

God Keeps His Promises

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Preacher: Cedric Moss

[0 : 0 0] Good morning. The scripture reading is taken from Genesis chapter 21. We will read the full chapter. The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord said 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 has commanded him. Abraham was a hundred 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 borne him a son in his old age. 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 Sarah said to Abraham, cast out this slave woman and 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. 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. 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 he sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. 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 bow shot. 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. He lived in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. 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 so joined. And Abraham said, I will swear. When Abraham reproved

Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servant 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. Abraham set you lambs of the flock apart. And Abimelech said to Abraham, what is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart? He said, these seven ewe lambs, you, 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. So after 25 years of waiting and wondering and even doubting that God would give them this promised son, we read in verses one and two, the Lord visited Sarah as he had said. And the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.

[5 : 01] 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, who Sarah bore to him, Isaac. I mean, you don't miss the point in these verses. The point is that God kept his promise. And in particular, he kept his promise to Sarah. In the physical realities of things.

We know that Abraham, when we work our way through the book of Genesis, we get to Genesis 25, and we see after Sarah's death, Abraham remarries, he marries Keturah and has six sons with her.

So clearly, Abraham was able, he was able to have children. And so what we see is really the miracle was with Sarah. She's 90 years old, and God did to her what he promised. He enabled her to have this child. We see God not just making this promise to Sarah, but God bringing this promise to pass. He enabled Sarah to bear this child. Now, why is there this repetition of Moses writing and saying in all these different ways to make it absolutely sure that this son that God promised to Abraham and to his wife Sarah, who was not just barren, but beyond childbearing years, why is he repeating himself to make this point?

Well, I think it's helpful to understand this. We have to remember, when we started the book of Genesis, I shared how the book of Genesis was written for Moses to make a case to the children of Israel as they were coming out of the land of Egypt, when God delivered them out of the house of bondage, he was taking them into the promised land.

These books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Moses wrote them to give them an argument to say, yes, all that is happening is by divine design, and God is leading you into this land that you are going to. And so the first of these books is the book of Genesis. And Moses, he has written this history to them, given them a revelation of who the true God is, how the world came into being, how humankind came into being, and even how their own ancestry, their lineage, came into being, how they came to be the children of Abraham. And so he's teaching them their history. And so now, here they are. They've been in slavery for 400 years, and Moses showed them that, that that was prophesied that that would happen. And now they're on their way into this land that God had promised their forefather that he would give to them.

[8 : 18] And he is living there as a resident alien. But remember that Moses is telling them these things 400 years removed from when they actually happened.

And he is recounting to them that this God, who has taken you into this land, who has promised that he's going to give you this land, this God has made promises, and he's kept them. This God promised your foremother, Sarah, who in her youth was not able to have children. And when she was old in advance in years, he promised that he was going to give her a child, a son in particular.

And he kept his promise. The birth of Isaac was miraculous. And so this account, repeated in these ways, Moses is reminding the children of Israel, as they are on their way into the promised land, walking through the wilderness. He is writing this account of history and the dealings of God with their forebears. And he's saying to them, God has the ability to keep his promises, no matter how great, no matter how daunting it seems, God is able to do that.

God is able to give you this land that you are going into. A group of ex-slaves, rejected people.

God is able to keep this remarkable promise that he's given to you. And here's one evidence of how he has done that. He promised that Sarah would have a son in an old age. And it happened when God determined that it should be. Notice it is very clear that it happened when God said it would happen. In verse 2, it says, Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. And we saw a few chapters back, the Lord told him in chapter 17, in a year's time, Sarah is going to have a child. And so they needed to believe that God was a God who kept his promise. And Moses tells them, this is your history, he's saying to them. He's saying your history is different. You should not hesitate to believe for a moment that God is going to do all of these things that he said he's going to do for you. Look back on your history and see how God took this old man and this old woman and he gave them a child, just as he said, a miraculous child. And his ancestry has now come down to you. And so he's saying to them, and indeed he's saying to us, God keeps his promises.

[11 : 31] No matter how remarkable, no matter how seemingly delayed they might be, God keeps his promises. And this is a repeated point that Moses is making in verses, in these first seven verses of chapter 21.

But not only do we see God keeping his promise in a joyful birth, the birth of Isaac, we also see God keeping his promise in a painful departure. And we see this in verses 8 to 21. Again, Moses is giving them the history, but at the same time, he is proving a point of how faithful God is to his promise.

Moses is. We're told that Isaac grew. In verse 8, Isaac grew and he was weaned. And when he was weaned, Abraham made a great feast for him.

And in those days, babies were weaned between two and three years. Imagine that today, that you're nursing up until two and three years.

But that's what they did. And so when a baby was weaned, it was a happy time. And one of the reasons it was a happy time is because a lot of babies didn't make it.

[13 : 00] Infant mortality was very high in those days. So a celebration was thrown, a feast was thrown by Abraham for his son who was weaned.

But not everybody at the party was weaned. But not everybody at the party was happy. We're told that Ishmael clearly wasn't happy. And what he was doing was he was making fun of his younger brother. We see that in verse 9, that Sarah observed Ishmael mocking Isaac.

Now, Ishmael would have been between 16 and 17 years old at this particular time. And his younger brother, Isaac, his half-brother, would have been between two and three years old.

But Sarah saw what he was doing. She saw us mocking. And she protested to Abraham. And not just protested, she demanded of Abraham that he would take Hagar and Ishmael and send them away.

And she used a strong word to cast them out. And her reason, she gives in verse 10, was that she did not want Isaac to be a co-heir with Ishmael.

[14 : 19] She did not want Ishmael to have any claim to the inheritance that was coming from Abraham that she wanted exclusively for her son Isaac.

And Abraham was displeased about this. He was displeased because he didn't want to send Ishmael away. And the Lord spoke to him seemingly at night and told him, Do as Sarah has said. Listen to the voice of your wife.

And then the Lord renewed a promise to Abraham that he had told him back in chapter 17, when he said that he was going to bless Ishmael and he was going to make a great nation out of him.

But notice in verse 12, the Lord gives a different reason for Ishmael being sent away than Sarah had in mind.

Sarah was concerned about Abraham's material possessions. She wanted it all for Isaac. She wanted him to be the sole heir. But the Lord had Abraham to send Ishmael away because God had his promise in view.

[15 : 35] The issue was offspring. The issue was spiritual inheritance, not material inheritance. Isaac was the divinely chosen son, though the younger of the two.

He was the divinely chosen son whom God promised to bring salvation to the nations through succeeding Abraham. So he promised Abraham and his seed.

And God accounted the continuation of that promise through Isaac and not through Ishmael. It began with Abraham, it was going to continue through Isaac.

And it came down through the lineage that God sovereignly determined. Now you may remember back in Genesis 17 when the Lord appeared to Abraham and he had given him the covenant of circumcision.

And he told him, Sarah's going to have a son. And Abraham fell to his knees and said, oh, please, let Ishmael be the one. Let Ishmael be the one to live before you.

[16 : 39] And the Lord said, no. He said, your seed will be accounted in Ishmael. He says, I'm going to, in Isaac. I'm going to bless Ishmael, but your offspring will be counted and named in Isaac, not through Ishmael.

And no doubt, this was a very, very difficult thing for him. So here we see Abraham some three to four years later between chapter 17 and chapter 21.

And we can see that Abraham is still very fond of his son, Ishmael. And he desires to keep him near to himself. But Abraham had to part with Ishmael because of his disobedience.

And it was a very painful thing. The pain related to his lack of trust in the Lord. His listening to his wife, Sarah, at that time, and going with a scheme to produce a child other than the way the Lord had promised the child to be given.

And Abraham had to send Ishmael away to make very clear what God's promise was. And his promise was in Isaac and not in Ishmael.

[18 : 16] And all of this is a part of God fulfilling the promise that he had made. He told Abraham, it's not with Ishmael. It is going to be with Isaac.

And so we see that Ishmael's departure, this painful departure for Abraham, was a part of God's plans and his purposes.

And they did not change because of his disobedience. Our disobedience does not change God's plans and God's purposes. He doesn't adjust what he has ordained that he will do to suit and accommodate our disobedience.

Any adjustment is going to be on our side. And so we see in verse 14 that Abraham rises up early in the morning, an indication of obedience and resoluteness.

He is promptly obeying what the Lord has said to him. He's not meandering about and trying to delay it, but he gets up, he obeys what the Lord told him to do early that morning.

[19 : 33] He took bread and water, gave it to Hagar and sent her and Ishmael away. Again, very painful, but it was all a part of God keeping his promise of giving Abraham a son through whom his offspring would be named and counted.

But in this painful departure, we also see that the Lord is keeping his promise to Hagar. Just imagine the despair and perhaps even anger that was in Hagar's heart.

As she and perhaps even Ishmael was angry as well, as he is a mature boy between 16 and 17. And they're wandering in the wilderness.

Just wandering in a waterless waste. And we see in verse 15, they run out of water. As far as Hagar is concerned, that's the death of both her and Ishmael.

But she obviously is thinking he'll probably die before she does. And she's unable to watch him die. And so she takes him and she puts him under a bush. And she goes a short distance of where he can be able to look at him.

[20 : 52] And she could do nothing else but weep. Weeping for herself, weeping for her son, weeping for the circumstances she's in that was no choice of hers.

She was a slave and she was forced to bear this child of Abraham. And then she was put out in this very difficult situation.

She was not the only one weeping. We're told in verse 17 that Ishmael was also weeping and the Lord heard Ishmael's voice.

Look at verses 17 to 19. 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.

[21 : 56] And 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. Now, exactly what is happening here?

What's happening here is that God was fulfilling his promise to Hagar and Ishmael that he made way back in Genesis 16.

This would be approximately 17 to 18 years earlier.

Because this was in Genesis 16. That was when Hagar was pregnant. She was running away from Sarah because of the mistreatment that she was going through. And the Lord meets her in this place of despair.

And the Lord made these promises to her. Let me go ahead and read that account in Genesis 16 and starting in verse 10.

[22 : 59] Now, here's what's interesting.

At that time, this was Sarah's response to it in Genesis 16 and verse 13. She said to God, You are a seeing.

You are a God of seeing. Truly, I have seen him who looks after me. God showed himself faithful to this woman who had been rejected, this woman who had been mistreated some 17 to 18 years earlier.

And she forgot. She forgot that encounter that she had with God, that God was the one who saw her, that God was the one who looked after her.

When she thought that she was in that wilderness all by herself, with no one to fend for her, God appears. Not because she was calling on him, but because he was the one who looked on her in her helpless condition.

[24 : 25] And she recognized, You are a seeing God. You're the one who looks after me. But time passed, and she had forgotten all that.

And so here she is in another wilderness situation, this time in Beersheba, and she is weeping. And she is in despair. And she forgot that God was the one who sees her, that God was the one who looked after her.

But God didn't forget. God did not forget her. God did not forget the promise that he made to her, that this child in your stomach, I'm going to bless him, and I'm going to make a great nation out of him.

And God remembered Hagar, and he remembered the promise that he had given her. This was God's grace to her. She wasn't crying out to him.

She wasn't looking for him. God looked after her, even though Abraham and Sarah did not. But you also see that God is being faithful to his promise to Ishmael.

[25 : 34] In Genesis 21, 22, 21, here's what we see. It says, And God was with the boy.

God was with Ishmael. God was with this child who was the product of disobedience. God was with him, and he grew up, and he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. God looked after Ishmael, even though he was not named as Abram's offspring.

He was not in the lineage of the promise. That God, nonetheless, was with him. And God, nonetheless, was good to him, despite Abraham's disobedience.

And this, too, brothers and sisters, is an expression of the amazing grace of God. And we see his mother, Hagar, performing a task that really was to be done by fathers, but Abraham was not in his life.

[26 : 45] And so it's Hagar's responsibility to go and find a wife for her husband, and she chooses a wife from among her people, the Egyptians.

And it's a signal that Ishmael is not a part of the covenant. And again, Moses is writing this to the children of Israel as they are making their way into the promised land.

And he's accounting for them this painful departure of Ishmael away from his father Abraham. And Moses wants the children of Israel to see, and he wants us to see, that God's promises will prevail above our disobedience.

And the only thing that our disobedience will bring us is pain. But sadly, the history of the nation of Israel is marked by painful disobedience, one act after the other.

And yet God kept his promises to them again and again and again without fail. And brothers and sisters, God keeps his promises again and again, despite our disobedience.

[28 : 12] Even when we are unfaithful, God remains faithful. And so, what we've seen so far in the passage is, God keeps his promise to Abraham in a joyful birth.

He keeps his promise to him in a painful departure. And then third and finally, we want us to see that God kept his promise to Abraham in a dreadful dispute.

We find this account in the closing verses of the chapter, verses 22 to 34. And we're told that this happened right around the time of the departure of Ishmael, a very painful time for Abraham.

That's what it says in verse 22, at that time, meaning right around that time, this is happening. And you can only imagine how that must have been for him.

I think we all know that one hard situation is enough to beat us down. And then sometimes we find them coming at us in a compounded way. One comes and another comes.

[29 : 24] And so, here he is. He is a resident alien in this land where King Abimelech is in charge. He's just at the part with this son who was still dear to his heart.

And now he has a difficult situation that he has to deal with. We're told that Abimelech comes to him with the command of his army, Phycah.

Now, this is a pretty interesting arrangement when you think it's kind of like the police showing up to an old woman's house and they have the SWAT team with them.

And you're like, why all this show of power? Well, Abimelech, who is the king, he shows up with the command of his army and he speaks to Abraham.

And he says to Abraham, I recognize that God is with you in all that you do. Now, therefore, swear by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants and with my posterity, but as I have dealt with you, so you are to deal with me in the land where you are sojourning, where you are as a resident alien.

[30 : 45] And Abraham agrees to swear this covenant with him. But just the optics of that, something doesn't look right. Why would this king be deferring to this old man who's just had a child, obviously doesn't have a bunch of sons who could help to defend him.

And this king comes with the head of his army to have this conversation with Abraham and ask him to make a treaty with him.

And normally it's the other way around. Normally the weaker would ask for the treaty and for the protection from the stronger. But here we see the tables are turned and on the face of it, the reason is not that obvious.

Why would Abimelech come to Abraham and defer to him in such a way, calling him to swear an oath? And what we see from the rest of the account is that Abimelech's servants had seized the well.

The ESV says they seized this well. The King James says they violently took the well, this well that Abraham dug. And to appreciate what's going on here, wells were a very precious possession in that day and in that region.

[32 : 11] Because in the wilderness, not every well that you dug was going to bring water. And so when you dug one and you got water from that, that was a precious thing because it meant that a community could be developed, life and livestock, and a whole vibrant civilization could develop from that.

And so it's no surprise that they would argue over who owned a well, who dug the well, and Abimelech's men decided to take this well from Abraham.

And Abraham raises this complaint to Abimelech about the well that his servants violently seized. And Abimelech pleads ignorance.

He says, I didn't know that. And he probably didn't. He seems to be a decent king. And Abraham is determined about this well.

And Abraham gives him these seven new lambs. And he says, this is a witness. This is the testimony that I have dug this well. I want you to take it from me.

[33 : 18] And Abimelech takes it. And the two of them made a covenant. They swore a covenant that day to settle the dispute of the land. I'm like, yeah, what is going on here?

What's going on here is that God is fulfilling the second part of his promise to Abraham, which was to give him land. And God is doing this supernaturally.

He is prospering Abraham in the land. It is evident to King Abimelech that God is with this guy. This is not something that is humanly possible, what I observe happening with him.

And King Abimelech is recognizing that this is nothing short of God being with this old man, being with him in all that he did and all that he had.

And now this powerful king, with the head of his army, essentially pleads with Abraham, a foreigner, whom he had given permission to be in the land and who he could have legally said, you need to leave.

[34 : 33] But God is at work in giving this land to Abraham that he promised. And he's causing Abimelech to recognize it.

And they make this covenant of peace. And the treaty itself that Abraham is being asked to not deal dishonestly or to not deal in a cruel and a harmful way with Abimelech and his people is evidence that he has recognized in earnest.

Not necessarily that he got the whole land physically entitled deeds to it, but this is in earnest that he is being given this land. The Lord is at work in the process to give him claim to this land that he had promised him.

And a tangible indication that a down payment, as it were, is this well that Abraham stakes his claim to and that Abimelech agrees, yes, that is your well.

That is a piece of the real estate in this land that belongs to you. And God is giving him this land and he then plants a tree.

[35 : 54] He plants a tamarisk tree, this huge tree, this tree that would grow and provide shade. And he calls on the name of the Lord. He calls on the name of the everlasting God, the eternal God.

And the account ends in verse 34, says that Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. He's not moving about like he was before.

He is now more stationary and stable in this land because God was giving him this land. And obviously, he didn't need more than that.

He didn't have a large family at this time. And so he got the land in earnest. But the point of all of this, Moses' point in sharing all of this is that God kept his promise to Abraham when he called him.

When he called him back in Genesis 12, when he said, I'm going to give you a land. We see that God is keeping this promise to him in the midst of this dispute, in the midst of this difficult situation.

[37 : 03] This situation where this king could have just devoured him and destroyed him. The only reason that it didn't happen is because God was with him and God was at work and God was fulfilling his promise to him.

And so here Moses is now writing to the children of Israel as they're going into the same land and he's saying, you have every right to go into this land because God has given this land to our father Abraham.

Our father Abraham lived in this land and by grace God gave it to him. He didn't have to fight for it. He didn't have to wage war over it.

It was given to him by the grace of God. And this was to remind the children of Israel of this faithful God who makes these promises and he keeps them.

They were to derive faith from Moses recounting this history to them to say to them this land that you're going into. This is not just a piece of land out of nowhere with no connection to you.

[38 : 12] He says, your forefather was given this land, the whole land of Canaan that he is now taking you into.

And he's going to fulfill this promise no matter what the odds look like. And there were people in the land but they were going there and those people had to be removed but God was going to give them the land because he had already done that in earnest in giving it to Abraham.

Brothers and sisters, God keeps his promises. It doesn't matter that years may go by without fulfillment as in the case of Isaac.

It doesn't matter that centuries may go by without fulfillment in the case of the land that God promised to him. Yes, he lived in it for a while and then he died and they went into slavery and so for 400 and some years the promise wasn't fulfilled but it didn't matter.

God made a promise and God would fulfill that promise because the burden is on him. The promises that God makes to us ultimately the fulfillment of them rests upon him and thank God that our disobedience will not derail God's purposes that he has set forth in his promises.

[39 : 42] Yes, our disobedience will result in pain but it will not result in derailment of the promises of God. God keeps his promises.

Now, I think it's important for us to recognize that God is not just keeping his promises here in a vacuum. These promises that God is keeping, they go back to the ultimate promise, the first promise that God made.

The first promise in the Bible that God made is in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 that one day he was going to send one, there was going to be a son who would arise, who would crush the head of the serpent, who would crush the head of Satan, the deceiver.

And all of these promises that God has made and God is fulfilling, they all lead to that ultimate promise being fulfilled. This promise of the son, the seed of Abraham going up, we looked at this maybe two, three weeks ago when we looked in Matthew chapter 1, we saw how Jesus was called both the son of Abraham and also the son of David.

And all of these promises that God makes, they ultimately point to that remarkable promise, he's going to send his son, who's going to defeat Satan in his cross, and he did defeat him in his cross, he defeated him in his cross, and so sinners like you and me can be forgiven of our sins, and we can be reconciled to God, and we can share in the glorious inheritance of the saints.

[41 : 40] Christ has come in fulfillment of that promise, but there's another promise, and we considered it as we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, that he's coming again.

And the same God who was faithful to his promises in the past will be faithful to this one promise in the future.

Why? Because he keeps all of his promises. He keeps all of his promises without fail. And so, brothers and sisters, it does not matter what it looks like, it does not matter how long it may take, God does and will fulfill all of his promises, every one of them.

And so, we can trust him. We can trust him. Let's pray. Father, thank you that you are a promise keeping God.

I pray, Lord, that in the same way that Israel was to derive faith from having the history recounted, I pray that we likewise will derive faith from hearing your word this morning, that you made promises that took a while, but they came at your appointed time.

[43 : 06] You made promises that seemed almost impossible to be fulfilled, but you fulfilled them nonetheless. us. I pray, Lord, that our faith will grow and deepen in your word and every promise that's contained in it.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's stand for a closing song.