

The Promised Son

Genesis 21:1-21

Since we focused somewhat last week upon Abraham's failure with Abimelech, let me begin today by reading the inspired account of Abraham's life as a whole, an account which presents Abraham as a great man of faith. He had his failures, to be sure, but those failures don't contradict God's overall evaluation of him. I'll read from,

Rom. 4:16 "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all 17 (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did."

We read further of Abraham...

Rom. 4:18 "...who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. 20 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. 22 And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Abraham was a man justified by faith, saved by grace alone through faith alone. And he is, therefore, the father of us all. Note the focus of Abraham's faith, described in Romans 4. It was the promise regarding the birth of Isaac. I read that "he did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in

faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform."

That's our subject this morning. God has power to do what he has promised. And what was the promise? What was the main promise which God gave to Abraham? Isaac. We see here that,

I. GOD KEPT HIS WORD REGARDING ISAAC.

Hebrew is a very repetitive language, which means that when they wanted to emphasize something, they would just repeat it. Which is precisely what we find in verse 1, "...as he had said." Then, in the same verse, "as he had spoken." The same Hebrew word is used. What he said. What he promised. That's what happened.

And according to verse 2, it happened "at the set time of which God had spoken to him." Same word again. God had spoken to Abraham. Sometimes it is translated, God had promised. For God, it is the same thing. You get the idea. When God says something, that is exactly what happens! Just as he spoke it.

One commentator writes that the words of these verses "express the quiet precision of his control." I like those words. Such an appropriate way to describe it! "The quiet precision of his control."

Let me say the same thing with more formal, technical, theological language, from our Shorter Catechism, defining the doctrine of providence: "God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions." In our text this morning, we apply that doctrine to a specific historical event. Isaac.

A. Sarah conceived and bore a son just as God promised.

v.1-2

Don't forget the supernatural power necessary for that to happen. Remember when the promise was given first to Abraham, then to Sarah.

Gen. 17:17 "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

That age is confirmed in our text here,
v.5

They were too old to have children. Even more specifically, we read that,

Gen.18:11 "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. 12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

Sarah had been unable to conceive children all her life. Now, she was past the age of bearing children, she had gone through her change of life. Whatever the medical cause for her infertility, she was now biologically beyond the possibility of having children. Her body no longer produced the eggs nor the hormones necessary for a pregnancy. But God said she would have a child, and then he specified the exact time when he would be born. And he was born.

v.2

Sarah reflects upon that in,
v.7

This, after twenty five years in the land of Canaan, waiting for

the fulfillment of God's promise. God kept his word. And as a result,

B. Isaac would always represent the faithfulness of God's promise.

Isaac himself is living proof of God's faithfulness, living proof that God keeps his word. It's proof that you can't refute, because there he was, born to a man 100 years old and a woman at 90. This was a real person. Living a real life.

v.8

His very name came to be a demonstration of God's faithfulness. The name Isaac means "laughter," as we've studied already. It was given very appropriately. When told of the promise, Abraham laughed. Then later, when Sarah heard, she, too, laughed. So his name would be "laughter," or more literally, "Isaac."

v.3

Abraham was quick to obey the requirements of God's covenant.

v.4

Then we read of the laughter. By God's grace, the laughter of doubting disbelief, for which Sarah particularly was rebuked, was transformed into the laughter of joyous celebration.

v.6

The laughter now, from Sarah herself to everyone who heard about this, was the joyousness of the fact that she had, indeed, given birth to a baby boy. The joyfulness, the excited surprise of that great blessing is described in the very next verse,

v.7

God is so good, and so perfectly faithful. To pick up where I left off last week,

2Tim. 2:11 “This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. 12 If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”

Let’s go to another NT confirmation of that, another reference to Isaac, demonstrating God’s faithfulness to keep his word. In Romans 9, Paul is struggling with the reality that not all of the Jewish people would come to Christ in faith, and he was so burdened by that that he would wish himself accursed for their sake! But even with some of his own people rejecting Jesus Christ, he resolves to keep the assurance that God’s word had not failed.

Rom. 9:6 “But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, 7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” 8 That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. 9 For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.”

Isaac would always represent the faithfulness of God’s promise. With that thought, let me make some applications. Let me encourage you, as you read the Bible, to take note of promises which God gives to you. There are many. Such as the promise of eternal life, the assurance of eternal life. The assurance that “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Philippians 1:6.

Or the promise that “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness..” 1 John 1:9. Or the precious promise “that all

things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” Romans 8:28.

I could go on for the whole hour with promise after promise. My application is to encourage you to believe those promises. Without a shadow of a doubt. And let Isaac be the proof. God keeps his word.

But what about Ishmael? Did God care about Ishmael’s destiny at all? Was he just a pitiful pawn in this whole game of spiritual roulette? Or would God show his faithfulness through Ishmael, too? Could he?

Well, he does. Ishmael isn’t left out of this story. What becomes of Ishmael is very much a part of this story. For God’s own glory.

II. GOD KEPT HIS WORD CONCERNING ISHMAEL.

Let me start out by explaining God’s overall purpose for Isaac and Ishmael, and that was to make a distinction between them. The overriding purpose of God, which we seen from the first pages of Genesis, is to make a separation. His purpose is to discriminate.

And that word means to make a separation between people. Specifically, God separates those who are his people from those who are not. He separates those who have entered his covenant from those who have not.

We’ve seen this separation in every generation. The line of God’s covenant people was through Seth, not Cain. Noah, not his brothers. Shem, not his brothers. Abraham, not his brothers. And then Isaac, not Ishmael.

And the next generation is probably as clear as it gets. God's line of covenant people is through Jacob, not Esau. All of that point to God's sovereign purpose, his eternal decree and electing, predestinating love.

Rom. 9:10 "And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

But back to Isaac and Ishmael. To put it as plainly as possible,

A. God would not establish his covenant through the line of Ishmael.

He has certainly made that plain so far in Genesis.

Gen. 17:20 "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. 21 But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."

In our text this morning we read of God fulfilling that promise. Ishmael would not be the head of God's covenant people. The promise would not be passed on through him. But we read of that in a rather strange way, in a seemingly harsh and bitter response from Sarah.

v.9-10

Now, let me first put that in the best possible light, and emphasize that Ishmael was mocking Isaac. He was mocking Sarah. Literally, it's actually the same word as laughing, but here

the obvious context, using a play on those words, is the laughter of cruel mockery. And Sarah would have none of that. Though her response is somewhat intemperate, it was nonetheless true. Though she speaks rather meanly of Hagar and Ishmael, calling them simply "that bondwoman" and "that bondwoman's son," still her evaluation is correct. Isaac would inherit the covenant promise. All that is confirmed in the inspired explanation given by the apostle Paul in,

This caused a great dilemma for Abraham, still bearing the evil fruit of the immoral plan which brought about Ishmael's conception in the first place. With his marriage and family torn apart by the competition brought about by his own unfaithfulness in sleeping with Hagar, the conflicts resulting from that sin never ceased. But he loved both his sons. They were, after all, both his sons. So we read in,

v.11

God answers, with sovereign authority,
v.12

God would take care of Ishmael, as we'll see shortly, but for now, the point is that Hagar and Ishmael should be sent away. Sarah may have spoken meanly, but she was right in what she requested. And God's message is crystal clear, "in Isaac your seed shall be called."

This is God's sovereign election. God's eternal decree. God's predestinating love. Call it whatever you want, it is God doing precisely what he has determined to do. It is God doing exactly as he said he would do. For his own glory.

Now, this emphasis gives the context for what we'll study in the next chapter, when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on

Mt. Moriah. That was his ultimate test of faith, one which he passed with flying colors. As we read,

Hebr. 11:17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”

God would not establish his covenant through the line of Ishmael. But God wasn’t mean, either. God can’t be accused of any cruelty whatsoever in his dealings with Ishmael, for although God’s word regarding Ishmael was negative, that is, the line of the covenant wouldn’t come through Ismael, God’s word toward Ismael is also positive. God had promised certain blessings to Ishmael. And,

B. God would show his faithfulness to the line of Ishmael.

God had promised to make Ishmael into a great nation himself.

Gen. 16:9 The Angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.” 10 Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.” 11 And the Angel of the LORD said to her: “Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has heard your affliction.”

God would keep his word! In a promise spoken to ease Abraham’s pain regarding the future of his son Ishmael, God repeated what he had told Hagar,

v.13

So Abraham willingly obeyed his God, though obviously

saddened by being compelled to force the departure of his own son. He sent off Hagar and Ishmael with provisions of food and water.

v.14

But, as the story goes on, they got lost in the desert, and ran out of food and water. Indeed, Ishmael, now a vital young man of 16 or 17, was near death, bringing unspeakable grief to his mother.

v.15-16

But then what do we read?

v.17-18

God heard! Remember the meaning of the name Ishmael. The name means “The God who sees!” The idea is that God sees, and therefore responds to the needs of Ishmael. He would become a great nation. At this point, God himself kept him alive.

v.19

And God continued to keep Ishmael alive. God continued to show his faithfulness to the line of Ishmael, even though it wasn’t the line of his covenant people.

v.20-21

And so we read of his descendants in,

Gen. 25:12 “Now this is the genealogy of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maidservant, bore to Abraham. 13 And these were the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, according to their generations: The firstborn of Ishmael, Nebajoth; then Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, 14 Mishma, Dumah, Massa, 15 Hadar, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. 16 These were the sons of Ishmael and these were their names, by their towns and their settlements, twelve princes according to

their nations. 17 These were the years of the life of Ishmael: one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. 18 (They dwelt from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt as you go toward Assyria.) He died in the presence of all his brethren.”

What’s the point? God kept his word! Even “if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself.” Great is his faithfulness.

Well, let me tie this together by referring to Galatians chapter 4, where Paul makes such a specific example of these two, Isaac and Ishmael, and their mothers, Sarah and Hagar. You might want to turn to that passage. First, let me explain the symbolism.

III. ISAAC AND ISHMAEL REPRESENT GOD’S ETERNAL PLAN OF SALVATION.

That’s what this is all about. OT history is the history of salvation. OT history is the doctrine of salvation acted out through historical people. And that OT history, therefore, can only be explained by NT theology. That’s very significant, since everything in the OT can really be applied theologically in the NT. That is, the OT history is a theological history. Or to put it another way, God is explaining the truths of salvation (theology) through the historical examples of his people.

In this case, you will understand God’s purpose for Isaac and Ishmael only by understanding the meaning of the doctrine of salvation defined in Galatians 4. Specifically,

A. Ishmael demonstrates that salvation is not a matter of our own work or effort, for that would be slavery.

Look at verses 21-25, realizing again that we have moved from an historical narrative in the OT to a theological application in the NT.

v.21-25

A brief explanation. The problem at the church at Galatia is that a certain group, called the Judaizers, were teaching that observance of the OT ceremonial laws was necessary for salvation. In other words, instead of seeing those OT ceremonial laws as symbols and types of Jesus Christ, they saw them as a system of works salvation. They were, therefore, wanting “to be under the law,” under the provisions of the law in order to accomplish their salvation and reconciliation with God.

It was slavery. Slavery to the law as the means of salvation. It was a denial of the gospel, and it was rebuked very severely. Hagar and Ishmael are used in the allegory, as symbols of that slavery.

v.25

The gospel declares to us that everything to do with reconciliation with God has to do with the cross of Jesus Christ, the work of Jesus. Thus,

2 Cor. 5:18 “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.”

Any other message of salvation is slavery. Any other message of salvation is a message of works-salvation. And Ishmael demonstrates that in the flesh. He represents the attempt to obtain reconciliation with God on the basis of human effort and human ability. And the appropriate historical point used so pointedly by Paul in Galatians four is that he was a slave. On the other hand,

B. Isaac demonstrates that salvation is entirely a matter of God’s grace, which brings freedom.

We are children of the free woman. But what does that mean? It means that our salvation comes to us by God's promise. Not by our works, but entirely by God's promise. There is a word for that. It's the word grace. Our salvation is entirely a matter of God's grace.

Now, how does that bring freedom? I could preach a whole sermon in answer to that question. Probably a whole series of sermons. Let me answer the question very briefly. How does the gospel of salvation by grace bring freedom? First, the freedom from the guilt of sin. By this gospel, your sins are forgiven. Your guilt is removed. By God. You don't have to do anything to remove it yourself. What incredible freedom.

Second, the freedom from the condemning wrath of God. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In Christ, by faith, you will never face the judgment of condemnation. For you have already been acquitted, you have already been declared not guilty, you have already been justified. You are free from the condemning wrath of God, no matter what sin you have committed. That is freedom!

Third, freedom from the curse of the moral law. Most clearly, the curse of death. And though your physical body will die, yet you will not die. For you remain alive in spirit, in soul, and that soul goes immediately to be with the Lord when you die.

Let me list several more ways in which we have freedom in Christ, and I am continuing to read from chapter 20 our our Westminster Confession. We are freed from the bondage to Satan. We are freed from the dominion of sin, that is freed from the slavery to sin. We are freed from the evil of afflictions. Not

the afflictions themselves, perhaps, but the evil of afflictions, for God works everything out for good. We are freed from the sting of death. We are freed from the victory of the grave. We are freed from everlasting damnation. And we are freed from the prohibitions against entering God's presence, and from the compulsion of having to obey him out of slavish fear.

Instead, as our Confession continues, we can approach him and even learn to obey him with a childlike love and a willing mind.

It is paragraphs like that that simply increase my love for the Westminster Confession every time I read it. So practical. So encouraging. We are free. It is a freedom demonstrated by Isaac. Salvation is entirely a matter of God's grace.

The gospel will set you free. God's eternal plan of salvation will set you free. And to quote Jesus, "the truth will set you free."

So that's the importance of Isaac and Ishmael. Freedom. Yet, in so many ways, Satan is working to do everything he can to take away your freedom. So I'll end with Paul's words which are found in,

Rom. 8:5 "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together."

The truth will set you free.