

Children of the Promise

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I don't know how good at waiting you are, but however good at waiting you are, how does it feel when the thing that you have been waiting for finally comes?

Some of you know Susie and I have two wonderful little boys. Our second came very quickly, but we had to wait for our first. We wanted a baby for a year and a half before one came along, and that's a short time in the grand scheme of things. We weren't waiting long, but it felt like forever. How did it feel then when we turned over the test and it was positive?

It was a short wait, and we had to hold on to that hope with an open hand. So what about this? Genesis tells us that Abraham was 75 when God promised that Sarah would give him a son, and here in verse 5 we read, Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Okay, so do the math. That's 25 years waiting for God's promise to come true. Where were you 25 years ago? Picture yourself there. Some of you weren't alive 25 years ago.

It's a long time. That's how long this couple have had to cling with a closed hand to God's promise, promise. And God has often had to hold their hands closed over his promise in that time when they've struggled to believe it could be true, when they've taken things into their own hands, when they've even laughed in God's face. He has faithfully come to them again and again with his promise to take their hands, to place it on his word every time that they feel it slip through their fingers. They've lost their grip on it. He has been faithful. Now think of the times when he has done that for them.

[2 : 1 0] Think back through the book of Genesis, back in chapter 15, Abraham doubted he would ever have a son. He said to God, surely my servant Eliezer, he will have to do. Then the word of the Lord came to him, this man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

And he took him out, didn't he? Showed them the night sky. Count the stars, he said. Can you number them? That is how many your descendants will be. The very next chapter, Sarah said to Abraham, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go and sleep with my slave.

Perhaps I can build a family through her. So Abraham has a son with Hagar, Ishmael. And in time, he says to God again, won't this son do what Ishmael do before you? And God says, chapter 17, yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son. You will call him Isaac. And I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. God comes back again, chapter 18, I will surely return this time next year. Sarah will surely have a son.

At that point, Sarah just laughs. She just laughs. It's been so long. But God replied, is anything too hard for the Lord? So do you see this baby boy, chapter 21, this baby is at the heart of this whole drama without the promised son. What good is God has promised to bless, to redeem the world through this family? And now what they have been waiting for is finally here. You wonder, as we read those words, did you feel what they must have felt? The Lord was gracious to Sarah, as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the very time. See what God has done. He has done what he has promised in verse one, and he has done it exactly when he promised to do it. Verse two, what is it saying? God has been faithful to his promise. We've seen, haven't we, how this family's faith has failed again and again over those 25 years. We've seen how every single time God has come patiently and faithfully to give them his word again. Now see why he's done that. Why has he come to them? Why has he held their faith up in his hands?

Because he is as good as his word. Because he is true to his promises. Friends, God comes to find our hope when it has fallen to the ground to pick it up and hang it back on the hook of his good word that never falls to the ground. This is the start of God's fulfilling his promises to Abraham in Genesis.

[5 : 22] We've been waiting a long time for this in this series. And so this morning we're just going to lean into this one wonderful and simple truth that God is faithful. His promises are trustworthy.

Let's see then what he's doing. Let's celebrate the birth of this promised child. Now it needs to be said, doesn't it, that every child is a gift from God. God alone creates life. It's not in our power or control to bring life into being. But Isaac is special for another reason. We've seen in verses one and two that word promised, repeated. He is a promised child. But what is also repeated in those two verses is the name of the one who has promised him. See that God's name. See in verse one it says Lord in capitals. Whenever our Bible does that it's standing in for the name Yahweh. God would later tell Moses that is the name his people were to call him. Now we use first names all of the time. I imagine when you came in today or when we meet together. We just use our first names. That is normal. But think of this.

You go to Buckingham Palace and you go for an audience with the king and you go into the room and you bow and you say your majesty and the king comes over to you and he says call me Charles.

Imagine that. That is what God is doing here. He does not want to be known by his titles and he does not want formalities. He wants his people to know him by name. What does it mean to be on first name terms with somebody? It speaks of a closeness, a familiarity, doesn't it? We are at home with this person. It's a place of intimacy, a relationship. This is what God wants for his people.

Know me personally, he says. God is a personal God. He is not a doctrine. He's not an idea. He's not a thing. And that's what his name is doing repeated here in verse 1. Yahweh was gracious to Sarah as he had said. And Yahweh did for Sarah what he had promised. See how personal this is. God personally creates all life, but there is something still more personal about the conception of this child because he is conceived in fulfillment of God's personal promise to this family, his personal covenant relationship with them. And see this, I love this. It's not just to the family in general, but to its members individually. Just look how personal the promise is to Sarah in verse 1 and then to Abraham. And then to Abraham, verse 2. The Lord did for Sarah what he had promised, verse 1. And she bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the very time God had promised him.

[8 : 36] God promised Sarah a son, chapter 18. And God promised Abraham a son, chapter 17. And chapter 21 highlights for us that he did for each of them, for Sarah and for Abraham, what he had promised each of them personally that he would do. See, our God, he is not content to make generic commitments or impersonal and businesslike contracts. He is a God who makes personal promises. He is a relational God. We talk vaguely, don't we, about the promises of God as a kind of catch-all phrase. But if you are a Christian today, you can say, God promised me eternal life in Christ. God has promised me that when Jesus died on the cross, he took my sins there. God has promised me that even when I die, yet I will live, because Christ died and was raised for me. God has promised me those things. But you say, well, that's true, isn't it? For everyone who's trusted in Christ, it's not just, it's not all about me. That is true. But as I thought about this, I thought about a dad going out, maybe it's coming up for Christmas, and the dad goes out to buy one amazing gift for his children. Okay, one gift between them. But it is incredible, unaffordable. And before he goes out, he takes his children aside one by one and says, listen, I want to give you this gift.

And I'm promising that I'll go and get it for you. It's coming for you. I'm going to give it to you. And so on the day he gives it, the children together, they receive it, they unwrap it together.

It is their gift. But each of them knows in their hearts that dad has bought it for them. It was promised, it was purchased for them personally. And they receive it together, this gift. That is God's promise, his gift of eternal life, yes to his people, but to each of us personally who has trusted in Christ. You people are drawn to Christ in all kinds of different ways, but it was this that actually brought me to him. Maybe like some of you, there was a moment in time where for me, it hit home that Christ had not simply come for the world in general to die for the world's sins out there, but he had come to die for me. And that it was my sins that he bore on the cross.

It was that dawning realization that drew me to him. I wonder, friends, can you say with Paul this morning, the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. You need to know that if you are a Christian today, if your trust is in Jesus, you can say those words with Paul, with all God's people, that as Christ hung on the cross, your name was graven in his hands. Even now as he sits in heaven, that your name is written on his heart. It is as personal as that, your salvation. God has promised, covenanted.

And you say, well, what has that got to do with Isaac? Well, Paul brings this birth scene up to date for us today in Galatians. That's why we read it. In Galatians 4, he says, now you, brothers and sisters, you, you, Christian brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise.

[12 : 34] Like you, he says, he was a son born by the power of the Spirit. He's saying like Isaac was born through God's covenant promise, so we have been born again through God's covenant promise kept in Jesus Christ. Normally, God works, of course, in ordinary, through ordinary biological processes, doesn't he, to create life. Isaac was born totally out with any natural process.

Whatever new techniques exist to help with reproduction, I still don't know a trial that has successfully enabled a 90-year-old woman and her 100-year-old husband to conceive a baby.

But what did God say to Sarah? Is anything too hard? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord to do? Brothers and sisters, if your faith is in Jesus Christ today, then understand this, that you are as miraculous as Isaac was. However it was that you came to Christ, it was not by natural processes.

You have been born again outside of natural processes. You are God's personal work and new creation in Christ.

He has promised and delivered for you by uniting you with his one long-promised son, Jesus Christ, through faith.

[14 : 09] So, brothers and sisters, if your trust is in Christ today, then you are a child of God's promise. That is how faithful God is to his covenant, okay, that he is still keeping it today as he draws people to Christ to trust in him. That is who we are, children of his promise. But what about the other child in the story?

Well, let us look next at the outcast child. Okay, a promised child and an outcast child. Back in the story, the family is in full celebration mode, aren't they? They laugh together, they have a great feast, they worship God as they circumcise Isaac, as God commanded them to do.

But the party is spoiled, isn't it, by an old rivalry. Ishmael, remember the son that Abraham had with Hagar the servant, was mocking, or more simply in Hebrew, laughing. And so, Sarah demands in the middle of this great feast and party that he and his mother be thrown out of the family.

And now, despite the translation, it says mocking, it's not actually that clear why Ishmael was laughing. It could be, couldn't it? It's feasible. He could be mocking the whole spectacle, sort of figuratively sitting outside of the party and throwing stones over the wall. That is a credible explanation, isn't it? But if you just glance up to verse 6, look at this. Sarah knew that people would laugh.

God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Her sinful laughter has turned to joyful laughter, hasn't it, as God gave her the son. And she predicts that others will join in her laughter. So then, why is she offended, verse 9, when she saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had born to Abraham was laughing? It could be that he was mocking them. But could it not be that Sarah herself had something against this boy, that she could not see his laughter as anything apart from mockery? And so, Sarah demands, get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.

[16 : 39] Remember, it's not the first time that she has demanded that they be cast out of the family. I think we see throughout this book, there is a cruel streak in Sarah that wants this boy out of her life, despite the fact that he was her idea. Abraham clearly feels differently. He doesn't want to send his son to send his son away, does he? But unlike last time, God tells him to let it happen. God said, don't be so distressed. Do it, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

In other words, though Sarah's heart is twisted and Abraham is worried, God says it is the right time for the family to go their separate ways. God does promise, doesn't he, to make Ishmael into this great nation. So, Abraham knows he will survive, but Abraham now has to trust God with that, because Ishmael doesn't have a part in the rest of the story. And so, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert with some food and some water, not knowing how they would survive. And it is what happens then in that wilderness that helps us understand the point of this for us today, because as he did before, so now the angel of the Lord comes to the outcasts and to the outsiders, to care for them in the wilderness. It's a tragic scene, isn't it? As we read it, the water runs out, and what are they to do? Sarah puts her son, Hagar rather, puts her son under a bush. She goes away.

She cannot just sit there and hear him cry. She cannot sit and watch him dying. And we are to wonder, is this how it ends for the outsiders in this story? You totally deserted, without food, without water, through no real fault of their own. Ishmael brought into the world through a desperate act of sin? Hagar married to her master through a twisted scheme. Now they are both stranded in the desert with no food and no water. Both are crying. Is this how it ends for the outsiders and the outcasts in God's story? Well, if we know the book of Genesis up to now, we know that it cannot possibly be. Just read with me from verse 17. Have a look. 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. But God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift him up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation. And 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. This is how the story goes on, isn't it? God hears. God draws near. God promises. God saves.

[19 : 47] Notice God's name isn't used here. They have a different relationship to him, don't they? There's not that closeness. They are on the outside. But that does not stop God, does it? Coming near to this family in love. He provides water in the wilderness where there was no water. Have we heard something like that before? Where has God given water where there was no water? Remember the original readers of this book, where are they? They are the family of Abraham. They are in the wilderness, in the desert.

Had God done something like that for them? Water where there was no water? He has, hasn't he? Water out of the rock. He provided water miraculously for them. Now God here, so many years before, gave water where there was no water water. He was water. He was water. He was water. He was water. He was water. He was water.

Why is that significant for them, for us? Well, it tells us again, doesn't it? It impresses upon us that just as God has saved those inside his family, so God saves those who are outside his family. God is not a small and tribal deity. He is the God of heaven and earth who has a purpose and a plan to bless every family of the earth, to spread his redeeming love to all creation. And here he shows that again, his grace, even to those whom he has not covenanted with. I think this foreshadows what the other thing that Paul is doing in that bit of Galatians, he's writing Paul to outsiders, people who were not Jews, not from Abraham's family tree, yet they have become Christians. They've also become outcasts, as the children of Abraham are saying, unless you are circumcised, you cannot be a Christian. But Paul says in that bit of Galatians that it is they, they, the outsider and the outcast, you people who are not in Abraham's family tree, you are counted as God's real children because you are the ones who have put faith in his covenant promise. He says, you outsiders, you are the Isaac in the story. You outcasts, you are the children of promise. And strangely, he says, it's those who are in Abraham's family tree who turn out to be the

Ishmael in the story, cast out of the family because they did not trust in God's covenant promise, in God's promised son, Jesus Christ. And so in Jesus, says Paul, it is the outsiders and the outcasts that God goes after to bring them into his family. It is not those descended from the flesh, from Isaac and Jacob and Abraham, who are God's family. It is those who have faith in his promised son, Jesus.

Back in Genesis, these families had to separate for God's purposes to be fulfilled in the long run. But it is pointing, isn't it, to an even greater fulfillment of God's plan in Jesus and in the church. This loving care that God shows to Hagar and Ishmael, it signals to us not only that he cares, but ultimately how he cares. It tells us, does it not, that his door is open, that there is a seat at the table for those on the outside. It tells us that God loves to seek and to save the lost, those who have strayed. It tells us that he loves to give living water to those who are in a dry place and far from him. That is God's purpose. Won't we see his heart? Will we not pray for this to happen? Church of Christ, bon accord, Christians, do not fall into thinking that it is all about us here. That it is about us children of promise only, the family of God. God loves to look outside these four walls, doesn't he? He loves to go after the lost. Perhaps you are here this morning and you don't know if you're welcome. Can I come to God? Well, here is a God who not only welcomes you, but who goes out to find you and bring you in. A God who meets us in the wilderness to give living water. Friends, there is a place for you in God's family. If you would put your trust in his promised son, Jesus Christ, and all that he has done to secure God's promises for you. That is how we become children of promise. That is how we come into his family. Finally, then, this morning, Genesis shows us in brief the promise in progress. Verses 22 to 34 give us a taste of what's to come. God is fulfilling his promise to his family, and God is doing that to bless the whole world. I'll just show us that second thing first in a very, very obvious way. The Lord blesses Abimelech through this family in verses 22 to 24, the foreign king. Okay, remember that we met last time? Well, he recognizes, verse 22, that God is with Abraham in everything that he does. So, now, swear to me, he says, that you will show me and this land the same kindness that I have shown to you. And that word kindness is the word *chesed*, which more often is used of God's love, God's faithful and covenant and steadfast love. And so, Abimelech asks God's family to show him God's love, and Abraham promises that he will. It's a long way, isn't it, from where these guys started off back in chapter 20. But now, God is bringing his blessing through his mediator to the nations. Also, a slightly harder one to spot, but once you see it, you can't unsee it. Did you notice, I wonder, Hagar and Ishmael are wandering in the desert of Beersheba. Hagar puts Ishmael under a bush, and God shows her a well. Well, in verse 30, look, Abraham claims a well of his own. And what is the well called in verse 31? It's called Beersheba.

[26 : 44] Abraham goes on to kind of plant a kind of tree there, a tamarisk tree. Now, the similarities are too close to be coincidence, but I'm still not sure quite what it is here to tell us.

Something maybe to talk about over coffee. I'd love to hear what you think. But my hunch is that that parallel is here to reinforce point two. It shows God dealing in a similar way with both his own family and the outcasts of his family. Both find water in the wilderness, in two different places, in two different ways, but both provided by God to care for their needs and to point towards his even greater purpose to bless every family of the earth with living water that satisfies. Now, the well is also a kind of first foothold in the land that God has promised his family. Having a well in a dry place like Canaan, it was a kind of de facto claim to the area because without a well, well, you can't water your animals, you can't drink, you can't cook, you can't clean. Without a well, you can't survive long. So now a well in the land is a foothold in God's place. And so remember the three M's. I wonder if you've written this down, the three M's of God's covenant. Remember what they are? To multiply Abraham, God has given him a son.

To magnify Abraham, he has planted him in his land. And to make Abraham a mediator of his blessing to the world. And God is showing faithful love to the nations through him. Now, okay, these are only three very small ticks so far. They are going to grow throughout the rest of Genesis, throughout the rest of the Bible. But no tick is insignificant next to God's promises. This is only the beginning of God fulfilling his word, but fulfilling it he is. And we today can stand so much long later, can't we, in God's promise plan. We today stand and look back on God's fulfilling his promises down through the generations to us today. And we can rejoice with this family. We have God's promise more fully realized. God's plan more fully revealed in this one chosen son of Abraham, this one promised Christ.

And today, brothers and sisters, then we can celebrate his faithful love, his fulfilled promise to us in Jesus. God has multiplied him so that his family numbers more than the stars in the sky.

God has magnified him, given him a name above every name and a kingdom that will never end. God has made him our mediator, a righteous mediator to stand between himself and us, to present us today blameless, spotless, righteous before our gods. God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And know this, he is still keeping his promise today as he draws people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to Christ to put their trust in him and enter his eternal blessing. So let's praise him for that now as we pray. Let's thank God together. Faithful God, we praise you. We thank you, our Father, that none of your good promises has ever once fallen to the ground. Our Father, we thank you that you are faithful to your every word. We thank you for Jesus, who is the yes and amen to all of your promises. And we thank you that in your love, you have drawn us to him, that you have given us a heart to trust in him. Lord, apart from him, we are indeed in a wilderness of sin. But Father, we thank you for Christ. And we pray then, Lord, that you would help us to live by every word that comes from your mouth. Father, we pray for we know our weakness. We pray that this week you would help us,

[31 : 25] Lord, that you would give us faith in your promises. Lord, we wait for the fulfillment of your word. Lord, we watch, we long, Lord, more than watchmen for the morning. So, Lord, give us hope, give us faith, we pray. And Lord, for those who are yet to trust in your promises, for those, Lord, who are yet to come to Christ in faith, Lord, we pray that they would know your steadfast love, that like Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, you would draw near to them and give them living water that wells up within them to eternal life. This is our prayer. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.