

# Texarkana Reformed Baptist Church

God's Faithfulness Revealed in the Birth of Isaac

(Genesis 21:1-7)

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**I**n recent weeks, we have been looking at some very sad biblical narratives in the book of Genesis that highlight man's unfaithfulness to God. We looked first at in Genesis 19 at the unfaithfulness of the people of Sodom, who turned their backs on God refused to acknowledge His divine authority over their lives, with the result that God finally had to judge them by sending fire from heaven. Then we looked at the unfaithfulness of Lot's wife, who disobeyed God's direct command by looking back at the accursed city from which she had fled, and was turned into a pillar of salt. We then considered Lot's unfaithfulness, as well, in allowing himself to become inebriated with drink and abused by his own daughters. Last week, we considered the temporary lapse of godly Abraham in Genesis 20 when, motivated by fear, he lied about his relationship to Sarah, in order to save his own neck.

This morning, after all these sad pictures of human failure and unfaithfulness, it is with joy we turn to a passage that magnifies God's faithfulness to His people as a promise-keeping God.

Here, our focus will be, not on man's failings, but on God's triumph in bringing to pass without fail everything that He has promised to do for His people. Here we see God's faithfulness revealed in the way He fulfilled, at just the right time and in the right manner, the promise He had made to Abraham to give him a son by Sarah, his wife. The birth of Isaac fulfilled a promise that God had made many years before, when He called Abraham to leave his father's home in Haran of Mesopotamia and travel far away to the land of Canaan. At that time, God said to Abraham, "I will make you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2); and later, He clarified that the nation of which He spoke would come from one son, who would be his heir. Through that son, Abraham would become a great nation. This was a promise that Abraham and Sarah struggled at times to keep believing.

Why so? What made it so hard for them to hold fast to this promise of God? How were they able to persevere in faith, despite discouragements?

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How did God finally fulfill His promise to them, and how did they respond when He did? Why did God wait so long to bless them with a son? These are the questions I want us to look at this morning.

I. What Made It So Hard to Hold Fast to God's Promise? Several things:

A. The Long Delay in its Fulfillment—

First, because of the long delay in the fulfillment of God's promise. Keep in mind that nine chapters separate God's first word to Abraham about his becoming a father, to the actual fulfillment of God's promise with the birth of Isaac. Those nine chapters, from Genesis 12 to Genesis 20, span a period of twenty-five years-- a long time to wait, especially when you consider how old Abraham and Sarah were when God called him. Abraham was already seventy-five years old, and Sarah was only ten years younger. No doubt, Abraham expected God to fulfill His promise much, much sooner than He did-- within a year's time, perhaps, or two years, at the most. Little did Abraham anticipate the incredibly long period of waiting that he and Sarah would have to endure before God's promise was fulfilled.

B. The Changes that Took Place in Abraham and Sarah—

Think, too, of the physical changes that took place in Abraham and Sarah during this period of waiting. As one year followed another, instead of growing physically stronger and healthier, Abraham and Sarah found themselves growing physically weaker and more prone to exhaustion. As they reflected on the passing years, it must have seemed incredible to them that God would expect them after so long a time and at their age to assume the responsibilities of parenthood and endure the sleepless nights and stressful days that go with caring for a newborn child. We can understand how hard it must have been for them to believe they were really going to be parents, after a lifetime of childlessness. Is it any wonder they were tempted to stagger at the promise of God? It contradicted everything in their experience.

C. The unanswered questions surrounding the promise—

A third factor that made it hard to hold fast to God's promise was the host of unanswered questions regarding its fulfillment. There were so many things that Abraham wanted to know about how God's promise would be fulfilled, but the answers were not forthcoming. For example, Abraham wanted to know when he would become a father. Ten years after arriving in

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the Promised Land, he and Sarah were still without children. When God appeared in Genesis 15 and assured Abraham that "one who will come from your own body shall be your heir," and when God sealed that promise by a covenant-making ceremony, surely Abraham thought, "It won't be long now until I'm holding my boy in my arms;" but in fact more time passed, and still no son. Why the long delay? In his impatience and confusion, Abraham allowed Sarah to convince him that he ought to beget a child by her handmaid Hagar, but when he succeeded in doing so, God then told him that Ishmael would not be his heir. He would beget a son by Sarah who would be his heir. So after nearly a quarter century of waiting, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place-- but how long Abraham had to wait for answers! The unanswered questions in Abraham's heart must have tempted him at times to doubt the seriousness of God's intentions.

D. The increasingly ridiculous contrast between visible reality and invisible hopes.

Then, finally, another factor that made it hard to hold fast to God's promise was the increasingly ridiculous contrast between visible reality and invisible hopes. After so many years of disappointment, so many hairs turning gray, so many wrinkles appearing on his face, so many aches and pains developing in his joints, it must have seemed increasingly absurd for Abraham to go on calling himself Abraham, which means, "The father of many nations." How could he call himself that with a straight face at ninety-nine years old and with a wife whose womb was as barren as an empty tomb? Was it not the height of absurdity for them to anticipate becoming parents? There must have been days when it seemed as if they were indulging in pure fantasy to go on cherishing such a hope. To imagine themselves parents made a sweet pipe dream, but it seemed out of touch with the reality that stared them in the face when they looked at each other.

Can you see how difficult it must have been for them to hold fast to God's promise? The difficulties in the fulfillment of that promise seemed insurmountable. From the standpoint of the "natural," Abraham's expectation seemed totally unreasonable. It seemed to fly in the face of reason and common sense. But Abraham did not "waver at the promise of God through unbelief," Paul tells us in Romans 4:20; rather, he "grew

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strong in faith." How so? What made it possible for him to hold fast to the assurance that God's promise would be fulfilled? Several things:

## II. What Made It Possible for Abraham to Hold Fast to God's Promise?

A. First, Abraham knew that he had a definite promise from God— This was the reason he could go on "hoping against hope"-- he knew that God had spoken; therefore, he could place his unwavering confidence in God's promise and look to it as a secure foundation on which to build his life.

When it comes to waiting for God to act in specific ways, it is always important to know that our expectations are based on God's promise-- otherwise, we are building our life on a foundation of sand. Some Christians entertain false hopes, because they are trusting God to do certain things that He has not promised to do anywhere in His Word. Some Christians believe that God has definitely promised them abundant material wealth and perfect physical health, and they believe these things will be theirs if they only claim them by means of a "positive confession." But God has made no such promise in Scripture that He will bless every Christian in that way. If He did, then how do you explain all the Christians who have been martyred throughout centuries-- who died of pneumonia or other diseases as they languished in a dark dungeon on account of their faith? Did they get sick and die simply because they didn't have enough faith? Of course not. They had faith, but genuine faith always clings to the promises God has given in his Word. It does not cling to mere fantasies or dreams or wishful thing. That would be to put faith in faith. But faith has no power in itself; it is only as strong as its object, and the only solid object on which to ground our faith is the sure and certain promises God has made to us in His Word.

Abraham knew that he had a definite promise from God concerning the birth of a son-- that is why, though he had to wait many, many years to see the fulfillment of that promise, he never surrendered his hope. He never stopped waiting on God, for to do that, he would have been to call God a liar-- something he refused to do.

B. Abraham understood the fulfillment of God's promise rested on God's infinite power—  
Second, Abraham was able to hold fast to God's promise, because he understood that the fulfillment of it rested on God's infinite power alone.

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With the passing of the years, Abraham felt body grow weaker; but he realized that his own diminishing strength could not affect God's power in the least. God was well able to open Sarah's womb and cause her to conceive a child, if He chose to do so. That depended entirely on His working. So Abraham rested in this fact, that if God was sovereign over the world He had made, there was nothing He could not do. In this way, Paul says, Abraham "gave glory to God . . . being fully convinced that what He had promised, He was also able to perform" (Romans 4:21).

C. Abraham had seen God's promises fulfilled in a measure already—  
A third reason Abraham could hold fast to God's promise is because he had seen it fulfilled already in a measure.

He had seen God bring him safely to the land of Canaan and preserve him there for many years. He had seen God preserve, protect, and greatly prosper him that land. He had also seen the Lord protect him in Egypt, on the field of battle, and in the city of Gerar, to which he had recently migrated. Everywhere he had gone, Abraham had experienced God's faithfulness in blessing him. God had never failed to provide for Abraham's needs and had multiplied his wealth far beyond all expectation. If God's promise had been fulfilled thus far, how was it not going to be fulfilled completely?

D. Abraham understood the mysteriousness of God's ways—  
Finally, Abraham could hold fast to God's promise, because He understood the mysteriousness of God's ways. He knew that God's thoughts were not his thoughts, and that God's ways were not His ways; so he didn't waste time trying to fathom God's inscrutable works of providence. He understood that God's ways are past finding out. He often does things that make no sense to our human understanding. Why would He make Abraham wait 25 years before giving him an heir? Abraham had no idea; he couldn't begin to fathom the 'why' of God's working. But he did understand what he was to be doing in the meantime, for God's instructions were clear--"Walk before me and be blameless." That was God's assignment; and that is what Abraham sought to do during the long years of waiting-- to be faithful to God in his daily life. He was to seek communion with God, to worship Him in truth and to walk with Him in holiness until that blessed

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hour when God's promise was fulfilled, and he could hold child of promise in his arms.

Then, suddenly, the hour came. After countless agonizing prayers and many wearying years of waiting for God to act-- the long-expected child was born. We can imagine how Abraham and Sarah must have looked at each other with a sense of amazement and awe. "Is this really happening, or are we dreaming? Has God really blessed us with a child in our old age?" The evidence was undeniable. God had indeed acted to fulfill a promise He had made repeatedly over many years. Yes, He has fulfilled His promise and He had done so at the exact time and manner in which He foretold.

### III. How Did God Fulfill His Promise?

So how did God fulfill His promise to Abraham and Sarah? First, the text emphasizes the fact that God acted in a supernatural manner. God visited Sarah, we read in verse 1, and that word "visited" is used sparingly in the Bible to describe only a few special occasions when God acted to pour out blessing on His people in extraordinary measure. For example, when God redeemed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the Bible says that God visited them. When He caused barren Hannah to conceive a child, we read that He visited her. Year later, when the angel Gabriel foretold the birth of Jesus, he said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you," and the Greek word translated "come upon" literally means "visit." Mary was to experience a divine visitation, and the result would be the birth of our Lord. His power would overshadow her and cause her to conceive supernaturally; and that is the idea here in Genesis 21. Isaac's birth was a supernatural birth. It was not a virgin birth, but it was a birth that involved the miracle-working power of God; had God not performed a miracle, Sarah would never have conceived.

The text also emphasizes the fact that God fulfilled His promise at the exact time and in the exact manner that He had foretold. Three times in the first two verses the text emphasizes this point: "the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. "So God did everything at the exact hour and in the exact manner that He predicted beforehand.

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### IV. How Did Abraham and Sarah Respond to Isaac's Arrival?

So how did Abraham and Sarah respond to Isaac's arrival? How did they express their gratitude to God? By obeying God, on the one hand, and by bearing witness to the work of God, on the other.

#### A. Abraham obeyed—

On the one hand, Abraham expressed his thankfulness to God through obedience to His commands. The Lord had instructed Abraham beforehand what name he was to give to the child and what ritual he was to perform as an expression of faith in the promise of God. He was to call the boy "Isaac," which means laughter, so that is just what Abraham did. We read in verse 3 that "Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him-- whom Sarah bore to him-- Isaac"

Why would God ordain that such an unusual name be given to this child? Well, you will remember that when God first told Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son within a year's time, he fell on his face and laughed. "Shall a child be born to man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" Abraham did not disbelieve God's promise, but was overwhelmed by how ridiculous it looked for a man his age to beget a child by a wife who was similarly advanced in years. Later on, however, when Sarah laughed at the announcement of Isaac's birth, her laughter did express a spirit of unbelief. Though Sarah denied it, she had laughed at what struck her as an utterly absurd and unbelievable proposition.

So the birth of Isaac provoked laughter from the beginning-- the laughter of amazement, on the one hand, and the laughter of ridicule, on the other. But God wanted Isaac's parents to know that He is the one who gets the last laugh, so for that reason, perhaps, He assigned the name "Laughter" to this child; that way, every time Sarah and Abraham called their son by name, they would remember that God indeed has the last laugh. God laughs at the foolishness of men who doubt His promises and His almighty power. At the same time, He causes people to laugh for joy at the wonder of God's gracious works, which He performs on behalf of unworthy sinners. Isaac's birth was an occasion of great joy for his parents, and indeed for all believers, since it points prophetically to the most joyful event in all of history, the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. That's why this

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child was named "laughter," because his birth foreshadowed the uncontainable joy that Christ's birth would bring to many.

In addition to giving his son the name Isaac, Abraham also obeyed God by circumcising Isaac on the eighth day. This also was a simple act of obedience to God, and obedience is always the best way to express our thankfulness to God. Isaac's circumcision also pointed forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus, for in the fullness of time, Jesus would come into the world to fulfill the symbolic meaning of circumcision by being 'cut off' from fellowship with His Heavenly Father and cast away as an unclean thing on the cross, so that all those for whom Jesus died could be cleansed of their sins by the shed blood of Christ and drawn into an everlasting relationship of fellowship with the Father. These glorious redemptive events were foreshadowed by the rite of circumcision.

So Abraham responded to Isaac's arrival by these acts of obedience to God.

B. Sarah testified to her joy and amazement—

Sarah had her own way of responding to Isaac's arrival, and that was by giving testimony to her utter joy and amazement she felt at the work of God. We read in verse 6 that Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children. For I have borne him a son in his old age." When Sarah says here, "God has made me laugh," she is bearing witness to a change that God had wrought in her heart; for the first time she laughed over Isaac's birth, it was in a spirit of unbelief; but here she is speaking of the joyful laughter of faith. James Dixon writes, "As Sarah looked upon her newborn, the reality strikes, God, alone, made it happen. God was at work in me. There is no earthly joy that can quite compare with those moments in life that clearly bring the knowledge that God is at work in us. "Can you testify to such a work in your life, a work that in your heart that only God could have done? Does that realization fill you with joy? Have you confessed that joy to others? The apostle Peter says that God has redeemed us from sin for this very purpose, that we might confess His glory to others, and praise Him for the greatness of His works. We have been made God's special people, says Peter, that we may proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). Is that the

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longing of your heart -- to tell others about Christ and what He has done for you? Do you consider it your great privilege to proclaim His praises and testify to His amazing grace that has called us out of the darkness of sin into the light of fellowship with God?

Well, we have seen this morning God's faithfulness revealed in the way He fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah. After years of waiting, God finally gave them the son He had promised. As I pointed out, Abraham and Sarah struggled at times to hold fast to God's promise because of the incredibly long time it took for God to do what He said He would do. As the years passed, it looked increasingly ridiculous that would ever become parents. But they never abandoned their faith in God's promise, though at times they found themselves struggling with confusion over God's mysterious working.

All this leads to one more question.

## V. Why Did God Wait So Long Before Doing What He Said He Would Do?

As I said earlier, Abraham had no idea why God waited so long to give him a son. It made no sense at all, from a human standpoint. But from our vantage point in history, we can see several reasons for the delay.

1. To grow their faith-- The first reason was to grow Abraham's and Sarah's faith in the Lord. One of the most painful tools God uses to grow our faith is affliction. When we are afflicted, we find ourselves having to depend on God just to make it through each day. We realize how much we depend on His grace to sustain us in our faith, and to keep us from falling into an attitude of despondency, doubt or distrust. That is why God allows our faith to be tested with afflictions; because faith is a plant that grows strongest in adverse conditions.

Now, there is no question that for Abraham and Sarah to have to wait so many years for the birth of Isaac was a great trial to their faith. They didn't understand what God was up to, but they came out stronger in their faith as a result of God subjecting them to the test of waiting. God does the same thing in our lives as well. He subjects our faith to trials, in order to grow our faith and to produce in us the quality of patience. That's why James exhorts us to rejoice when we find ourselves in trials, because we know that God has a gracious purpose in subjecting our faith to testing. "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that

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the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:2). God is so concerned about producing in us a godly character, that he is willing to subject our faith to testing to achieve that goal. It brings Him no pleasure to see us suffering, but He has His eye set on the goal, which is to make us more like Christ our Lord. He wants us to be happy, but His first concern is for our holiness-- so He often makes us wait for long periods of time before answering our prayers or fulfilling His promises to us, in order to work in us the quality of patience. He wants us to understand that it is "through faith and patience" alone that God's people inherit His promises.

2. To display His supernatural power-- A second reason God delayed in giving Sarah and Abraham their son was to display His supernatural power. Had God given them a son as soon as they arrived in Canaan, it would not have magnified His miracle-working power as much as giving them a son when Abraham was a hundred years old, and Sarah ninety. He wanted them both to be "as good as dead" in their bodies so that it might clearly be seen that the power behind this birth came solely from God and not from men.

That brings to a third reason for the delay in God's acting to fulfill His promise:

3. To foreshadow the manner in which Christ would later come into the world-- The birth of Isaac foreshadowed in so many ways the birth of Abraham's greater son, our Lord Jesus, who would be born many centuries later as a descendant of Isaac. In Christ, all the families of the earth would be blessed, for He would be born to be the Savior of the world.

In what ways did Isaac's birth foreshadow the birth of Jesus?

a. Well, like Isaac, Jesus would be born in fulfillment of a divine promise, a promise that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when God foretold that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent, and would be bruised by the serpent-- a prophecy fulfilled when Jesus died on the cross. There, at Calvary, Jesus was struck by serpent when He was mortally wounded on the cross, but at the same time, He dealt a mortal blow to Satan from which he will never recover. So Jesus' birth came in fulfillment of a divine promise, just like the birth of Isaac.

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b. Moreover, as with Isaac, Jesus' birth came after a long period of waiting. How many generations came and went, anxiously waiting for God to fulfill His promise to send the Messiah. How many prayers went up from believing hearts through the long, slow march of centuries, as God's people waited for the promised One who would redeem men from their sins and establish God's kingdom of righteousness on the earth.

c. And when at last the promised Seed of Abraham appeared, his birth was accomplished by supernatural power, just as in the case of Isaac. In Isaac's case, his mother was an old woman who could not conceive because she was barren, but God removed her barrenness by enabling her to bear a child. In Jesus' case, his mother was a young woman who could not conceive because she had known no man, and was still a virgin. But the Spirit of God visited her and caused her to conceive by a miracle.

d. Then, finally, as with the birth of Isaac, the birth of Jesus was welcomed with outbursts of joy. How many expressions of joyful praise went up in connection with Jesus' birth--from His mother Mary, from her cousin Elizabeth, from godly Simeon and Anna in the temple, and from all the angels of God who sang joyfully in the heavens on the night of Jesus' birth.

How little did Sarah and Abraham realize that by waiting so long for the birth of Isaac, they were prophetically foreshadowing the manner of Christ's birth. Their perseverance in hope foreshadowed the church's perseverance in hope through all the centuries that men waited for God to fulfill His promise by sending His Son into the world.

### CONCLUSION

The patient endurance of Abraham and Sarah in waiting for the birth of Isaac provides a model for believers in all generation to emulate. God's elect under the Old Covenant certainly had to wait a very long time for God to fulfill His promise concerning the Messiah by sending Him the first time into the world. But Jesus came at last, and He did everything necessary to procure for us the free gift of salvation by His life of perfect obedience to God and His vicarious death in our place on the cross. Having done

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everything necessary to redeem us, He returned to the glory of heaven and is now reigning on the throne of glory over all the earth.

But now, we ourselves have to wait a very long time for God to fulfill His promise concerning the second coming of Jesus. We are now going on two thousand years since Jesus ascended to heaven, but His promise is that He will return some day in the same manner that He was taken up-- personally, bodily, and visibly. Along with the promise of His coming, we have the promise of the consummation of all things-- the promise of our future resurrection, the promise of final judgment, the promise of a new heavens and new earth in which we shall dwell forever. None of these realities are presently visible to our eyes, but we have a solid for hope based on the fact that so many prophecies concerning Jesus have already been fulfilled. God wants us, therefore, during this interim period, to go on living in hope, expressing our thankfulness to God by our obedience to His will and our joyful testimony to others. He wants to work in us a patient, persevering character, so that we will increasingly resemble our Savior, who showed such endurance in the face of testing. That is why there is this long delay before Christ comes again. God is testing our faith, He is perfecting in us a righteous character, and He is sending us into all the world so that others might come to know the Savior in whom we have put our trust.

So let us go on trusting in God and waiting patiently for the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us never stagger at God's promises because they seem impossible for God to fulfill. Have you not learned by now that He is the God of the impossible? Let us embrace His promises, therefore, with unwavering faith, knowing that all of God's promises are 'yes and amen' to us in Christ. Amen.