

Part 22: Present Promises, Present Problems

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Today is Palm Sunday, and it's a day of celebration for the Christian only because we know the full story of Holy Week.

But for the Jews who lived in the moment, Palm Sunday was a massive letdown. God was finally fulfilling his promise and they expected nothing less than total, comprehensive deliverance. They would finally be free from Roman rule, finally free to be unopposed, unhindered, and happy forever.

The only thing bigger than their hope for this day, was the disappointment they experienced when Jesus arrived.

He didn't go to the Roman barracks and kick out the foreign oppressors. He went to the temple, and kicked out the religious hypocrites. And then, he left. We've all had moments where we've felt disappointed with what was promised. It failed to meet our expectations or solve the problems we expected. You can imagine the conversations around the dinner table that night: "What was that Jesus guy talking about? What did he think he accomplished? Look at all these problems that remain! What about Rome? What about Herod? What about all that restoration talk?"

If you read stories of those who have been lost in the woods, you'll find that nothing brings them more hope than coming upon a river. They realize that they aren't out of the woods yet, they've still got problems, but they know two things. First, that river will give them the water and the food they need to survive in the wilderness. Second, if you follow the river, it will lead you to a bigger river, which will lead you out and eventually into civilization and safety.

God's promises are like streams that originate and flow down the mountain of grace, and when we find them they are able to lead us out of the wilderness and into the ocean of glory. But like those Jews finally had the Messiah, but they were disappointed the woods of Roman occupation remained. We might feel the same way at times. Today, Isaac is finally born, but despite the clearing of the promise, the thicket of their problems endured. When this is our experience, can we trust God's river of promise as a faithful way through the valley of our problems, or do we have to try and figure it out on our own?

Our main point in Genesis 21 will be this: **Trust God's promise amidst life's uncertainties.** How do we do that well? Our passage gives us help in three points of clarity: **God's Promise and Our Pleasure, God's Promise and Our Problems,** and lastly **God's Promise and His Pledge.**

Kids, have you ever had to wait a long time for something you wanted so badly? How did it feel when that moment finally arrived? Well, Abraham and Sarah have been waiting 25 years for God to keep his promise to them, and today, the promised baby finally arrives: **Genesis 21:1-5**, "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. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him."

Here we see our first point this morning: **God's Promise and Our Pleasure**. God's faithfulness to his word is the source of our greatest pleasure in life.

Many Christians have a passage of scripture that we struggle to see God's goodness in. They produce in us a reluctant submission as we say, "I wish it were different, but I trust you Lord."

There may be some in here right now who are wrestling with this passage. Why? Because the birth that the whole world has been waiting for is accompanied by, what is perhaps, the worst birth announcement ever.

If I were God, which I'm not, and this was the information I shared with my wife, she'd be wholly unsatisfied with me. "Sweet heart, Abe and Sarah finally had a boy." "Oh that's so great! What's his name again?" "Isaac, I think." "Wow. They must be thrilled. When was he born?" "Uh, the other day." "How much did he weigh?" "Um..." "Was he jaundiced at all? I know Sarah was worried. Was she able to have a natural delivery?" "Uh, yeah, I know they are planning on circumcising him..."

That's all we get. There once wasn't Isaac, and then there was, and then he was circumcised. Isaac is all over this text, but he's always second fiddle. The author is drawing us not to the joy of Isaac's birth, but the joy of God's faithfulness.

Look again: "The Lord visited and did as he promised." "Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son at the time of which God had spoken and Abraham called the name of his son Isaac, the name that God told him to name him. Abraham circumcised Isaac just as God commanded him."

In case you missed it, Sarah's words highlight her pleasure: **Genesis 21:19-18**, "God had made laughter (that's what Isaac's name means) for me, everyone who hears will join in laughing with me...who would have said that Abraham and I would have a child?"

Sarah is not just over the hill, she's down the other side in the valley. She's 100 years old. But she's rejoicing because she has a child. God said it would happen. She says to her friends, "I didn't believe it, you didn't believe it, but God did it."

This passage stimulates our delight in God in two ways. First, draw pleasure knowing that God keeps his promise *personally*.

The Lord *visited* Sarah as he had promised. What a beautiful reminder. We encounter promises and contracts as impersonal terms and conditions—but God doesn't use intermediaries to fulfill his promise; he keeps it, and he keeps it because the promise of God is God himself.

Remember the language of Genesis 17, "I will be God to you and to your offspring after you." When we wonder if God will keep his promise, what we are really wondering is if God will keep himself. He wasn't forced into a promise, he was motivated by love into the promise. And nothing keeps an infinitely powerful God from doing what he loves. And this God desires to draw near and visit those he loves with the word of his promise. Do you believe in God's promise? Do you believe that if you have faith in Jesus that you are assured of salvation? Then know the Lord has not merely validated your parking ticket, he has visited you intimately.

This visitation brought life into Sarah's barren womb, but God's personal visitation to the Christian implants in us the very life of God through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God now lives inside you as a seal and a guarantee of his promises left to come.

Second, take pleasure knowing keeps his promise *providentially*. God's providential timing is perfect. Isaac was born at just the time God said he would be. Just because we don't get a "save-the-date" invitation on God's promises doesn't mean there's not a definite date. God's promises are certain, and they will certainly come to pass exactly at the time he sees best fit. God is never delayed. God didn't wait 25 years because he had to warm up his divine powers. He wasn't late for the plane, held up in a storm, or asleep at the wheel. God waited 25 years so that at just the right time, just as he said, he would do just as he said. The whole of our life is wrapped up in God's providential timing. God keeps his promise by keeping the time, so our time ought to be kept in check with God's promise.

When we see a God as personally and providentially involved as this—it becomes our pleasure to live in light of his promise. God's providence didn't lead Abraham and Sarah into passivity. Instead they put themselves to work, which at times seemed fruitless, knowing that God would at some point bless it.

They kept trying to conceive knowing God would do it. And then when Isaac was born, Abraham put himself to more works of obedience, he circumcised Isaac just as God commanded. How would your life be different if you believed that God keeps his promises? What new hope would you take in seemingly fruitless situations of evangelism? What new purpose might we find in trusting Jesus' words, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you."

We don't know what God is doing all the time, but God has made it clear what we should be doing all the time. We take God at his word, and we wrap our lives around it knowing the river gets us somewhere.

Sarah rejoices that the river worked. God provided. And she calls out to others and says, "Come and laugh with me, come and be amazed at what this God can do."

As Sarah nursed Isaac, she was astounded at God's pleasure. We will have moments like that to, and when God's promise seems most fresh to us, we have a perfect perspective. But Isaac would grow, he'd be weaned. God's miraculous moment of provision would get further in Sarah's review mirror. And when that happens, we might struggle with perspective again.

Because as Isaac left the nursery and grew, so too did the problems seem to grow in the household. When that happens, how do we gain perspective again?

This leads us into our second point this morning: **God's Promise and Our Problems.**

This would have been the end of the story, and perhaps a reasonably normal happily ever after were it not for the presence of one particular problem. What is that problem? Sin. The joy of the best birthday is ruined by the bitterness and brokenness that Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar's sin had caused. The promised boy had come, but he wasn't the only boy in the home. Sarah rejoiced, but she wasn't the only mom in the home.

That's what this passage highlights. If Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar never sinned to gain a child, life in the home would be easier. If Abraham never lied to foreign kings, life in the land would be a lot simpler. But

God's promise to us is because of our sin, and therefore God's promise to us helps us navigate life when we are still working through the implications of our sin.

This passage is a relational trainwreck. And yet as the despair of their problems threatens to have the last word, God reminds them that his promise is strong, and he's not done yet. He's still faithful, still able to help.

Notice first, Sarah's bitterness. She finally got what she wanted, but it didn't fix her problems. **Genesis 21:8-10**, "And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac."

Sarah's words were prophetic but not in a good way. They were laughing, but here Ishmael is laughing at Isaac. It's a big day in Isaac's life, he's weaned. But Ishmael, at this point, is a teenager, and he probably mocks Isaac in a way that teenagers might do at times. But Sarah can't stand it. Insecurity steps in. She can't live with these people. "Abraham," she says, "Cast them out."

Sometimes those who have God's promise can respond with hatred and annoyance to those who seem to be against us. When people make us feel silly for our faith or our obedience, when our comfort is threatened, we respond with bitter anger. Even the disciples struggled with this. They felt slighted by the unbelief of the Gentiles and approached Jesus to get the go ahead to execute a divine napalm strike on their villages.

But the promise God gives us in Jesus is a durable one, it shouldn't make us bitter or petty when we feel it being targeted by others. We should be prayerful and check the posture of our own heart. Wasn't it Sarah who once laughed at God when he promised her a child? Yet, God did not cast her out. Just because Sarah has the promise, it doesn't protect her from feelings of bitterness. But if she's ever going to be free from bitterness, it can't be because she's free of interpersonal strife. It must be because she believes in a promise that gives us peace with God and is the grounds we have for peace with others.

Sarah is bitter. And upon hearing what she wants Abraham to do, Abraham is broken: **Genesis 21:11-13**, "And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring."

The word for "displeased" is one that conveys the deep pain this caused Abraham. He is harmed and wounded by Sarah's request. Even though Ishmael is not the son of promise, he was Abraham's son. But God actually affirms Sarah's decision and encourages Abraham to do this.

I think God knows that if Ishmael remains in the home, Abraham will struggle to not place his hope in him. Ishmael is older. He will always be the bigger boy, the stronger boy, the older boy. Abraham is prone to placing his trust in those observable outward markers and sometimes it is God's kindness to remove from us those things which we love so dearly and yet upon which we lean so dangerously.

The old adage, “better to have and not need than need and not have,” does not apply to the idols of our hearts. Instead, it is better to need only what you have, for in the promise of God alone we have all that we need.

The Lord reminds Abraham that he made a promise to Ishmael as well, and Abraham will have to trust the Lord to keep that one as well. So Abraham sends them away, he equips Hagar and Ismael with the best he can provide, and he trusts them to the Lord.

But nevertheless, Hagar is bereft of hope and Ishmael feels abandoned. It’s not long before what little Abraham gave them is one, but then we read this: **Genesis 21:15-20**, “When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.”

Now, we need to remember something here. The promise God made to Ismael and Hagar is not the same promise God made to Isaac and Sarah. The promise that exists here, which God draws to the front, is one that serves sinners but doesn’t save them. It preserves life, but it doesn’t grant eternal life. It provides blessing, but it is not the blessing.

But why would God provide this blessing? First, because our God is so good that he cares not only for the child of faith, but for the child born through a lapse of faith. Second, because God’s promise to Ishmael is meant to lead all of us back into the promise of Isaac. In Galatians 4, Paul equates Ishmael’s promise with those who trust the law, and Isaac’s promise as those who trust in the gospel. To be won back into God’s family requires you to be “born again” by faith in Jesus. No one is born an insider to faith. We all have to come through Jesus. When Jesus told the parable of the wedding feast he told his servants to go out and invite those from the highways and the hedges. God delivered the boy under the bush so that all who are lost might be saved by faith in the man on the cross.

Is God opening your eyes to see that provision today? Oftentimes God shows us our problems so that he might open our eyes to his promise. Hagar and Ishmael couldn’t see the provision which was right in front of them until God opened their eyes. Is he opening your eyes right now?

The world will take from you, it will leave you feeling alone, but God will show you his provision, he will lead you to the well of mercy, and of grace. This physical provision in Genesis 21 should remind us of a similar and yet greater provision in the gospel of John.

There, we meet another woman who has been cast off. She’s unloved, used and ashamed of her own sin. But a man approached her and asked her for a drink, a drink from Isaac’s well. She’s shocked that this man, this Jewish man, would speak to her—a Samaritan and a sinful one at that.

But that man, was Jesus, and look at what he said to her: **John 4:10,13-14**: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water...Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the

water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Are your problems big? God’s promise is bigger. Big enough to save you from their ultimate condemnation, and big enough to guide you through sin’s remaining confusion. God is faithful. Trust him. Follow the river. Run to Jesus.

This leads us to our final point: **God’s Promise and His Pledge.**

In many ways this chapter ties up the loose ends from Genesis 12. God promised that Abraham’s offspring would increase and in him would all the nations be blessed. Well, we’ve seen the child finally come, and now we will see the promise of blessings to the nations.

We met Abimelech last week. He was the most recent king to be duped and deceived by Abraham. Abraham lied to him, and it almost cost Abimelech not only his life, but the life of his own kingdom.

But, after God delivered Abimelech, Abimelech told Abraham to live anywhere he wanted in his kingdom. Now, Abraham, who was already gaining power, people and possessions, just had a son. An heir to his throne. And Abimelech says, “fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice, shame on you.”

He, and his general, approach Abraham and we read this, **Genesis 21:22-23**, “God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.”

Abimelech sees that Abraham is increasing in power. Indeed, God is with him. So he appeals to Abraham for no more lies. No more funny business. He says, “As I have treated you *kindly*, so *treat* me.” That word *kindly* is an important word in Moses’ books. It’s the word *kesed*. It is a word that means, “covenant love and faithfulness.” It is a word God uses in regard to his covenant with his people to describe his loving faithfulness to them.

What Abimelech is asking Abraham for is the certainty of Abraham’s honest, open, and kind assurance of his mercy. That Abraham will not deceive him again, he will not kill off his people by force. He’s appealing to Abraham’s sense of mercy, love and justice.

And he’s right to make this request. Because as soon as he asks this, look at what happens in **Genesis 21:25-26**, Abraham says, “Fine, I’ve been meaning to tell you, you’re in the wrong. Your servants have taken a well that doesn’t belong to them.” Abimelech then says, “I do not know who has done this thing, you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.”

I know there are some people in here today who might expect from God what Abimelech received from Abraham. You hear us talking about grace and faith and forgiveness. But what happens if you approach God one day in glory and he says, “Yes, I’m sorry though. I would have accepted you, but there was some sin over there that you didn’t know about, and your faith alone won’t cut it.”

Or maybe you are worried that you’ll be treated like Sarah treated Ishmael. Maybe the Lord is content to have you as long as you toe the line. But if you slip up, if you make a mistake, he’ll cast you out and you’ll have to fend for yourself.

What confidence is there in God's faithfulness when even the most faithful men and women are still prone to pettiness and pride?

Well, Abraham, the petty and mischievous man of faith did make a covenant with Abimelech. But you'll notice it wasn't based on him. Look at **Genesis 21:32-34**, "So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines."

The confidence of Abimelech, the confidence of any who would appeal to God's loving kindness is in the Lord Everlasting. We've already seen the Lord as the Almighty *El Shaddai*, but now he's the Lord Everlasting *El 'Olam*.

The everlasting God alone is able to provide a confidence amidst our problems that we can rely on even when it seems everything else fails. Even when it seems we fail. This is no false peace. While we can't see Abraham's tamarisk, we can see the tree of a greater pledge. On the cross Jesus is not only a refuge for sinners who come to him, but he is the promise of assurance when we find ourselves doubting the promise.

When we come upon the problems of life, we can in confidence trust in the promise of God. So, today, trust in the Lord with confidence. Don't doubt God's goodness in your circumstance. Do you feel caught up in sin? Run to him. Do you feel the promise getting choked out by life's problems. Run to him. And run in hope. Jesus will not break his promise to you. Jesus is not bitter over your sin. Jesus is not afraid to draw near. Jesus is the promise for those who have only problems. Follow the river into the ocean of mercy, and do it with confidence.

As one old Scottish pastor wrote: "No, not despairingly I come to thee. No, not distrustingly I bend the knee; Sin hath gone over me, yet this still my plea, Jesus hath died. Faithful and just art Thou, forgiving all; loving and kind art Thou when poor ones call; Lord, let the cleansing blood, blood of the Lamb of God, pass over my soul."

As we lead into resurrection Sunday, remember, God keeps his promises. He has in Jesus, he will in Jesus, will you keep to him. If we can trust him when we stand before the Lord, can we not trust him when we stand before the trials of men.

Let us orient the whole of our lives around this promise and in it take great courage for living.