

Gen 18:1-15; 21:1-7

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[0:00] We are continuing our series in the book of Genesis tonight. We're studying the life of Abraham. So turn with me to chapter 18 in the book of Genesis.

We're going to look at chapter 18, a little bit of 18, and a little bit of 21. That's page 12 in the pew, if you want to turn there. Tonight, we're looking at the part of Abraham's life that is the promise and the birth of Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac.

Genesis chapter 18. So let me read this for us, and then we'll pray, and we'll ask God's help that we might understand and apply it.

So starting in Genesis 18, verse 1. And the Lord appeared to him, that is Abraham, by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.

He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

[1:13] Let a little water be brought and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. While I bring a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on, since you have come to your servant.

So they said, Do as you have said. And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, Quick, three say as a fine flour, knead it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf tender and good and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly.

Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. 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.

And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.

[2:16] So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure? The Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time, I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son. But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. He said, No, but you did laugh. Okay, turn to chapter 21 on page 17. We'll pick up in verse 1.

Chapter 21, verse 1.

The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did 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, which means he laughs, by the way. And Sarah circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

[3:26] 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. All right, let's pray. Father, we ask this afternoon, this evening, that our minds and our hearts would understand and receive your word tonight.

Father, we ask that the truth of this passage would sink deep and allow us to become who you've called us to be by your grace. In Jesus' name, amen. All right, well, with the time that we have tonight, I want us to just think about three things in this passage.

Three things that I think are kind of the big idea. So what's the big idea of this story that we just read from Genesis? Well, above and through it all, I think the main point, pretty straightforwardly, is this. That God keeps his promises. The Lord keeps his promises. If you're still at Genesis chapter 21, look again at verse 1.

[4 : 38] Notice how the narrator writes it out. The Lord visited Sarah as he had said. And the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. Not a single thing that God had promised fell to the ground.

God keeps his promises, every single one of them. Now, that's very unlike, right, nearly every other experience that we have.

Isn't it? When it comes to promises. I mean, think about it. There are no shortage of promises being made in our world today. Right? Think of all the promises.

Politicians make promises. Our friends make promises. Husbands and wives make promises to one another. We even see ourselves making promises. Right?

Think in your mind, what's the last promise that you made to someone? What was it? I promise I'll be home before dinner. Man, the number of times I've made that promise.

[5 : 38] And it has not come true. I promise I'll never do this, that, or the other thing again. And sometimes we keep our promises, right? We're able to sort of hold true and do it and follow through.

But many times we don't. You know, we can look out at our world and we can look into our own hearts and we can see a long string of broken promises.

Why? Why is that? Why is it so hard for us to keep our promises? Well, on one level, there are a lot of forces in our world that are outside of our control, right? I promise to be home for dinner, and yet there's an accident on the road when I'm driving home.

The traffic backs up, and I'm sitting in wall-to-wall traffic on Whitney Avenue for an hour. Or I'm just driving Whitney Avenue, which is really slow in general, because that's how Whitney Avenue works. We have very little control. So many times we aren't able to keep our promises. Right? But you and I know that that's often not nearly half of the reason why we struggle to keep promises.

[6 : 47] The problem often isn't outside of us, but inside of us. Right? We're fickle. We're lazy. We're selfish. And at the end of the day, keeping promises is costly.

Right? Right? To keep a promise often means we have to sacrifice our own desires, our own plans, our own comfort.

And that is something that we human beings do very rarely, if at all. But against this very human backdrop of our promise breaking.

In our text tonight, we're presented with a divine reality. That God keeps his promises. God told Abraham in chapter 7, just before our text tonight, that his seed, his offspring, his family line, would continue through Sarah and no one else.

That they would have a son. And here in chapter 18 and 21, God fulfills his promise just as he said. Now, put yourself in Abraham and Sarah's shoes tonight.

[8 : 03] Not in chapter 21, where everything sort of reaches its happy fulfillment. Put yourself in their shoes in chapter 18. Put yourself in the tent on that hot Middle Eastern day.

Because it's hot there. We think it's hot in New Haven. It's not hot. Now, if you're Sarah, if you're Abraham, how long at that point in the story had you been waiting for God to make good on his promises?

Months? Years? And you have to realize that at first, the promise of God to Abraham and Sarah probably made Abraham and Sarah's experience even more bitter.

Here's why. Because they were unable to have children of their own. We sort of know this at the start of the story. Which is a painful experience for any couple, especially in the ancient world, when so much of your identity and family stability and financial well-being depended on your ability as a family to have children.

Who else was going to keep the herds and till the fields? It was your kids. Who else was going to bear your name into the next generation? It was your children.

[9 : 24] So here's a couple who's already hurting because they can't have children. And then God comes in chapters 12 and 15 and 17 and makes a promise and says, no, you're going to have a child.

And at first, that promise probably brings them a lot of comfort and hope. When Abraham gets that promise in chapter 17, you remember what he does? He laughs. And Matt said last week, it was probably a laughter of joy because God was saying, I'm going to do it.

But then what happens when the fulfillment of that promise doesn't come? And doesn't come. And doesn't come.

I can imagine that the promise may have made things even harder at times for Sarah and Abraham. The book of Proverbs says, hope deferred makes the heart sick.

Not only were they struggling with infertility, but now they were struggling with the fact that God had made a promise. And it seemed like he wasn't going to follow through. Now, the reality is, friends, that God doesn't promise all of us today that we will have children.

[10:32] God doesn't promise all of us that we will ever get married. God doesn't promise us health and wealth and well-being. But God still makes promises to us, church. God promises to justify us in Christ, to make us right with the heavenly father.

God promises to sanctify us in this life, to make us more and more holy. God promises one day to glorify us in the new heavens and new earth. God promises to put an end to evil and injustice. But you know what?

The waiting is hard. And in the waiting, our faith starts to flounder, doesn't it? And sometimes, the promise can even make things a little more bitter.

Think about it. Have you ever had a prayer that goes unanswered? And you keep praying it, and it still goes unanswered. And you keep praying it, and it still goes unanswered.

You can think in those moments, does God hear? Is God just unable to act? But friends, this text here in Genesis is here for us, showing us that God is not forgotten, and God does hear, and God is still in complete control of our lives.

[11:57] Paul Miller, in his book, *A Praying Life*, which is a great book on prayer, by the way. Probably one of the best I've read. He writes this as we think about waiting on God's promises.

He writes this. He says, if God is sovereign, then he is in control of all the details of my life. If God is loving, then he's going to be shaping the details of my life for my good.

If God is all-wise, then he's not going to do everything I want, because I don't know what I need. If God is patient, then he's going to take time to do all this.

When we put all these together, God's sovereignty, love, wisdom, patience, we have a divine story. And friends, all of us who are in Christ are living, all of us, in the midst of that divine story, with a God who is sovereign and loving and all-wise and patient, in control of all the details of your life, working all of them for good, but not doing everything you want, because you don't always know what you need, and not always doing it in the time frame that you think you need.

And yet, he is still keeping all of his promises. Before we move on to the next point, I think the application briefly here is maybe twofold.

[13:28] First, are you a student of God's promises in God's word? Abraham received special revelation about the birth of his son Isaac.

That was a very particular moment in redemptive history. The Lord literally, mysteriously shows up with two other messengers that day. Isn't it interesting how the narrative keeps going back and forth between three messengers, the Lord, three messengers, the Lord.

It was a very mysterious moment in the Old Testament when God shows up, literally shows up to Abraham under a veil. God shows up, speaks to Abraham, and tells him, you're going to have a son.

But here's the crazy thing, church. You and I, we've got something even better than that. We have something even better than God showing up and telling us something.

Because you and I don't have to wait around in the heat of the day, hoping that God shows up in some special way. Because for us, living at this time in redemptive history, God has inspired and preserved all of his promises for us in his word.

[14:45] You and I can do something Abraham could never do. We can pick up a Bible, we can open the New Testament, and we can read how God has fulfilled all of his redemptive promises in Jesus Christ.

And then we can discover as we read there all of the promises that are true for us and will be true for us in Christ. And friend, are you a student of those promises?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German pastor and theologian who died in a concentration camp during World War II, when he was teaching other pastors at a sort of covert seminary in Germany, he used to always tell his students, he said that you need to read the Bible, brothers, sisters.

You need to read the Bible as if it is God addressing you. He's talking to you through the Bible. Yes, God was speaking to the church long ago.

That's when it was inspired and written down. But these words are there preserved to speak to us as well. So we can read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. And we can read the New Testament and apply it to ourselves in the light of Christ.

[15:57] So friends, if God keeps his promises, let's be students of God's promises and let's treasure them up and let's hold them fast. And second, I think the lesson is do we cling to the promises?

Sarah laughs when she hears the Lord reaffirm this promise that they would have a son. And this laugh probably is not the sort of joyful chuckle of Abraham confident in his Lord.

Yeah? Can you agree with me on that reading of this text? But you know what? We can sympathize with Sarah, can't we? Think about it.

God promises to display his glory through the church. God promises to draw and bring men and women from every nation, tribe, and tongue to himself.

And sometimes, and those are just two promises of like a thousand in the New Testament. And sometimes we think about those promises and we can laugh. That weary, doubtful, disappointed laugh.

[17:04] Really, God? I've been a part of the church for a long time. And I don't see a lot of glory going on in the church. This is really where you're going to display your manifold wisdom to the world?

Really, God? You're going to draw men and women to yourself through the proclamation of something as foolish as a man dying on a cross 2,000 years ago?

You don't know how far my neighbors are from believing in you in general, let alone believing in that. And we start to laugh.

But when we start to laugh that kind of laugh, what do we need to do? We need to remember, quite simply, who God is. We need to remember that it is God who's making these promises.

Not me. Not you. Not a president. The God of the universe is making these promises.

[18:19] Romans 4, 20 through 21, actually reflecting on this sort of season of Abraham's life. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 4, says, No distrust made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith.

How? As he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Abraham's faith, his trust, grew strong as he gave glory to God.

That is, as he remembered and exalted in who God is. The almighty maker of heaven and earth, as the old creed says.

The infinitely holy one. The God of steadfast love and faithfulness. The God of perfect justice and righteousness. This is the God who's making these promises. The one beside whom there is no other.

And as we know from the New Testament, this is the God who sent his own son, who freely took on flesh to redeem us from sin and seal us for eternal life by his spirit, who conquered death in the resurrection, who ascended to the right hand of majesty, who's poured out his spirit, who even now, through the proclamation of the gospel, is in power and in authority calling men and women, calling all nations to himself to find life and rest and peace, and who has established his church on every single continent and continues to call men and women and convert men and women everywhere, every day.

[19:50] That's the God who's making these promises. Do you realize how insane it is that this couple we're learning about tonight, Abraham and Sarah, a nobody, nothing couple in the ancient Near East, out of this promise that he makes to them, the entire world has now been filled.

Isn't that amazing? God keeps his promises. That's the first big point. Second, we see in this text that God keeps his promises by sheer grace.

God keeps his promises by complete and utterly sheer, totally free grace. How do we see that in this text? What did Abraham and Sarah contribute to the fulfillment of this promise?

Did they meet God halfway? Did they do their part so God would do his part? Does God help those who help themselves? That's not how it works.

I mean, come on. Abraham and Sarah could do nothing but trust God to fulfill the promise of bearing a son, right? After all, they were both way too old to bear children. The narrator reminds us

of that in verse 11 of chapter 18, if you want to look there.

[21 : 15] He sort of states the obvious. Now, Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of woman had ceased to be with Sarah. Three times, he sort of drives the point home. They're old.

They're advanced in years. And Sarah is not going to have a child, naturally. In case you missed it, it ain't gonna happen. Sarah herself says it out loud.

She laughs to herself, saying, After I'm worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure? That is the pleasure of bearing a child. Chapter 21, verse 5. Remember what it said? Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

I mean, look, you don't have to be an OBGYN to know that really, really old people can't have children anymore, right? Is that obvious? It's obvious. What was God doing here?

God was showing us something utterly crucial and incredibly central to the biblical story. God is showing us here in Abraham and Sarah that his saving promises are completely his doing.

[22 : 23] And that nothing is too hard for the Lord. And our human works and our human strength are not what advances God's purposes in the world. It's God's grace.

Before God saved us, if you're a believer here tonight, before God saved us, you and I were dead in sin. That's what the Bible says. Just like Abraham and Sarah were as good as dead when it came to bearing children, you and I were spiritually dead in our sin.

We couldn't lift a finger to rescue ourselves. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in sin, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace, God's unmerited favor and promise, you have been saved. Does that sound familiar? I hope it does. That's Ephesians 2.

We took like a whole year and studied Ephesians in the evening service. Wasn't that what we were seeing in Ephesians? That God making good in his promise doesn't depend on you. Your job is to trust that he'll get the job done and obey out of gratitude for his unbelievable generosity toward us in Christ.

[23 : 40] Now, why does God do it this way? Why do God's redemptive promises move forward, not on the basis of our work or our ability, but on the basis of his ability and his grace?

Well, there's a lot we can say about that. But think about two things. First, isn't that really good news? Just to be honest, isn't it really good news that God's promises advance in our life, not because we rise to the challenge, not because of our strength and our intellect and our moral record or our desserts.

And if God's promises don't depend on those things, if God can give a baby to a couple like Abraham and Sarah, is anything too hard for the Lord? Is anything too hard for the Lord, no matter who you are or what your background is?

That God can forgive your sins, even your pride and self-righteousness, to think that you don't need a Savior, that God can forgive even those sins and make you his child.

That God can release you over time from that addiction, that besetting sin that always seems to plague you. That God can give you gifts and a calling to serve others and that you can know the joy of building up the church.

[25 : 14] Friends, doesn't that take the burden off your shoulders? And doesn't it make you joyful? Just to be honest. God keeps his promises and he keeps them all the way, even when I couldn't lift a finger to help.

There's another reason why God does it this way. Because when God's saving promises reach us, apart from our works, when we see that they're all of grace, then it's God who gets the glory.

Imagine visiting Abraham and Sarah after the birth of Isaac. There you are in chapter 21. You got the email saying that they had had a baby. Whoa, that's crazy. And then the take them a meal email came to them around and you signed up because you want to take them a meal.

So you show up with whatever, pasta primavera or whatever, and you got them a little card and you got them a little baby gift. You got them one of those like stupid rubber giraffes that costs like 40 bucks.

Congratulations. What do you say to Abraham as he sits there 100 years old with a newborn? What do you say to Sarah, 90 years old, as she holds her baby?

[26 : 24] Friends, in that moment, you can't help but acknowledge and admit that this is the Lord's doing and it's wonderful in our eyes.

You glorify God. He gets all the credit because there's no fertility treatment in the world that's going to pull that one off, especially in the time of Abraham.

It wasn't Abraham's virility. It wasn't Sarah's fertility that produced this child. It was God and he gets all the glory and it's the same with all of God's promises.

God does it by grace so that he gets the glory and when he gets the glory, we get to stop staring at ourselves for once and we get to start adoring him.

Lost in wonder, thanks and praise, as the old hymn puts it. Aren't you tired of looking at yourself, church? Isn't it so wearisome to keep worrying about yourself?

[27 : 33] And God says, let me glorify myself before you by redeeming you through grace so you can get healed of your self-centeredness and lose yourself in something beautiful, namely me.

And I'm a fountain that's never going to run dry and you'll be satisfied in me forever. And when you finally get outside of yourself, you can start loving other people and know the joy and the freedom of living for the glory of God instead of for the glory of yourself.

Third point. Then we'll go to the table. We've seen that God keeps his promises. God keeps his promises by grace. And last, what this text shows us is that God's promises are there to turn our sorrow into joy.

This past week, I was reading in Psalm 30 and verse 5 just sort of jumped out at me as I was thinking about our Genesis text. Psalm 30 verse 5 says, weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

And is that not what we see here in the story of Abraham and Sarah? That through the birth of a son, God turned the sorrow of Abraham and Sarah into laughter. That the bitter laugh of disappointment and of a heart grown sick becomes the joyful laughter of a heart shot through with grace.

[29 : 04] But friends, you have to see this story in light of the whole story of redemption. You've got to see this story in light of the whole story of the Bible. Yes, through the birth of a son, God turns Abraham and Sarah's sorrow into joy.

But through the birth of a son, God turns not just the sorrow of Abraham and Sarah into laughter, but ultimately, he was turning the sorrow of the whole world into laughter.

Because you see, in Isaac, in this boy born to Abraham and Sarah, God's covenant promise was advancing.

God's promise to lift the curse of the fall that we had brought upon ourselves. God's promise to restore the blessing of Eden and a fellowship with him.

God's promise that that blessing would go to all nations. That's what God was telling Abraham in Genesis 12 when he called him and he made a covenant with him. And here in Isaac, that redemptive purpose of God advances.

[30 : 14] And God gets one step closer to blessing the nations with his forgiveness and righteousness and grace and presence. But you know, here in the birth of Isaac, we even get a glimpse of how God's going to turn our sorrow into laughter.

Because don't we know that when the fullness of time had come, God was going to do it again. And he was going to do it through a promised son to an unlikely couple.

But this time, the couple, and the mother especially, wasn't going to be too old, but the mother was going to be too young. A virgin, just engaged to be married.

Someone who shouldn't be having babies. And yet Jesus comes, born of a virgin Mary, coming down to take our sorrow and sin in his life and in his death and giving us joy in his resurrection. So that now, today, that joyful laughter of Sarah and Abraham in chapter 21 becomes the joyful laughter of the church worldwide.

[31 : 29] God has done it. He's kept his promise. Our sins are forgiven. And new life has begun. And the Bible tells us that one day, Jesus, because he's conquered sin and death, all sorrow and all pain and all tears are going to flee away when he comes to reign.

And every bitter disappointment that we have faced will be met and answered with the joy of heaven. and the church will laugh with Sarah's laughter and God will be all in all.

God keeps his promises. As we go to the table, remember that, church. Not a single word will fail and in Christ, all sorrow will turn to laughter.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, how we need your spirit to come and to grant us faith. Lord, we praise you and we thank you that you are a promise keeping God and that in Christ all of your promises are

yes and amen.

It is true. Lord, help us by your spirit to cling to Christ in hope and in joy and in faith we pray. Amen. Well, friends, we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together and Matt, would you come up and help me serve?

[33 : 04] Thanks. We talked about God keeping his promises and what this table is meant to do is meant to be a reminder of just that. It is meant to be something that we can take up in our hands and we can actually put into our bodies as the most tangible, real, concrete reminder that God has done it.

He's kept his promises for us. If you're new to Trinity, if you're visiting, what we're going to do is we're going to take bread that's been broken and we're going to pass it out and then we're going to eat it together and we're going to take a cup and we're going to pass it out and we're going to drink it together and this bread and this cup represent, they symbolize Christ's body that's been broken for us and they represent the blood of Christ.

This cup represents the blood of Christ that's been shed for us. So if you're here tonight and if it's true of you that you've turned from sin and placed your trust in Christ, if you're a Christian, then take this bread and take this cup and hear the Lord Jesus himself saying, I've done this for you.

If you're here tonight and you're not a believer, if you're still sort of searching spiritually, then instead of taking the bread and cup, just pass them by. This is a sort of act for those who are united to Christ by faith.

Instead of taking the bread and taking the cup, which are symbols of what Christ has done, instead hear the voice of Christ saying, come to me and I'll give you rest. Turn from your own path and rest in Christ.

[34 : 36] Instead of taking the bread and cup, take Christ. Let me read from the New Testament. Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians as he's reminding the church in Corinth about the Lord's Supper.

He says, I receive from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, when he had given thanks he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

So Matt, would you pray for us as we prepare to take the bread? Thanks. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, as we contemplate this table and as we look at these crackers that represent your body broken for us, we think what a great love you have shown us.

What a great sacrifice, what a cost it took for you to redeem us from our sin and to rescue us. Lord, what a costly keeping of your promises to be the redeemer of a people for your very own glory. Lord, as we take this tonight, may we be sobered, sobered by the costliness of our sin, Lord, that it took death, your death, to rescue us from how bad our sin is.

[36 : 00] But Lord, may we also take it with joy, knowing that you have kept your promises and you have rescued us who put our faith in you. And so we take it knowing, Lord, that we are yours.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.