

## **Who has the last laugh? Gen. 21**

God called Abraham from his hometown of Ur to the land He promised to give him. He called him from what is modern day Iraq to what we know as Israel. So Abraham left not knowing where he was going.

The call of God also came with a promise– that God would make Abraham the father of many nations. But Abraham was 75 years old and his wife Sarah was 65 years old. And they had no children. Over the next quarter of a century God reaffirms his promise to Abraham. But they still had no children.

Now Abraham and Sarah try to help God’s plan along. Sarah gives her servant, Hagar to Abraham as a second wife. A son, named Ishmael is born to Hagar. This was a perfectly acceptable practice in Abraham’s culture, but that wasn’t what God asked him to do. Just because the culture says something is perfectly acceptable, doesn’t mean that it’s God approved. God says “*No, this is not the way we are going to do this. Sarah will have a son.*” Now the last time God makes this promise to them, Abraham is 99 years old and Sarah is 89.

Let’s just say Sarah’s biological clock had ceased ticking a long time ago and there are no fertility clinics to help with the process. There is no in vitro fertilization. There are no test tube babies. In the face of these basic biological facts of life, Sarah laughed at the angels when they repeated God’s promise. God’s promise was now humanly impossible.

That brings us to our text. Gen. 21:1-7.

Gen 21:1-7

*21:1 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. 4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.*

*6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." 7 And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." NIV*

God gives Abraham and Sarah a son and they name him Isaac. Do you know what Isaac means? It means laughter. That's why Sarah says in verse 6, “*God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.*”

A year before, Sarah was laughing at God, laughing at the impossibility of His promise. Now here they are a year later, and Sarah is laughing again. This time though, she is not laughing

out of incredulity, but she is laughing in sheer delight and surprise. I almost imagine her laughing as giddy giggles. I imagine that Abraham is laughing in joy as well. They laugh partly because it is too good to be true. They laugh because they have given up hope, and when hope is born anew it is always funny before it is real. They laughed because that is what you do when someone says he can do the impossible. Everyone is laughing. God did the impossible.

But it is God who gets the last laugh. First, they laugh at God. Then they laugh with God—for God is laughing too. With a smile on his face, God does what he does best—the unbelievable, the impossible. He does what no one else can do.

Every time they call Isaac, every time they mention his name, they are reminded of the fact they laughed at God, because God had promised what only God could perform.

What do we learn from the birth of Isaac? First we learn that...

### **I. God keeps His promises.**

After 25 years of waiting, God keeps his word. The first thing we notice in the very first two verses are these words, *Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.* God keeps His promises. He keeps His word.

Sarah had borne the burden of being barren for many years. That was a heavy burden in that culture and at that time. People must have laughed at her when they heard that her husband's name was Abraham, “father of multitude.” But now all of her reproach was ended and they were rejoicing in the arrival of their son.

The birth of Isaac certainly brought great joy to his parents, but more than that his birth meant **the fulfillment of God's promise.** When God had called Abraham, He promised to make of him a great nation that would bless the whole world. (12:1-3). Then He repeatedly promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants (17:7) and to multiply them greatly (13:15-17). Abraham would be the father of the promised seed (15:4), and Sarah (not Hagar) would be the mother (17:19; 18:9-15). The birth of Isaac reminds us that God keeps His promises.

However, when we say that God keeps His promises, He does so in his own way, and in His own time. God did not do this in the way or time that Abraham would have chosen. If they had mapped this out, it would have been quite different. However, in the long run, God's way turned out to be the best way. Just because God doesn't keep his promises the way we would like

him to, doesn't mean that God doesn't keep his promises.

Sometimes those promises come in the most unexpected times and they come in the most unexpected ways. When you walk with God, prepare to be surprised. Prepare to be amazed. And prepare to laugh for God's promises bring great blessings and joy.

Isaac's birth also means that...

## **II. God Rewards our Patience.**

Abraham and Sarah had to wait 25 years for their son to be born, because it is "through faith and patience [we] inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:12; 10:36). Trusting God's promises not only gives you a blessing at the end, but it gives you a blessing while you are waiting. In the very act of waiting we learn to trust in God and depend on Him.

God used those 25 years to strip Abraham of his dependence on self and to shape him into the man God called him to be. Waiting on God is never wasted. Every day, every month, every year of waiting on God is a part of the process making you into the man or woman of God He has called you to be.

Life itself is an exercise in waiting on God. We are waiting as God is patient with us not wanting anyone to perish. We wait as he fulfills His plan of redemption for all of humanity. We wait for the return of Jesus, and for our eternal glory. God's plan through all of that waiting is to shape our lives in holiness and righteousness.

Titus 2:11-13

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,*

We live in a microwave society. We want instant gratification. We do not like to wait. Ed was visiting a local department store with his wife. Ed browsed in the shoe department, hardware, books, and electronics while waiting for his wife to try on "just a few things," a clerk asked he could be of assistance.

"No, thank you," Ed replied. "I'm just waiting for wife."

At that point, a man behind him said, "I'm waiting for my wife, too, but I never thought to bring lunch and an overnight bag."

We don't like to wait, but waiting has its rewards. The following people were late for work one day. They all worked in the same building:

- The head of a company was late because his son started kindergarten.
- Another fellow was late because it was his turn to bring donuts.
- One woman was late because her alarm clock didn't go off on time.
- One was late because of being stuck in traffic, because of an auto accident.
- One of them missed his bus.
- One spilled food on her clothes and had to take time to change.
- One's car wouldn't start.
- One went back to answer the telephone.
- One had a child that delayed and didn't get ready as soon as he should have.
- One couldn't get a taxi.
- The one that struck me was the man who put on a new pair of shoes that morning, took the various means to get to work but before he got there, he developed a blister on his foot. He stopped at a drugstore to buy a Band-Aid.

The date they were late was September 11, 2001, and they all worked at the World Trade Center. For them being late meant being alive.

I'm not saying every time you're late it is an act of divine intervention. I'm not giving you an excuse for being late. Sometimes we're just late. But so often when things delay us and keep us from where we're trying to go, we act like the world is falling apart. So when you are stuck in traffic, miss an elevator, turn back to answer a ringing telephone or any number of things that annoy you, know that that may very well be exactly where God wants you to be at that very moment.

Next time your morning seems to be going wrong, the children are slow getting dressed, you can't seem to find the car keys, you hit every red light, don't get mad or frustrated; remember that your schedule is not God's schedule. Just because your schedule is messed up, doesn't mean His is.

In an on-demand culture, we must guard against an ATM spirituality. A one-minute prayer or a five-minute devotional isn't like a magic diet pill that deliver instant results. In a microwave world we must have a crock-pot faith. A life of godliness is slow cooked. When we wait we listen. When we wait we learn. When we wait we trust. When we wait we grow. Waiting on God will always be better than getting what we want, when we want it.

This summer we watched Olympic athletes perform amazing feats of strength and skill, and in some cases amazing feats of stupidity. But we're not talking about those. These athletes developed these skills through hours of daily practice over many years. So we grow in godliness as we walk in faith toward the promises of God. God rewards our patience

The birth of Isaac also shows us that...

### **III. God's Power is Revealed in our Weakness.**

That was one reason why God waited so long: He wanted Abraham and Sarah to be "as good as dead" so that their son's birth would be a miracle of God and not a marvel of human nature (Rom. 4:17-21). He wanted there to be no mistaking whose power made this possible. God often waits until we have exhausted our resources before He steps in, so we know it is God and not us. Abraham and Sarah experienced God's resurrection power in their lives because they yielded to Him and believed His Word. God sometimes wants to take you where you can do nothing, so He can do something.

As long as you stay in your comfort zone, as long as you stay where you can do things by your own strength, you will never live by the power of God. As Paul writes in Ephesians 3:20, "*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*" Finally, the birth of Isaac means that...

### **IV. God Accomplishes His Purpose.**

Think about this. At the moment Isaac was born, the future redemption of a lost world rested with a little baby boy! Isaac would father Jacob, and Jacob would give the world the twelve tribes of Israel; and from Israel the promised Messiah would be born.

You may wonder if what you do is really important to God and His work in this world. If you are faithful to trust His Word and do His will; it is. The next time you feel defeated and discouraged, remember Abraham and Sarah; and remind yourself that faith and promise go together. God keeps His promises and gives you the power you need to do what He wants you to do. No matter how long you may have to wait you can trust God to accomplish His purposes.

All of these things show us that we can trust God, but what does it really mean to trust God?

- It means to **believe what he says**; we must **take Him at His word**.
- It means to **calmly rely on Him in a crisis** knowing that He will not lead us astray.
- It means **putting more confidence in His character than you put in your own**.
- It means **acknowledging God's authority and wisdom in every area of your life** not just those we chose to open to Him.

It sounds easy, but it does not come easy to most of us. There are several reasons. First, we all have past disappointments. We have all had people hurt us. We've trusted someone and they violated our trust. We depended on them and they did not come through for us. They made a promise and didn't fulfill it. And because of this we do not trust anyone. We do not want to be

vulnerable again. So, we don't trust God fully either.

We must overcome this distrust! God is not like everyone else. Focus on His character! God does not lie. He does not disappoint. He does not forget us and our needs. Our Lord can be depended upon.

A second reason it is hard for us to trust is our pride. We are raised from an early age to be self-reliant. Like Abraham we sometimes say we trust God but really are trusting our efforts. If you remember, Abraham had a similar problem. He thought he would "help" God when he sought to father a child through Hagar.

The Psalms point to many things we tend to trust other than the Lord:

- We trust in our military strength (44:6).
- We trust in our wealth (49:6).
- We trust in our schemes (62:10).
- We trust our friends or our governments and systems (118:8,9).

Trusting God's character means putting our faith in Him. It is not GOD AND anything. It is simply trusting God.

A third reason we have trouble relying on God is our limited perspective. Because we live in an instant society we aren't very good at waiting on the Lord. Abraham and Sarah had to wait decades for God to begin to fulfill the promise He made to Abraham. God was building character into Abraham and was waiting until Abraham would realize that it was ONLY by God that the blessing was given.

God's timing is different than ours. We are primarily concerned with results, God is concerned with the process as well as the result. Often God will delay until He has prepared us to receive His blessing. We interpret delay as disapproval. When God delays, we quickly conclude that "it is hopeless," "God don't care." When in reality God is at work preparing us or the circumstances.

So how can we live more according to God's promises? Read and study God's promises. There is no substitute for being in the Word. A Christian who rarely reads his or her Bible will find it a constant struggle to trust in God. They will continually take matters into their own hands and mess it up. They will live in constant frustration missing out on the joy and strength of God.

The Bible is the sword of the Spirit. It is living and active. It is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that you may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. If you want to live more according to the promises of

God, then you must be in the Word.

As you are in the Word, look for God's promises. When you come across a promise in the Bible ask some important questions: "Is this a promise for a specific individual or is it a promise that is for all who believe, including me?" Then ask, "Is there a condition to this promise? Most of God's promises are accompanied by a condition, if you do this, then I will do that. "If you abide in me and my word abides in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you." If so, note the condition.

When you find a promise of God for your life, underline it. Some people underline it in a unique color so they can find them easily as they page through their Bibles. If you make it a habit, after a while your Bible will come alive with the promises of God that just leap of the page with constant reminders of the faithfulness of God.

Look for God's faithfulness in your daily life. It is easier to trust God for the promises of life when we notice the many times he is faithful. Pay attention to the way He provides for us. Notice the times He brings us comfort. Notice how he brings rain and sunshine as needed. Notice the strength He gives for difficult times.

Sadly we can go day after day with spiritual blinders on missing how God's hand moves in our lives in many ways. Ask God to open your eyes. Look for the little things. Pray and give him thanks. Give him credit for the big things. Don't take the credit for yourself. When we look for God's faithfulness we will find it easier to trust Him.

God keeps His word. God is faithful! What the Lord promises, He delivers. We must put our faith in God's character, He does not lie, He keeps His word, He fulfills His promises. We also need to put our faith in God's ability, that nothing is impossible for Him. Joy is anchored in God's faithfulness.