

In His Time and Way

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[0 : 00] Well, last Sunday we left off the story of Abraham, and as we left him, he was, we imagine, lying on his back in the field, looking up into the night sky, counting the stars.

God had made a wonderful promise to him that he would have numerous descendants. He made a covenant with him that day, and Moses tells us in Genesis, back in chapter 15, that Abraham believed.

But the passage of time has a way of doing a number on our faith. And even though Abraham has been given new details about how these promises will be fulfilled and tangible symbols of God's assurance, doubt begins to creep in again.

This time, through the back door of his own household. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So she said to Abram, The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave.

[1 : 24] Perhaps I can build a family through her. Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan 10 years, Sarai, his wife, took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.

He slept with Hagar. And she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abraham, You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.

I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she's pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me. Your slave is in your hands, Abram said.

Do with her whatever you think best. Then Sarai mistreated Hagar. And the story goes on from there. It's been 10 years now since Abraham has entered the promised land.

On three different occasions, the Lord has said that he would give Abraham offspring. And the last time, which we heard about last Sunday, he said that it will be a son of your own flesh and blood.

[2 : 42] But the time has passed by. And a little bit more time. And a little bit more time. And still, no sign of this promised child.

This son. It's been 10 years now since they first arrived in Canaan. And they've tried and tried and tried.

Sarai is now 75 years old. Menopause is long come and gone. And still, no children. Finally, we get the sense here that Sarah just can't take it anymore.

She's done with hoping in this impossible situation. And so she comes up with a plan to kind of help God's promise come true.

But even as she first speaks of her plan to her husband, Abraham, we can already tell that this is not a good thing. Notice the words that she uses as she speaks to Abraham.

[3 : 47] She says, The Lord has kept me from having children. Perhaps a little bit of frustration and bitterness there.

She gives the Lord the credit or perhaps the blame for why she has not yet conceived. She gives Hagar, her maidservant, to Abraham.

Notice those words she says right at the end there, verse 2. Perhaps I can build a family through her.

It seems as though Sarah is done with anticipating and waiting for what God has promised to do. God has promised to build a family for Abraham.

But the Lord, he's the one who has kept me from having children. Perhaps I can get the family that I desire for myself through this other way.

[4 : 56] And to all of our disappointment, Abraham agrees with her. This is the moment where we were hoping that Abraham would say, No, Sarah.

I am yours and yours alone. God made a promise and he's going to keep it. And so we just need to keep waiting patiently. But unfortunately, he doesn't say that.

He agrees to go along with the plan. This whole episode is just dripping in how it's written with parallels to the Garden of Eden.

To that moment when Adam and Eve blew it together. The writer, Moses, is signaling that what is happening here is not good.

This was a bad decision. And we're not going to read the rest of the chapter, but we read a little bit of it there. The results of this decision?

[6 : 01] Heartache, pain, suffering, abuse, marital conflict. The family, the sense we get is nearly torn apart. This was not a decision of faith.

And at the end of it all, Hagar does bear a son for Abram. And technically, he is Abram's flesh and blood. But is this how the Lord meant for it to go?

The way that this whole story is framed by Moses tells us no. Chapter 17. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him.

13 years later. Ishmael now is just entering into his teenage years. We can only imagine what this has been like for Abram.

As a 99-year-old man. 80 to 90-year-old man. And the Lord appears to him again. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty.

[7 : 28] Walk before me faithfully. And be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you. And will greatly increase your numbers.

So the Lord appears to him again. And there's probably two things in there that I think, at least to me, kind of strike me as odd.

With what the Lord says to him. For the first time in all of this, since the very beginning, God is giving Abraham something to do.

A command to obey. Requirements. Up until now, it's been, I will bless you. Period. I will do all this for you.

Period. He walked through the animal halves himself. I'm going to make sure I keep all of my promises to you. Period. And now suddenly, it seems that there's conditions.

[8 : 29] That the Lord expects something of Abraham. Walk before me faithfully. And be blameless. That's interesting. We'll come back to that.

The second thing that we notice is that the Lord seems to command these two things as a condition for making his covenant with Abraham. And then I will make my covenant with you.

And right about now, we're probably all thinking, well, wasn't the covenant already made with Abraham over a decade ago? That's what we talked about last Sunday. How can the Lord now suddenly put conditions into it?

The simple answer is, and it's going to come out as we read on, is that this is not a second covenant. This is an expansion. This is an official confirmation of that same covenant that's already been made.

And we'll see that in a moment. So the Lord appears. He kind of gives these introductory statements, these commands, this promise.

[9 : 33] He sets it up. And then in verse 3, Abram fell face down. And God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you.

You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.

I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations of you. And kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you.

For the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give you as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you.

And I will be their God. So again, the Lord makes promises to Abraham.

[10 : 43] One of the first orders of business with this covenant, we're going to change your name. No longer will you be called Abram. Now you're going to be called Abraham, which means father of a multitude.

And here's the first of the big promises. I'm going to make you a father of nations, of many nations.

Way back when the Lord first spoke to Abraham, it was, I will make you into a great nation. But now the Lord enlarges the promise. I'm going to make you the father of nations, plural. Not just some, not just a few, but a multitude of nations, many nations. Wow. The Lord goes on. I will make you very fruitful. Kings will come from you. You see a lot of kings in the land right now? Just wait and see.

[11 : 44] Kings will come from you. Some of your descendants will be them. And there's more. This covenant that I'm establishing with you, it will be an everlasting covenant, says the Lord, between me and you, and between me and your descendants after you.

And speaking of everlasting, this land in which you're still living as a foreigner, 23 years later, this land will be your everlasting possession.

This land will be your everlasting possession. Permanent. And then after all these great promises, God makes the ultimate promise.

He says in verse seven, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you. to be your God. I will be your God.

To be your God. And the God of your descendants after you. And I will be their God.

[12 : 49] He says again in verse eight. If all that God has promised up until now to Abraham isn't amazing and wonderful enough, God now promises this incredible thing, to be their God.

God. And it's here that we, the promises that have been made kind of come into focus and we start to see. God is not interested in just giving Abraham the ultimate sweepstakes, a huge contract for a generous portion of land and a, and a huge family tree.

That's not what this is all about. Those, those are, those are part of it. But with this is all about this covenant that I'm establishing with you is so that I will be your God and you will be my people.

This is about a relationship between God and Abraham. A covenant relationship. The closest picture that we have of this, we don't really have covenant relationship that we, you know, that's like this today except marriage.

That's kind of the closest picture we have. It's, it's a relationship covenant where both people exchange promises. And make vows to one another, to be loyal to each other, to be devoted to one another exclusively and permanently.

[14 : 13] This is kind of a beginning of a picture of what God is envisioning, what God desires with Abraham and with his descendants, a permanent, deeply committed, devoted, loyal relationship between me.

as God and you, Abraham and your descendants. It's to be a two way relationship. And suddenly as we go back to the beginning comment where the Lord said, walk before me faithfully and be blameless, that it makes sense.

This is what the Lord has been after all along. It's not just been about, I'm just going to give you a bunch of stuff so you can be happy. And then we'll go our separate ways. No, this has been about forging a relationship, a deep relationship, a committed relationship.

And so of course there's the expectation on Abraham's side of things, that he will live in submission to God. This is not a human, human covenant.

This is a God and human covenant. So we should expect that obedience is part of the overall picture.

[15 : 35] That walking faithfully devoted to the Lord is part of this for Abraham. I will establish this with you to be your God.

This is the ultimate promise in this whole covenant package. This is really the goal and the direction of this covenant.

Verse nine. Then God said to Abraham, as for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep. Every male among you shall be circumcised. The Lord goes on to lay out what is going to be both a condition and a sign of this covenant relationship.

relationship and it's circumcision. Abraham is to be circumcised. Every male in his household is to be circumcised. And from now on, every male born into the household is to be circumcised at eight days old or a week old.

[16 : 51] Choosing not to be circumcised is choosing to break the covenant and will result in being cut off from the people, from the promises. The Lord makes this circumcision a part of the covenant.

But he also says very clearly in here, it is to be a sign of the covenant. And so the question I want to answer this morning is how does that work? And why circumcision of all things?

I mean, probably most of us are wondering that. Why that? This is another example of God taking a human custom or tradition that was already around and happening in the ancient world and setting it apart for his own purposes.

So what's the symbolism here? I don't want to be too graphic, but first of all, circumcision involves cutting off the foreskin.

It points back to the covenant that was cut with Abraham. That's the language that was used last Sunday. The animals that were cut in two. Cutting is how this covenant is formed.

[18:03] And so the symbol, the sign of it involves cutting. Second, circumcision is permanent. There's no going back from that.

There's apparently some kind of surgery today that they do, but it doesn't sound like it really does a whole lot to, to really reverse it. It's irreversible. It's a permanent thing.

Just as this covenant is permanent, it's an everlasting covenant. There's no going back on the words, the promises that I've made to you.

And so the sign of it is permanent and it will serve as a constant reminder to those who bear it.

Third, the organ, we call it that, which undergoes the procedure is the organ for sexual reproduction.

And that corresponds to the promises that have been made. That he would have seed, offspring, and be very fruitful.

[19:09] They're directly related to one another. And fourth, it's a way for God to have his mark on his people. But it's not like branding.

Something that you would do for cattle, just to help other people distinguish whose, whose is your, which ones are yours, and which ones belong to someone else. This mark is upon the most intimate and private part, where God alone sees it.

And this points to the sacred, and close, and exclusive relationship that this covenant is all about. This was a requirement that God gave to Abraham.

It was also a sign of the covenant. And I want to stress this, that this sign right from the get-go was always intended to go with, walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

The relationship aspect. Just because you were circumcised in the ancient world, didn't automatically make you the Lord's. In fact, there's a couple instances later on in the Old Testament, where some people missed that circumcision moment, and later were circumcised, and kind of brought back into the covenant.

[20:29] And the Lord allowed that. And as we'll find out with Ishmael in a moment here, merely being circumcised is not enough to claim this covenant, and the promises that were made in it, for yourself.

The Lord is not interested in just giving another religious duty, another empty ritual for his people to do. His intention right from the get-go is that this goes along with a full-hearted devotion to him, to this relationship that's being established by the covenant.

They're meant to go together. And we can see this as early as Deuteronomy, when the Lord is already talking about the need for his people to have their hearts circumcised.

He wants to see the covenant relationship lived out in here, and not just on the outside in the body. After spelling out the details of this sign of the covenant, we hear a little bit more of what the Lord has promised in verse 15.

God also said to Abraham, As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai. Her name will be Sarah. I will bless her, and will surely give you a son by her.

[21:56] I will bless her so that she will become the mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her. Verse 17. Abraham fell face down.

He laughed and said to himself, Will a son be born to a man 100 years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90?

This is one of my favorite moments. Carl's not here today, but I want you to picture him. He's 91. Add eight years to that.

Here's Abraham. He's already fallen down once on his face before the Lord, and so you imagine that he's kind of on his knees, and the Lord tells him that he's going to bless Sarah and give him a son by Sarah, his 90-year-old wife.

And this is his response. He falls down on his face, and he laughs. Look at what it says.

[23 : 02] Look at what it says. Note that it says, He said to himself, not to God. He said to himself, Will a son be born to a man 100 years old?

Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90? We don't really know exactly what he means by this. I mean, some would say maybe he's got doubt and unbelief.

This is, that's ridiculous. Others would just say, maybe he thought the Lord was joking with him. Maybe he, maybe he just thought it was funny that, what this would mean if the Lord really did this. I mean, here I am 100 years old, and I'm going to have a child, a two-year-old that I'll be chasing around. People are going to laugh at me.

This is, we don't know exactly what he was thinking, but he thought it was funny. And he laughed. The next thing that he says, if only Ishmael might live under your blessing.

[24 : 12] Lord, I'm 100 years old. Let Ishmael, the son I've already got, have the blessings. That's good enough for me.

You don't have to do it this way. This is, this is crazy. I mean, look at us. We're senior citizens here. Then God said, yes, but your wife, Sarah, will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac, which means he laughed.

I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you.

I will surely bless him. I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of 12 rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.

But my covenant, I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year. When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

[25 : 28] So what's the Lord's answer? Abraham asks if Ishmael might bear the blessing, might inherit the blessings and the promises.

The Lord's answer is, well, yes, I will bless Ishmael, but my promise is this covenant will be for Isaac and his descendants and not for Ishmael.

There's no reason given here. It just seems that the Lord has his plan. One guy looking at this said it seems the Lord is stubborn. I won't use that word.

I think it seems the Lord is committed to his plan. Not through Ishmael, but through Isaac. The promises, the land, it'll be for Isaac and not Ishmael.

But notice how the Lord does listen to Abraham in this moment, which is amazing. May Ishmael live under your blessing. Yes, I have heard you.

[26 : 36] I know that you love your son. He's precious to you. And yes, I will bless him. And the Lord is not stingy by any means with how he promises to bless Ishmael.

I mean, many of these promises are things that the Lord has already said to Abraham. I will make him into a great nation too. You'll be the father of a multitude of nations, but I will make him into a great nation.

I will greatly increase his descendants, just as I said I would do for you. But there's also some differences. He'll be the father of 12 rulers, 12 tribal leaders.

not kings. And that bit about the land and I will be your God and you will be my people.

That's not there. My covenant, the greater promises, the covenant through which I will be your God and you will be my people is for Isaac and his descendants and not for Ishmael.

[27 : 43] finally, the Lord gives Abraham the specific promise that long ago he was waiting for. By this time next year, Sarah will bear you a son.

A definite time frame. Something to look forward to. And so what does Abraham do in response to all this? Verse 23. On that very day, Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household and circumcised them as God told him.

Abraham acted in faith. He took the Lord's word seriously. He did what the Lord told him to do. Notice those little words in 23. On that very day. It's actually twice in that little paragraph there. On that very day, he obeyed God immediately. And he didn't just go halfway. He did the whole household. He went the full way just as God told him to do.

[28 : 55] And this was no small thing. Just a few chapters back, we know that Abraham has 318 trained fighting men in his household, servants.

By now, probably up to 400. We're talking setting up a tent and getting potentially 400 guys to go through this.

And yet he does it right away, exactly as the Lord told him to do. Full-hearted faith and full-hearted obedience.

Well, what do we learn from all this? What does Abraham learn about God through all this? There's a lot here. We see back towards the beginning here that while God promises to bless the socks off his people, he doesn't just give them a free pass to, oh, you can live however you want.

No, there are good and right expectations that come along with this. This is about a covenant relationship. This is not just about me giving you a bunch of stuff. It's the same for us in the new covenant with Christ.

[30 : 10] As the apostle Peter said in his letter to the churches, he said, be holy in all you do just as the Lord is holy. Paul said it in his letter to the Philippians.

As you've always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Yes, submission to God, to the Lord, obedience is part of the relationship.

It's not the basis for the relationship. That's grace. That's the gift of God. But it's a part. And speaking of relationship, that's another thing that we really see here.

The Lord is not just interested in giving us all this stuff and then having us go our separate ways. All along, this has been about establishing a relationship with a people.

And not just any relationship, not just a friendship, but a deeply committed relationship in which he is fully devoted to his people and his people are fully devoted to him.

[31 : 19] The kind of relationship that can only really be described by the word covenant. And even beyond that, blood covenant.

The act of circumcision was fitting to describe just how sacred, how close this relationship is to be. How permanent. We see again here in this passage that God is ever so gracious. I mean, think of all the things that God promised to Abraham. Father of multitude of nations.

All this land, I'm going to give it to you. Why? What has Abraham done to deserve this? I mean, look at how he responded to Sarai just a moment earlier with this whole Hagar incident.

we're reminded from last Sunday that the Lord did not see Abraham as righteous. So why is he getting all of this grace, this gift, this promise, this blessing?

[32 : 26] Not because he deserves it, but because God is gracious and merciful and wants to give it to him. to the sinner from Ur.

We also see the Lord's graciousness in how he responds to Abraham. I mean, here Abraham is on his face and he laughs. God makes one of the most incredible promises to him and he laughs in the face of God's promise.

And the Lord doesn't strike him down. he's gracious to him. He even listens to his request that Ishmael would be blessed to.

He says, yes, I will. We learn from Abraham that living by faith means taking God seriously. It means obeying immediately and fully.

But if there's one thing that really stands out to me in all this, it's how Abraham learns here that God will keep his promises but that he will do it in his way and in his time.

[33 : 38] We sure see that here, don't we? God will keep his promises in his time. The initial promise was made 25 years ago. We've been here for 10 years, still no progress, still no sign of a son.

So we'll try to help God along with it. And even then, the Lord waits another 14 years till Abraham is nearly 100 and Sarah 90 before he lets them know that it will be yet one more year until the promised son is born.

If there's one thing that we see here, it's that God is not in a hurry. He's patient. Abraham and Sarah, they think he's late. they think he's slow.

But the Lord has his appointed time and he will keep his promise in his time. Perhaps there's things in your life right now for which you've been waiting for God to act, to intervene, to do something.

Prayer, prayers that you've prayed. Maybe you feel like God is slow or late. maybe like Sarah, you're just about ready to take things into your own hand and find a way to get it done yourself.

[34 : 58] But know this, our time and the brevity of our lives poses no threat to the promises of God. He is able to keep his promise no matter what.

how Abraham and Sarah would have been spared all that heartache and pain and suffering, their family nearly being torn apart, had they only waited for the promised son.

Secondly, we see that God will keep his promises in his way. He will keep them in his time and he will keep them in his way. God's way didn't seem to be working and so Abraham and Sarah cooked up a plan, a different way.

And for 13 years Abraham has been holding this baby boy, he's been chasing around this little boy, now this boy is 13 years old, he's been looking at Ishmael as the one through whom God's promises would come true for 13 years and then God appears to him and says, no, it won't be through Ishmael.

It'll be a different way. It'll be through Isaac. I'm going to do it a different way. I'm going to do it the impossible way. I'm going to reverse menopause for your 90-year-old wife and have her bear a son and do it that way.

[36 : 38] And even though Abraham asks, do it this way, the Lord says, no, this is the way that I will fulfill my promise to you.

This is what you're going to name him. The promises of this covenant will be his, they will not be Ishmael's. God will keep his promise, but he will do it in his way.

Perhaps there's things in your life right now that you feel are not going the way that you want them to. Things in which you're wondering, how can you allow this to happen, Lord, when you said, fill in the blank in your word.

If you really love me, if you really care about me, why is my story going like this? But it's here we see that God doesn't always do things our way or according to our plan.

Does it mean he's unfaithful, unkind, unloving, distant, uncaring? No. We must remember as Abraham saw very clearly that day that he, Yahweh, is the God.

[38 : 00] God. And we are not. He is able to keep his promises, but he will do it in his way. This kind of makes us uncomfortable sometimes, I think.

We want a God that we can control. We want a God that will at least give us a sense that we're in control. people. But the Lord, Yahweh, is free.

He's not bound by our expectations of him. He's not bound by our limited point of view. He will keep his promises, but the horizons of his promises often stretch far beyond what we can see or expect. and he will keep them in his way. And so the question this kind of drives us to words is this.

Will we learn to trust him and walk before him faithfully no matter what? No matter what we see or don't see. No matter what we feel or don't feel.

[39 : 12] No matter whether the situation is improving in the present or not. Will we learn to trust him no matter what? And so this morning as we close, where do we find Abraham?

Again, we find him lying on his back, this time staring up at the ceiling of his tent with the searing pain in his loins.

but confident and rejoicing, expecting with great anticipation the miracle, the impossible that the Lord is about to do in just a year's time.

And that is just the prelude of the bigger and greater promises that God has made. all of this part of this wonderful relationship that God has initiated with him and brought him into and confirmed today through this covenant.

let's pray. Thank you for your word, Lord.

[40 : 35] It speaks of a time long ago, but in many ways we go through similar things in our lives today. Thank you for the encouragement of your word. Teach us to walk by faith, to live by faith, to make our decisions by faith, not based on what we can see, Lord, but based on what your word tells us, the promises that you have made to us.

We thank you that you have made great promises to us. You've spoken about your return, about a great kingdom that we will be a part of someday.

Lord, by our own evaluation of things and time, it's a long time in coming. It's been 2,000 years. But we choose to trust that you will keep your promises, not only to Abraham, but also to us, no matter what.

It's in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.