

As we return to our journey through Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are expecting a child. This morning we will read of the birth of Isaac; an event which brings great joy and laughter...and some significant tears as well. Please stand and let us read together Genesis 21:1-21:

The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. ² And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." ⁷ 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."

⁸ And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." ¹¹ And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. ¹³ And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Let me not look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) God's Perfect Faithfulness; 2) God's Perfect Pruning; and 3) God's Perfect Grace.

I. God's Perfect Faithfulness

Nine chapters ago, in Genesis 12, God called upon a 75-year-old man named Abram. God said to Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

The irony of God's promise to make Abram a great nation was that Abram and his wife, Sarai, had no children. Sarai (or Sarah as she is now called in Gen. 21), as we have since learned, was barren and incapable of bearing children. So, since Genesis 12, we have been wondering how God would make a great nation of a man who had no children.

Skip ahead 10 years, and we find Abram and Sarai growing impatient with God. Thinking that God might need a little help in fulfilling His promise of an heir, Sarah encourages Abraham to take their Egyptian slave woman as a wife so that Abraham might have a son that they could raise as their own. Thus, at the age of 86, Abraham becomes a father to Ishmael, but we soon learn that Ishmael was not at all God's plan, though God promises to bless Ishmael on account of Abraham.

Skip ahead another 13 years. Abraham is now 99-years-old, and God appears to Abraham in Genesis 17 and announces that he and Sarah will have a son in a year's time. Both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the promise of God given their age, but God does not waver in His commitment to bless them with a son who is to be named Isaac. However, after that glorious promise, Sodom is destroyed, Lot impregnates his two adult daughters, and Abraham tells the king of the Philistines that Sarah is his sister! For the last several chapters, it's been one sad and disappointing story after another, demonstrating the total depravity of those who have been called by God to be faithful.

Yet now, as we begin the 21st chapter of Genesis, when Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90, the couple is blessed with a baby boy, just as God promised. We read in vss. 1-2: The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

Church, God is faithful to keep His promises, amen? The image bearers of God are notoriously unfaithful and sinful, but God is always faithful. Notice the redundancy of this point in the first two verses here in Genesis 21. God did "as He had said," "as He had promised," and "at the time of which God had spoken." The entire focus is on God and His perfect faithfulness. We would do well to remember that God is never confused, uncertain, or incapable of delivering on His promises! God's faithfulness is perfect, always.

We should also note that God's timing is always perfect. Now, one could argue that God waited a long time to fulfill His promise to Abraham and Sarah, but by what standard should we measure God's timing? If God's timing were to be measured by my standard, my wait should not exceed that of a red light at the intersection! How arrogant we are to think that God's timing should somehow accommodate our expectations. Instead, we would do well to consider the brilliance of God's timing--even in this story of Isaac's birth.

God waited until Abraham and Sarah were well beyond the age of bearing children to demonstrate the sovereignty of His power and providence. Isaac is God's gift--God's doing. Abraham and Sarah are recipients and now stewards of God's gift of "Laughter" which is what the name Isaac means! Isaac is literally a gift of God's unmerited grace who has been entrusted to his parents that were as good as dead! There is a lot for us to think about here that we will return to at the end of the message.

Note also how we have seen Abraham's faith grow and mature in the season of waiting, as is often the case when we are forced to wait upon God, amen? Abraham was not ready a day sooner to father this son of the promise, and we've seen that truth played out in several difficult stories leading up to Genesis 21. Note also that in response to God's perfect faithfulness after a

long season of waiting, Father Abraham is now obedient to God's command. We read in vss. 3-5: Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Church, God is never early or late in keeping His promises—God's timing is God's timing, and there is always purpose in God's timing. This is a hard lesson for the young, but it is the consistent testimony of seasoned believers. God is never arbitrary about timing, and there is value in the waiting.

Sadly, however, what we have seen in Abraham and Sarah's story rings true with our own. Although we want to believe God and we want to wait on Him patiently, we often forge on ahead with our own plans and make a mess out of things due to our unfaithful and impertinent impatience. I cannot begin to recount all the times this has been true in my life, and I often wonder how different my life would be today had I simply waited on the Lord and trusted Him instead of impatiently pressing on with my best thinking and unfaithful behaviors. Our impatience always leads to messy consequences, and although our impatience will not deter God's perfect faithfulness, those consequences will require God's perfect pruning. And that leads us to our second subheading...

II. God's Perfect Pruning

As fallible human beings, we are all inclined to believe the lies of the Enemy, and they are the same lies whispered by the Serpent to young Adam and Eve at the beginning of human history. The Enemy's lie usually sounds something like this: "God cannot be trusted to have your best interests in mind. God is holding out on you because God doesn't want you to have fun and all the best things of life. Therefore, you should take what you want because you deserve to be happy on your own terms."

Abraham and Sarah, in a moment of weakness and faithlessness, believed the same Liar who tempted our First Parents. Even though God had made a promise to provide them with an heir, Abraham and Sarah heard the Liar whisper that God had forgotten them and underestimated the frailty of their years. They believed the lie that God could not be trusted to provide what they needed, so they took of the "forbidden fruit" when Sarah orchestrated the union between Abraham and her handmaiden, Hagar. The result of their unfaithfulness, the consequence of their Plan B, was a boy named Ishmael.

Now, many children have come into the world through acts of unfaithfulness. In fact, I suspect many seated here today were "accidents" of indiscretion by well-intended young parents, so this story creates a tension that we must address. At no point should we think that Ishmael is to be blamed for the unfaithfulness of Abraham and Sarah. And at no point should we blame the slave girl named Hagar for the unfaithfulness of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah must bear the consequence for their unfaithfulness to God; and, for 13 years, that consequence has been mostly felt by Ms. Sarah. For the past 13 years, Abraham has had a son, but Sarah did not acknowledge the boy as "their son," and she wanted nothing to do with the boy or his Egyptian mother. Even though "Plan B" was originally her idea, it didn't take long for Sarah to realize she had made a mistake, and she has lived with that mistake every day for 13 years. We can imagine

Sarah's torture of seeing Abraham so happily engaged with his Egyptian son and sharing the joy of parenting that son with Abraham's younger and prettier wife, Hagar. Every day for 13 years, Sarah has been reminded of her barren womb and her aging face. Even when God Himself came to personally assure Sarah that she would be granted a son, she laughed at God! She had become so embittered and so skeptical that she literally laughed at the promises of God.

Yet now, one year after the LORD's visit, Sarah has a son of her own! And, for a time, Sarah's heart feels only joy and laughter of the best kind! We read in vss. 6-7: And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over 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."

Sarah is full of joy, and we get the sense that her joy and laughter was consistent and satisfying for the first three years of Isaac's young life. However, at the end of Isaac's third year, when the time came to throw the traditional party celebrating the weaning of her firstborn son, the dark cloud in Sarah's jealous heart returned. We read in vss. 8-11: 8 And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. 10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." 11 And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.

We can almost cut the tension here with a knife. We already know from Abraham's conversation with God in Genesis 17 that Abraham loves his son, Ishmael. Until Isaac was born, Ishmael was his only son. Though the tension between Sarah and Hagar has been insufferable for many years, Abraham has enjoyed having a son, even if Ishmael was not God's intention for their lives. As far as Abraham is concerned, Plan B has worked out OK. No doubt the patriarch has been hoping that the painful consequence of their unfaithful decision was now behind them. Surely now that Sarah had a son of her own, perhaps she would come to embrace Ishmael and her servant, Hagar.

However, on the day of Isaac's weaning, Sarah's ever watchful eye spies Ishmael laughing, though we sense that his laughing is of a different ilk. The context here suggests that Ishmael was mocking his little brother, or Ms. Sarah... we don't know for sure. What we do know is that seeing Ishmael laughing triggers the painful memories of those 13 years, and Sarah snaps. She immediately goes to Abraham and demands that the patriarch cast out the slave woman and "her son." Sarah does not even acknowledge that Ishmael is also Abraham's son. She cruelly demands that Abraham cast out his firstborn son and his second wife—a request that feels almost impossible to Abraham.

Now, we should not think that Sarah is somehow acting out of virtue or noble purpose. Sarah's behavior here is nothing short of cruel, though predictable. Tradition would require that Abraham's estate and legacy be passed down to the firstborn son, and that would be Ishmael. The mere thought is unbearable for Sarah: Isaac will be the heir, and Ishmael has to go. Abraham is literally between a rock and a hard place. Thankfully, God has not left Abraham to figure this situation out on his own. Instead, God comes to Abraham in vss. 12-13 and states: "Be

not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. 13 And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.”

Had Abraham and Sarah waited patiently on the Lord and trusted Him to fulfill His promises, this situation would have never come about. Abraham would have never been faced with this horrible dilemma—to choose between two sons: the son of the promise, and the son born of impatience. As is always the case, the unfaithfulness of Abraham and Sarah has consequences that spill over onto other people, just like our unfaithful choices affect countless others as well. Even so, God promises Abraham that it’s going to be alright. Isaac is to be the heir, so the son born of their Plan B must go. Even so, God will be with Ishmael and Hagar, and God will bless them. Abraham will once again be called upon to trust God, even in this difficult season of pruning; but little does he know that this painful test will pale in comparison to the test that is coming.

Note that, once again, we find Abraham to be obedient, even under impossible circumstances. In vs. 14 we read: So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

This scene is one of tears and tremendous sadness. Abraham is forced to trust God and release those he loves. God has promised to take care of Hagar and Ishmael, and Abraham has learned to trust God’s promises. There is nothing about this moment that feels right to us as the readers, but we must remember that Hagar and Ishmael were never part of God’s providential plan for Abraham and Sarah. This painful situation came about due to their sinful impatience and unwillingness to trust God.

Church, how often do we resent God for the painful pruning in our lives, even when the necessary pruning was required due to our own sin? Think about it. Whenever we allow a good thing to become an ultimate thing in our lives... whenever we allow something to usurp God’s rightful place as God in our hearts... we can anticipate the Pruner’s Knife. Have you made an idol out of your job or your leadership position? How painful it will be when God prunes that idol out of your heart, and yet His pruning is perfect for the sake of your salvation and your return to Him. Have you made an idol out of that man or that woman that you are so desperate to impress? How painful it will be when that relationship ends, and yet God will not have you give your soul to another for your own sake, and even for the sake of that person you are dating. Have you set your heart on that new car, on building your dream house, on making a name for yourself? How painful it will be when the Pruner’s Knife cuts away the rot of your idolatry, and yet His knife is an expression of His deep love for you... a love that risks offense for the sake of bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God.

The pruning away of Hagar and Ishmael feels harsh and even unloving to us as the readers of Genesis 21, even as the pruning away of our own idolatrous relationships feels harsh and unloving when it is required of God’s people.

Church, God is NEVER unloving...ever. God has a unique, loving relationship with Hagar and Ishmael, and He will not turn His face away from them.

We read in vss. 15-21: When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, "Let me not look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation." 19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. 20 And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Listen: God's grace is sufficient not only for those who make mistakes, but also for those who have been affected by our mistakes. Hagar and Ishmael find themselves out in the wilderness, and one could easily argue that their plight was a consequence of Abraham and Sarah's unfaithfulness to God. Hagar and Ishmael certainly had their own issues, but this mother and son would certainly have a reasonable argument against God's chosen servants. Yet note how God extends care to those who have been hurt by His people. Though pruned away from the family of promise that will lead to the birth of Jesus many generations later, God still has important plans for Hagar and Ishmael. God opens Hagar's eyes to see His provision, and God gives Hagar a vision of who her son will become: God will make Ishmael into a great nation.

So, did God make Ishmael into a great nation? Yes, most historians would agree that the Arab people trace their heritage to Ishmael, and the Arab's have been a dominant force in world history for many centuries. God was faithful to Ishmael, even if Ishmael was not all that faithful to God. Such is the relationship we have with God as those who bear His image and yet suffer the corruption of sin: God is faithful; we are not...and that is largely the whole story of Genesis.

That leads to our third and final subheading...

III. God's Perfect Grace

I hope you can see that the story of Isaac being born to Abraham and Sarah points forward to Jesus and the Gospel. James Boice identifies seven parallels in the birth narratives between Isaac and Jesus:

- 1) Both Isaac and Jesus are promised by God in advance.
- 2) Both birth narratives feature a season of waiting.
- 3) Both mothers question "How can this be?"
- 4) Both names are given to the parents in advance, and both are significant in meaning.
- 5) Both births are said to have taken place at their "appointed times."
- 6) Both births required a miracle.
- 7) Both births were an occasion of exceptional joy.¹

¹ James Boice, *Genesis Vol. 2*, 659-660.

It goes without saying that Isaac's birth narrative only points to the superior arrival of Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. The narratives are not identical, but we cannot help but notice how God's gracious provision of a Savior is foreshadowed in God's gracious provision of a miraculous son who will birth a nation called Israel, and out of his line will come Judah, and out of the line of Judah will come Jesus!

This story also points directly to the Gospel. I hope you can see how the birth of Isaac represents God's unmerited grace. For example, when Paul references this story in Romans 4, he writes: ¹³For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." ²³But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Just as God gave the gift of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah when they were as good as dead in their bodies, God made us alive in Christ when we were "dead in our trespasses" according to Ephesians 2.

Paul also associates the pruning of Hagar and Ishmael from the family of promise as an allegory of the Gospel grace as compared to salvation through works of the law. In Galatians 4 Paul writes:

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written,

"Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband."

²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." ³¹So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Church, God's grace is not grace if any part of it is attached to our performance or our merit. The entire story of Abraham is a story of God's unmerited grace and election, and the only righteousness ever associated with Abraham is that Abraham believed God. So it is with us to this day.

We are all those who have a story of unfaithful impatience and sinful indulgence. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are people with Plan B narratives that have led to painful consequences in our lives and the lives of others. Were all of our stories to be read three thousand years from now, they would all read similar to the stories we are reading here this morning: they would be stories of God's perfect faithfulness; God's perfect pruning; and God's perfect grace for a people created in His image who chronically messed things up!

In some sense, we are all Abrahams and Sarahs—we are those who have been chosen by God simply because He loves us, not because we deserve to be chosen. We are those whose sin has made us spiritually dead, and yet God blesses us with a miraculous birth—the birth of a Son, God's only Son. And because of that Son, because of what Jesus accomplishes on our behalf by dying on the cross we deserve and conquering the power of sin and death in His resurrection, we are forgiven and redeemed! Even our mistakes and our worst decisions are redemptively woven into the tapestry of God's providence, and God receives all the glory He is due through the life and testimony of His redeemed people—the Church—those sinners who have been saved (and pruned!) by God's unmerited, perfect grace!

Church, be grateful and turn back to the LORD. God is faithful, but we must embrace the Pruner's Knife as necessary so that we might be restored, matured in our faith, and set back upon the path of God's plans for our lives. Even when we have been unfaithful, always remember God's perfect faithfulness, God's perfect pruning, and God's perfect grace. Amen? Will you pray with me?