

Genesis 21

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: 14 April 2013

Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 00] I'm reading at the beginning. The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. You don't need me to tell you that God's ways are often in the deep.

They are often mysterious. It appears to us that God often seems to work in the dark. But the one thing that the Bible shows to us is that God will always keep his word.

We might have a difficulty in understanding exactly what his word means to us, and it's maybe years later that we come to understand that God has actually fulfilled his promise.

Sometimes we don't realize what he is doing because we see things in a particular way. We understand things according to our own experience and our own logic, but sometimes God's ways are in the deep and they're in the dark, and it's sometimes afterwards, maybe a long time afterwards, that we come to realize that what he had said and what he has said has actually come to pass.

[1 : 30] And so we find here that this is quite a remarkable part of Abraham's life tied in with the promise of God.

As we all know, Abraham and Sarah, because we're told in Hebrews that it was by faith that she conceived and bore a child, Isaac, but both Abraham and Sarah displayed remarkable faith.

Abraham, we could say, was a frontiersman of faith, a giant in the faith. And when you think of when it was and of how limited his, what we would say, his Bible knowledge or such like was, because we live in a day where we have everything.

We have the full ministry of the Spirit. We have a completed word. Abraham lived, as it were, at the very dawn, as it were, or close to the dawn of God's revelation and working.

And so some of his movements of faith and his stance of faith and his steps of faith and his journey of faith, it really is quite remarkable.

[2 : 52] A great man of faith. Yes, he had his dips and he had his failings and his falls. They're recorded for us. That's one of the beautiful things about the Bible, is that the heroes and the heroines are shown just for what they are.

Great people of faith, and yet they have their weaknesses, they have their weak times, their weak moments. They've had their lapses where they've slipped, they've fallen. And Abraham, although he is the father of the faithful and displayed amazing faith in his life, yet there were moments of lapses in his faith where he didn't trust God, where he tried to lean upon his own understanding. The Word tells us, trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. Well, there were times when Abraham actually reversed it, and he trusted in his own understanding and didn't lean upon the Lord.

But, as we say, the main thrust of his life was one of great faith, and that's why, rightly so, he is looked upon in many ways as his giant of faith.

Now, it tells us here a very simple statement that the Lord visited Sarah, as he said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.

[4 : 18] And as we remember, there were years and years of hopes rising and fading, rising and fading, where God's Word seemed to come, as it were, right back to them, and all was well, and then it's like the Word would fade away, and the likelihood of the Word ever being fulfilled would become less and less and less.

But the fact of the matter is, God had spoken. And when God says something, that's it. The Word of God says, God is not a man that he should lie, nor the Son of Man that he should repent.

What he hath said, he will do. And that's an amazing thing, because it's so different to ourselves. Now, we know that there are people, and we could call them very, very dependable people. And they're dependable because their Word, by and large, is true. And that doesn't mean that other people, their Word isn't true, but some people aren't as dependable as others, because some might be more prone to forgetting.

I'm sure we've all can put our hands up and remember times where we've promised people that we would do something, and we've forgotten. Or we said we would be somewhere, and we forgot to go. [5 : 39] And that's human nature. That's just what we're like. It's not that we deliberately forgot. It's just we forgot so often. And I'm sure, as we get older, I certainly find myself over and over and over again finding I'm continuing to forget things to do and places I should be at and things that I've said I'm going to do.

And it's maybe a long time after I just said, I can't believe I've forgotten. And even if you write things down, you'd still forget. But the wonderful thing is that God is never, ever, ever like that.

He knows the end from the beginning. And when God gives His Word, that's it. That's the end of the matter. When God says something, He will fulfill it.

And so, we find here that the Lord makes this great statement, or the Word tells us this great thing, that the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as He had promised.

And we have to ask ourselves, well, what was that? Well, we know that back in chapter 18, the Lord gave that promise to Abraham.

[6 : 57] And that He said, we find that in chapter 8, verse 9, they said to Him, where is Sarah, your wife? And He said, she is in the tent.

The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, shall have a son. So, that's what we tie into what it says here.

The Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as He had promised. At the appointed time, that is what the Lord is saying to Israel.

I will surely return to you about this time next year. And so, we find that the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did as He had promised.

And that's the wonderful thing. We find here that the Lord is coming. The Lord is coming to do. And when the Lord comes to visit, it's quite an important word, this, the Lord visited.

[8 : 03] When the Lord comes to visit, He comes to perform something. Now, when the Lord comes to visit His people, He will come very often to perform some act of mercy, something that He will bring into their life.

And it's very often after a period of darkness, or a period of fear, or a period where there's almost been nothing.

And many of the Lord's people are left like that. Maybe you're here today, and you are in a period of darkness, and a period of fear, a period of blackness. And it's as if the Lord is far away.

You can't hear Him. You can't touch Him. You can't feel Him. And you're in this darkness, in this void. But it's when the Lord comes, and He visits. When He visits His people, it's as if He comes to restore, to bring.

Like it says in the book of Ruth, how the Lord visited His people. In other words, He brought an end to the famine, and He brought bread back to them.

[9 : 17] He brought food back to them. And so the Lord was going to visit in order to perform. Sometimes the Lord will visit in judgment.

And that is upon those who have rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's a very, very solemn thing, because again the Bible speaks in these kind of terms, of the Lord visiting in judgment, visiting in wrath.

Because you see, sometimes people can go for years and years, and they've heard all about the gospel, and they reject Jesus, and they think, well, it's no big deal, because there's nothing happening. But one day God is going to visit, and He's going to come in judgment, and He's going to come in wrath.

And He's going to bring judgment upon those who have rejected His Son. So when we read about God visiting, it is in order to perform. And that's what we find here in a positive sense, that He has come to visit.

Now, this promise, or the fulfillment of this promise, goes way back. And that's why we have to say that Abraham, in particular, and Sarah, displayed great faith along the way.

[10:33] Abraham's faith dipped, so did Sarah's. Sarah's faith took a great dip, and we'll just see that in a moment. But she also exercised great faith, and rightly is in the book of Hebrews, as one of the giants of faith.

Now, we've got to remember the obedience of Abraham and Sarah, because way back, remember how God called. In chapter 12 there, how God called.

In chapter 11, it introduces us to Abraham. But in chapter 12, God called Abraham, and of course Sarah, as long with Abraham, and she went with him, out of his own land, the land of the Ur of the Chaldees.

And he said, I'm going to take you to a land. And God gave to Abraham great promises. It wasn't, he didn't spell out everything. And to begin with, Abraham's movement actually is quite extraordinary.

Because the Lord said, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and so on.

[11:46] Abraham got up on the strength of God's word, and he went out, as it tells us elsewhere, not knowing where he went. At that particular stage, he was in the dark.

And this is why he was displaying great faith. But he clung on to this promise, God has called me out, and he's going to take me into a land, he's going to give me a land, and he's going to bless. I'm going to be the source of blessing. This is what he said, I will make of you a great nation. Wow. Because at that time, they had no family. And I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. This is a blessing of Christ. Amazing. That was one of the most amazing promises ever given to any person.

It was tied in these two or three verses at the beginning of chapter 12 in the book of Genesis. So, Abraham went out. And you know, in many ways, that what Abraham's response to God's Word is very like a person coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

[13:02] Because every person who accepts Christ, who responds to the call of the gospel, is doing something similar to what Abraham did.

And they're getting up, as it were, from everything that they're familiar with, with the environment and the surroundings and the very way their life is, the way they think, the way they view, the way that they've been comfortable with.

And they launch out, as it were, saying, right, Lord, I want you now to be king of my life. I was king. I was queen. I was in charge of my life.

I was boss. But now I want you to take over. That's what happens when a person becomes a Christian. We're asking the Lord to come in and to become ruler and to become king of our life. It's an extraordinary moment. And maybe there's somebody in here today, and, you know, you would like to be a Christian. And you've come to church for quite a long time, and you're saying, I really want to move from where I am and move out to follow Jesus, but I'm scared.

[14:21] I feel I'm almost there, but I just keep getting held back because there are things I'm not sure about. It's like a step into the unknown.

I know where I am right now, but I'm not ready for what's out there. It's unknown. Well, that's faith. That is the step of faith.

That is where we are, as it were, throwing ourselves upon the Lord, and we're trusting the Lord, taking Him at His word to be the Lord, to be the king, to be the rule of our life.

And that is what is involved, from our point of view, from our perspective, in seeking the Lordship of Christ as our own.

And so we find that Abraham, he leaves his own land and heads off, and the Lord, bit by bit, shows him the way to go. Now, of course, long time elapsed after that.

[15:28] And then the Lord again meets up with Abraham in chapter 15. And in chapter 15, again, after the Lord came and he said, Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield.

Your reward shall be very great. That's a beautiful statement there. But Abraham said, Now, see, quite a number of years have elapsed.

And God had promised that He was going to make of Abraham to be the father of a great nation.

And Abraham is now speaking to the Lord. Years have gone by, and there is still no family.

And Abraham is asking the Lord, and he says, So at this point, Abraham is saying to the Lord, Lord, I know you've promised me to make me the father of a nation.

But the only way that I can see that happening is my chief servant, Eliezer. Is he, is it going to be through him?

[16:42] Because I don't have a child. And the Lord tells him very clearly that that's not how it's going to be. This man shall not be your heir.

Your very own son shall be your heir. So the Lord becomes very specific there. And remember how he was told to go and look at the night sky and to see.

And he says, I'm going to give you, your descendants will be more than the stars, like the stars of the heaven and like the sand of the seashore and so on. And then after that, there was silence for again for a long, long time.

Nothing happened for a long time. And you know, this is where the testing comes. Because you know, see when you have God's word, you've read God's word, you believe God's word, faith lays hold upon it, and it gives you strength and persuasion and assurance.

And then it's like silence for quite a while. You're no longer, somehow you're not able to take that word to you the way that you were.

[17:49] And what you believed God was going to do is not happening. And weeks go on, and months go on, and years go on.

And it's not happening. In fact, it's going the very opposite direction. And you know, God will often work in that way. I don't know how often people will say, maybe in their older life, in their age and years, well, God's ways have certainly been mysterious.

And he seems so often to be working against himself. You look at the life of Joseph. God gave Joseph a promise when he was young that he was going to be in an exalted position.

And he saw his family, as it were, bowing down before him. And for years, Joseph, as we know, was a prisoner in Egypt, as his family roamed free.

And for years, God's promise seemed to be just mocking him. It seemed to be just, it seemed to be like a lie. And then all of a sudden it changed.

[19:01] And Joseph is propelled from the dungeon to the throne in Egypt. And God fulfills his word. And it tells us in the psalm that until the time of the word, until the time the Lord's word was fulfilled, the word of the Lord tried him.

So this message that God gave all these years was testing, testing, testing Joseph. And it will be the same for us as well.

We are going to be tested. And there's another thing. Sometimes God's word doesn't mean what we think it does. Sometimes when we have his word, it is spiritual.

And what I mean by that is, take for example, and I'm sure we've all experienced things like that, where you are praying and praying for somebody. And it seems to be as you pray that it's also as if the word has come to your mind, and you believe that things are going to be well.

You say, oh, this passion that I'm praying for is going to recover. It seems to be like a, you get this boost. But that's not what happens.

[20:17] And sometimes you're left confused. But then you come to realize, as time goes on, that the Lord actually, yes, he was through to his word, but it was a spiritual meaning.

You took it as a purely physical, as a temporal thing, but the Lord's meaning was spiritual. It had a deeper meaning. Now, of course, there are times when the Lord speaks to us through his word, and it is.

It's temporal. It's physical. It is such. You might today be in darkness and doubt. You might have a lack of assurance, and maybe your trust in the Lord is not what it should be because of this very thing.

The one thing I'll say to you, and I can see it, I've seen it so often in my own life, is that the Lord is true to his word. And one day you will see the fulfillment of that.

It might not be the way that you've expected or anticipated, and it might take you a long time, but the Lord will work. Time is moving, but then we see, but there's another aspect comes into this whole story, one I think we're very familiar with, because again there's a silence.

[21:36] And again, although God has promised again to Abraham, yes, you're going to be the father. Nothing happens. And Sarah says to Abraham one day, you know I've been thinking.

Now, do you know, it doesn't actually tell us, but I believe, I believe that Satan is entering the scene here. Because Satan always uses successful strategy.

When Satan has been successful in the past, he will use that strategy again. He had a very successful strategy in Eden, because he got at Adam through Eve. That was the way. Not the direct, but the indirect approach. And he does it again. And Sarah says to Abraham, you know, I am too old to have a child. I think the only way that this promise of God can be fulfilled, and that you will be a father, is to take Hagar, my maidservant, and have a child with her. [22 : 54] And then that will be, I'll adopt this as my son, and this will be the fulfillment of the promise. And again, how like us, isn't it?

We're going to help God out. We think that since the promise isn't going to be fulfilled, well, we better, it's time for us to work. And I think we've all been there as well. Because, you know, we are so impatient. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their impatience. And you know what he said to them? Your time is always now. And he's saying the same to me and to you. Your time is always now. We are impatient because God often works slowly. And particularly in the day that we're living in, and this is the day of the instant, and the day of just the instant response, and everybody's wanting everything at once. We find it so difficult to accept that God often works slowly. You know, sometimes we are guilty of saying, oh, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord has left us. [24 : 02] The Lord is not working. How do we know? When we follow biblical history, we will see that the one thing that God's people have to learn is to be patient as God works.

That doesn't mean that we don't work. Of course we do. But we mustn't get in the way of God. We've got to be careful. And so we find that Abraham agreed to that, and he fathered a child with Hagar, and of course that's where Ishmael was born. But again the Lord comes a good while after, and the Lord tells Abraham, no, that's not your heir. And that's why we find in chapter 18 the Lord saying, Sarah will have a son. Sarah, remember she laughed? She couldn't believe it. Because at that stage in life, Abraham was 100, and Sarah was 90. When you think about it, humanly speaking, it couldn't happen. And that's where God will often take us. Why?

[25 : 12] Because as long as we have a finger in it, we will claim the glory ourselves. As long as we think that we've achieved, we will take the credit.

And that's so true. That's why salvation of our souls is all of grace. If we could have a part in our own salvation, we would give Christ none of the glory. We would give the Father none of the glory. We take all the glory to ourselves. If we could even just get one little finger in and claim one little bit and say, oh well, but you see, this is why I'm a Christian. It's because I do. It's all of grace. And all the glory goes to God, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And that's why God will often take us to the place of the impossible so that the glory will all be His and we cannot turn around and say, well, it's because of this or that that I did or I said or whatever. [26 : 16] And that's where He took Abraham and Sarah into the place of the impossible. And so we find that written large over this amazing piece of biblical history is God's sovereign control and God's sovereign power and showing us that we must take God at His word.

And God did. He worked a miracle because it's as it were He revitalized and renewed. Now, it wasn't a miraculous baby. It was everything was worked in the normal course of events. but God renewed. But their faith was involved.

And it was by faith it tells us very clearly that because Sarah believed although initially she laughed she believed. And through her belief God, through her faith God empowered her. There's no question whatever in that. And it's similar same with Abraham. And you know this when God when God begins to work it's like He doesn't stop. [27 : 26] because Abraham became like a new man. Because I think it's one of the saddest things when we read about the death of Sarah and the whole area of the burial of the death and the mourning and the burial of Sarah.

But Abraham took another wife and he fathered children with that wife. Now some people say that he took this other wife at the same time as Sarah because polygamy was often practiced at that

time.

but it would appear with the exception of Hagar that Abraham was somebody who was committed simply to Sarah and to Sarah alone. And it is in all likelihood that it was after she died.

So that as Abraham exercised that faith in the Lord and the Lord empowered Abraham and empowered Sarah that that empowering continued. and that's the way that the Lord works.

The great message and the great lesson for us today is to exercise complete trust in the Lord and that is so hard for us to do.

[28 : 38] It's one and I'm saying that even to the Christian. Yes we've trusted the Lord for our soul salvation. We are united to Him. But in the day-to-day exercise of faith as we journey through life with all its challenges and all its traumas and all its difficulties and all its issues and problems let us trust the Lord.

For those of you who are following Him and you may be in the dark my prayer is that the Lord will enable you to sing the Lord's song again. That He will bring His joy into your heart.

That He will visit you in His mercy in His love. That He will rejoice over you with His love and cause you to sing again. And that His word will be fulfilled that we'll be given the faith to believe and the faith even to see.

And that we won't trust in ourselves. Now I'm not saying for one moment that we are not to work and this is not in any way a message promoting laziness or promoting and saying we are not to make any planning I mustn't write anything down in my diary and say I'm going to do this I'm going to do that.

Of course not. But we are to be putting the Lord always before us and seeking His that He will guide us as we go through life that we will have this simple trust where we're living daily with Him.

[30 : 05] Because it's so easy to go wrong. Remember what the word says there is a way that seemeth right and to our person but at the end thereof are the ways of death. We can choose to go the wrong way it may appear right but it's wrong.

But if we're looking to the Lord He will direct us. And you know I love listening to old people who have gone along with the Lord in life.

And yes there have been challenges and some people have really really dark providences that they've had to go through. and yet through it all there is this amazing coming together of God's handiwork in our life.

As I've often said I believe it's part of what we will find as a social rejoicing in heaven is where we see what didn't make sense to us here.

It's not just where we will meet up with those that the Lord has taken that we miss. But we will come to understand what we couldn't understand here.

[31 : 14] Something of the mystery of His providence and of His dealings. May we then have a simple childlike faith that will trust in the Lord always.

Let us pray. O Lord our God we ask to help us and to bless us. We pray to encourage us in Your Word. We pray that even if we walk in the dark that You will come to be a light upon our path.

We pray Lord for us in everything that we're about in all our movements to and fro. We pray Lord for those who are unwell for those Lord who are in hospital who are going to hospital.

We pray for any who are undergoing or are to undergo treatment. We pray that these things will work well. We ask O Lord for deliverance for health and for strength and we pray that Your hand will be upon us for good.

Guide us in everything. Cleanse us from our sin. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Our concluding psalm is from the Scottish Psalter.