

The Promise of Faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 March 2007

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] If you turn your Bibles to Genesis chapter 21, we're finishing our series on Genesis, right in the middle of Genesis, and this is one of the high points that we're going to be looking at.

And I want to welcome you as you're turning to the, I'd like to welcome you to the 10 a.m. service, and I hope that towards the end of my sermon you'll welcome all those who will be arriving for the 11 o'clock service as well.

The time change, as David mentioned, does shake our lives up a little bit, but it's nothing compared to what's going on here in Genesis. This is really shaking the foundations of humanity and the world.

If you remember, when David short introduced Abraham, he compared it to an earthquake, the blessings that God announces.

And in that introduction, if I remember right, he revealed that he has an earthquake kit in his premises somewhere with a supply of Vegemite.

[1 : 08] And I don't know if anyone's tried to break in or tried to get that. Maybe it's actually deterrent against intruders. That's probably more what it is. But it's a very good image to talk about the grace that God announced to Abraham being like an earthquake because it does turn the world upside down.

And it's not in a way of bringing destruction, but in bringing great blessing. It is a picture of what happens when God's grace very powerfully comes into the life of a person and into the life of humanity.

And that's what happens when God says, I will bless you to Abraham and you will be a blessing. And through you, all the nations of the world will be blessed. God is not saying, people are really going to enjoy being around you.

You're going to be a nice presence in the world and people all over the world were here and it'll be kind of a nice thing just to know about you. No, what God is saying there is that he is going to transform the world.

He's really talking about the fact that God has a plan to transform the relationships in the world, the relationships that people have with God and with creation and with one another.

[2 : 24] It's a deep blessing that reverses the curse of the Garden of Eden in the fall. Now, the curse of sin and evil is actually reversed in this grace.

But that was 25 years ago now. Here we are in chapter 21 and we're 25 years later. And the problem is that nothing has happened tangibly about that promise, something that Abraham and Sarah can see and touch.

They've heard God's word and this has strengthened them, but they have not seen any tangible expression of that blessing.

They continue to be infertile and yet what is necessary for the promises to take place is that their descendants multiply and that God blesses the world through them.

So it's a time of great tension and uncertainty for Abraham and Sarah. After all, those promises were made when there were 75 and 65 respectively. So now they're close to 100.

[3 : 33] What will happen? How is God going to accomplish this? Well, as time went by, Abraham decided that they needed to help God out with a new theology for his promises.

And the thing with a new theology is that it really is about people wanting or trying to change God in order to suit their circumstances, which is exactly what Abraham and Sarah do.

But God's grace is an unchanging, powerful grace that actually transforms people in their circumstances. That's who God is. He is one who is greater than the things that we are about, our cultures, the situations we face.

And his grace comes into them and brings light and power and transformation. But Abraham and Sarah needed to be reminded of this grace through God's word over and over again.

Back in chapter 15, Abraham decided, well, God hasn't given me a child. Therefore, God, I will choose a servant and he'll be the bearer of the promise.

[4 : 44] But God's word comes to him and says, no, the promise is clear. Your own child will be your heir. And then in chapter 16, Sarah suggested, as we mentioned two weeks ago, that Abraham sleep with his maidservant Hagar to get the promised child.

And of course, Abraham quickly obliges and Hagar gives him birth to Ishmael. But God said, no, the promise is clear. Sarah is the one who will give birth.

She is going to be the one who will bless the nations. And then even after God had promised that Sarah would give birth to baby Isaac, her response is to laugh in complete disbelief.

Will I really have a child now that I am old, she says in chapter 18. And then again, God spoke to her and said, is anything too hard for the Lord?

And then finally, in the last chapter, which we haven't read, chapter 20, we see Abraham dealing with his old phobias. He has this fear that when he moves to a new place, the ruler there is going to fall in love with his wife and kill him so that he can marry her.

[5 : 55] And Abraham's courageous response to that is to tell everyone in the area that Sarah is actually his sister. And Abimelech, who is the king in this area in chapter 20, takes her into the harem.

But again, it's God's word that drives Abimelech to God's grace and tells him, no, you will bring a curse on yourself if you do this. And Abimelech repented and actually had to point Abraham into God's ways.

So you see there's a pattern here that as they wait for God's promises, there are serious lapses of faith in Abraham and Sarah. And over and over again, God's grace through his word brings them back.

In fact, what you see all through this account of Sarah and Abraham in their relationship with God is you see very starkly contrasted the sinfulness of the human heart and the goodness of God's grace, the power and goodness of God's grace.

They are put together in these chapters. So what God does is he powerfully and patiently brings them back to the promise that he has given to them.

[7 : 10] And in that process, God actually does change Abraham and Sarah and blesses them, even in their faithlessness. A number of times, Abraham and Sarah are impatient with God.

They ask God, why does he prevent them from having children? We are getting old over and over again. They keep saying that. And yet, as we look back on their life, we actually see faith come out in the end.

And we ask ourselves, why is God so gracious and patient with Abraham and Sarah? It's not the question they would have asked at the time.

And this is a perspective that each of us should have as well, because it is in our human nature to be like them, to ask why God has not met our expectations and our timetables.

It's very natural for us to ask, why is he allowing hardship and anxiety and uncertainty and pain in my life? But one of the great gifts of God's word, as we're seeing here in Genesis, is that as we hear it, God actually opens our eyes to his grace, to see his great patience and his provision for us, to see who he is, his love for us.

[8 : 26] We are able to see ourselves as we see Abraham and Sarah in these chapters of Genesis. We are sinful people whom God deeply loves and blesses.

And God is faithful to us, even when we accuse God, even when we are faithless. He calls us back to trust him and obey his word. So if you turn to chapter 21, you're going to see the opening of the eyes of Abraham and Sarah to God's amazing grace.

He opens them through his word. So you see in verse 1, it says that the Lord visited Sarah. In other words, God's grace is poured on Sarah as he had said, you know, according to his word.

And then again, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And then again, and Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time which God had spoken to him.

You see that, you can't miss the repetition. God is doing what he has promised. His word is true. It is reliable. And it brings them, it calls them to his extraordinary grace.

[9 : 41] And so Paul, the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans that when, you know, the 90-year-old infertile Sarah gave birth to Isaac and Abraham, the 100-year-old husband, is there with her, they knew at that point, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not, is their God.

And that's the way Paul puts it, in a wonderful way. Theirs is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

That is our God. And, you know, Sarah would not have understood this if she had been fertile, if she had given birth when she was young. God had a purpose for their waiting.

He had a purpose for the decades of infertility and uncertainty, for their lapses of faith. It was so that they would know God and his grace in their life.

That they would know that he is the one who pours grace to them and brings them back to his promises. He is the God who gives life to the dead. Now, we might not know why we suffer, why God makes us wait.

[10 : 55] But we do know that, beyond a shadow of doubt, that he will give us grace through those times. That we will know him. And we will know his love for us through those times.

God's word brings us back to that grace over and over again. It is confirmed in his word. That we see his grace clearly as we go through these times, which are difficult for us and very painful at times.

And I think that in those times, it's really important for us to see in Abraham and Sarah the two right responses to seeing and knowing God's grace in our lives.

There's two things we see. In verse 3, we see obedience to God's word. Abraham named his son Isaac. And that was the name that God said you will name him.

He was obeying that right immediately upon birth. And then in verse 4, Abraham circumcised Isaac as God had commanded him. Eight days later.

[12 : 00] Immediately, we see the obedience of Abraham in response to grace. And secondly, you see rejoicing in the grace of God. And it's a marvelous way that this is shown in these verses.

Because Sarah, who had laughed in disbelief at God's word to her, says in verse 6, God has made laughter for me. And everyone who hears will laugh over me.

In other words, will rejoice with me. And you can hear her joy in verse 7. Who would have thought, who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children? Yet, I have borne him a son in his old age.

Well, she's saying Abraham was old. She was too. But it's a wonderful expression of her exuberance and what God has done for her. She's amazed at God's grace.

And she wants to share her amazement with the world. Those who hear of this, you know, they will wonder. And this shows a remarkable change in Sarah. Because, you know, she's gone from desperate housewife to the first evangelist of God's good news.

[13 : 10] She is one who wants her rejoicing to be known because of God's grace to her in fulfilling his promises. She is an evangelist. And her joy is deep because this little baby Isaac is not simply the long-awaited child that she's been wanting for years and years and years.

He is actually the living guarantee. Somebody that Sarah and Abraham can touch and see. He is the guarantee of God's promise to bless the world through their descendants.

So when they look at Isaac, they are actually looking at the faithfulness of God. And there's a significance for us, a deep significance for us, in this birth of Isaac as well.

And it was brought home to me when my son Alexander, who's four years old, came up and asked me while I was working on my sermon. He said, do you need any help with your sermon? And I said, well, yes, actually I could.

He said, well, what are you doing a sermon on? And I said, well, I'm doing it on Abraham and Sarah and the little baby Isaac who was born. And he said, what you need is a donkey.

[14 : 27] I said, well, he went and he said, I'm going to get you a donkey. He went into the other room. He could hear him rummaging away in his toy cupboard and came back. He said, I couldn't find a real donkey. But he said, I got the next best thing.

And he gave me a little plastic figure of Eeyore. Now, Eeyore is a donkey. He said, it's not a real donkey, but it is one. And I thought, Alexander, why did you think of a donkey right away?

Well, of course, it's because there is a similarity there with the birth of Jesus. And in his books, you see a donkey figures very prominently when they're going to Bethlehem.

And that is exactly right. In the Bible, there is clearly a connection between Isaac's birth and Jesus' birth as well. Because in both of them, a promised baby is miraculously born to parents who bring great joy.

And will result in the blessing of the nations. But, of course, the difference is, is that Isaac is a guarantee that the promise will continue.

[15 : 29] But Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. He is the embodiment of that promise. Brought to us. Brought to life. Brought to life. And, and you see this, you see this when the old prophet Simeon holds Jesus in the temple when he's eight days old.

Simeon looks at the baby as he's holding Jesus. And he praised God. And he said, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation. Which you have prepared in the sight of all nations. A light of revelation to the Gentiles.

And the glory of your people Israel. You see what is going on here. Is that Simeon is prophesying that yes, Jesus fulfills that promise.

He is God's salvation given to the world. Prepared in the sight of all nations. And he is the light that reveals God to the Gentiles.

[16 : 32] To the people outside the promise. To the, to the nations of the world. And that is what the glory of the people of Israel is all about. That through them, and then through this person, Jesus, people who don't know God would see him.

And know him. And be blessed by coming into relationship with him. And this is where, this is what Ishmael represents. He represents those people for whom the promise comes.

To bless the world. In this passage, you are going to see, if you jump down to verse 9. That there is Hagar's 16 year old son, Ishmael.

And he is, it says, playing with Isaac. It is at a big feast. And there is this reaction by Sarah that seems quite outlandish at him playing. But the RSV lets us down a bit here.

Because the word for play is actually to laugh. And it can be used as ridiculing. Which in this context is what Ishmael is doing.

[17 : 40] So that's why the NIV says that Ishmael was mocking Isaac. And so Sarah immediately kicks them out of the home. And says that Ishmael shall not be heir with my son Isaac.

She is being a protective mother. But she is also, maybe unconsciously, saying that is a very serious thing to ridicule the blessing.

To ridicule the promise of God. And they are banished. Abraham is very angry with Sarah. Doesn't want it to happen. But God backs up Sarah's decision.

And tells Abraham that it is through Isaac alone that the descendants shall be named. But in verse 13, because of Abraham, God promises that he is going to bless Ishmael.

Even though he is not part of this promise. And make him a nation. And so Hagar and Ishmael head off into the desert. They reach the end of their water supply. They are dying.

[18 : 38] And they cry out to God. And we see at the end of this passage that God hears their prayers. And provides all that they need. Even though eventually Ishmael's descendants are going to be the enemies of God's people.

Now that picture is important for us. Because in this you see the relationship of God to those who do not know him. Who are not part of the promise. He hears their cries.

And knows their concerns. And has mercy on them. And that's the whole purpose for the people of the promise. That they would bless those who do not know God. That they would have God's heart towards these people.

That they would hear their cries. And that they would bring the good news of the gospel to them. And this points towards the mission of Jesus Christ. Because he is born to be a light of revelation.

To whom? To the Gentiles. He comes for people who do not know God. All of us are naturally in that camp. We are in Ishmael's camp. We are each sinners who reject the promise of God.

[19 : 43] But God knows the world's needs. He hears our cries. And his plan all along in Jesus. The descendant of Abraham and Isaac. Is to save people into the place of blessing.

And to fulfill the promise. So that through his sacrificial death on the cross. He forgives sins. And brings people into peace with God forever.

So much so that people can call God their heavenly father. This is God's grace. This is the purpose of these promises. That Isaac is embodying.

And so I want to close by saying. That all of us. Have actually been transformed by this amazing grace. If we have placed our trust in Jesus Christ. We are children of that promise. And the only response that we can make. Is to trust in the promise. Of who Jesus is.

[20 : 43] And that's why Abraham and Sarah are such an important. They are such important people for us. Because when they encountered God's grace. The only response. Was to rejoice deeply with gratitude.

And then to obey what God had to say. And very simply. That is what we each are called to as well. We are called to pray with David. In Psalm 51.

That God would continually fill us. With the joy of his salvation. And give us hearts. Clean hearts. New hearts. That are willing to serve him.

Which is what we pray in Lent. Over and over again. The joy of our salvation. Is something that is obscured at times. By the stresses and concerns of this world.

By the fact that God's timetable. Does not match ours at times. But that joy. Is something that is ours. Permanently. Through Jesus Christ.

[21 : 39] His grace comes into our life. In every circumstance. That we experience. And we are given grace. To proclaim. That joy. To be evangelists like Sarah.

To share in the grace. God has poured out on us. God has poured out on us. God has poured out on us. So throughout Genesis. And right through the Bible. You know. As we close this sermon. If there is one thing. That we are called to do. And we see this in Abraham's life. Application that jumps out at us. Is that when you hold on to God.

And hold on to his promises. You will never go wrong. And in fact. God will deeply bless you. And his grace will transform you. In the face of our temptations.

And wrong expectations. And suffering. We are called through Abraham. And Sarah. To hold on to the truth. That God is the one. Who gives life to the dead.

[22 : 36] And calls into being the things. That are not. He has the words of eternal life. To whom else. Would we go. God grant us grace.

And power. To cling to him. And to his promise. And to know his grace. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.