

Do you pray?

And, when you pray, what do you expect?

Does God do what you expect?

I find that He almost never does.

God waits longer than I would like.

He answers differently than I think I would like.

Maybe you are different than I am and God does what you want the way that you want it.

But, this was not Abraham's experience.

God made him wait 25 years and had to correct his understanding at least a few times.

We, you and I and Abraham might be inclined to become upset at God, maybe even angry...

"Why? Why God do You take so long?"

"Why does answered prayer often seem so incomplete? Why are there always loose ends? Another need?"

"Why don't you do it how I thought would be best?"

And, then we begin to see the utter silliness of our questioning.

And, if we will not let go of questions like these, God has some questions for us...

The unrighteous people of God have been questioning the rightness of what God does... **Ezekiel 18:25, 29**

And, answers... **Isaiah 55:8-9**

Abraham is learning here... and through him, Moses and the people of Israel are learning... and we are learning of...

The perfect action of the Lord, the Everlasting God

God does it the right way. And, He has reasons for all that He does... reasons often beyond us at the time.

Together we will look at three aspects of our God who keeps His promises His way. We will see that His way is always the right way.

I. God keeps His promise.

vss. 1-7

Now, you might say, "Yes pastor, this is obvious. We did not need you to tell us..."

not to mention the fact that you've told us already... many times."

And, of course, that would all be true... if you had said that.

But, then I would say to you, "Let us never miss the obvious things in Scripture. Sometimes they are the most profound."

Furthermore, yes we have heard this many times. But why?

It is because this is emphasized in these chapters of Genesis.

In fact, if in Genesis 1-11 we have been introduced to the Creator God, punishing sin and showing mercy

In Genesis 12-21 we have been introduced to the promise keeping God.

In every one of these chapters we see the sovereign God making promises

or coming through for the one to whom His promises have been made.

And, as we move through these chapters, the promise of God gains clarity and proximity.

In chapter 21 we find that what God has promised He now performs.

Let us then ask the text a few questions about this God who keeps His promise.

First, "What?" What promise does God keep?

vs. 1 "as He had said"

vs. 1 "as He had promised"

vs. 2 "at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him."

Three times... we are not meant to miss the fact. God keeps His promises. He does what He says He will do.

You see, God has told Abraham and Sarah, "In a year you will have a son." (Gen. 17-18)

This is what the Everlasting God has said. You can never trust God's Word too much. What He says, He will do.

So, be in the Bible... reading, listening, studying, taking it in... Make it a part of you.

Don't read it like some people do their horoscope... just a glance to make the day go better. Magical insight.

Learn what God says, how He says it. Learn the whole story. Devote your life to it. So you will know what He says.

Now, there are lots of things that we would love God to do for us...

and we could convince ourselves that God has promised to do these things.

Maybe we were praying and we REALLY felt that God would do it.

Maybe someone comes up to us and says, "I know that God will do this for you."

Maybe we have an amazing emotional experience and we conclude, "God is going to do it!"

Or, amazing circumstances collide to convince us that God is working in just the way that we imagine.

"It must be that God is saying something."

Well... maybe. But all of these things are different from God actually telling us... making a promise.

God does use things like these to lead us, even in our praying.

He does use things like these to encourage us, and even to teach us.

But all these things are different from the Everlasting God actually speaking to us... which He does primarily through His Word.

The Bible is our solid rock, our firm foundation...

Here is where we can find promises that we know He has made... understood in their right context, guided by the Holy Spirit.

"But," you might say, "This minimizes God's power. These are not the promises that I was particularly interested in."

Well, then, you do not understand the promises in the Bible. It is time to get to work understanding His Word.

Second, "When?" When does God, who keeps His promise, keep his promise?

The text answers this question as well. (vs. 2) "at the appointed time"

You see? God is never late. He is never early. He always arrives precisely when He means to. (like Gandalf)

We don't always know exactly what God is up to... but he always has a reason for His timing.

Here, certainly God is teaching Abraham and Sarah to trust him... for 25 years!

Hebrews 11:1 If you and I are going to learn trust, hope, patience... we need time. Waiting time. Hoping time.

Possibly God is doing this at just this moment as a witness to Abimelech.

Abraham is his neighbor. Abraham will become his ally. He, too, is learning from God and learning from God.

Certainly God used this story to teach Israel as they wandered in the wilderness and He is using it to teach us today.

God's timing is always perfect.

Third, "How?" How does God do these things that He says He will do?

Well, finally, finally God has given Abraham an heir through Sarah... as He promised 15 years ago.

But, is this the final step? Has Abraham arrived? Is it the end of all the problems?

No. God's promises fulfilled before eternity never are. What they actually are is a bridge on the way marked out by God.

An end and a beginning... a marker on the way. So, Abraham does not get to stay there. He must move on.

This is progress...

In the plan of God...

This is the first of the "multitude of nations... leading to the blessing to be a blessing to all nations."

In Abraham's walk of faith... but not in the problems he has to face. There will be more.

And, he will need to have faith in God for those as well. But, his faith is making progress.

Fourth, "Why?" Why does God come through at just the right time in just the right way?

This, I think is a truly marvelous lesson... and it is in the name of a child, "Isaac" = laughter.

It is the third time that laughter shows up with Abraham and Sarah.

The first was the laughter of Abraham... silent laughter of amazement and worship at the intention of God. (Gen. 17:17)

The second was Sarah in the tent, eavesdropping on Abraham's conversation with the Lord. (Gen. 18:12)

Hers was the laughter of disbelief... silent, cynical, and embarrassing.

But, now, her laughter has changed. It is out loud! It is full of joy.

It is because of God's faithfulness, and how He was faithful... for God has been faithful in a surprising way.

God loves to work this way. And, He wants Abraham and Sarah to remember that He does.

This is why God assigned the name "laughter" to their boy.

This is why Sarah revels in the name. She loves it...

because she will always be reminded of the joy that God brings in keeping promises in the most unexpected ways.

God surprises us and sometimes we can only laugh at how.

Many of you know that I am a preacher. And, you might also guess that I and my beautiful wife often pray for our children.

One thing we have asked God for all of them is that they would be saved and walk with Jesus.

You can imagine all the ways that God might save a preacher's kid.

Now, I'll tell you another way.

8 years ago one evening I received a call from a man I'd never met. He'd ridden his bicycle into Beresford.

He said he had no money and no food and needed help.

I met him out at Burger King and drove him and his bicycle and knapsack down to the police station.

Soon, he was set up with some money for supper and a room in the motel.

I had an appointment that night and could not stay with him, but I told him I'd meet him in the morning for breakfast.

We met at Emily's and after the first breakfast I offered him another. He looked hungry.

We talked about God and he told me of his faith and love for Jesus.

Then he asked about my kids, names, ages, what they liked to do. Well, I didn't answer those questions. You never know.

But, then out of his ratty knapsack he pulled three cassette tapes.

He told me that he listened to them all the time and these ones he just about knew by heart.

They were episodes of Adventures in Odyssey, he told me, and He wanted my kids to have them.

We parted. I gave him some money and told him to spend it on food. He said he would. Off he went on his bike.

I've never seen him again. I'm sure I will someday.

I went home. I told the girls the story and gave them the tapes.

One of those tapes was the Adventures in Odyssey episode where they find themselves in the Pilgrim's Progress.

They are trying to get to the Celestial City and have to overcome all kinds of obstacles to get there.

Katie asked her sisters about all of that and the Celestial City and they took her to Nancy.

Nancy told Katie that she needed to trust Christ as her Savior in order to get to heaven and Katie prayed right then.

She still remembers the day.

Who would have thought that a preacher's daughter would be saved by the gift of a homeless man?

It still makes me laugh.

Life is full of surprises from God... for our joy.

At this point the story takes a disturbing direction. At first glance we don't like it. I don't like it. It seems not to be fair.

Sure, we can understand what happens. But, we would expect better of Sarah... and Abraham... and God.

II. God protects His promise. vss. 8-21

Ishmael, Hagar's son, is bullying Isaac. Ishmael is 14 years older.

The word "mocking" = laughing (vs. 6) in intensive form. "Really laughing!" Maybe He's making fun of his name.

It is like the "joking" that Lot's sons-in-laws though he was doing back in Sodom. (Gen. 19:14)

There is some history between Sarah and Hagar that might be part of the cause. **Gen. 16:4-6**

Hagar has been under Sarah's dominion ever since. Now, perhaps Hagar is retaliating through the boys.

Bullying. It's ugly.

And, so, Sarah responds as most mothers would. She's angry. She wants to protect her son. (vs. 10)

Abraham does not know what to do.

Now it gets really troubling. God speaks to Abraham, and He seems to take Sarah's side! (vs. 12-13)

And, then, when Abraham obeys, it appears that what Sarah wants is to see them both sent out into the desert with a day's ration. bread... and a water bottle... alone. It's a death sentence.

But, Abraham obeys God and does what Sarah wants!

Then God meets them in the wilderness, answers her prayer, and provides for them both.

He remembers His promise to Hagar in Genesis 16. And, we hear little more about Ishmael hereafter.

But, Why? Why does God seem to reward the selfishness of Sarah? What is God doing? What could He be teaching?

Certainly, God is making sure that Isaac is protected as the heir.

Also, Abraham is learning that he has to live with the consequences of his earlier sins... as we all do.

Abraham is learning to obey God in the challenges of life... and learning that God gives guidance in these things.

And, God is getting Ishmael out of the picture in preparation for chapter 22. (Gen. 22:2)

But, there is more...

Every now and then, an O.T. story is interpreted in the N.T. When this happens it is ALWAYS instructive.

In this case Paul, in Galatians, uses this story to teach a lesson I never would have thought that it teaches.

He uses this situation as an illustration from the past of a reality that was for him in the present. It is present for us as well.

Paul is explaining here that in Christ we are sons of the promise and have been rescued from living under the Law and slavery to sin.

And, by the Law, he means the first five books of the Old Testament apart from the fulfillment of their promise.

Galatians 4:21-5:1

Hagar = Mt. Sinai (OT), present (NT) city of Jerusalem... because she is in slavery with her children. (vs. 25)

New Testament Jewish Legalism = keeping God's laws in order to earn God's righteousness and His favor.

Her children are born according to the flesh. Ishmael was the result of the effort of men. (vs. 29)

Sarah = Jerusalem above, freedom, the mother of the children of the promise.

Her children were born of the Spirit, by the will and plan of God. (vs. 29)

So, what is the point? If you sat and read this passage over and over for two hours, it would eventually hit you!

The key is in vs. 30. The two things cannot coexist! This is what God was showing way back in Genesis.

When Isaac arrived (the work of the Spirit), Ishmael (the work of man) had to go. He was never the plan in the first place.

When Jesus came (the work of the Spirit of God), Legalism (man's work) had to go. It was never the plan in the first place.

Isaac had his place in the camp by a work and grace of God... by a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

Ishmael had a place there only if he behaved himself. When he didn't behave, he was out!

That's how the Law works. One failure and you're gone. There is no hope that way. We will all fail.

And, you cannot be living both ways at the same time. Many Christians try. But it only leads to discouraging failure.

See, grace means that legalism must go. It cannot stay... because grace sees the Law in an entirely new and different light.

Remember the message last week? Legalism asks, "What do I have to do?" = What is the minimum required?

But you cannot earn God's favor in this way. Righteousness is by grace through faith or not at all.

After all, who wants a child who says, "What is the least I can do to be considered a good kid?"

Certainly not God. No, there must be a better way than this sort of legalistic attempt to measure up.

We don't want to be those who say to God, "What do I have to do?" And then we will fail to do it!

We want to be those who's standing with God is entirely by grace, a gift, then we say, "What all can I do for you?"

Do you see the difference? It's the difference between a good son and a bad son. The good son lives in His father's grace.

This is the person who is secure and wants to obey, to go over and above.

Because, it's my family, this Kingdom of God, and I am an heir. I want to invest in what God has promised!

III. God makes a place for His promise. vss. 22-34

Here, it is enough to say that God, the Everlasting God, is making a safe place for Abraham to live in the land He has given him.

As Isaac is the beginning of the people promised, this is the beginning of the land promised.

It is incremental. It is incomplete. But, as always God is moving... God's promise is making progress.

What has God promised to you?

You might think immediately of material things, or of people you love and are praying for.

You might even think of prayers that you have prayed for a long time.

No doubt, God is working on those things on your behalf. He does not forget the small things.

He dresses the lilies and feeds the birds.

But I think that in both the O.T. and the New, God is constantly trying to lift our sights above these concerns toward the real promises.

A future and a hope forever, saved, washed in His blood and made righteous, fit for a New Heaven and a New Earth.

That's the promise He has certainly made to us. And, every day here is progress... if you live in light of the promise.