
Being Polished by God

Genesis 21

We have all probably had old cars. I've had my share. Kent Hughes relates his buying an old VW bug. It was that lovely pea green that they came in. Its paint had been dulled by the years. So while it was a fairly reliable car, it was a very ugly car. He decided to do something about it. He bought some polishing compound and went to work. With a lot of elbow grease, he was able to restore a lot of its original shine. But it took a lot of time and a lot of hard work.

God is doing this in our lives. God is at work to polish you. We get dulled spiritually by the dust of the world and exposure to sin and temptation. We need to be washed, polished and waxed so that we will shine. This is what Genesis 21 is about. These three events are linked in that they are God's work of polishing and preparing Abraham. Yes, there are many threads and themes through this text. And we'll talk about them. But I want you to sit up and take notice at how God is at work. God is preparing Abraham for the test of Genesis 22 and God is settling Abraham into the land.

How do we tend to respond to times when God gets out His sandpaper, polishing compound and buffers?

YOU WILL SOMETIMES QUESTION GOD AND BECOME PERPLEXED. This may not be wrong if you are in it moving towards God. But sometimes, this questioning and perplexity becomes a step in moving away from the Lord.

YOU MAY RESENT WHAT GOD IS DOING AND BECOME BITTER. So many people are all these "rub" areas in their lives where God has been polishing and they have become resentful and bitter.

YOU SOMETIMES BECOME ANGRY AND TURN AGAINST THOSE GOD IS USING. How many times are relationships broken because you will not accept the honing and shaping work of God from people? Are there these kinds of broken relationships in your own life?

YOU MAY REJECT WHAT GOD IS DOING AND COME UNDER HIS CHASTENING. Sadly, there are many people who resisted and rejected what God is doing and are now under his severe, but loving rod of correction.

How will Abraham respond through these three situations in which God is directly at work? Can you see how God is at work in your life to polish you? The point here is not to give how to tips on handling these situations. The point here is to encourage you to take heart and have hope that God is at work in your life. These three seemingly unrelated events are like lots of things in your own life - what is God up to?

In the Midst of Personal Blessing (v.1-7)

The first place where God is at work in polishing us is in the midst of personal blessing. This might come as a surprise, but God is polishing and preparing us when things seem to be going well.

21 The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. ² And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." ⁷ 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."

God's Direct Intervention (v.1-2)

This is a very great high point in Genesis. Here is the culmination of a grand promise, a great faith and a long patience. Yet, it is written with almost stark understatement. In two short sentences, Abraham and Sarah become parents. When it was impossible physically, God directly intervened so that Sarah conceived and bore a child.

Let us not miss the connection to Jesus' own birth. He was the promised Messiah. He came just at the time of God's ordination. He was born in a way that was naturally and physically impossible. Like Sarah, Mary conceived through a miracle. Sarah's conception was a miracle of regeneration where her physical deadness was overcome. Mary's was a miracle of conception where the Spirit of God begat in her womb the Lord Jesus in the mysterious union of the incarnation.

Abraham's Practical Obedience (v.3-4)

In this time of great blessing, of hopes and promises fulfilled, Abraham continues to obey God. He is not so overwhelmed or focused on the blessing itself that he forgets what God has told him to do. So he names his son as God commanded. And, at the time God instructed, he circumcises his son. So, here is faith believing God in an obeying way.

Here is often what God is working toward in the midst of our blessings. He wants us to not forget God in the midst of His blessings. He is polishing our obedience in the good times. This is not as odd as it might seem at first. Is it not easy for us, when God is pleased to prosper us and bless us, to forget what God has instructed us? We take such great pleasure in God's blessings that we forget that we were created in order to bring pleasure to God; or if I may put another way, to please Him. Yet, many Christians slip, slide and drift in times of blessing. In these times, God is polishing your obedience.

Sarah's Evident Joy (v.5-7)

This great miracle brings both joy and a bit of possibly nervous laughter. She is amazed and grateful over the miracle. She knows her story will spread wide. Those who hear will laugh with joy. Maybe some will laugh in derision. But God has been faithful so that she will bear a son in their old age.

God wants us to connect our blessings with His promises and provisions. Sometimes there are ordinary blessings that seem just to be ours. Then there are extraordinary blessings where we are acutely aware they are from God. The polishing work God is doing in blessing is for us to

see God at work in it all. He desires that our enjoyment of what He has blessed us with points others to God.

Make no mistake. God is polishing you in the midst of blessing. Will you forget Him? Or will your enjoyment of God's blessing help others to see God at work?

In the Midst of Family Conflict (v.8-21)

God is preparing and polishing people in the midst of family conflict. O, how painful family difficulties can be. Issues between spouse, between parents and children, in extended families can be so disheartening and discouraging. Yet, God is at work.

⁸ And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." ¹¹ And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. ¹³ And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

Its Initial Problem (v.8-9)

What was a blessing now becomes a point of difficulty and division. It has been as much as two years between verses 7 and 8. Abraham is noticeably proud of his son. When he is weaned, he throws a big party. The family is all there, including Hagar and Ishmael. The text here says that Ishmael was laughing, presumably at Isaac. The laughter here is probably one of derision or scorn. Ishmael here is between 14 and 17 years old.ⁱ Here is the elder son who probably fully expects to be the heir and is making fun of this kid who is at the center of attention.

Its Difficult Responses (v.10-14)

Sarah is quite evidently angry. Maybe she sees a heart trajectory that is putting Isaac in danger. Maybe there has been a long smoldering resentment in Sarah that now finally bursts through. Maybe Ishmael's laughter is just that of a happy young boy and Sarah is misreading evil into it. Regardless (and the Bible is not clear) she demands that Abraham send them away.

Abraham is not happy. This is very difficult. He is the middle of a mess, frankly of his own making. There has been the conflict between Hagar and Sarah. Now, the boys are involved. And now, Sarah is making a demand that is very displeasing. He obviously is loath to send them away. He knows the last time they left, God sent them back with a tacit rebuke of Abraham and Sarah for their handling of it. It seems that he is poised to reject Sarah's demands and try to weather the storm.

But, God intervenes to show Abraham that, while this is very difficult, it is serving God's purposes and plans. God assures Abraham that He intends to bless Ishmael because of His promises to Abraham. He also makes clear that this is happening in order to protect Isaac's place in the family and his future inheritance.

So, Abraham gets up early the next morning to obey God. He loads her up with provisions for the journey. He sends her on her way. She ends up wandering around in the southern wilderness which will later be called Beer-Sheba.

Its Divine Providence (v.15-21)

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Let me not look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Hagar evidently is lost and has run out of water. They have wandered around long enough now that Ishmael apparently has begun to fail and possibly is nearing death. She cannot bear to watch him die. So she lays him down under some bushes, goes a bowshot away and sits down, weeping for her loss.

For the second time in her life, God speaks to her. He will not allow them to die for He has plans for them. Yes, they were an obstacle to Isaac's being the heir and had to depart so that thread of redemptive history could advance. But God also has a plan for Ishmael that cannot be thwarted. God is going to make a great people group from him just as he promised Abraham. So, God opens her eyes to see what she was blind to – a well of water nearby.

The story rather abruptly ends in a couple of sentences. God is with Ishmael. God is attending his life with protection and provision because God has made a promise He will keep. They settle in the wilderness with Ishmael becoming a master archer and marrying an Egyptian.

Its Practical Application

Now I want to think about this together. God is clearly at work in this conflict. This is not just random acts of unkindness.

God is at work to carry out His plans.

Abraham and Sarah's struggle with Hagar and Ishmael has not stopped God or even hindered Him. His plans will be carried out. While we might not know exactly what God's plans for us are, we know that He will work them out, even when we are struggling with conflict, differences and division.

God is at work to protect His people.

Isaac is the true heir and Ishmael is an obstacle. God has made sure there was no questioning of Sarah's purity and now makes sure there will be no questioning of Isaac's place. At the same time, he takes up and cares for Hagar and Ishmael as they call on Him.

God is at work to mold and shape His people.

Through this, God is working on shaping and molding Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and to some degree, Ishmael. The file and rasp, the buffer and polish, may not be pleasant or smooth. But God is a master-craftsman. What he has in mind will emerge. His polishing work will produce Christ-likeness in the end.

We should take great heart in this. Even in the midst of intense conflict, God is at work to further His purposes. He may be protecting you. He may be carrying out His promises in a way that you

cannot see now. He may be preparing you for something. He is certainly polishing you so that you will be more like the Lord Jesus.

In the Testing of Strategic Relationships (v.22-34)

God is also preparing and polishing his people in the testing of important relationships. I want you think about this carefully. God has been preparing and polishing Abraham to become the patriarch in the land. Isaac has arrived and the promise of an heir has been fulfilled. Ishmael has departed and a threat has been removed. Now, Abraham secures the final piece of the promised land and begins to put down roots.

By Lasting Commitments (v.22-24)

²² At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do. ²³ Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned."

²⁴ And Abraham said, "I will swear."

Here is a strategic relationship – the one between Abimelech and Abraham. Understandably, Abimelech is concerned about Abraham's status in the land. Moses intends for us to notice the order of events that lead up to this. Abimelech has opened up the land for Abraham to live in. Abraham now has a natural heir and has sent Hagar and Ishmael away. So he comes with both a peace offering and a show of force.

He acknowledges what we often miss in the midst of God's providences. He recognizes that God is with Abraham through all these things. So, he wants assurances, because of Abraham's earlier deceptions, that Abraham will keep his word and act with kindness and respect to Abimelech. So they enter into a covenant that secures what Abimelech gave. It also holds Abraham and his descendants to their word.

By Settling Differences (v.25-32)

²⁵ When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, ²⁶ Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today." ²⁷ So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. ²⁸ Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. ²⁹ And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?" ³⁰ He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well." ³¹ Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. ³² So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines.

In the course of their discussion, Abraham complains to Abimelech that some of his servants had seized. These were wells that Abraham had dug. In the mid-east, the digger of a well on open land owns the well itself until an agreement is reached with the local king or tribal chief. However, Abimelech's servants have seized the wells without Abimelech's knowledge and without due process.

Abraham then offers seven lambs to Abimelech. These are given as certifying that he had dug the wells. He is in essence acknowledging that he has been deceitful in the past and is swearing to the truthfulness of his claim. Abimelech enters into the covenant with Abraham, giving him those wells and affirming Abraham's over-lordship in the land.

Part of the point of this is to show that Ishmael's descendants have no claim to this part of Palestine called Beer-Sheba. Though he almost died in the wilderness in this region, Abraham has duly asserted his claim and it has been affirmed. Beer-Sheba will become an important homestead for the patriarchs right up to the time they go down to Egypt.

By Acknowledging God (v.33-34)

³³ Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. ³⁴ And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.

In three ways, Abraham acknowledges God in this strategic relationship. He plants a tree as a lasting memorial to this event. He identifies and worships God as the enduring one. And, he lives in peace and safety in this area, later inhabited by the terrible enemies of Israel, the Philistines.

God is preparing and polishing Abraham to become rooted and settled down in the land. Through a time of blessing, he has his son. Through a time of conflict, God protects his heir. Through the testing of an important relationship, God causes him to put down roots and trust and worship an enduring God.

If we think about this for a moment, we can see the relevance of this for our lives. Most of us are involved in important relationships. Our primary one is here in the church. We also have strategic relationships at work, school and in our neighborhoods. God is at work through them to place us where he wants us, to cause us to serve and witness for Him and to give us opportunities to know His Name and to trust Him.

Reflect and Respond

Here are some important lessons to hang our hats on.

RECOGNIZE THAT GOD IS CAUSING YOU TO LEARN TO LIVE AS AN ISAAC AND NOT AN ISHMAEL. In the New Testament, Paul writes to the Galatian believers in chapters 3 and 4 referring back to this text. Using an analogy, he exhorts them to live as the new man you are becoming, not the old man; to walk in the Spirit, not the flesh; to live in freedom, not bondage. All this is because Ishmael, representing the old, flesh and bondage was cast out and Isaac, the son of the promise, represents the new, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit and freedom. So God is at work in polishing you to cause you to live as a Christian.

GOD IS AT WORK IN ALL OF LIFE TO PREPARE YOU AND POLISH YOU. Never forget this. It doesn't matter what is going on, everything is designed by the loving hand of God to draw you to Him and to cause you to please Him. In God's world, there are no true accidents, just unforeseen providences where God is carrying forward His plan and purposes.

If you would call yourself an unbeliever or a seeker, let me speak to you a moment. God is not just at work in the lives of His people. He has brought you here this morning to meet this particular group of people, to sing these songs, to hear this message preached on this day. It is no accident. So may be today is the day to give your life to God, to believe in Him, to surrender to Him and to call on Him to save you. Maybe you are not ready yet – you have doubts or questions or are just not sure. We would be delighted to talk with you after the service.

PLEASE GOD WHEN YOU ARE EXPERIENCING THE BLESSING OF GOD. This is a bigger challenge than we want to acknowledge. Allow the blessings of God to cause you to even more trust Him and obey Him. Be quick in the good times to rise up and do what God wants.

PLEASE GOD WHEN YOU ARE IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT, EVEN FAMILY DIFFICULTY. Become the kind of person who knows what God is working on in the midst of conflict. Do not make peace an idol. Do not start a conflict without Biblical justification. Try to be a peacemaker. Trust that God knows what He is doing. Seek to know what God is teaching you and training you through the conflict.

PLEASE GOD THROUGH THOSE IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS. Your Christian life involves a lot of very important relationships. God is working through them to help you grow and change. Your difficult spouse or impossible children; your hard boss or tiresome co-workers; all these are relationships that God is using for your good and His great glory.

So, how's the polishing going?

ⁱ Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born and 100 when Isaac was born. See Genesis 16:16; 21:5-8