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Sermon Notes

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Promises Kept

Genesis 21:1-34

Introduction: A World of Promises Broken, An Eternity Because of Promises Kept

Early in the summer of 1897, Charles Parsons went to visit the aged George Mueller in his study in Bristol. Mueller received him with a cordial handshake. By this time, God had used Mueller to care for the needs of well over nine thousand orphans in England, and Charles Parsons wanted to know how he'd done it.

Mueller's answer was straightforward... the secret was in trusting the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises

Parsons asked "You have always found the Lord faithful to His promise?"

Mueller answered: "Always. He has never failed me! For nearly seventy years every need in connection with this work has been supplied. The orphans from the first until now, have numbered nine thousand five hundred, but they have never [lacked] a meal. Never! Hundreds of times we have commenced the day without a penny in hand, but our Heavenly Father has sent supplies by the moment they were actually required. There never was a time when there was no wholesome meal. During all these years I have been enabled to trust in God, in the living God, and in Him alone. One million four hundred thousand pounds have been sent to me in answer to prayer."

All of Mueller's ministry was based on an active trust in the promises of God. He looked on them like checks signed by the hand of the Living God Himself. One Puritan writer said, "Show God His promises... God is fond of His handwriting!" Mueller did this day after day

Mankind's history: a world of promises broken

Broken Treaties by governments

Broken pledges of reward

Broken business partnerships and failed promissory notes

Broken campaign promises by politicians

Broken wedding promises by spouses

Broken promises by parents to children, and by children to parents

Treachery, duplicity

Psalm 116:11 And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars."

BUT GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES!!! And my eternity is depending on that simple fact. God speaks a promise, the sinner hears and believes the promise, and my eternity is built on an unshakeable foundation

I. The Old Testament Account: Promises Kept

A. The Birth of Isaac (vs. 1-8)

1. God Finally Keeps His Promise!!!

a. strongly emphasized in the text

b. long-awaited moment... for twenty-five years since the call in Ur of the Chaldees; many years of married life before that (perhaps as many as 75 years)

2. God's many promises concerning Isaac and Abraham's offspring

- ***Genesis 12:1-3 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."***
- ***Genesis 12:7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.***
- ***Genesis 13:14-16 The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.***
- ***Genesis 15:4-5 Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."***
- ***Genesis 17:16 I will bless [Sarah] and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."***

- ***Genesis 17:19 Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."***
- ***Genesis 17:21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."***
- ***Genesis 18:10 Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."***
- ***Genesis 18:14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."***
- ***Genesis 18:18-19 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."***

Ten different passages; seven clear references to Isaac, Sarah's son. Promises made for two and half decades, now at last fulfilled

3. GOD KEEPS HIS WORD... despite all obstacles

- a. the long delay in fulfilling His promise was all part of the plan
- b. now Abraham's was one hundred years old... an old man

vs. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

- c. Sarah's previously dead womb came alive just one time

4. Their faith was vindicated

- a. the faith of Abraham was vindicated

Romans 4:19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead-- since he was about a hundred years old-- and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

- b. the faith of Sarah was vindicated too

ESV Hebrews 11:11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

NOTE: NIV focuses on Abraham's faith, but the best text reading is that SARAH HERSELF received POWER to conceive because SHE considered God faithful who had made the promise

The issue was not biology but theology... her womb came alive one time by the power of God... power to conceive was given not by some wonder fertility drug but by God's miracle-working power

5. The Timeless Lesson: God Can Do ANYTHING!!!!

Genesis 18:14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

So also, when you lay your head down on your pillow that one last time in your old age... when you breathe your last no matter how God chooses to take you out of this sin-cursed world, God will put your final trust in the same God who gave life to a old man's dead body and the dead womb of his wife

Romans 4:17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

6. Abraham Keeps His Word: The Covenant of Circumcision (vs. 4)

Genesis 21:4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him.

7. Joy, Wonder, and Celebration at God's Faithfulness (vs. 6-8)

Genesis 21:6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

Isaac's name was "laughter"... this was not the mocking laughter we saw in Sarah earlier or we would see in a moment in Ishmael... rather it is the laughter of joy and celebration in what God has done.

Sarah also reacted in wonder at the details... like nursing a baby at age ninety!!!

vs. 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."

Sarah must have felt a special joy at last at being able to fulfill her wifely role to her husband in bearing him an heir

The child grew quickly and the time came for him to be weaned... the strange mixture of joy at the advancement of the child in age and development and sadness at the fact that Sarah would never nurse again... this is the strange mixture of parents. Time flies in the text and it flies in life too

When Isaac was weaned, Abraham celebrated by having a vast feast. No longer sucking milk, his son could not begin to enjoy solid food

vs. 8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.

Summary: verses 1-8 God keeps His incredible promise at last!!! Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah... bringing joy, wonder and celebration

But the occasion of the celebration brings a new danger... problems with Ishmael

B. The Expulsion of Ishmael (vs. 9-21)

vs. 9 *But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking*

1. Who Was Ishmael?

- a. Genesis 16: Sarah saw she was barren, and followed the custom of the day... she gave her servant Hagar to Abraham as his second wife... so Sarah could legally have a son through Hagar... but this was not of the Lord, for it broke the patten of marriage established in Adam and Eve
- b. Hagar became pregnant, and began to despise the authority of Sarah... Sarah treated her harshly and Hagar ran away into the desert to escape Sarah
- c. The angel of the Lord spoke to Hagar and commanded her to return to Sarah as submit to her
- d. the angel of the Lord also spoke a prophecy to Hagar concerning her son, Ishmael

Genesis 16:9-12 Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." 11 The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. 12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

- e. God also spoke two prophecies to Abraham about Ishmael

In Genesis 17, God made a clear promise that Sarah would have a son, Isaac, and that Sarah's son Isaac would be Abraham's heir through whom the world would be blessed

Abraham laughed with joy, but also was concerned about Ishmael... a major issue in Genesis 21

Genesis 17:18-21 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" 19 Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. 21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."

It seems that Abraham is clinging to Ishmael as well as Isaac, wanting them both to be heirs and equally blessed by God

In my opinion, a big part of Genesis 21 is to adjust Abraham's heart and understanding... to cause him to stop clinging equally to Ishmael with Isaac

2. Why Was Ishmael Cast Out?

- a. because he mocked

vs. 9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking

The word for mocking here is directly related to Isaac's name, "laughter"... but clearly this is not a laughter of celebration and joy... rather of mockery and unbelief

The apostle Paul calls it persecution:

Galatians 4:29 At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit.

By this time Ishmael would have been about fifteen years old

He was laughing at little Isaac's weaning feast... and Sarah saw it

- b. because Sarah wanted him and Hagar cast out

Sarah perceived a threat to Isaac... a threat also to her own position in the family

Sarah, like many mothers, derived some of her significance from the role of her son as heir... she saw what things would be like down the road

Sarah was furious and went to Abraham

vs. 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."

Note that Sarah does not use Hagar's name, but denigrates her position entirely: **THAT SLAVE WOMAN AND HER SON** she calls them

She also believed the clear statement God had made to Abraham in Genesis 17:

for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

- c. because he posed a threat to Isaac's role as sole heir

Huge problems have small beginnings... they should have been uprooted before they took over

Illus. KUDZU

Kudzu was introduced to the United States in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Countries were invited to build exhibits to celebrate the 100th birthday of the U.S. The Japanese government constructed a beautiful garden filled with plants from their country. The large leaves and sweet-smelling blooms of kudzu captured the imagination of American gardeners who used the plant for ornamental purposes. This tiny infusion led to an explosion that few could have foreseen... the problem is that kudzu grows too well

The Bible says "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." Like kudzu taking over a county, like yeast spreading through a lump, so conflict over a future heir could have spread in Abraham's family... the small seed of mocking had to be nipped in the bud before it conquered the whole family

Illus. History of Europe... nations rent by civil wars as brothers battle for the right to succeed their father to the throne

Alexander Dumas' classic *The Man in the Iron Mask* is about Louis XIVth's twin brother who was the rightful successor to the throne of France but who had been kept locked up in the Bastille dungeon in a diabolical iron mask to keep anyone from seeing his face and learning his true identity. The men in power knew full well that there could be a bloody war of succession between the twin brothers if the prisoner ever escaped

This is the history of European dynasties... and those of Kingdoms around the world

Who will be the heir?

God wanted to cut that problem off before it happened

d. because Abraham needed it done

This is especially true because Abraham had a genuine fatherly affection for Ishmael. When God said very clearly that it was through Isaac that his offspring would be named, Abraham responded by praying

Genesis 17:18-21 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" 19 Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him

We see it again here in this text as well:

vs. 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son.

It may be that Abraham's own heart was muddled concerning how Ishmael and Isaac would relate to each other and to God's magnificent Redemptive Plan... God had to strip Ishmael out of Abraham's active care and thrust him out on his own so that the Redemptive Plan could succeed

e. because God commanded it

vs. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

Whatever were Sarah's motives, God wanted it done! Ultimately that is why Abraham sent them away.

Note therefore Abraham's obedience to God's command:

vs. 14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba.

3. How Did God provide for Ishmael and Hagar?

- a. harshness of the desert is certain death without provision

sweltering heat, hidden canyons, vast expanses, clear blue skies, and stark promontories

- b. Hagar took her teen-aged son as far as they could go

- c. lay him under a tree and went off so she wouldn't hear him crying

vs. 15-16 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob.

Death was near, but so was life... and the difference between the two was the word of God. God's word literally meant life to Hagar and Ishmael

God had already spoken His word to Hagar and Abraham about Ishmael's future... now He spoke to make it happen

vs. 17-19 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

NOTICE: Ishmael's name meant "God hears"... so twice in the text, the angel of the Lord reminded us and Hagar of this central fact

Hagar had gone away from her son so she wouldn't hear him crying... but God never forsook him

Psalm 27:10 Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.

Isaiah 49:15 "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

4. God respoke and kept his promise to Abraham and Hagar

- a. multiple promises in the past, as we have seen

Genesis 16:10 The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

Genesis 17:18-21 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" ... 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. "

- b. reiterated here to both father and mother

To father Abraham:

vs. 13 "I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

To mother Hagar:

vs. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

PROMISES KEPT!!! God will make Ishmael the father of twelve desert-dwelling tribes, roaming free through Arabia

5. Ishmael's "dusty blessings" vs. Isaac's "heavenly blessings"

- a. Abraham's descendents of two types: the dust and the stars

Genesis 13:16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

Genesis 15:5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

- b. dust descendents = Ishamel, Esau, unbelieving Jews

Ishmael lived free, roaming like a wild donkey in the desert reaches

His mother got a wife for him from Egypt, he had lots of kids, enjoyed the spectacular desert nights looking up at the starry host... cooking goat meat on a spit, laughing with his sons... it was a dusty, earth bound, physical life... the life of one who mocked at the promise of God

He and his descendents were Abraham's dusty children... and dust represents MORTALITY

Genesis 3:19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

So also was Esau, who traded his birthright for a good bowl of stew... who despised the promises of Isaac

So also were the Jews who rejected the word of God, who rejected Christ and who lived for earthly prosperity

Abraham's dusty children

c. Isaac was one of the stars of the universe... bound for heavenly glory

So also all who have trusted in Christ... not by our power but by the word of God, he takes children of dust and makes us eternally

Daniel 12:3 Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Philippians 2:15 so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe

Matthew 13:43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Isaac was destined for glory... to shine eternally in the kingdom of God with the glory of the sun

Ishmael was destined for dust... a life in the desert, exceptional skill as an archer, a wife from Egypt, twelve sons, and then death

C. The Covenant with Abimelech (vs. 22-34)

II. The New Testament Significance: An Allegory of the Spirit-Filled Life (Galatians 4)

Illus. "Allegorical Interpretation in the Ancient Church"

A. The Galatian Controversy

"Circumcision group" false teaching about Law of Moses

Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

Paul took it very seriously, saying it was "another gospel," actually "no gospel at all"

Galatians 1:8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

To Paul, the idea that we would have to keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved was an attack on the grace of God in Christ... an attack on the gospel itself

B. We Are Sons, Not Slaves (Galatians 4:4-7)

Galatians 4:4-7 *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*

In order to illustrate this, he turned to an allegory based on the story in our chapter today:

C. An Allegory Based on Ishmael (Galatians 4:21-31)

Galatians 4:21-31 *Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.²³ His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.²⁴ These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.²⁵ Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children.²⁶ But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.²⁷ For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband."²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.²⁹ At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."³¹ Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

In this allegory, Ishmael represents one kind of person, Isaac another

Ishmael represents a natural-born son, not a child of the promise

Isaac represents the supernaturally born son, the child of the promise

Ishmael represents all natural human beings who have never trusted in Christ for salvation

Isaac represents believers, who are born again by the Spirit

Just as there are two types of people, there are two ways to live: by the flesh resulting in eternal death, or by the Spirit resulting in eternal death.

The key application for the Galatian Christians was to realize that they were ISAAC and not ISHMAEL:

²⁸ *Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.²⁹ At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."³¹ Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

The expulsion of Ishmael then represents Judgment Day, when all who are not born again by the Spirit will be cast out eternally:

Matthew 7:23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Ishmael people live for the flesh, live for the moment... they live for lust and pleasure and adventure and comfort and ease and success and pride and a good home and a good woman and a good meal... this is the life of Ishmael, the hunter and desert-dweller.

Isaac lives for the promise, for things to come

Ishmael was the son of the slave woman, and thus had no place in the family:

John 8:34-36 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

D. Paul's Central Lesson: Live As Sons, Not Slaves

Galatians 5:1-6 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Galatians 5:16-25 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. ¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

The allegory is now clear: Isaac and Ishmael represent two kinds of people according to the gospel

One, Ishmael, is born in the ordinary way... through sin... he represents the natural, fleshly life

The other, Isaac, could never have been born except by a direct miracle of God... this represents those who are born again by the Spirit

Ishmael is a slave to sin, and that way ends in eternal death

Isaac is a child of God, and that way ends in eternal life in Christ

III. Application

1. Have Total Confidence in a Promise-Keeping God
2. Celebrate What God Has Already Done
3. Expect Ishmael to Mock and the Flesh to Fight
4. Imitate God: Love Your Enemies As God Loved Ishmael
5. Imitate God: Keep Your Promises, As God Kept His
6. Live as Children of Promise, Not as Slaves
7. Trust in Christ Alone