

“Waiting for God”

Genesis 21: 1-7

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Text Comment

- v.1 To say that the Lord *visited Sarah* is to emphasize that it was the Lord’s direct intervention that caused her, an old woman herself, to conceive a child with Abraham, her elderly husband. [Sarna, 145] The same phrase is found in 1 Sam. 2:21 explaining how Hannah conceived Samuel.
- v.2 So, finally, the problem is resolved that was first broached as far back as 11:30: Sarah was barren and had no children. So much of the Abraham narrative to this point has been driven by Abraham’s lack of a child and an heir.
- v.3 Isaac is the only one of the patriarchs whose name was given by God before his birth. For that reason he is the only one of them who was not given a new name by the Lord.
- v.4 The fulfillment of God’s promise is matched by Abraham’s keeping of God’s covenant. He promptly obeyed the Lord’s commands: naming his son Isaac (17:19) and circumcising him (17:12). Isaac is the first one we know to have been circumcised on the eighth day. Ishmael, remember, was circumcised when he was thirteen years of age.
- v.6 Sarah’s cynical and sarcastic laughter (18:12) had turned into the laughter of pure joy. What is more, we see her presented here clearly as a woman of faith. She knew from whom her blessings had come! Sarah’s words have a poetic quality to them and are sometimes set in poetic form in some English translations. [Wenham, Sarna; Speiser] Twice she used the word “laugh” which was the root of Isaac’s name as well.
- v.7 Sarah’s use of the plural “children” may be a further demonstration of her faith. It may indicate that she saw “beyond Isaac to his offspring who are destined to bless the earth.” [Waltke, 293] In any case, the narrator concentrates on Sarah not Abraham and draws our attention to what she said.

The cleverest graffito I ever came across was on the wall of the men’s room at the University Library in Aberdeen, Scotland. It read ““Back in Ten Minutes” and it was signed “Godot.” For those who don’t recognize the joke, the reference is to Samuel Beckett’s absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*, or GOD-oh as Beckett himself said the name should be pronounced. Godot, whomever he was, never shows up, so the two acts of the play are filled with conversation about all manner of things between the several characters as they wait in vain for the person who never comes. A boy arrives to tell them that Godot is definitely coming, but he’s still a no show at the end of the play. *Waiting for Godot*, written originally in French, was first performed in 1953 and its English language version has been judged by some, for reasons that completely escape me, the greatest play of the 20th century.

Though Beckett himself refused to confirm this – he was apparently delighted by the fact that his play was interpreted in a great many different ways – many have thought that Godot is a God-figure and that his never showing up is what leaves the characters stranded in their lives. One student of Beckett's plays wrote that the "God who emerges from Beckett's texts is one who is both cursed for his perverse absence and cursed for his surveillant presence." [M. Bryden, *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, introduction.] Which is to say that Samuel Beckett, who was no believer in God, nevertheless was preoccupied with God.

All of that to say that *waiting for God*, waiting for a long time, long enough that one begins to doubt God is coming at all, is also a theme in the Bible and perhaps *the* great challenge and hardship of the Christian life. God withholding himself and not coming quickly to the aid of his people in crisis is, as you well know, a common motif in the Psalms. The need to wait upon the Lord is a frequent lesson in the Bible. Apparently the immediate satisfaction of our desires does not accomplish God's purposes in the lives of his people. And the same lesson is taught in the New Testament. Not only does Paul tell us that the whole creation groans as it *waits* for the day of resurrection, but even the saints in heaven are waiting according to the book of Revelation:

"O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, *how long* before you will judge and avenge our blood..." [6:10]

So it is not a surprise, or should not be to an attentive reader of the Bible, that Abraham – one of the principal exemplars of the Christian life in Holy Scripture, one of the characters in the history of redemption whose life is held up as an example for all believers in Jesus Christ – should be *a man who had to wait for God*. He had to wait, in fact, for a very long time.

Abraham entered the story when he was called by God and commanded to leave his homeland for Canaan. He was seventy-five years old, as we are told in Gen. 12:4. He was told at that time that he would be the father of a great nation. He was one-hundred years old when a son was born to him and Sarah as we read here in 21:5. Through that quarter of a century there had been repeated affirmations of the promise that God had made to him. God continued to remind Abraham that he had promised him a son. And when Abraham struggled to believe that such a thing could happen, the Lord had assured him that it would. There had also been several crises that had seemed to place God's promise to Abraham and Sarah in jeopardy. Twice Sarah had found herself temporarily the wife of another man. But those crises had been resolved by the intervention of God. The years passed, these two old people got older and older. Then, finally, after waiting so long, Sarah, now a very old woman herself, conceived a son and nine months later gave birth to Isaac.

It is obvious that the long wait served to demonstrate that the child was the gift of God and that only God could have given them their son. If they were too old to have children at 75 and 65 – Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham, as we read in 17:17 – how much more impossible was it for them to conceive a child twenty-five years later! But the fact is, for Abraham and Sarah, it was a long wait *after* a long life without children in world in which being childless was one of the greatest burdens anyone could bear.

But there is more to this than may immediately meet the eye. The birth of Isaac after a quarter century of waiting was the *only* truly visible fulfillment of *any of the promises* God had made to Abraham. He was living in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, but after many years there he didn't own even so much as one square foot of Canaan real estate. He was a sojourner, not even a landed immigrant. He had to be careful not to run afoul of his neighbors who actually did own their own property and so had many more rights than he had. He could be forced to leave at any time. Further, even now, with the birth of Isaac, he had but one child. He had been promised so great a multitude of descendants that no one would be able to number them. But Abraham could do the math. He wasn't going to be around to see that multitude. He had but one child, not a multitude of descendants. Even when he died, seventy-five years later, the family was still just getting started.

Through his descendants Abraham had been promised that the whole world would be blessed. But the blessing of the whole world lay far beyond the distant horizon in Abraham's day. So not only did they have to wait many years for the son that had been promised to them, the other promises that had been made were nowhere in sight when Isaac was born.

The great Puritan, Richard Sibbes, commenting on this phenomenon of believers having to *wait* for the promises of God to be fulfilled, wrote this:

“[In this waiting] we may discern a main difference betwixt a Christian and a carnal man, who is short-spirited, and all for the present. He will have his good here, whereas a saint of God continues still waiting, though all things seem contrary to what he expects.”
[Works, I, 251]

Think about this now. Put yourselves in Abraham's sandals if you can. He had received one promise after many years of waiting – waiting that we have read was difficult for Abraham and Sarah; it put them on their mettle to trust the Lord – but only that one promise. The other developments that God had promised him, he now knew, would not come to pass until long after he and his wife had died. His descendants would inherit the Promised Land, but the Lord had already told him in chapter 15 that it would be more than four centuries before they did. And when would the whole world be blessed through him? Abraham didn't know.

But what he did know was that the first promise, that he would have a son and an heir *had been fulfilled*, as it were against all conceivable odds. God had kept his word. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that without an heir, Abraham could not have become a great nation; he could not have inherited the Promised Land; and, certainly, all nations could not have been blessed through him. The one promise that the Lord *did* fulfill in Abraham's lifetime was the one that *had to be* if all the rest were to come to pass in due time.

So take note of the great stress that is laid on the fact that the promise was fulfilled. Its fulfillment may have been delayed, but God had kept his word.

"The Lord was gracious to Sarah, *as he had said...*"

"The Lord did for Sarah *what he had promised.*"

"Sarah conceived...and bore a son....*at the time of which God had spoken to him.*"

Sarah's own words further lay emphasis on the fulfillment of God's promise. They named their son Isaac because God had told them to, but that was because Sarah had laughed in disbelief, when a year before she had heard the Lord promise Abraham a son within the year. Here we read her acknowledgement that God had turned her cynical laughter into joyous laughter *just as he had said he would!* She herself reminds us in this way that she had doubted the promise of God but acknowledged that she had been wrong to mistrust him, no matter the apparent obstacles in the way of her having a son in her old age.

Remember, over and again in these chapters that relate the story of Abraham's life we have witnessed not only the unfolding of the covenant that God had made with Abraham and with his descendants – first his physical and then his spiritual descendants – but also the unfolding of the nature of the life of faith. Abraham, and Sarah to a lesser degree, are *every believer*. He is called "the father of the faithful," he is prominent among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, and his life and his faith are recollected as an example for us many times in the Bible. In other words, in Abraham's personal history we learn what it means to walk with God, not only from God's side but from man's side, our side.

And here certainly is one of the great lessons that Abraham's life is designed to teach every Christian man or woman. Not just *a* lesson, but one of the *most important* lessons. And that lesson is this: to live by faith in this world means that we must count on the truthfulness of God's Word, we must count on his keeping the promises he has made to us, *even when it can seem, when it often does seem, that God has forgotten all about us and all about the promises he made to us.* When our heavenly Father, and when our Lord and Savior makes a promise to us, we are to count on it as something absolutely sure and certain of fulfillment. God never breaks his word to his people, and they are to live in the active confidence of that fact.

That may seem to a brand new Christian a fact so obvious it hardly needs to be said. He or she who has first encountered the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, a person whose life has been turned upside down and transformed from the inside out, a person whose heart has been changed at the root, is scarcely likely to doubt that God will keep the promises he has made to his people. But as time passes he or she begins to learn that all is not as simple as at first it seemed to be.

In the battle with sin, despite many fervent prayers and tears, defeats sometimes outnumber victories though the Lord has promised those who have trusted in him have been freed from sin and that sin will have no dominion over them. And then there are a whole set of desires for others that Christians find they have: to see others saved, to see others freed from the burdens of their lives, and so on. And the Christian has a whole set of holy desires from himself or herself. *But time passes and nothing happens,* or sometimes matters get worse instead of better. The Lord promised his people that if they delight themselves in him he will give them the desires of their hearts. Well, let me tell you frankly, my friends, my brothers and sisters, there are a lot of things that I believe I ought to desire as a Christian, things I do desire as a Christian man, a father, a friend, and as the pastor of this church, that God has not seen fit to give me or to others I love. I'm *waiting for God*. I've been waiting a long time for some things, a shorter time for others, but

waiting has become a large part of my life. And, strangely, the older I get the more I seem to be waiting. And I know you are waiting too.

Let's be frank about this. It will help us all if we are bluntly honest. God has so ordered our lives in covenant with him that it can seem for a long time, for years on end, that God *has not been faithful* and *that he has not kept his word*. We wait for him to act and nothing happens. We wait for him to appear and he never shows; at least not in such a way as to prove his presence and to put our doubts to rest. Was this not exactly the test that even Abraham, the father of the faithful, struggled to pass?

It is one thing to be promised a son far later than is normal in life; after years of longing for a child and after finally accepting that you will die childless. But, it is an altogether more difficult thing to believe firmly and to act on that belief when the promise that God made to you was not fulfilled year after year, and that as disappointment mounts and the heavens remain silent, one continues to get older and older and the prospect of childbearing becomes, by any sensible reckoning, so impossible as to make the promise seem nothing but a mockery of one's hopes. But that is what God did. He promised Abraham and Sarah – already grieving over their long failure to conceive a child – a son of their own. Not an adopted son, but a son of their own bodies. He got their hopes up. But he didn't give them a son, not then, not in a year, not in ten, not in twenty. And, I can assure you, more than once poor Sarah lay at night in her tent wondering why God had raised her hopes only to dash them so repeatedly.

And sometimes you and I wonder the same thing. Why did God promise to fulfill the desires of our hearts if he wasn't going to give us what we desired and what, as his children, we have a right to desire? But it is exactly that question that a Christian must answer. It is exactly such doubts that a Christian must overcome. It is exactly that existential crisis that a Christian must fight through to the other side. And the way that is done, is the way that Abraham and Sarah teach us here. For while no doubt they struggled to believe the word God had spoken to them, they learned that God never fails to keep his word and that nothing was more certain, through those long, dark, and seemingly hopeless twenty-five years than that they were going to have a son. And the son wouldn't arrive on their deathbed either. Abraham was one-hundred when Isaac was born and Sarah was ninety. But Abraham would live *another seventy-five years*, and Sarah *another thirty seven years* after their son was born. They were given plenty of time to reflect on the doubts that had so beset them while they were waiting for the Lord. Plenty of time to counsel others not to make the same mistake they had made. How many times, do you suppose Abraham and Sarah said something like the opening verses of Psalm 40?

“I waited...for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.” Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.”

To come to this realization – that God will *always* prove true to his word and promise no matter how unlikely that can seem – is actually what it means to believe in God, day by day, in the in and out of your ordinary life; this is what it means to be a man or woman of faith. No wonder that the Bible's first great example of a man of faith should have been a man who had to *wait* so long to see God's promise come to pass. Sibbes was right: *to live in hope, in confidence in God's word no matter the circumstances of our lives, is the largest part of what it means to believe. We*

throw such words – faith, trust, belief – around a good deal, but what we are really talking about is being sure that God’s going to keep his word when it doesn’t look like he will. That is, perhaps, the largest part what it means to walk by faith! To be a Christian is to be certain of things one cannot see. To live as a Christian is acting each day in the confidence that God will keep his word, no matter that it can easily seem that he *has not kept* his word and *will not keep* his word.

Lest anyone think that this is not the nub of the issue and the real burden of the Christian life, the Bible furnishes us with one example after another of those who believed, who hoped against hope, and were eventually rewarded: Sarah and Hannah and Elizabeth with children; Israel with deliverance from Egypt; the Jews returning from Babylon, Simeon with the consolation of Israel; Paul with his long sought and long wept for sanctification. It also gives us examples of the opposite: those who gave up their waiting for God; who would believe no longer in a promise that was so long coming. So the promise never visited them and they lost what had been promised. Israel wanted what it wanted in the wilderness *now*; and that cost them everything!

This is very hard for 21st century Americans to grasp and for 21st century American Christians to grasp, but the Christian life is fundamentally oriented to the future. This is what it means to live by faith, after all. It is oriented to the past, to be sure, to what Christ has already done for us in history. But even his death and resurrection long ago are significant primarily because of what they promise for the future. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews says in a dozen different ways, nobody has yet experienced, nobody has laid hold of, no one yet possesses the salvation that Christ purchased for his people on the cross. We may have the first fruits of that salvation, we may have the beginnings of it, the first stages of it. But, let’s be honest; we do not have, for example, enough of Christ’s salvation, of his resurrection life even to make obvious the distinction between those who are saved and those who are not, at least a distinction that anyone and everyone can recognize. We Christians cannot even tell for sure, in all cases, who the real Christians are. Only when salvation comes in its fullness will that distinction be as clear and as obvious as the difference between day and night.

That is why, again in Hebrews, Jesus Christ is said to be "the guarantee" of our salvation. You don't need a guarantee for something you already have. You need a guarantee for something that has been promised to you, but has not yet been delivered. You need a guarantee so you can be sure that something is worth your waiting! Peter speaks of God’s “exceeding great and precious promises.” And they are exceedingly great and impossibly precious. But they *are promises!* Much of what has been promised we do not yet have in our fist!

That is often even true of the promises that touch our life in this world, promises regarding our daily bread and the length of our days, promises of peace and joy, promises regarding marriage and family, regarding the salvation of our children; promises that the gates of hell will never prevail against church of God, something we must believe against hope in the western world today, since it can look very much as if the gates of hell *are* prevailing against the church. And, of course, there are promises regarding the forgiveness of our sins, the nearness of God, his hearing of our prayers, his ruling over all the circumstances of our lives, and so on. And, then, there are promises touching the future prospects of all believers, of the whole church of God: of

its eventual vindication before the world, the triumph of the gospel, the return of Jesus Christ, and of the world of unmixed joy that will open to our sight at the end of time.

Just as the entire church has been waiting now these 2,000 years for Christ's return and the promised consummation of the ages, so individual Christians have been waiting long and hard and often in confusion for the fulfillment of promises God has made to them in his Word: from some specific promised blessing they have sought from his hand to that growth in grace and holiness that Christ has promised to all who trust in him.

It is one thing to know that God's word endures forever, that his promises are yea and amen, that he always keeps his word. It is another thing altogether, as you and I know all too well, to believe that so firmly that one lives his or her life in the strength of that conviction; lives dark day by dark day in the assurance that those promises will be fulfilled for you as they were for Abraham and Sarah, *to believe that in defiance of appearances to the contrary.*

If you ask, as every Christian asks sooner or later, why God should make the Christian life a matter of believing promises that are so long in coming, the wise have always thought they knew; if not the whole reason, at least part of the reason.

That kind of faith, that kind of bare trust in God, that faith that rests on nothing more than the fact that God has spoken, is the faith whose exercise kills the self. And the self, of course, is our greatest enemy -- the love of ourselves, the attention we pay to ourselves, the way we prefer ourselves to God and others. Indeed, "self" is simply another and more homely name for sin! No one ever attains real spiritual power or goodness until the self is battered into submission and God becomes all-in-all. And nothing is better suited to battering the self into submission, to bringing us at last not to think of everything so completely in terms of ourselves than simply this long wait, these disappointed hopes that divine promises raise in us when they are not soon fulfilled. This and this alone teaches us to see our lives in other terms than in the satisfaction of our own desires, to see God's purposes as higher and more important than our own, God's wisdom greater than ours.

In that waiting that all Christians must do, all that God really cares about in your soul is being tested and exercised. That is why God has made it the rule that all his children must wait for a long time for much of what he has promised them. If he gives them some things, he insists that they wait for many other things, and in every life they must wait for something that matters deeply to them and forces upon them over and over again everyday this single choice: God's will or mine! Will we wait for God or will we have our pleasures now without God and in indifference to what he has said to us in his Word?

When we still believe through years of heaven's silence, the Lord not appearing, not showing up, that is true faith and that is real love. It is here that we give God the greatest glory, trusting him simply because *it is Him!* The Lord says in Isaiah 49:23: "those who wait *for me* shall not be put to shame." Resolve now in your heart before the Lord that you will be among those who waited for God and were not disappointed!

God's help is always sure,

His method seldom guessed;
Delay will make our pleasure pure,
Surprise will give it zest!