

Downstream from a Miracle

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[0 : 00] Father, I ask that you would gently but powerfully pour the Holy Spirit upon myself and upon all who are watching this video, listening into this sermon.

We ask, Lord, that you would draw us close to yourself, that you would help us to understand that you are God, that you are sovereign over all things, that you are good and loving, and that you keep your word.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. So, one of the things which is regularly talked about in movies and in literature nowadays is whether or not we are, in fact, just controlled or pushed around by blind, uncaring fate, or whether we have significant choice.

And, of course, it would be a pretty depressing movie or story if at the end of it it was the case that it was just pure and utter blind, uncaring fate.

So, usually when movies talk about it, in a sense, they try to say that there is some type of a choice. We also see, in small ways but increasing ways, discussions about whether the world is empty or full.

[1 : 13] It goes along, actually, with the previous type of question in the sense that if, in fact, everything is just a result of Allah's will, if, in fact, everything is just the working out of karma and karmic destiny, if, in fact, the world is, as certain naturalistic scientists describe it, that there's just cause and effect, then, in a sense, the world is empty.

But we don't feel that the world is empty. We feel at times that there's things which are beautiful and loving and that when you see certain types of things, it's not just that you're imposing your desire for meaning and significance onto the event, but you have a sense that you're recognizing something which is there.

At the same time, there's also questions about whether or not, and this is sort of going to sound like it's a bit of a left turn, but they're actually a bit connected with each other.

Some people think, and some Christians think, that God only answers their prayers. And, of course, if you aren't a Christian, that's going to be very, very offensive, the idea that somehow or another God only answers your prayers.

Like, that just seems wrong. And, in fact, many people, if they had the comfort to say that to a Christian who seems to talk as if that's the case, would actually say that not only is that arrogant, George, if I was the one making that claim, but it's actually not true.

[2 : 38] Like, George, if you just look at it, if it was true that God answered Christians' prayers but not non-Christians' prayers, and, by the way, I have to be careful.

Like, if God answers, because it's not as if, like, on one level you can sort of divide the world into Christian and non-Christian, but, obviously, everybody in the world doesn't think of themselves as non-Christians. They think of themselves as themselves.

And so, really, a better way to put it is, you know, the Buddhists would say, you know, George, I think, you know, God answers Buddhist prayers. I think he answers Hindu prayers. I think he answers secular people's prayers, spiritual people's prayers, boutique religious people's prayers.

And, in fact, George, it doesn't even seem as if there's any evidence for the idea that God has any particular desire to answer Christians' prayers, because, I mean, if you look around, Christians aren't richer, more powerful, more successful than non-Christians.

And, in fact, actually, if anything, it looks as if God is answering everybody's prayers other than Christians, because the Christian church is declining, and it's not very popular.

[3 : 47] So, anyway, we're going to look at a very, very old story, and it's in Genesis chapter 21. This is the second to last of our series of sermons on the life of Abraham.

And this story is a very simple story, but, like, a lot of these stories, like, all of these stories, of these Abraham stories, they're simple, but they're deep.

And there's lots of different ways you could, there's lots of things you could mine from these particular stories, but we're just going to look at one aspect of this story. But it speaks into this whole thing of fate, of choice, of the world being, the universe being empty, or it being full of prayer and different people groups and their different understandings of God.

And this one story actually has some very profound insights into each of these questions. So let's look. We're going to be looking at Genesis chapter 21. And what happened just before this is Genesis chapter 20 was a story which helped us reflect upon the question of why it is that people do wrong things, like why do I gratuitously sometimes do something which I know is wrong?

And the other thing about that story is it gave some profound insight into the religious and spiritual imagination and how the gospel subverts our religious and spiritual imaginations, our natural ones.

[5 : 21] But even while it subverts them, it actually fulfills the deepest longing of the spiritual and religious intuitions. That was in Genesis chapter 20. We looked at it last week.

So let's look at this story, Genesis chapter 21. And it begins with a simple, beautiful verse that, I mean, that's a verse if you're a Christian.

If you're from another type of faith commitment or searching or skeptic, this is a verse which in many ways captures the essence of the Christian life.

And for Christians, it's a verse that captures one of the essences of the Christian life. And it's very simple. It goes like this. The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.

Very, very simple. The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. Here's a very, very beautiful, gentle image of the Lord visiting.

[6 : 27] And the Lord visits to act, to deliver, to meet, to connect. And he visits Sarah, and he does exactly what he had said that he was going to do.

He makes promises to Sarah that Sarah sometimes doesn't believe, but at other times sort of has believed. She's not a perfect person, but he has visited her, and he does what he's promising.

In fact, this first verse, in a sense, summarizes all of the chapter. And it's also something which is very important because it helps to explain the gospel.

You see, for Christians, the gospel is this good news that even though you are very, very far from God, the triune God, the true and living God, and even though he has no obligation to love you or to care for you, and even though you have done many things that make you not deserve his love, and even if there are things about you which are very shameful or very, very unsuccessful, that the promise of the gospel is that Jesus, the God, the Son of God, visited the human race.

And just as he had promised in the 39 books of what we Christians called the Old Testament and our Jewish friends called the Tanakh, there's this constant promise that God would do something that human beings could not do for themselves that he would deliver, and that he does this in the person of his Son, in not just the life that Jesus lives, but most importantly, his death that he dies, and then his resurrection.

[8 : 08] And that this is God's means to reconcile people to himself. It's God's means that when we put our faith and trust in the person of Jesus and what he's done, that God makes us his child by adoption and grace, that he visits us, so to speak, and that now the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in a sense, now live within the Christian, that Christ is our hope of glory, and that we now live as the child of our Heavenly Father in his world.

And that's the gospel, that God visited us, just as he said he would, and he keeps his promise, which is if we put our faith and trust in Christ, that we will be his child by adoption and grace, that he doesn't weigh our merits, but pardons our offenses.

And so in some ways, this very, very simple little verse, which encapsulates a story, also encapsulates what you'll see time and time again in the stories that come, and ultimately in the story of the New Testament, of the gospel, and the promise of the New Testament.

And in this particular case, what we see is that God has promised that he was going to do something which was humanly and naturalistically impossible, that God was going to intervene in the natural world in a way that we would call a miracle, that Sarah, who has been barren for a long, long, long time, never able to bear children in her entire life, even when, in a sense, her reproductive capabilities were there, but long after that has ceased to exist, and she's truly barren, that God would create a miracle baby, that she would, in fact, have a baby.

And so that's what's going to happen in the rest of the story. Let's just look at it. The next verses are very, very simple, just to show that, in fact, God, who's promised that he would do a miracle in Sarah, that he would bring life out of barrenness, he visits her and keeps his promise.

[10 : 09] Look what it says, verse 2. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

And Sarah said, God has made laughter for me. Everyone who hears will laugh over me. And she said, who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?

Yet I have born him a son in his old age. And so God has performed a miracle. Now, in fact, actually sort of even emphasizes that not only that the baby is born, but she's going to nurse the baby, like there's a whole...

One of the things I like to say, and it's very true, is that the more science develops, science doesn't disprove the miracles, because science can't disprove miracles.

Science increases the wow. Science increases the wow. Now, bringing up this thing of the miracle, and another thing, if the Bible just ended here, what we would have is a classic story that could be turned into a blockbuster Hollywood movie.

[11 : 41] You know, Abraham is 100, Sarah is 90, God has visited Sarah, he's kept his promise, a miracle has been performed, Isaac is born, and they all lived happily ever after.

And there you go, you have a classic Hollywood movie, and they all lived happily ever after. But one of the things about the Bible is... Actually, on one level, by the way, the story ends with that those who are God's children by adoption and grace live happily ever after into eternity in the new heaven and the new earth.

But that prophecy, which is still in the future for us, the Bible is a very, very, very realistic book. A very realistic book. And in fact, part of the problem we have with the Bible is how realistic it is.

And the Bible is both a realistic mirror and a realistic window. It is a mirror in the sense that it helps us to see ourselves as we really are, and it's a window in the sense that it helps us to see the world as it really is.

A world where there really is a God, the triune God, who really exists, who has created all things, who sustains all things. That that's the world that we actually live in, even if it's not the world portrayed by academia, by government, by the courts, by the media, by the public intellectuals.

[13 : 03] That in fact, the real world that actually is the one that we inhabit is one where the triune God has created and sustained all things, and we human beings live in it.

So in this particular thing, you have a miracle. Now, you actually, the story in a sense just can't end here by saying, and they all lived happily ever after, because if you've been reading the story, if you've read the story from chapter 12, 13, all the way on to here, you'll see that God has made a couple of promises.

He's promised not only that this boy will be born, but that he's going to be the heir. He's going to also be the beginning of a line that will culminate with God blessing the whole earth through this seed, this offspring, this line.

And there's also been promises made about the land. And so those things still have to be dealt with. They have to be wrapped up. They have to have something that talks about how, it's not just that the birth is going to be enough.

But the other thing is that miracles have consequences downstream. And so what we're going to see is that if a miracle actually happens, it's going to have consequences downstream.

[14 : 17] And it's not, in a sense, going to be enough. Now, what do I mean by that? And let me help you to try to understand how it works and how it all fits in with science. I love, you've heard variations of this analogy before.

If you've heard me preach many times, you know, Lord have mercy. And one of the analogies I like is of the pool table. And so you can imagine you have a pool table and it's a very, very large one and you have a machine which is designed to have the cue hit a particular ball.

And assume for a second that in principle scientists could study the felt on the pool table, study the, how bouncy the edges of the pool table are, knows the roundnesses and everything about the balls and they place the balls in a particular, you know, the balls are placed.

and scientists in theory could have the machine use the cue to hit the first ball to send the ball in motion. And in theory, scientists could mathematically plot how that ball is going to move, what balls it's going to hit and how those different balls will all be hit and how they'll bounce around.

And it would in a sense be able to map how all of those things move and where they end up. And so one of the ways to understand, and that's how science works, right?

[15 : 39] It figures out, it studies how these natural processes work. But science can't say anything at all about a miracle because just as in this experiment, which is all, let's say, perfectly done, let's say a millisecond after the cue hits that first ball, a millisecond after it, your six-year-old adds an extra ball on the table right in the middle.

Now, now all of your predictions aren't going to be correct. Now, the laws of motion and all of those other things are all still true, but there's now an extra ball on the table, which means now that those balls that you've calculated their directions are going to, some of them are going to hit that ball and they're all going to move in different ways and the end result will be a very different thing than you had predicted.

And that, in many ways, is one of the best ways to understand what the Bible understands as a miracle. It's not that it suspends the laws of science or the laws of nature. It is that God, who sustains all things and is sovereign over all things, occasionally he does a new thing.

He puts, in a sense, a new pool ball or billiard ball onto the table. And when the miracle comes, there's now going to be consequences downstream, right? The balls were all going to end up in a different place than if God had not done the miracle.

And so, one of the things that we have to, in a sense, look at, like, see, what this starts to point us to and what this story is going to do, because the story doesn't just end with the miracle.

[17 : 17] The story looks at what happens downstream from the miracle. In fact, if I have a title for this talk, it will be downstream from a miracle. And that's what this story is going to show you.

The miracle happens, but one moment, like, there's Ishmael, there's Hagar. You might not know who these people are if you're watching this and haven't followed any of the other stories, but if you have, there's these other people around.

There's consequences for them, like, how's this miracle going to affect them? And so, what this story at a very simple level does, it shows that for Christians, and this, this, by the way, I think, perfectly fits our experience.

You see, when I said, you know, earlier that, you know, if you have a world of pure cause and effect, whether it's from the will of Allah or karmic destiny or just cause and effect, it's hard to see how there could be really beauty and meaning and significance in the world, yet we feel there is beauty and meaning and significance.

And we feel that we have choices, but the fact that we have choices doesn't mean that there's no longer other cause and effect or consequence. And so, how do you put all those things together? And the Bible presents this wonderful picture in the sense of a dance, guaranteed by God, a dance of providence, which is where God acts in the flow of events to bring about a result that he wants, where miracles, where God intervenes, and also human beings that God has endowed with the dignity of causality, in other words, that we can actually freely choose.

[18 : 51] And so, the world isn't simplistically reduced to cause and effect, nor is it simplistically reduced to mere choice, because, by the way, if the world was reduced to mere choice, once again, the world would be empty.

It would not really have inherently some type of beauty or meaning and significance that we are to recognize. And so, the Bible, in stories like this, wonderfully puts together this dance of the existence of the triune God, of cause and effect, of human beings being able to choose, of providence and of miracle.

And let's see how this now starts to work itself out in this story, because Abraham has another son who's about 12 years older or something like that, 10 to 12 or 13 years older.

What happens? Well, we'll look at verse 8. And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

And in the culture, archaeologists and anthropologists and scholars tell us that probably was somewhere between the ages 2 1/2 and 3, close to 3, that the weaning would have happened. Verse 9, But Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had born, sorry, but Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, laughing.

[20 : 18] Now, just sort of pause here for a second. In this particular version of the Bible, which I've read, it's one of the most literal versions, the ESV. And sometimes the literal versions aren't very helpful, because there's a very, very strong connotation in the original language that it's cruel, mocking laughter.

laughter. So it's not the laughter of a 12-year-old having lots of fun or a 14- or 15-year-old having lots of fun. It's the laughter of the bully.

It's the laughter of the powerful in terms of ridiculing and shaming the weak. It's the laughter of not only shaming the weak, but the promise or the hope of the person laughing that harm and damage will be done.

And that's what's being communicated here in this particular text. So, what's going to happen? Well, what we see here is these next two verses are a really important way to help us to understand how God interacts with the world.

How there can still be both human freedom and there also can be, like as some Christians say, God only has plan A. He doesn't need a plan B. Human beings still have freedom, but God still sometimes, not sometimes, He superintends events towards His desired end.

[21 : 45] Verse 10, So, she, that is Sarah, 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.

and the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. Now, some of you who are very familiar with the Bible will know that those words of Sarah end up becoming very important as part of an argument in the book of Galatians, but we're not going to necessarily go there right now.

The point is that Sarah means harm to Hagar and her son Ishmael. She does not desire their good.

She desires to hurt them. She is a tigress in a sense when it comes to standing up for her son.

And even if, and from her point of view, Abraham's not doing enough about it, she's not going to stand idly by. She's a tigress. She's not a labradoodle.

[22 : 57] And she's going to defend her son. Now, by the way, this also ends up having a bit of an impact because if you go back and you read all of the earlier things, it's very, very clear from the earlier parts of the story, the earlier stories that make up the story of Abraham, that in fact the promise is that God was going to provide one son of promise, the line that would eventually culminate in Jesus the Messiah.

And so, how is this going to work out if there's Ishmael and if there's enmity and how they're going to be with Isaac? And Abraham doesn't like what Sarah wants to do, but what's going to happen?

Is Sarah going to win or is Abraham going to win? Well, as we see in the moment, well, let's see what happens. Look at verse 13. Verse 12. But God said to Abraham, be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman.

It's really more of a sense of, he can still be in a sense displeased. The implication of this is more in the original language that it's part of his promise that I'm going to do something about this on God's part through providence.

Continues on, 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.

[24 : 32] Now, if you've watched some of these other sermons on the life of Abraham, one of the things I say constantly is, I mean, not only in a sense is this a story, but it's a story within a bigger book, which we now know of as the book of Genesis.

And the book of Genesis is also part of a larger story, which is the five books, all ultimately and primarily written by Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And of course, part of a larger book still in terms of the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament. But Genesis 50 ends with a very, very important story, and we can see that this story here is foreshadowing this, and it's a very important thing for us to understand a little bit about how we have human freedom and how God interacts with our freedom while still being sovereign.

There's a story at the end in terms of Joseph and his brothers, and his brothers hate Joseph, and so they sell Joseph as a slave to some wandering traders.

They literally take their younger brother and give him to these traders. They take money for it, and they sell their son into slavery. And then the story proceeds, and all these other things happen in the story, but at the end of it, by a series of providential events, Joseph ends up becoming the second most powerful person in the nation of Egypt, and there's a famine, and his brothers come back, and his dad comes back, and all of that stuff, and it ends up that Joseph is able to save the life of his family.

[26 : 08] And after Joseph's father dies, the brothers say, by the way, we want you to know that before our father died, he privately told us not to hold against us the fact that, you know, like, we sold you into slavery a little bit, because, you know, they're pretty worried.

Joseph is the second most powerful person in Egypt, and they sold him into slavery. And there's a very, very powerful phrase there that Joseph says, that you meant it for ill, you meant it for bad, but God used it for good.

You meant it for evil, but God used it for good. And what we see here is the same type of a story being told here in this thing.

Sarah means this thing for Hagar, for evil, but God is going to use it for good. Let's see how this works.

And by the way, if you think about it for a second, this is going to be very important for us to understand when it comes to the gospel. You see, this story, in a sense, is preparing us for the gospel in a very, very subtle way. You see, what happens in the gospel is, like, how does Jesus end up being born where he's born fulfilling prophecies, and how does he end up dying where he dies fulfilling prophecies, and how does he rise from the dead, and everything like that?

[27 : 36] And a lot of these things are completely and utterly out of control. Well, what happens is an emperor in Rome just decides that he wants to do something, and all these people groups happen to move around.

But he makes his decision because for whatever reason he wants to have more power or just show how powerful he is, but the result is that Jesus is born exactly where God has prophesied that the Savior would be born.

And that when it comes time to the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman leaders, they all are just acting out of their own agenda, and in every case of those agendas, they're desiring harm for Jesus, but the result of them acting out of their own agendas and acting to wanting to harm Jesus is that once again, multiple scripture texts, the prophecies of them is fulfilled, and Jesus ends up dying just as he has also predicted.

One of the reasons you can, in a sense, trust the words of Jesus is that when you look at the eyewitness biographies of Jesus, Jesus himself predicts he's going to die in a way that he can't orchestrate, because it's something that has to be done by Roman power.

He doesn't say, I'm going to kill myself, because then you could just say, well, I mean, I don't know, he's sitting up and he's a bit of a scam, but he predicts he's going to die in a way that only the pagan Roman authorities can actually do, and he dies that way, vindicating his words, and then he rises from the dead.

[29 : 00] And in all those cases, whether it's the emperor, whether it's the Romans, whether it's the leaders, the Jewish leaders, everybody is acting according to their free will, and they all act in a way which means harm.

But it ends up that God uses it for good, because the death of Jesus upon the cross is his death as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And his resurrection is the promise of the vindication and the promise of life and the hope of glory for the Christian.

And so everybody uses their freedom freely, but God superintends the events by providence that even though everybody in the story means evil, God brings great good out of it.

It's one of the ways that God intervenes in the world. So what happens to the child? Well, let's look verse 14, what happens to Ishmael. So verse 14, so Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder along with the child, and sent her away, and she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

Now Abraham is taking God at his word that he will do as he said and as he has promised. We don't know how much bread she had. Archaeologists, anthropologists say that she probably had about what we would now consider almost 12 litres of water, which is going to last a couple of days maybe in the wilderness, but it's not going to be enough.

[30 : 38] God has to intervene in some ways, whether it's through providence or miracle, if that's going to happen. And we can see that Sarah's intent was murderous.

She hasn't had this word from God that Abraham has. She's quite happy if Sarah and if Hagar and Ishmael meet their doom. So what happens?

Well, let's listen. And this story which happens, it's a beautiful illustration of the fact that Christians believe that there's only one God, and the one God who really exists and truly exists is the only God who can answer prayer, and that he answers the prayer of Christians and of Buddhists and of Hindus and of the Jewish people and of people with boutique spiritualities.

He's the only God to hear your prayer, the triune God. There is no other. And whether you acknowledge him or not, there is only that triune God who can hear your prayer, and only he can answer them.

And it's a longer sermon, and a different sermon to say that sometimes he says no, sometimes he says yes, sometimes he says not yet, and sometimes he says yes, but he answers it in a very, very unexpected and unanticipated way that you might only realize many, many, quite a bit later how he'd answered your prayer in an unexpected way.

[32 : 12] But let's listen to the story, verse 15. When the water and the skin was gone, because they'd been wandering in the wilderness, she put the child under one of the bushes.

Now, I just have to pause here for a second, and this is one of the problems, this is actually one of the ways that this version of the Bible is very helpful, because throughout the story there's two different Hebrew words, and when the word boy is used, boy basically means, so later on in the Bible, Solomon, when he's 40, calls himself a boy.

And so boy really doesn't describe an actual age, it describes not being capable, it describes not being mature enough, it describes not being worthy enough and competent enough, and that's what the word boy means.

And the word child captures this idea of the biological and, in a sense, the maternal or the paternal relationship. And so throughout this story, when it's emphasizing, I mean, if you, you know, Louise and I, all of our children are older, like quite a bit older, but I just said all of our children, I called them my children, even though some of them are, you know, have children of their own.

But they're still, they'll always be our children. And so throughout this whole story, when you see child, it's emphasizing the relationship between Hagar and Ishmael.

[33 : 50] And whenever you see boy, it's emphasizing the fact that they're, in a sense, of their weakness and not being competent. So back earlier, it's not that, in the original language, it's not the case that somehow or another, Ishmael got on Hagar's shoulders.

No, no, they left together. The skin of water, the bread was given to the two of them and they go wandering off. And when here, when it says, when the water, verse 15, of the skin was gone and she put the child under one of the bushes, the word put is all right, but it's actually better to understand it as thrown.

And if you've ever watched any movie of two people or a group of people and they're wandering in the desert and they're about to, their water's gone and they're getting very, very weak and close to the point of exhaustion, you see them holding each other and supporting each other up and at the end it might be that they just sort of like put the person down because there's a tiny little bit of a shade.

And that's what's being communicated here is that Ishmael is close to death. The water is, the lack of water is affecting him more than Hagar.

Verse 16, then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off about the distance of a bow shot. For she said, let me not look on the death of the child.

[35 : 10] And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy. He's not Jewish.

He's not, in a sense, from this point of view, part of God's people, so to speak. He's not Jewish. He's, yeah, he's not Jewish.

But God hears his prayer. Listen again, verse 17. And God heard the voice of the boy and the angel of God, in a sense, another way of referring to 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 and lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.

[36 : 17] He lived in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took a wife for him in Egypt. So one of the things that we see here is that God answers Ishmael's prayer.

You see, there's only one God, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, three persons, one God. He alone is the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, sovereign over all things.

And so there's only that one true and living God that any prayer can go to. And he hears the prayer of the wicked and the good, the old and the young, of the gay and the straight, of the Buddhist and the Hindu and the Muslim and the Christian.

There is only one God who can hear everybody's prayer. And you might wonder about that. And it doesn't necessarily the case that he answers the prayers of Christians with more yeses than non-Christians.

Now that, of course, maybe requires a longer whole sermon. I just want to point at how this... Take a step back to understand why this is. And it connects with the gospel.

[37 : 21] Imagine that you have a friend. And you have a friend. We'll call her Sue. You know, and Sue's pretty. And she's nice. And she's pleasant. And, you know, she has a job.

And she's kind. And she's creative. And all of that. But for some reason, no guy ever asks her out. And no guy wants to marry her. And she'd love to marry. But just no guy asks Sue out.

Well, one day, Sue's grandmother decides to buy her a lottery ticket. And Sue, to everybody's surprise, wins \$60 million. And, of course, it's in the paper.

You know, Sue Smith or Sue Sinclair wins \$60 million. And within the next month, 20 guys want to date her. 20 guys want to date her.

Now, you can almost begin to see how, in some ways, winning \$60 million would actually be more of a curse than a blessing.

[38 : 26] Sue has wanted to get married. Now, do they want to marry her because she's Sue or because she has \$60 million? How would she even know whether that's the case?

I mean, she might actually even have to go and live somewhere and change her name and pretend she has no money so that she could at least find somebody who would love her for herself and then have to navigate the fact that she misrepresented herself and that she's actually Sue Smith and is worth \$60 million plus whatever interest has been made over that time period while it went on.

You know, because, you know, in a sense, isn't that more what we desire? That we desire to be known for who we are and either have people be our friends for who we are, not just for what we can give them, or to have that love relationship with another person who loves us for who we are.

And in fact, actually, if you think about it for a second, wouldn't you say that if you met somebody who'd say they'd rather have a million dollars than a husband or a wife who would love them, know them, and love them? Wouldn't you think that that person was shallow?

And you see, this basic intuition that we have about ourselves, that we want to have people love us for ourselves, you see, that's ultimately what God's end game is.

[39 : 45] That God wants us to begin to love him for who he is. He calls us into a love relationship with him.

And you see, that's one of the reasons why God doesn't necessarily say yes to Christians' prayers more than non-Christians. See, if it was in fact the case that, I don't know, every time I prayed, or most of the time I prayed, God gives me a yes and I get it, people would start to notice, good grief, you know, George is very successful, he has lots of money, like things are working out for him, how's it going?

I'd say, well, I just pray, you know, I'm a Christian, and as a Christian, when I pray, God just says yes. And people will say, I want to become a Christian. Well, they don't want to become a Christian because they want to know the triune God.

They don't want to become a Christian because they realize that they're far from God and rebel. They want to become a Christian so they can get the stuff they want. But God's desire is to have this relationship of love with you.

Now, just this final story, I'm very conscious of the time, I took a couple of minutes to introduce it, but the Bible doesn't have a jaundiced view of the human race that we only want to do evil things, and it's just a matter of God merely working through the evil things that happen so that the things that he wants to have happen, happen.

[41 : 12] The Bible is realistic, and to be realistic, it isn't just that people desire evil things and that God, something happens as a result of it. In fact, the Bible recognizes that sometimes people want to have fair treaties and do things which are fair, and that actually happens, and it's very interesting.

Look what happens in verse 22, and it begins by at that time. So it's actually saying that the same time this thing is going on with Hagar and Ishmael, at the same time this other thing happens as well.

So it presents, on one hand, it's showing that there's this dance, there's this dance between causality, that we can cause things, there's this dance, that there's an ordered universe, there's this dance of the fact that God is sovereign, there's this dance that sometimes God acts by miracles, but that there's this providence, and that people, not only do they act out of evil, but they act out of good things, and it's going on at the exact same time.

And look what it says, just very, very briefly. At that time, Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, said to Abraham, 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.

And Abraham said, I will swear. Now God is using providence downstream. He's used providence downstream to make it now that there's only going to be Isaac. It's very clear who that seed is, but also now that the land is becoming more, in a sense, a place where Abraham has a true claim to it.

[42 : 46] Verse 25, when Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, Abimelech said, I do not know who has done this thing. You did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.

So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant, a treaty, a contract. Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart, and Abimelech said to Abraham, what is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?

And he said, Abraham said, these seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well. Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath.

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.

In other words, he worshipped the Lord. And he worshipped the Lord, the everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. So we have this wonderful picture.

[43 : 51] You see that the dance that on one hand, sometimes people wish real ill, but God will turn that ill into good. God is provident even though human beings are using their free will for evil.

And sometimes human beings just want to have a fair treaty and they want to have friends and they want to be good neighbors. And this is also in a way that God can use sovereignly to have his purposes fulfilled because he will visit his people and do as he has said and keep his promises as he has said.

So here's the thing just in summary. Yes, I've said that God answers the prayers. If you're a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Muslim, the triune God hears and answers your prayers.

And if you're an atheist and you pray, he hears and answers your prayers. There's only one God and he's a God who hears and he's a God who sees. But what difference does it make to be a Christian?

See, this is all preparing us, as I said earlier, about the gospel, about how it all works, where Jesus died on the cross, and how even this beginning bit about God has visited us and done what he had said he's done, done what he's promised, and he's promised a savior and a deliverer, and he's done that.

[45 : 02] And he's promised that if anyone turns to Christ, that he will turn no one away, that he will take you, and he will be your savior and your Lord. He will take you into himself, and he will come and live within you, and he will be yours.

And just like others, we Christians are called to pray, but here's the difference that it makes to be a Christian. There is an everlasting God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the same God who is everlasting, the same God who heard Abraham, who heard Ishmael, is the only God.

There is an everlasting God. But he, to me, as a Christian, is not just the everlasting God. He is my Father. He is my Father in heaven, and I live in his world.

Every day I wake up, and I wake up in his world. And I am his child by adoption and grace. He, when I put my faith and trust in Jesus, I become adopted as his child, and I only become his child by his grace to me.

I become his child because of John 3, 16. For God, the words of Jesus, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all who believe in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

[46 : 27] So, the everlasting God is my Father. I live in his world. He is with me, and he loves to hear my prayers. And he holds me in the hollow in the palm of his hand.

And nothing will ever cause him to let me go. And I have the hope of glory because even if I have very hard things that I have to face, I don't have to face them alone. I face them with my Father, and he will bring me, he will bring me into his kingdom and into eternal glory, not because of my strength, but by his.

So, every day, I am invited to live. And you, if you are a Christian, are invited to live in your Father's world. Let's pray. Father, pour out the Holy Spirit upon us.

Help us to know that you hear our prayers, that you love to hear the prayer of your children. Help us to know that this is your world, that you are our Father in heaven, but this is your world, and that you are sovereign, and that we can live today and every day as your child by adoption and grace, following Jesus, our Savior and Lord, the one who redeemed us, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, that you give willingly and lovingly and powerfully to all who become your children by adoption and grace.

Help us, Father, to live in such a way. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.