The safety bars at my gym are designed to catch falling weights up to 800 pounds.

What do all of these promises have in common? They are all promises I hope to never have to trust in.

In the season of Advent we reflect on the promised birth of Jesus Christ but have you ever considered your relationship to promises? Even if they aren't as significant of the examples we give above, we naturally temper our expectations don't we?

When we hear of "Lifetime Warranties," we interpret it as, "a solid product that should last and if it doesn't you'll spend the rest of your life working with customer support to get a replacement."

By nature we love to hear a promise, but rarely are our lives authentically shaped by promises. College football coaches walk away from their employment contract as soon a better option is presented. We keep our old phones as a fall back even if the new one is promised to work faster and last longer. Divorce rates are at a historic low in the United States, but this may be influenced by the fact that marriage rates are at a historic low. We have seemingly moved past the power of a promise.

It doesn't take a modern sociologist to explain this dilemma. In fact the Bible tells us why. Externally our world makes promises which try to outpace the endless disappointment of human hope. Internally though, our own hearts are stricken with the disease of unbelief and faithlessness. The story we are going to examine this morning is another birth in the Bible's Old Testament which helps us understand the significance of the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a story itself which ties a seemingly unbelievable promises with the constant temptation of unbelief itself.

God's promise to bring Abraham in his old age a son was just as wild as something you'd hear on an infomercial. But despite the integrity of the promise maker, Abraham wrestled to actually live his life in light of the promise that he believed in.

As you heard the scripture read for us already this morning you may have noticed something that seems to barbaric to our modern minds—a father who seemed willing to sacrifice his son. But as we will see in the course of our time today, this is not a statement of the character of Abraham or of the God of the Bible, but instead it's a statement on the nature of our problem. The problem of sin is severe. Our unbelief is only fully dealt with when it itself is put to death.

But it is in the midst of this unbelievable darkness that the promise of the gospel affects real change in the lives of God's people. This is what we are going to look at today in the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Our main point today is going to be this: **Jesus is the promise that finally changes our lives.** We are going to examine this by looking broadly at the events recorded in Genesis 12-22 and we are going to have three pit stops along the way. First we are going to see **God's Promise is the Revelation of**

Amazing Grace, then we are going to see **Man's Problem is Unbelief**, and lastly that **God's Provision is the Sacrifice for Faith**.

To begin, would you read with me **Genesis 12:1-3**?

So here we see our first point today: **God's Promise is the Revelation of Amazing Grace**.

I'm sure you've heard the song before, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now I'm find, was blind but now I see."

What we just saw in Genesis 12 is the conductor's wand of the amazing grace that will follow the rest of scripture's symphony.

For what we know about Abraham, who is here simply called Abram, is that there is nothing remotely remarkable about him. If you're wondering if you missed anything up until this point the answer is "No."

Abraham didn't offer a pure and sincere sacrifice like Abel, he wasn't a bastion of righteousness like Noah, he wasn't faithful to care for the sins of others like Shem and Japheth. He didn't translate the Bible, he didn't memorize the most scripture, he didn't pray seven times a day. All we know about him was that he had a goal to travel to Canaan, but for some reason—be it apathy or hardship—he settled halfway there. Secondly we know that he is from the line of Seth—the line of God's promise to Adam and Eve to provide hope for the world.

This is how each of us are to understand God's grace. It never comes to us based off what we have done or who we are. Grace is never by merit but only by mercy. God didn't choose Abraham because he was the man of promise, but God chose Abraham and call him to a blessing because God is a God of promise.

God's promise is so compelling that Abraham willingly leaves behind everything to obey God. If you have that text open still God promises him three things: 1. God promises him prosperity (He will become a great nation, God will bless him and make his name great), 2. God promises him security (God will bless those who bless him, and God himself will curse those who Curse him), and 3. God promises him charity (Abraham's promise will overflow to those around him, he will be a blessing so much so that all the families of the earth will look at the promise made to Abraham and they will benefit from it).

Once more in Genesis 15 where God promises to be his shield, and once more at length in **Genesis 17:1-8**. Kings will come from Abraham's line, blessings will flow to the nations, a land and a place of permanence secured beautifully by the promise of God.

You see for some of us the gospel comes to us as it came to Abraham. It reveals to us needs we didn't know we had. Abraham had a barren wife, and this was probably his biggest felt need. But on the most part, he seemed to be doing fine. He had his family, he had settled in the land, and made a good life.

But God showed him that he was made for more than worldly complacency. For many of us we might think the world has satisfied our needs in full, but when God reveals to us the immensity of the promise he brings us in the gospel we realize that we were never aware of how many needs we truly had! Life was good, but he had no idea how much better it could be with the promise of God!

For others of us, we are overwhelmed at the needs in our life. We are crippled by fear, paralyzed by the weight of mattering things, and stricken by the anxiety of hopelessness. We scratch and claw not out of a sense of delusional contentment but out of a fearful sense of desperation.

The promise of God's salvation, the hope of life in the promise of God's grace, awakens some and comforts others. Regardless of who you are, what you make, and the status of your heart the promise made to Abraham would have been irresistibly beautiful if God revealed it to you.

What if just this moment everything that God promised Abraham was promised to you? Think of the relief that would happen if your lender said, "For you, I'll drop interest rates" or your boss saying, "For you, I promise first of the year to double your salary," or perhaps "I promise to put you in a position of influence where you can affect the change you always wanted."

Even though it doesn't come with paychecks and painted fences, God's promise of blessing in the free gift of Jesus Christ is so much greater than all of this. How much more might God's promise to save us from our sins, give us the righteousness of Jesus, and change us into ambassadors of mercy change our lives and affect our hopes. The gospel is God's revelation. Without it we either settle for less or suffer under more.

But just like you might have, Abraham ran into a problem. The problem was this: though the promise of a family line was powerful, Sarah was barren. Time went by and his wife couldn't conceive a child. And here we see the problem we face in our second point: **Man's Problem is Unbelief.**

The story of Abraham will show that even though he was moved by the promise, he wrestled to actually trust it. He wanted to trust it as he saw fit in his own mind.

Right after God articulates this promise for the first time in Genesis 12, Abraham goes to Egypt and he fears that because his wife is beautiful Pharaoh will take his wife for himself and kill Abraham. So what does Abraham do? He says, "The Lord has promised to curse those who curse me, he has promised me offspring. Therefore I know that I can trust the Lord with myself and my wife."

No! Instead he takes matters into his own hands and asks Sarah to act like his sister so that if Pharaoh would take her, he would let Abraham live as her brother instead of killing him as her husband. But what does God do? He miraculously intervenes and reveals himself to Pharaoh and Pharaoh returns Sarah to Abraham untouched.

Certainly Abraham and Sarah both learned their lesson.

By the time Genesis 15 rolls around, and after God promised to be Abraham's shield, Abraham should have said: "Yes absolutely, there is nothing more certain in life than God's promise to me!"

But look at what happens **Genesis 15:1-6.**

What's Abraham's response? Sarah's still barren, we have no children, "O' Lord, would you please accept Eliezer my relative as the heir to this promise."

But what does God say? This man shall not be it, it shall be your very own son. He gives them a reminder of the stars in the sky and Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Certainly the problem has been solved!

But then Genesis 16 happens. Sarah herself begins to panic regarding the promise. So in order to secure it, she gives Abraham her servant Hagar. What's happening here? Abraham and Sarah see God's promise to do all of this through their offspring, but they don't see the promise yet so they think God needs a little help. Abraham sleeps with Hagar and she conceives and the sin of this adultery nearly tears the family apart. For many of us, it's not that we don't believe God wants what's best for us, but sometimes we somehow begin to think that our sin might actually help us get what God himself promised. But sin never pays. God doesn't need our sin to satisfy his promises.

But remarkably, God comes to Hagar and makes a promise with her and her son. It's not the same promise to Abraham, but even to this illegitimate child God makes a promise.

Did the pain of this sin finally cause everything to click in Abraham's mind? God appears to him again in **Genesis 17:15-18**.

What does Abraham do? "Lord, I know you've promised something, but it's starting to look like you didn't quite take into consideration the age and barrenness of my wife, so would you take Ishmael?"

For us, how many times does the seeming delay of God's promise cause us to supplement it with things that make sense from our perspective?

But look at what God says next: **Genesis 17:19-21**.

Now God's promise is even more specific. There is a time frame, next year. It will be Sarah not Hagar. It will be an offspring named Isaac, not Ishmael and he will finalize the covenant of all this blessing.

And then finally read with me **Genesis 21:1-5**.

Did you notice the cadence of repeated words in that text we just read? In Genesis 22:1-7, seven verses the word "born" or "son" is repeated ten times. The emphasis is clear.

God kept his word. Though it seemed long, it was exactly when God appointed it. The promise was never in doubt. And now the world has hope. Now blessing would come. Now everything Abraham had every hoped for, everything the watching world was waiting for had finally happened. The covenant of blessing in the birth of Isaac was finally here.

But notice what happens next: **Genesis 22:1-2**.

Now, as readers, what hope do we have in this moment for Abraham? It took nothing for Abraham to cave in Egypt. Nothing for him to offer up Eliezer. Nothing for him to sleep with Hagar. Nothing for him to off up Ishmael. At each moment the slightest challenge brought back the issue of lack of faith. And now he's asked to offer up his son, his only son Isaac, the one he loves and to sacrifice him?

What would we expect Abraham to do? Read with me **Genesis 22:3-8**.

Do you see how remarkable this is? Despite God's call for him to sacrifice Isaac, did you see what he said to his young men in verse 4? He said, "I and the boy will come back again to you." He didn't make excuses, he didn't cheat the system. He trusted in the promise. Then when Isaac asked again as they climbed the mountain, what did he say, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." The question of "How?" plagued Abraham in the past and led him to take matters into his own hands: "How will I live if Pharaoh likes my wife," "How can I have a blessing if God won't accept Eliezer," "How will I have an offspring if I don't sleep with Hagar?" But here Abraham throws the question of how on the altar he is about to build. He doesn't know how...but he knows God will provide another way. He has to because God is faithful.

How far will this go? Read on **Genesis 22:9-10**.

Here, constantly fickle Abraham extended his hand over his son. Trembling, terrified, but trusting. How? How did we get here?

I mentioned last week that the world seeks to only condemn you based on your past, but in the gospel Jesus takes all the condemnation and instead gives us gracious correction. What has Abraham seen? God's provision in Egypt. God's promise even to Ishmael and Hagar. God's provision of giving a son just as he said. In chapter 21, Hagar and Ishmael go into the desert to die and just when it seemed they would, God miraculously provided provision to keep his promise to them.

The eyes of faith begin to look back at once seemed like failures and instead begin to see God's faithfulness behind it all. God's faithfulness always leads us to today. Right now, God is calling you to act in correlation with who you think he is and if you think he's good on his word.

Would you hope in his promise? What would happen to this child of blessing, this child of the covenant as Abraham stood knife drawn overhead?

Genesis 22:11-14.

God provided.

You see there is a drastic drama in this text, and it's a drama that plays out in each and every one of our lives. In order for God to keep his promise to bless Abraham and the world, the same promise he made last week to Adam and Eve, Isaac needed to live. But in order for Abraham's faith to be sincere and fearful faith, Isaac needed to die. Abraham needed to be weaned off the hopes of promises less than God's and a power less than grace.

This happened only by God's miraculous provision. In order for God's blessing to flow to the nations what needed to die on that mountain was not Isaac, but instead unbelief. And this is our final point this morning: **God's Provision is the Sacrifice for Faith.**

Abraham saw with exclusivity that the promise of God is worth every bit of our faith, not just the simple and easy parts.

While Abraham seemed to overcome this battle, it still waged on even in Isaac and his offspring. The story of the Old Testament is a story of swinging between faith and unbelief, trust and idols. But one day things changed.

Read with me **Matthew 1:1-2, 16**.

Look at how Paul speaks of this in **Galatians 3:16**.

Jesus is the offspring of Isaac who is the one in whom we find our prosperity, our security, and the charity of grace to the nations.

Jesus is your promise better than Isaac.

But he did so not only by being the child of promise, but by being the child of sacrifice that Isaac never was. Isaac trusted in his father on that altar and was spared so that Abraham might pass the test of faith, Jesus trusted in his Father and was the willing sacrifice so that we might pass the test. Unbelief would always remain until a suitable sacrifice was made and it was the sacrifice of Jesus which saves us from unbelief. It is the promise of Jesus that shows us the external aspects of our world will eventually be changed, but it is also the promise of Jesus that deals with the internal problem of sin in our heart.

It opens our eyes to see the promise of God and to believe it with the firmness of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the firstborn who is both the son of promise and the lamb of sacrifice.

Our problem to believe God's promise to save us from our sins and to bless us in Jesus is not because God is weak. It's not even because God delays to bring the fullness of his kingdom now. Our problem is that our hearts are prone to disbelieve, to compromise and to accept promises on our own terms.

How often do we like Abraham say, "I know you've promised to accept me as a blameless child of God through the work of Jesus, but I hate this conflict with my co-worker, if you would just accept peace in that sphere then I would have the blessing you promised." "I know you've promised to give me perfect intimacy with you and with the church by the blood of the cross, but this singleness is just too hard, maybe if you would accept my need for a spouse instead then I will have the blessing you promised." "I know you've promised joy in freedom from sin and in pursuit of holiness, but if you would just accept my successful family and career instead, then I will have the peace you promised."

But the only substitute for the promise is the substitute of Jesus. None of our idols, none of our compromises will get us there. We must trust the provision of God in Jesus, and that alone.

You see the birth and near sacrifice of Isaac showed us that even up to death we can trust in the promise of God. But the birth and actual sacrifice of Jesus shows us that we can trust in the promise of God even into death.

Our faith pushes us to raise knives against our idols when the world calls us to raise our fist at God. It beckons you in a sense of desperate reliance to say, "The Lord will provide, and I know he will because he has sent his son."

Now if we are honest, many of us don't take God's promise at his word, and we like Abraham can look back and see lapses of faith all over—places where we chose the promise of pornography, the promise of popularity, the promise of profit as a supplement to the promise of God.

But despite what we saw in Abraham, look at what is said of him in **Romans 4:18-25**.

The whole history of Abraham is re-written here. Why? Because of his faith. Because there came a point where he threw aside the doubt he had in the promise, and gave himself wholly to the promise of God. And if we do that, if today, you place your trust in Jesus, if by faith you confess your need for him, that commitment will not only rewrite your history but it will take you places you never dreamed as you find God more faithful than you ever imagined.

The promise of confession, repentance and reliance upon God might seem totally unfitting given the challenges of this world. But it is exactly confession, repentance and reliance upon Jesus which provides for us everything we need to be saved by his prosperity, protected by his security and transformed by his charity.