

Grace in Genesis (vi)

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[0 : 00] Grace in Genesis number 6. Sims is a very old parrot, a very old parrot indeed.

Normally yellow crowned Amazon parrots have a life expectancy of 50 years. But earlier this week Sims celebrated his 70th birthday.

He's the school parrot at a primary school in St. Helier in Jersey. And since his arrival there in 1988, Sims has made generations of children feel welcome at the school by saying hello to them as they walk through the doors.

I guess there are thousands of people on Jersey who can't quite imagine what school will be like without Sims the parrot. Some people mistakenly believe that the doctrine of the grace of God is relatively young.

That it's the invention of the Apostle Paul in the first century AD. The reality is that the doctrine of grace is as old as the earth itself and older still.

[1 : 13] The truth is that God has always been treating human beings way better than they deserve. And has been giving them good gifts entirely of his good pleasure.

He has always loved his world. The primary school in Jersey wouldn't be the same without Sims. To an even greater extent, God wouldn't be God without his grace.

The reality is that God has been working according to his grace since before the beginning of the world. A grace we see fully operational in the book of Genesis in the life of Abraham nearly 4,000 years ago.

Yes, that grace is ultimately demonstrated in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. But grace is here in Genesis 21 just as plainly as it's in Romans chapter 3.

In the stories of Isaac's birth, Ishmael's rejection and Abraham's treaty with Abimelech, God is at work in his love and grace. And that's reassuring for us.

[2 : 21] Because the story of our lives is also the experience of God's grace in situations entirely as varied as those Abraham met in Genesis chapter 21.

In joy and sorrow, in pleasure and in pain, in glory and in grief. I want us to see three things from Genesis 21 this evening about the grace of God at work in Genesis.

First of all, it's a grace that never breaks in verses 1 through 7. A grace that never makes in verses 8 through 21. And a grace that never forsakes in verses 22 through 34.

We need to thank God for the experience of his grace in Christ Jesus. Life would be unthinkable without his grace.

First of all then, in verses 1 through 7, we see the grace which never breaks. The grace which never breaks. These verses drip with the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.

[3 : 27] Though he and his wife Sarah were very old by this point, they had a child and they named him Isaac. In Genesis 15 verse 4, God had promised Abraham that he would have an heir of his own body.

And then in Genesis 18 verse 10, had promised that this time next year, Sarah would give birth to a child. These are the unlikely promises of God. God will do the impossible.

God will fill a barren womb with new life. Such a promise seems so unlikely that Abraham and Sarah laugh when they hear it. A laugh which goes on laughing.

And that's why they call the child Isaac, which means in Hebrew, he laughs. God made an unlikely promise. But because God delights to work in such a way to draw attention to his wonderful grace, he fulfilled his unlikely promise.

The operative phrase is in verse 1. Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he said. The Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. God did what he said.

[4 : 40] God did what he promised. That's who God is. That's what makes his grace so utterly unique. He never breaks his promises.

It is such an outlandish promise that a barren woman in her old age should give birth to a healthy child. No wonder Abraham and Sarah laugh with a laugh that keeps on laughing. But it's a promise that God's not laughing at. He delights to do the impossible because it draws attention to the wonder of his grace.

He did the same with Hannah, the mother of Samuel, whose womb God opened. He did the same with Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, who in her old age gave birth to a son.

In some ways he did the same with Mary, the mother of our Lord, in whose womb our Lord was miraculously conceived. The angel said to her, Mary you have found grace in the eyes of God.

[5 : 45] The miracle working, promise keeping activity of God became so famous that the Hebrews began to sing a song about it. In Psalm 113 verse 9, they sang of God, he settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children.

Praise the Lord. You see, whether it's in giving birth or in bringing salvation, God in his grace never breaks his promises.

He does what he says. He does what he's promised. He always has. He always will. We don't always keep our promises, do we?

Perhaps it's because we forget about them. Or perhaps because it's a clash in our timetables. Or perhaps we've run out of energy or something else gets in the way.

But God is not like us. He never forgets the promises he makes and nothing ever gets in the way of his keeping of them. Not even human foolishness.

[6 : 51] Not even our sin. Some of the ways in which he keeps his promises seem outlandishly unlikely. He promises that a virgin will give birth to a child.

That the sufferings of this child will make atonement for the sins of a nation. He promises that sinners and outcasts shall be his precious possession. And yet all these unlikely promises he faithfully kept.

His promises, as we saw last time, that a man shall be saved by the simple act of faith. And he never breaks his promise. We're coming up to a time of general election.

So we're all familiar with promises, right? This party promises to invest in the National Health Service. This party promises to reduce child poverty.

This party promises to reduce greenhouse emissions. This party promises to abolish tuition fees. I'm not a cynical person, really.

[7 : 59] Or perhaps it's just that I've discovered from experience that political parties will make all kinds of promises in order to win our votes. I'll be charitable and assume that some of their motives are good.

But they genuinely intend to make Great Britain a better place to live. And I'm going to be real and suggest that their good intentions don't always result in good outcomes.

Over the next couple of weeks, as we watch national debates and we read our newspapers, one of the phrases you will hear from every side of the political spectrum, whether you're a Tory talking about the Labour Party, or whether a nationalist talking about the Tories, or whatever it is, you cannot trust them to keep their promises.

There's a reason in general we don't trust our politicians. And it's because in general politicians break their promises whenever it suits their agendas.

But God, by contrast, never breaks his promises to us. And therefore he can be fully trusted. The only reason he can be the object of our complete faith is that he is completely faithful in the keeping of all his gospel promises.

[9 : 21] In Genesis 3.15, he promised that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. He kept his promise, though it cost him the life of his son, given him the cross to destroy the works of Satan.

And save a people for himself. There's one born in every second. But the birth of this child 4,000 years ago, Isaac, to an elderly couple called Abraham and Sarah is extra special.

It's heaven's declaration of the trustworthiness of God. That he shall always keep his promises to us, no matter the seeming impossibility or the personal cost to himself.

And that's good. Because God is all of grace. In Psalm 91 verse 15, of what I consider to be one of the greatest promises of scripture, God says to the man or the woman who is struggling, for

whatever reason, he says, He will call upon me and I will answer him.

I will be with him in trouble. I will deliver and honor him. If God can be trusted to keep the promise he made to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, if God can be trusted to keep the promise he made to Abraham and Sarah 4,000 years ago, can God not be trusted to answer us when we call upon him?

[10:50] Can God not be trusted to be with us when we're in trouble? I don't know what particular kind of trouble you find yourself in tonight. Perhaps you're confused about the future.

Perhaps you've been listening to Greta Thornburg and you're anxious about climate change. Perhaps you're grieving over the loss of a loved one. Perhaps you're facing a period of mental illness.

Perhaps you have gnawing doubts or are facing redundancy. Whatever the trouble, God tells us that when we call upon him, he will answer us and he will be with us in trouble.

Genesis 15, 1 through 7 teaches us about God that in his grace, he never, ever breaks his promises. The grace which never breaks.

Secondly, we have from verse 8 to 21, the grace that never makes. The grace that never makes. Let me explain this. This is a tragic tale, the tale of Hagar and Ishmael, which makes rather sordid reading.

[11:57] Let's face it, it's a good job Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness because if a man is saved by his works, Abraham was doomed.

He had more skeletons in his cupboard than Dr. Crippen. Perhaps the most shameful of them all was the scandal of Hagar and Ishmael. Illicit love child sent away for no greater reason than that Sarah could not bear to have him around.

I'm sure we all know the story. Sarah's impatient to have children and willing to wait for God's perfect timing, she urges Abraham to take for himself one of her servants, a lady called Hagar. Sarah couldn't bear it when Hagar became pregnant and so treated Hagar harshly. Hagar ran away, but God found her in the desert and assured her that the child she would bear would be the father of a great nation and would have many descendants.

She returned to Sarah in the course of time she gave birth to a son and called him Ishmael, which means God listens. When Isaac was born and then weaned, Abraham threw a great party.

[13:13] But Ishmael, as we read in verse 10, mocked Isaac. That's what big brothers do to the little brothers. And it being a divided family, it made the situation even worse.

Sarah was outraged and she commanded her husband Abraham to get rid of Hagar and her boy Ishmael. Abraham, the hen-pecked husband as he was, did as Sarah told him and banished Hagar and Ishmael into the desert.

Things were going badly for them. The child is dying of hunger and thirst until God intervenes, reiterates the promises he'd made to Hagar all these years ago.

He rescues Hagar and her child and the fullness of time, as we read in verse 21, Hagar got him a wife from Egypt.

Now, let's leave the ethical rightness or wrongness of what Abraham and Sarah did to Hagar and Ishmael for a moment to the side. It wasn't the first time, nor will it be the last, that outstanding men and women of God treated family members badly.

[14:24] Isaac ended up doing the same and so did his son Jacob. Let's leave the ethics of it to another day because the truth is that God is behind it all.

In verse 12, he tells a distressed Abraham, listen to whatever Sarah tells you. This banishment for all of its rights and wrongs is God's purpose for both Ishmael and Isaac.

But try as hard as I might, and I've been thinking about this for some time, I can't help thinking that God made a mistake with Ishmael. That instead of God making a man, he made a monster.

That he treated Ishmael harshly, unfairly. Pinocchio was annoyed that Geppetto made him out of wood. The monster was driven insane because Dr. Frankenstein had made him out of pieces of dead men.

Did God make a mistake in the shameful episode of Hagar and Ishmael? Do we have here a divine Hagar gate, as it were? Let me tell you that as any fair person studies scripture, he must conclude that the grace of God never makes mistakes.

[15:44] From Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, God is planning his work and working his plan. He's making no mistakes with Hagar and Ishmael, for even the skeletons in Abraham's closet are, in God's economy, embraced in his sovereign will for the good of his people.

Ishmael's hand will always be turned against God's people. His descendants will always be a thorn in Israel's side.

It will be the children of Ishmael who sell Joseph into Egypt. Their continual opposition will be a reminder to the children of Israel to rely wholly in God.

You see, far from being a mistake, God could not have given his people a better gift than Ishmael. Because without Ishmael and his descendants, they'd have run away from his grace in a heartbeat. I wonder whether we ever think that God makes mistakes in the things he sends into our lives. These things we were talking about in our first point, things like grief and confusion and illness and doubt.

[17:04] Does God make mistakes with us? Does he let things slip through his fingers? Well, think again.

For even these things he sends into our lives are things he sends to teach us to depend more upon the sufficiency of his gospel grace for us.

Or perhaps like everyone else in this world, you have secrets. You've got skeletons in your closet. Mistakes that you've made in the past which you think even God can't deal with.

Your own personal Ishmaels. Think again. Because in the grace of God, even they turn out for good if they drive us to Christ for forgiveness.

When it comes to the Ishmaels of our lives, those areas in which we think God has made a mistake with us, or those areas in which we know we've made a mistake before God, let's remember the words of Jesus in John 9 verse 3 when asked why a man had been born blind, Jesus replied, this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

[18:17] Also, let's remember the words of Paul in Romans 8 28. Words so dear to all of us. All. We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him.

Yes, even those Ishmaels and mistakes. We might make mistakes in life. We do every day. Some were serious than others.

But the grace of God is such that he never makes mistakes. not even in the convoluted turns of the tragic episode of Hagar in Genesis 21.

The grace which never makes. And then third and lastly, the grace which never forsakes.

The grace which never forsakes, verse 22 through 34. I don't guess any of us here have been in the precise situation. Abraham finds himself in Genesis 21.

[19:19] He may not have a child, but he's homeless. He's a stranger in a strange land. A refugee with nowhere to call home.

The land in which he's staying is occupied by powerful people. One of whom is Abimelech, who is king of the Philistines, together with the commander of his armies, Phicol.

The operative verse is in verse 34. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time. The precise word for stayed in this context here refers to how a person might stay in a hotel, but it's not his home.

But a refugee might stay in a country, but it's not his country. It means that this land at this time was not home for Abraham. He's just staying there.

The land doesn't belong to him. A truth which Abimelech and Phicol, rather, make quite clear to him in the treaty. They draw up with Abraham, and in the episode of the well.

[20:30] Abraham is still homeless, and the land by force of arms still belongs to Abimelech. And yet Abraham goes the extra mile to reassure Abimelech of his good intentions and his willingness to abide by the terms of the treaty.

The land isn't his. Yet we read in verse 33, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree there, and calls on the name of the Lord.

It may not be his as yet, but God has promised that one day it will be his.

So Abraham settles down to work and to worship there. He's got family and he's got servants. He's got a place to work. He's got a place to dig wells.

He's now got a place to worship, and a permanent reminder of his presence there. A town called Beersheba, and a tamarisk tree.

[21:34] These may be such small tokens of the fulfillment of God's promise, but they're tokens nonetheless. With the birth of Isaac, God has already fulfilled his promise to give Abraham an heir of his own body.

And now he's beginning to fulfill the promise he made to Abraham about the land of Canaan. In token of which, Abraham digs a well, plants a tree, names a town Beersheba, which exists to this very day.

Well, it's a tree. It has a trunk, and it's got branches, and it's got leaves, and there were millions of other tamarisk trees in the world of the day. But this tree is the token of God's faithful promise. But what I want you to notice from this last section of Genesis 21 are the words that Abimelech said to Abraham in verse 22. God is with you in everything you do.

God is with you in everything you do. Here's Abraham. He's homeless, stranger in a strange land, planting tamarisk trees.

[22 : 46] God's with him in everything he does. The eternal Lord is with Abraham wherever he is, whether in the safety of his own tent, whether sitting under a tamarisk tree, or whether in danger of a dispute with a foreign king.

The grace of God never forsakes or abandons his people. Last week, we saw together that the most frequently issued command in the Bible is do not be afraid.

Of similar frequency is God's promise to be with his people. Think of that promise which we considered a bit earlier from Psalm 91 verse 5, Psalm 91 verse 15.

I will be with him in trouble. It's an incredible thought. But the God of the heavens and the earth condescends to be with us, not in the heights of our experience, but in the depth of our experience, in the grief and in the grime, in the valley, in the darkness.

His name is Emmanuel, God with us. And for that, we praise him eternally. You know they say, laugh when the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone.

[24 : 16] That's not true for the Christian. You're never alone because God is always with you. In truth, it's when we're in the depths of our own weakness, we best experience the all-sufficiency of the grace of Christ for us.

The gospel which affirms our salvation not on the basis of who we are or what we've done, but on the basis of what Christ has done for us on the cross and in his resurrection.

That's the grace which never forsakes. The very words which come from the mouth of Jesus when he says to his disciples, behold, I'm with you to the very end of the age.

Let's then be sure of these three things. God never breaks his promises. God never makes mistakes.

God never forsakes his people. The grace of God is the central reality of the Bible. It's the everyday experience of every Christian.

[25 : 25] There's grace in Genesis. There's grace in Glasgow. There's grace for all of us in the gospel.

Let us pray. Thank you.