

“The Promise Fulfilled”
(Genesis 21)

How important is it to the Lord that we keep our promises? I think we can safely say that it's very important. He wants us to be men and women and children of our word. The things that we say are the things He wants us to do, especially when we make vows to Him. Solomon writes, “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!” (Ecc. 5:4). Well, if this is what God expects of us, how much more does He expect it of Himself? The reason He wants us to be faithful is because He is faithful. He wants us to be like Him. Well, just how faithful is God? He is perfectly faithful. He never says anything unless He fully intends to do it. This means that whatever He promises will never fail to come to pass. Sometimes He even keeps His promises when those to whom He makes them fail to believe them. Remember what we saw last week. Even though Abraham and Sarah both failed to trust in the Lord and in His promise by lying to Abimelech, yet He was still faithful to His promise. He protected Sarah by striking Abimelech's house with sickness. He didn't allow him to touch her. And He eventually restored her to Abraham, even giving him more to go out with than what he came in with. God kept His promise, even though Abraham and Sarah's faith failed. And now this evening, we will see the fulfillment of what the Lord had said He would do: He causes Sarah to conceive and give birth to a son, the promised seed, the one through whom the Messiah eventually would come.

The first thing we see in this chapter is the birth of the promised seed, the fulfillment of God's promise. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son at the appointed time, just as He said. Again we mustn't forget that they had this child beyond the age when childbearing was possible. Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. Even though they didn't grow old as quickly in those days, yet they were still too old, humanly speaking, to have children. The conception and birth of this child, in other words, was a miracle. I believe we can safely say that the Lord didn't bring this child into the world in this way only to test Abraham and Sarah's faith. It was also meant to be a picture of another child who was yet to be born in Abraham's line, a picture of another miraculous conception and birth, one that was far more important – that of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His case there was no human father, but a divine One. But still a child was born, where, humanly speaking, there shouldn't have been one. The birth of this child was so unlikely and it brought so much laughter and joy to all who heard about it that they named him Isaac, which means laughter. Sarah said that the Lord had made laughter for her, and that everyone who heard of this birth would laugh with her. Who would have believed that Sarah would nurse a child, and that at such an old age? But she did. The Lord can do the impossible. He is a God of miracles. We should never doubt anything He says, but trust in His promises. Abraham and Sarah did, although not perfectly, and they received what was promised. And in accordance with the commandment of God, Abraham very happily applied the sign of the covenant to his son when he was eight days old.

This was the birth of the promised seed. It was a time of great joy for Abraham and Sarah. But then followed a time which was not as pleasant, the persecution of the promised seed and the driving out of the seed of the flesh.

After the child grew a little and was weaned – which was at about 2 or 3 years of age, Abraham made a great feast for Isaac. At that feast Sarah noticed that Ishmael was mocking, or making fun of Isaac. Obviously, Isaac's birth meant that his relationship with Abraham was going to change. We might even say that his behavior was an indication of what the Lord was going to do with him. If he had rejoiced with the others at the fulfillment of God's promise, that might have been an indication that the Lord was going to include him in the covenant. But the fact that he was mocking Isaac was a sign that he was rejecting the covenant. God's promise didn't mean anything to him. The only thing he was concerned about was his own inheritance. This is another way in which Isaac's birth pictured that of our Lord's. When Jesus was born, there were those who rejoiced at His birth. But there were also others, others who were jealous of this new King, others such as Herod who wanted to kill Him because he was afraid Jesus would take away his kingdom. When Jesus was fully grown and was ministering the Gospel, there were those who loved and received Him, such as the disciples, and there were those who hated Him, such as the scribes and Pharisees, again because they were afraid that Jesus would take away their positions. Even today there are these two reactions to Christ. There are those who receive Him, and those who make fun of Him and won't have anything to do with Him. Obviously, how we treat Jesus is an indication of what the Lord is going to do with us. He will either include us in His kingdom or cast us out on this basis. One other thing we should bear in mind is this: if we love Jesus and receive Him, we will be treated in the same way He was. Paul writes, "But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, so it is now also" (Gal. 4:29). If you're going to live like Christ, prepare yourself to be hated like He was by those who don't know Him (John 15:18; 1 John 3:13).

Now when Sarah saw Ishmael, she demanded that Abraham drive both him and his mother out. The son of the bondwoman was not to be an heir with the son of promise. This was probably motivated by her motherly jealousy for her son. But it is also the picture that Paul used to refer to the children of the flesh and the children of the promise, or the difference between true believers and false, and how the Lord was going to treat them (Gal. 4:30). Those who are of the flesh will not be heirs with those of the promise. The matter distressed Abraham, but the Lord comforted him. He told him to listen to Sarah, because it was through Isaac that his descendants would be named – that is, Isaac was the child of promise, the one through whom He would bring about His salvation. He further said that He was going to make Ishmael into a great nation, because Ishmael too was one of Abraham's children. This reflects the promise that He had earlier made to Hagar (Gen. 16:10-12), as well as the promise He made to Abraham that he would be the father of nations (17:4-6). And so Abraham rose early in the morning, gave Hagar bread, a skin of water and the boy, and sent her away. Undoubtedly this must have been very painful for Abraham since Ishmael was his own son. Nevertheless, he submitted to God's plan, realizing that salvation for himself, for his house and perhaps even for some of the descendants of Ishmael would come only through his obedience to the Lord, according to God's promise, "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3).

And so Hagar left and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba, away from the tents of Abraham. The worst thing that a person can ever do is to wander away from the covenant people of God, because this is where God dwells. This is why being put out of the church is such a serious matter. But what choice did they have? They were not to be a part of God's covenant people. They wandered until all their water was used up. Hagar then left Ishmael under a bush and went a little ways beyond him, because she didn't want to see him die, and she lifted up her voice and began to cry. Apparently, she didn't remember the promise the angel of the Lord had made to her earlier. If she had, perhaps she wouldn't have despaired. But again, the Lord is faithful to His Word, even when we fail to believe it. The Lord heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to her from heaven. And He said, "Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand; for I will make a great nation of him" (v. 18). Then the Lord opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She filled the water skin and gave the boy a drink. And the Lord was with the boy, and he grew and became an archer, and Hagar went and took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. And he lived in the wilderness of Paran. Now why did the Lord remember Ishmael? After all, Hagar and Ishmael were both excluded from His covenant people. It was because of Abraham. The reason the Lord made the promise to Hagar in the first place was because He had promised that Abraham would be the father of nations, and because Ishmael was Abraham's seed. However, the break with the covenant community was there and still continues to this day. Most of Ishmael's descendants (the Arabs) are entrenched in the Islamic religion of Mohammed and are therefore excluded from the kingdom of God. There are, however, some who have come to embrace the true God through faith in the angel of the covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the Lord opened Hagar's eyes to see the well of water that saved her and her son's life, so the Lord opens the eyes of His elect people, even among the descendants of Ishmael, to see the well of salvation that is in Christ.

The last thing we see in this chapter is the preservation of the promised seed. In those days, Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and Phicol, the commander of his army, visited Abraham. Abimelech had seen that the Lord was with Abraham in all that he did, and he was afraid of him. If the Lord continued to bless him, Abraham and his seed might be a threat to his posterity. So with a desire to prevent this future problem, he came out to make a covenant with him. Abimelech wanted Abraham to swear that he would not deal falsely with him, his children, or his posterity, but that he would show them the same kindness that he had previously shown to him. The fear of the Lord had fallen upon Abimelech, so that he was afraid of Abraham. Clearly, this was God's mercy in preserving him. This wouldn't be the last time the Lord would protect His people in this way. He often caused the nations around Israel to fear His people, so that they would leave them alone, or so that they would fall before them. Certainly the Lord does the same to protect His people today. And Abraham wasn't unfavorable to this idea, but before he made this covenant with Abimelech, he first wanted to clear up a dispute over a well. His servants had dug it, but Abimelech's servants had taken it. Obviously, wells were very important in those days and in that culture, since their lives and the lives of their livestock depended on them. Abimelech said that he hadn't known anything about it, but was willing, because of his fear of Abraham, to uphold his claim on it. Once that was settled, the two made a covenant. Abraham gave Abimelech seven ewe lambs as a witness that he dug the well, and the two of them made an oath. Therefore that place was

called Beersheba, or the well of the oath. Some see in this covenant a hint that one day all the nations would bow before the seed of Abraham and would live with Him in covenant. This could certainly be true, since this is clearly what the Bible says will happen. One day all the nations, even every knee, will bow before Christ and confess Him as Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11).

Finally, after they made the covenant, Abimelech and Phicol returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree, perhaps in remembrance of the covenant with Abimelech and the Lord's mercy, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God, thanking Him for His mercies. And he continued to live in that land for many days. The Lord doesn't want us to forget His mercies. This is why He has given us one day in seven to remember His covenant with us through the Lord Jesus Christ, and to renew our covenant with Him. As we saw this morning, the Lord's Day is a constant reminder to us of the resurrection of Christ, even as the Lord's Supper is a constant reminder to us of His death. It is through these two things that God's covenant was made and that we are saved. Perhaps if we were more faithful to meditate on the mercies of the Lord on this day, it would help us to despair less and to trust Him more. This is surely what He intends for them to be for us. Let's learn then to use them in this way, so that we might be strengthened and encouraged to serve Him more faithfully. Amen.