

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISE

Genesis 20:1-21:34

Lesson 10a

Key Verse: 21:1

"Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said,
and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised."

Abraham's relations with the unbelieving world change very subtly in this passage. When Abraham moved to Gerar, the old fear of powerful worldly rulers arose again in his heart. He did not think of himself as God's servant, nor did he think of Abimelech as a man like himself. He regarded Abimelech as a king with the power of life and death over small people like himself; he assumed that Abimelech was a godless man with no conscience. So he lied and got into trouble. Abraham had made a commitment of his whole heart and life to God. He had repented of his family-centered life and accepted God's covenant and a new name--"Father of many nations." He had sealed that covenant with circumcision. But there were some things in his past life that still remained to be solved. His unclear attitude was exposed when he came in contact with the unbelieving world. God trained him and blessed him, and when he met Abimelech again at the end of chapter 21, he was a different man.

1. Abraham's bad habit and God's faithfulness (20:1-18)

Abraham had been living near the trees of Mamre at Hebron. After he witnessed the destruction of Sodom, he moved south into the Negev, then to the west into Philistine territory. The Philistines had a reputation for being fierce and godless, so fear came into Abraham's heart. He reverted to his old habit, and told Abimelech, king of Gerar, that Sarah his wife was his sister--so, Abimelech took her. In the past, he had asked Sarah to show her love for him by saying that she was his sister. (She was, indeed, his half-sister--but a half truth is a whole lie.) He had done this in Egypt (12), and had almost lost his wife. Fear brought this old habit to the surface. Fear makes men do strange things.

It turned out that Abimelech was not a godless man. He and his officials feared God (3,4,6). When God warned Abimelech that he was as good as dead because he had taken a married woman, Abimelech humbly asked God's mercy. He apologized to Abraham and Sarah and made restitution. And he asked Abraham to pray for him. Even though Abraham was wrong and Abimelech seems to be much better, God stood on Abraham's side and he honored Abraham as his servant.

2. Isaac and Ishmael (21:1-21)

"God was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised." God's right time came; he gave Sarah a

son, Isaac. God's timing is important and we must learn to wait on him. Impatience is one kind of unbelief. Isaac was God's gift. He brought joy and happiness. He was God's blessing. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." (6) The laughter of unbelief became the laughter of joy and gratitude.

Abraham had thought that he was happy with Ishmael--and indeed, he had enjoyed some human happiness. But Isaac, whose name means "laughter", was more than just a happy little boy who brought human happiness to Abraham and Sarah. He represented God's love and faithfulness. He was God's gift of love. He brought spiritual joy in God to Abraham--joy that only comes when we have peace with God and when we realize that God really loves us personally and deeply. God is a God of promise, and he keeps his promises. God's time schedule is different from our ideas and calculations. We must learn to pray and wait on God, trusting in his faithfulness to keep his promises.

Isaac grew and was weaned. On the day Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a great feast. This happy day was marred by a small incident which became very big. Ishmael, a strong teenager, almost a man, was obviously jealous of little Isaac. Sarah realized that Ishmael was too strong for Isaac and she asked Abraham to get rid of the slave woman and her son.

Abraham was distressed, because it concerned his son whom he loved. He didn't like a suggestion that seemed to come from Sarah's jealousy.

But God told him not to be distressed, but to listen to Sarah in this matter. God promised him, "it is through Isaac that your descendants will be reckoned." God also promised to take care of Hagar and Ishmael and bless them.

So Abraham overcame his strong sense of human obligation and his human feelings; he trusted and obeyed God. He got up early in the morning, gave Hagar and Ishmael a skin of water and some food and sent them away. This seems to be a cruel thing to do. But it was actually the way of blessing for Hagar. Ishmael was old enough to take care of himself and his mother. If Abraham had insisted on taking care of them to the end, then God could not have cared for them or blessed them. God's care and blessing were much better than anything Abraham could do for them.

Abraham knew that he must protect and care for the covenant son by any means, for he was not only a blessing to Abraham's household--he carried with him God's promise to bless the whole world through him. God was clear. Abraham's real descendants must be children of promise (Gal 3:29; Ro 4:18-24) not children of the flesh.

To cast out Ishmael was to cut away the last bit of human and worldly compromise from his life and heart. This was the fruit of real repentance and an affirmation of Abraham's acceptance of God's ways and God's work. He had to deny himself. Something in him died.

In the desert, Hagar again met the God who sees and hears. She depended on God, and God was faithful to her, for Abraham's sake. God enabled her to raise her son and he blessed their family.

3. The treaty at Beersheba (22-34)

When Abraham cast out Ishmael, he was ending his life of compromise. Fear went out of his heart. His relationships with those in his own family changed and his relationship with the unbelieving world also changed. Abimelech and his commander, Phicol, came to visit Abraham again. They greeted him, "God is with you in everything you do. Now swear to me here before God that you will ..show me kindness..." Abimelech recognized Abraham as God's servant. And Abraham recognized himself as God's servant. With his fear gone, he could confront Abimelech with the problem of a well which Abraham's servants dug, but which the Philistines had taken over. Abimelech apologized. Then, Abraham gave a gift to Abimelech as a sign that the well belonged to him. Abraham took the lead in their relationship. He met Abimelech as an equal.

After this, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called on the name of the Lord. His spiritual victory over Abimelech did not make him proud; it made him more humbly dependant on God. His real

victory was victory over himself through absolute obedience to God.