

## **Genesis 21:1-8** **The Birth of Isaac**

We can all affirm that God is faithful. In fact, the older I get, and the more life experiences I have, the more I can personally testify to God's faithfulness. But you need not take my word for it, Scripture also insists upon this. Indeed, God is defined by His faithfulness.

“Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Deuteronomy 7:9).

“O Lord God of hosts, who is like You, O mighty Lord? Your faithfulness also surrounds You” (Psalm 89:8).

“ O Lord, You are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; for You have worked wonders, plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness” (Isaiah 25:1).

“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9).

The Law, the poetry, the prophets, and the New Testament all maintain that God is faithful. But what do we mean by this? When we say God is faithful, what exactly are we saying? Or perhaps more to the point, to whom is God faithful?

Certainly He is not faithful only to us. That is, God's faithfulness is not defined by His obedience to our commands or His response to our wishes. That would be absurd. As much as this world often sees God as a celestial genie who ought to give us what we want, surely believers cannot see Him that way.

So we must conclude that God is faithful to Himself. God is true to Himself.

“God is not a man, that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;  
Has He said, and will He not do it?  
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good” (Numbers 23:19).

That is, God is faithful to bring about what He has planned. This sovereign plan, begun in eternity past, is for our good and His glory. It is His perfect plan for those whom He has called to be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29). And therefore when we align ourselves with His will, when we find ourselves in the midst of His perfect plan for our lives, we ought to live confidently and expectantly. We ought to look forward to the great things God will do in us and through us to bring about His kingdom purposes.

In our passage today, we see a part of this plan work out. For Abraham and Sarah, anticipation finally became reality. Abraham and Sarah saw fulfilled the promise of God that they would have a son. So let us begin by seeing them enjoying the moment as they held their newborn baby boy.

## **The Birth**

As He had promised, God gave Abraham and Sarah a child. Without detail, Scripture simply states that “the Lord took note of Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had promised” (v. 1). We cannot overlook the fact that Scripture emphasizes that God chose to remember Sarah. God “took note” of Sarah and God “did . . . as He had promised.” To be sure, Abraham had a role in this, but it must not be lost on us, as it was not lost on Abraham and Sarah, that God was the source of life. As Paul put it in his letter to the church in Galatia, “but the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise” (Galatians 4:23).

And their joy was made all the greater for the waiting. I am certain that we have all experienced at some point the uncomfortable truth that the gap between expectation and reality is disappointment. For how many months, how many years, had Abraham and Sarah expected a child only to be disappointed. Even before they left Haran, they must have, like any other family of the time, tried to have children. Children were necessary to both the immediate survival of the family (as they helped with the household duties) and to continuing the family into the future. Any family with possessions required a male child especially to provide continuity and keep the family possessions within the family. Imagine the heartbreak as month after month they failed to conceive. Let us appreciate their frustration.

But then they were promised a child by God. While this promise relieved the pressure of wondering if they would ever have a child, the birth of this promised child was a long time in coming. When they left for Canaan, Abraham had been promised that God would “will make you a great nation” (Genesis 12:2). At that time Abraham was seventy-five years old. So they left for Canaan obediently. And still no child. They had been obedient, but God had not yet fulfilled His promise. So Abraham and Sarah waited. Some ten years later, God again reaffirmed His promise. He told Abraham,

“Do not fear, Abram,  
I am a shield to you;  
Your reward shall be very great” (Genesis 15:1).

But Abraham had begun to wonder. He reminded God that a distant relative was destined to be his heir when he said “<sup>2</sup>O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? . . . <sup>3</sup>since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir” (Genesis 15:2-3). Note that Abraham politely, but resolutely, pointed out that God had not fulfilled His promise. Not offended, God insisted that a surrogate heir was not His plan. “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir” (Genesis 15:4).

But still Sarah remained barren. So after more time passed, Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands. Taking it upon themselves to help God keep His promises, “Sarai said to Abram, ‘now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her’” (Genesis 16:2). Abraham complied, and the plan worked all too well. Hagar did conceive a child, but when she had done so, she hated her mistress and tension in the family became unbearable. Eventually Hagar was sent away. But God remembered her too, and the family, dysfunctional as it was, was reunited.

Still more years passed. Ishmael, the son of Hagar and presumably the promised child, was growing. He had reached adolescence and was well on his way to adulthood. All seemed well. God had been faithful. He had kept His promise that child born of Abraham would be the 'seed' through whom all the nations would be blessed. But Abraham and Sarah had misunderstood. Like Eliezer of Damascus, Ishmael, also, was not God's plan for Abraham and Sarah. So, God again appeared to Abraham and reminded him of His promise,

“I will establish My covenant between Me and you,  
And I will multiply you exceedingly” (Genesis 17:2).

Then, after describing the ritual of circumcision that was to signify that covenant, God surprised Abraham. <sup>15</sup>“As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup>I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her” (Genesis 17:15-16). Abraham was astonished. He already had a son. And one from his own body. “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Genesis 17:17). Such was his response. It was so impossible that Abraham laughed so hard he fell over.

But God insisted. When he again had Abraham's attention He said, “no, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him” (Genesis 17:19). And soon thereafter, God again appeared to Abraham to give him the details as to the keeping of His promise. Putting a time frame on the fulfillment of His promise, God said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son” (Genesis 18:10).

And still some months passed. It had been nearly twenty five years since God had promised Abraham offspring. His adopted servant was not to be the heir. Ishmael was not to be the heir. Abraham had been specifically promised by God that he and Sarah would have a child. And then, finally, Sarah was pregnant.

God “took note” of Sarah (v. 1). The parallel experience can be found in the lives of Hannah and Elizabeth, two other women of God that had not been blessed with children until the Lord chose to do so.

<sup>19</sup>Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. <sup>20</sup>It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son” (1 Samuel 1:19-20).

<sup>24</sup>After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, <sup>25</sup>this is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked with favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men” (Luke 1:24-25).

That God was responsible for the conception of Isaac is not to say that Isaac had a divine paternity. Rather, the point is that it was God's sovereign choice to allow each of these women to become pregnant. We must remember both the disgrace and hopelessness of infertility in the ancient world. There was nothing for husband and wife to do except proceed according to the normal ways of procreation. If no child resulted from their experience, there was nothing to be done except rely upon the Lord. Despite the

arrogance that our modern medicine encourages, we, too, are entirely at the Lord's mercy when it comes to child bearing. He alone is the author of life. He alone forms us in the womb (Psalm 139:13).

And God also kept the baby safe within the womb. The nine months passed in a single verse. We have no reason to doubt that, despite her advanced age, Sarah carried the baby until full term. So, she "bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him" (v. 2). Note that the child was born at God's appointed time. Not a moment too soon or too late. Just when God had planned for the child to be born, so he was. As God is the author of life, so too is He the preserver of life in the womb. This, of course, does not absolve couples who are pregnant from doing all they can to take care of both the mother and the child. But it is to insist that God is as sovereign over the child in the womb as He is over every other human being.

God had indeed been faithful. He had kept His promises made more than two decades before. During the intervening years, Abraham and Sarah had seen God protect them from famine, keep Sarah safe in Pharaoh's household, allow them to prosper economically, keep Abraham safe and empower him to be successful in a significant local war, allow Lot to be spared from destruction, protect them yet again when they went among the pagan Philistines, and even keep Sarah safe and undefiled in the household of Abimelech when Abraham lied about her again. They had seen God do all this. Now, they had seen Him provide for them a son.

That Abraham and Sarah rejoiced over the birth of their long-awaited son, did not mean that they neglected their obligations to the God Who had provided the child. They were not so caught up in their joy that they forgot their God. So, obediently, "Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him" (v. 3-4).

When wandering from her mistress, an angel of the Lord had appeared to Hagar and told her that she would have a son and that she should name him Ishmael. After Hagar returned to Abraham and Sarah, she later related what had happened to Abraham and he complied (Genesis 16:11, 16). God also took the prerogative of naming Isaac. Abraham merely called the child as he had been commanded by God (Genesis 17:19).

Abraham also followed the rite of circumcision (Genesis 17:10). Practicing the rite of circumcision was another an act of obedience. He did not delay. He did nothing other than comply precisely as God had commanded. Abraham responded to God's grace by showing his gratitude in obedience.

### **The Rejoicing**

Though not given the indulgence of coming up with a name for their son, the significance of the assigned name was not lost on the parents themselves. "Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' 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'" (v. 5-7).

The name Isaac was certainly appropriate. The name means “he laughs” and referenced both the joy of the parents at this moment as well as the reminder that both Abraham and Sarah had laughed at the prospect of conceiving a child at their age. Thus every time that Abraham and Sarah called the child, they were reminded both of the joy they experienced at his birth as well as the doubt they had demonstrated when God promised them a child. Isaac served as a reminder of both their own weakness and God’s faithfulness.

Sarah acknowledged that God provided the gift of the child. God had “made laughter for me” (v. 6). She, too, had born a son to Abraham. Her disgrace was removed. She also assumed that “everyone who hears will laugh with me” (v. 6). This may have been an optimistic assessment when it came to Hagar. Though Sarah could now look Hagar in the face, it proved unlikely that Hagar rejoiced in the birth of Isaac. After all, her son Ishmael had been the presumed heir. Now she was no more than a servant. She was no longer the mother of the child that would succeed Abraham. The dysfunction in the family that had resolved itself while Sarah remained childless, was again thrust onto center stage.

But even after Isaac had been brought safely into the world, there was still concern. In the ancient world infant mortality (and maternal mortality for that matter) were very high. And the odds of survival did not improve much during the first few years of life. Any number of diseases could take the life of a newborn. Tuberculosis, malaria, rabies, influenza, leprosy, and probably smallpox and pneumonia as well are a few of the diseases known in the ancient world for which there was neither treatment nor cure. The lack of detailed records make it impossible for the historian to arrive at specific numbers on infant mortality in the ancient world, but in classical Rome (some two thousand years later) infant mortality was somewhere between 30-40%. Another 20-30% of children died before they reached adolescence. The ancient world of Abraham and Sarah could certainly have been no better.

So we should not be surprised to find that when Isaac became a toddler, Abraham through a party. “The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned” (v. 8). Isaac had survived infancy and was probably about two or three years old (2 Maccabees 7:27). The promised child now had a better chance of survival. Abraham and Sarah celebrated and, no doubt, invited many to this celebration. The servants rejoiced. Leaders from the surrounding area, pagans though they might be, were likely included among the guests. They ate. They danced. Yet, we can imagine Hagar and Ishmael sulking in the corner, not enjoying the party at all, and wondering at what the future held for them now that Isaac had arrived.

### **Takeaways**

The birth of Isaac is a wonderful demonstration of the faithfulness of God. In His own perfect time, God brought about what He had promised. We all know that God is faithful. We all know that He is true to Himself. And yet how does that truth impact our spiritual life? One immediate way that comes to mind is in our prayer life.

Prayer is a frequent theme of Scripture. The topic is mentioned well over one hundred times in the Bible. The great men and women of the Old Testament prayed, and their prayers are recorded for us. Jesus prayed, and He taught His disciples how to pray. A few examples may suffice for the whole.

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

“I want the men in every place to pray” (1 Timothy 2:8).

“The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16).

In some ways, we seem to pray all the time. We pray before we eat. We pray before meetings. We pray before we go to sleep. But I might ask how many of our prayers are routine and uttered without much thought. Perhaps we do not have rote prayers that we have memorized, but it is worth considering how much of our time in prayer is spent absentmindedly.

And when we pray, do we pray expectantly? Not that we should presume upon God. He is sovereign and He always answers our prayers with what is best. But are we sometimes surprised when God is gracious and responds to our prayers in the way we had hoped? Always remembering that God is not at our beck-and-call, we ought to pray expectantly.

Sometimes, I think we can pray without expectation. We are surprised by God’s grace. Perhaps the best example of this occurs in the book of Acts.

“<sup>6</sup>On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. <sup>7</sup>And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, ‘get up quickly.’ And his chains fell off his hands. <sup>8</sup>And the angel said to him, ‘gird yourself and put on your sandals.’ And he did so. And he said to him, ‘wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’ <sup>9</sup>And he went out and continued to follow . . . <sup>12</sup>he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. <sup>13</sup>When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup>When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. <sup>15</sup>They said to her, ‘you are out of your mind!’ But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, ‘it is his angel.’ <sup>16</sup>But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed” (Acts 12:6-9, 12-16).

We do not know the details of the prayer that was being offered, but surely they were praying for Peter’s safety and release. Yet when their prayer was answered, they thought it more likely that an angel of God had appeared than that their prayer had been answered. Such an understanding shows little trust in the faithfulness of God. May God give us the grace to pray with trust in the faithfulness of God to answer our prayers according to His perfect will for our good and His glory.