**GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE**

January 28, 2018

Genesis 20:1-21:34

Key Verse 21:1 “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.”

Today, God finally gives Abraham a son Isaac after 25 long years. The birth of Isaac signals that God is faithful and mighty in his promise. Sometimes we feel that God is too slow in keeping his promise, but we may be sure that God always keeps his promise in his time. We also learn how God helped Abraham to overcome his old habit of inner fear. When Abraham moved to Gerar, the old fear of powerful worldly rulers arose again in his heart. He did not think of himself as God’s servant, nor did he think of Abimelech as a man like himself. He regarded Abimelech as a king with the power of life and death over small people like himself; he assumed that Abimelech was a godless man with no conscience. He did not see God as big and powerful and sovereign over his life. He did not believe that he was really immortal until God was finished with him in this life. When the pressure came, God seemed small and weak and unable because fear gripped his heart and choked out faith. So he lied and got into trouble. Abraham had made a commitment of his whole heart and life to God. He had repented of his family-centered life and accepted God’s covenant and a new name—“Father of many nations.” He had sealed that covenant with circumcision. But there were some things in his past life that still remained to be resolved, namely, his inner fear. His inner fear was exposed when he came in contact with the unbelieving world. God trained him through sending away Ishmael. When Abraham met Abimelech again at the end of chapter 21, he was a different man. May God bless us to trust God’s promise to the end so that we all may experience his grace and power in our life of faith.

**First**, Abraham’s bad habit and God’s faithfulness (20:1-18). Abraham had been living near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron. After he witnessed the destruction of Sodom, he moved south into the Negev, then to the west into Philistine territory. The Philistines had a reputation for being fierce and godless, so fear came into Abraham’s heart. He reverted to his old habit, and told Abimelech, king of Gerar, that Sarah his wife was his sister. So Abimelech took her because she was a very beautiful woman even though she was 90. She was indeed, his half-sister (12)—but a half truth is a lie. He had done this in Egypt, and had almost lost his wife. Fear brought this old habit to the surface. Fear makes men do strange things. Fear can be a very positive emotion. It convinces us to step away from the edge of a tall building. But spiritually fear can also talk us out of believing God and trusting his promises. We fear having enough money so we do not give to the cause of Christ or don’t help others who are in need. We fear we will not get a job so we lie on the application or in the interview. We fear others won’t accept us for who we are so we lie or act differently around them. Or we fear that others will look down upon us if they really knew how messed up we are so we do not tell anyone our struggles with sin.

Do you think you will do better when you were in Abraham’s situation? Abraham’s problem was his inner fear; fear of identifying himself as God’s servant among unbelievers. We boldly say in the church that we are God’s chosen people, a royal priesthood, and sing loudly and pray loudly. But among unbelievers, we are ashamed of being Christians. We are ashamed when we see many unbelievers who are rich and successful. That’s why many students do not pray before the meal at the cafeteria. This unclear attitude with the unbelievers is Abraham’s deep problem, and so is ours. St. Paul declared, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” (Rom 1:16) Let me give you an example. Suppose there is a Christian working under an unbelieving boss. The boss does not know that he is a Christian. One day the boss asks him to come on Sunday to work because they are very busy. The boss never asked before. Many Christians would say, “Sure, boss,” for fear of losing his job, instead of going to church. Thus he compromises his faith. He should say, “No, I cannot come because I have to go to church.” Then one of two things will happen. First, the boss might say, “I am sorry. I did not know that you are a Christian. You don’t have to come.” Second, he may get angry, and say, “You are fired.” Then God promised clearly that he would provide a better job. Jesus said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” May God help us to have a clear identity as servants of God among unbelievers.

It turned out that Abimelech was not a godless man. He and his officials feared God. When God warned Abimelech that he was as good as dead because he had taken a married woman, Abimelech humbly asked God’s mercy. He apologized to Abraham and Sarah and made restitution. And he asked Abraham to pray for him. Even though Abraham was wrong and Abimelech seems to be much better, God stood on Abraham’s side and honored Abraham as his servant. Though Abraham made a mistake, God carried his promise according to his plan. God was faithful to keep his promise to Abraham in spite of his human mistake. Abraham learned that God was the Sovereign of all people. God opened his spiritual eyes to see God’s presence everywhere he went. This was a new beginning of Abraham’s spiritual growth.

**Second**, God keeps his promise (21:1-7). Look at 21:1,2. “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.” It was the greatest day for Abraham and Sarah. Sarah forgot all her past sufferings as a barren woman and her sorrow turned into joy. We can learn two things.

Firstly, God’s grace. God was gracious to Sarah. Sarah felt she had a big hole in her heart because she could not bear a child to Abraham. She felt cursed as a woman. She felt like a failure as a wife. Woman’s happiness comes from fruitfulness. Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist shared the same testimony when she was barren in Luke 1:25. “She said,’ in these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.’” By the grace of God Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham. In the same way, Hannah the mother of Samuel was sorrowful due to her barrenness. Her husband could not comfort her. Only God solved his barrenness and brought her joy and happiness through the birth of Samuel. God showed his shining grace to Sarah. God did not want Sarah to remain as a barren woman. He was gracious to her at his appointed time. God removed her shame and disgrace as an unfruitful woman by his grace. God lifted up Sarah to become a mother of many kings through the birth of Isaac. It is God who gives us his grace. Isaac was not the product of her human effort but the gift of God. Isaac is a miracle baby because God opened Sarah’s dead womb.

Secondly, God’s appointed time. Look at verse 2 again. “Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.” God’s time is different from our time. It would have been good if God gave Isaac to Abraham immediately after he received God’s calling. But God waited for 25 years to fulfill his promise. To God timing is everything. God waited for Abraham to become a mature servant of God through 25 years of faith training. Abraham was interested in solving his no son problem but God was interested in raising him up as a father of many nations and a man of faith for the generations to come. God wanted Abraham to grow as a spiritual giant to fulfill God’s salvation plan. If God gave him Isaac too soon, Abraham might not have experienced the depth of God’s power and love for all mankind. He might have become satisfied with God’s blessings and lost an opportunity to understand God’s heart to save the whole world. We should not be disappointed when God is slow in answering our prayers. God waits for us so that we can have enough faith to understand his blessing. Let’s learn to wait for God’s appointed time in our life of faith.

Look at verses 6-7. Sarah leaped for joy because God brought her laughter. Isaac means “he laughs.” All her neighbors laughed together with her. It is God who brings us true laughter. We also laugh when we read this passage. Who imagined that Sarah in her 90 years age would nurse a child? It was unthinkable. It was unbelievable. It would have made the headline news all over the world. But it was true. Sarah was holding a child with her gray hairs. It was beyond human imagination. God’s work is beyond our imagination. Do you believe that God will make us laugh when he raises up 12 disciples among University of Toronto students? There is a saying, “All is well that ends well.” This is true. Our life can be measured how we end our life. Our life will be evaluated by the fruit we bear. Isaac was the fruit of Abraham’s obedience. He was the symbol of victory of faith. As we studied last week, we learned the contrast between Abraham and Lot. They both received God’s calling and started a journey of faith. But there was a decision hour in Genesis 13. Lot followed his worldly desire to enjoy the riches of the world while Abraham followed God’s promise. One ended in destruction while the other in joy and laughter. Each day we have a choice between God’s promise and the world. If we hold God’s promise and live by faith, we will have many Isaacs and laugh together with others. We will live with God forever and share his glory like Abraham. If we choose the world, we will end our life with sorrow and tragedy like Lot. Let’s follow Abraham’s life of faith and share the joy of fruitful life like Sarah.

**Third**, send away Ishmael (8-34). Look at verses 8-9. “The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking.” At that time a child was weaned at the age of three. Isaac was a three year old boy and Ishmael was a 17 year old teenager. What happened in this happy day? Ishmael was mocking. Here mocking means “despising” or “persecuting.” Ishmael, a strong teenager, almost a man, was obviously jealous of little Isaac. Isaac seemed to take away love and attention from Abraham and now he became fatalistic about his future.

Look at verse 10. “And she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” Sarah realized that Ishmael was too strong for Isaac and she asked Abraham to get rid of the slave woman and her son. This was Abraham’s sore spot. Abraham was distressed, because it concerned his son whom he loved. He didn’t like a suggestion that seemed to come from Sarah’s jealousy. Look at verse 12. But God supported Sarah’s suggestion at this time and told him not to be distressed, but to listen to Sarah in this matter. God promised him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” God also promised to take care of Hagar and Ishmael and bless them. So Abraham overcame his strong sense of human obligation and human attachment; he trusted and obeyed God. He got up early in the morning, gave Hagar and Ishmael a skin of water and some food and sent them away. This seems to be a cruel thing to do. But it was actually the way of blessing for Hagar. Ishmael was old enough to take care of himself and his mother. If Abraham had insisted on taking care of them to the end, then God could not have cared for them or blessed them. God’s care and blessing were much better than anything Abraham could do for them.

Abraham realized that he must protect and care for the covenant son by any means, for he was not only a blessing to Abraham’s household—he carried with him God’s promise to bless the whole world through him. God was clear. Abraham’s real descendants must be children of the promise (Gal 3:29; Ro 4:18-24) not children of the flesh. Ishmael did not come from the promise of God but he was the product of Abraham’s impatience and human compromise. To cast out Ishmael was to cut away the last bit of human and worldly compromise from his life and heart. This was the fruit of real repentance and an affirmation of Abraham’s acceptance of God’s ways and God’s work. He had to deny himself. Something that hindered his spiritual growth died. When Abraham cast out Ishmael, he was ending his life of compromise. Fear went out of his heart. His relationships with those in his own family changed and his relationship with the unbelieving world also changed. Abimelech and his commander, Phicol, came to visit Abraham again. They greeted him “God is with you in everything you do. Now swear to me here before God that you will not deal with me or my children...” Abraham’s exemplary life of faith moved the pagan king Abimelech. Abraham influenced him to see God in his life of faith. Abimelech recognized Abraham as God’s servant. And Abraham recognized himself as God’s servant. With his fear gone, he could confront Abimelech about a well that Abraham’s servants had dug, but which the Philistines had taken over. Abimelech apologized. Then, Abraham gave a gift to Abimelech as a sign that the well belonged to him. Abraham took the lead in their relationship. He met Abimelech as an equal.

After this, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called on the name of the Lord. This time he called God the Eternal God. This showed that Abraham learned that God controlled all human history beyond time and space. God is eternal. His spiritual victory over Abimelech did not make him proud; it made him more humbly dependent on God. His real victory was victory over himself through absolute obedience to God. I pray that we all may live our life in such a way that all our unbelieving friends will say, “God is with you in everything you do. Please pray for me.”