

“Abraham and Sarah: God Keeps a Promise”

Hebrews 11:11-13

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Years ago, I was speaking at a chapel service at the nursing home here in Chisholm when one of the ladies shouted, “That’s a lie!” “What’s a lie?” I replied. “What you are talking about. That did not happen. It’s a lie.” “Well,” I said, “It is a rather remarkable story, but the Bible tells us it did happen, and I believe it is the truth, not a lie.”

What is the story that caused that little uproar at the nursing home? The subject of our text today: the birth of Isaac. In Genesis 21, we read how Abraham’s wife, Sarah, gives birth to a son, Isaac. The amazing part of the story is that at the time, Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 91. The gal at the nursing home, whom at the time was well into her 80’s found that just too incredible.

Now, perhaps some of you are a bit skeptical of this account as well. If so, I would be glad to discuss those doubts with you. It is indeed a very unusual event. Yet, I agree with the writer of the book of Hebrews, who sees the birth of Isaac as a great miracle that demonstrates both the power of God and the faith of Abraham and Sarah.

This morning, as we continue our tour of the Faith Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11, we come to the second of the Abraham exhibits. Last week we saw how Abraham and his family moved to the land of Canaan, Modern Israel. Today, we see how many years later, he and Sarah are miraculously blessed with a very special son. Let’s pause and pray that we would hear the Lord speak today through His spirit and that we would realize the significance of these words for our lives today.

**Hebrews 11:11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.** Now some versions, including the old NIV, say “by faith Abraham became a father, even though both he and Sarah were past the age. The ESV, which I read, the KJV, and most translations focus on Sarah’s faith. The Greek text is ambiguous on that point, which is okay, because in Genesis it is both Abraham and Sarah who trust God and receive His promise.

**Hebrews 11:12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, (this is clearly Abraham) were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.**

Let’s go back and review this story in the Old Testament book of Genesis. We are first introduced to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 11, when called Abram and Sarai.

We are told that she is barren, has no children. An inability to have children can be an emotionally traumatic experience for a woman today, but in those days, it also carried a significant social stigma. Not being able to become pregnant was a real burden for Sarah. Yet, in Genesis 12, as Abraham and his family head for their new home in Canaan, the Lord says, “I will make you into a great nation.” At this point Abraham is 75 years old and Sarah is 66. How God will make a great nation from this childless, senior couple is a mystery, but this is His promise.

Then, about 10 years later, Genesis 15, the Lord appears to Abraham in a vision. Abraham reminds the Lord that he has no children and that a servant will inherit his possessions. But God says, **Genesis 15:4,5 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man (the servant) shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”**

And then that marvelous verse, **Genesis 15:6 And Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.** So, Abraham is convinced he is going to have a son. But how can that be? His wife is 76 years old and has never been pregnant. Yet, Sarah has a plan.

“Let’s have a surrogate mother,” she says. Sarah has a maid named Hagar. **Genesis 16:2 And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; if may be that I shall obtain children by her.”**

Abraham sleeps with Hagar, and she becomes pregnant. And a son, Ishmael, is born.

Eventually friction and jealousy develop between Sarah and Hagar and the whole situation turns into a soap opera. Then 13 years later, when Abraham is 99 years old and Sarah is 90, the Lord once again appears to Abraham, he affirms the promise he has made, but says, **Genesis 17:19,21** **“Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him... I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”**

A short time later Abraham and Sarah get three visitors who looked like men but were apparently angels. Listen to their conversation recorded in **Genesis 18:9-15** **they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in year. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”**

How could it even happen? How could a 90-year-old woman, who has never been pregnant. Who has a 99-year-old husband, possibly have a baby? Things like that don't even happen in the most bizarre supermarket tabloids.

Yet is anything too hard for the Lord? One year later, **Genesis 21:1-7** **The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was with days old, as God had commanded**

**him. Abraham was a hundred-year-old when his son Isaac was born to him. 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.”**

Wow, this is a marvelous story. Yet, the Bible is clear that it really did happen. This is not an ancient myth or fairytale. If you find it incredible, it is likely because you have bought into a modern myth which says miracles are impossible.

Friends, if God exists, miracles are clearly possible. If He does not exist, we then inhabit an accidental and random universe where discussions about what is possible and what is not, are nonsensical.

A more common objection to the Abraham/Sarah story is this: “Pastor Dan, all this stuff happened 4000 years ago. I have so much going on in my life right now, I don't see how knowing about Abraham and Sarah does me any good at all.”

Well, folks, I think there are three important lessons from this story which can be helpful and encouraging to each of us.

**Lesson #1** – We need to be willing to trust God's promises. One of the basic themes of the Bible, especially in these chapters of Genesis, is that God keeps His promises. Folks, that makes Him different than anyone else I know. We have gotten used to the fact that politicians frequently break promises they make, and often make promises they have no intention of keeping.

Yet, some of the rest of us also make promises that we take rather lightly. “Oh, I will make sure I drop that book off at your house this week.” But the end of the week comes, and that book is still on your shelf. Children can be hurt when parents do not follow through on promises they make. Yet, it is not just casual promises that we break. Many fail to keep their most solemn vow of all. “I will be faithful to you as long as we both shall live.” As someone said, “People still get married for better or worse, just not for long.”

Sometimes, even though we have every intention of keeping a promise, we simply cannot do so because of circumstances. You might promise

your son, "Next Saturday I will take you to Minneapolis for the Twin's game".... But if the game gets rained out, or if you have an appendectomy on Thursday, or one of a dozen other circumstances occur, your son will not be at the Twin's game next Saturday, no matter how hard you try to keep your promise.

But it is not that way with God. He keeps all of His promises. He does not forget about any of them. And there is nothing that can ever prevent Him from keeping His word. There is nothing too hard for the Lord. If He tells a 90-year-old woman, she will have a baby next year. You can be sure she will have that baby. Neither circumstances, human beings, or the devil himself, can prevent God from keeping His word.

Friends, this book is full of what 2 Peter 1:4a says are very great and precious promises. What are those promises? Let me mention just a few. There is the promise that our sins are forgiven if we trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. No matter what horrible things you have done, or now many times you have done them, God promises to forgive you through Jesus.

There is also the promise of resurrection. In **John 11:25** Jesus says, **Whoever believes in me will, even though he die, yet shall he live.** Because Jesus has conquered death, he is able to ensure that those who trust in Him will conquer death as well.

Then there is the promise of **Hebrews 13:5a** ( a quote from Deuteronomy 31) **God has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you.** No matter where you are, no matter the situation you are facing, God is always beside you. Folks, those are just some of the very great and precious promises contained in this book.

So, what does this mean for us? First, we need to read and study the Bible, so we know what God's promises are. The comedian Woody Allen once said, "After I took a speed-reading course, I was able to read the Bible in 12 minutes. It was something about God."

Folks, some people attend church on many Sundays, and are far more virtuous than Woody Allen, but I'm afraid they don't know much more about the Bible than, "It is something about God." If we are going to experience the full benefits from

God's promises, we need to make sure we know what they are.

Second, like Abraham, we need to believe God. We need to believe we can trust these promises. And then, third, we need to put our faith into action and apply God's promises as we live each day.

Years ago, a Blackfoot Indian chief gave the Canadian Pacific Railroad permission to cross tribal land. In exchange he was given a lifetime pass to ride on the trains. The chief put the pass in a leather pouch and carried it around his neck for the rest of his life. However, he never rode once on a train.

I am afraid Christians sometimes kind of do the same thing. Maybe you have a plaque on your wall proclaiming our confidence in God's promises. May you love the old hymn "Standing on the Promises" or the Getty song, "Every Promise of Your Word." But, when a problem arises, when the doctor says he needs to do a biopsy, when you learn you daughter is at the police station because she was caught shopliftings, when you find out the car repair you thought would be \$100 is going to be \$1000, at those times, you kind of forget those promises.

Friends don't do that. Remember those promises, utilize those promises to gain strength, peace and hope. Friends, if you know, believe and apply the promises contained in this book, you will be a happier person, and will be much better prepared to honor the Lord and serve your community. We need to trust God's promises.

**Lesson #2** – the Lord keeps His promises even when our faith is not perfect. Our text not only commends the faith of Abraham, but also the faith of Sarah. Yet, when we go back to Genesis, Sarah hardly seems like a woman of great faith.

When she hears the promise God will give her a son, Sarah laughs. She thinks it is a joke, When the Lord asks, "Why did Sarah laugh?" She lies and says, "I did not laugh," (maybe it was just a cough.)

Friends, is this a woman of great faith? Yet, when Isaac is born, she is overjoyed. **Genesis 21:6** **"God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.** Meaning not at me,

but with me. Sometime during that year, the Lord had turned Sarah's doubt into faith.

Friends, we need to remember that God does not disqualify people from His kingdom because they struggle with doubt. Elijah, John the Baptist, and the apostle Thomas are other famous doubters, who were all men of great faith.

Whenever we find ourselves struggling with doubt, or even think, "I wonder if this Christianity stuff is really true," we should not become discouraged. Rather than giving up on faith, we need to pray and ask God to strengthen our faith.

Perhaps pray, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." And we need to remember that is not the quantity of faith that is important. Jesus said that our faith can be as tiny as a mustard seed, and it can still move a mountain. What really matters is the object of our faith. In what or where we put our faith is what matters most.

Let's jump ahead a few months. It is December. Just think of those nice, crisp days. You are walking out in the woods, and you come to a stream that you want to cross. It is frozen over, but you are not quite sure if the ice is thick enough to hold the weight of your body. So, you hesitate. Do you step out on the ice or not? Are you 70% sure the ice will hold you? 50% sure? 20%? But do you know what? How much faith you have in the ice does not really matter, as long as you are willing to step out on it. If you do that and the ice is 10 inches thick, it will hold you, no matter what your level of confidence or how much doubt you have.

If the ice is a quarter of an inch thick, you will fall through even if you have 100% confidence in the ice, even if you have no doubt at all. It is the thickness of the ice, the object of your faith, rather than your degree of confidence or quality of faith that matters.

Folks, Sarah reminds us that if we are willing to step out and trust the Lord, it doesn't matter how much doubt we have struggled with, we will not be disappointed. God will not let us down. We will not fall through.

But of course, we cannot just stand on the bank and wonder if we should step out. If we do that, we won't get wet, but we also won't make it to the

other side. Unless we are willing to step out in faith, act upon the promises of God, act even when the shadows of doubt are creeping in our minds, we will never experience the blessings God wants us to have.

Friends, remember, even if your faith is not perfect, God will honor it, as long as it is faith placed in Him. Instead of putting your faith in yourself, in your own wisdom or ability, or other people, or in some form of religion, you need to step out and trust in Jesus Christ.

**Lesson #3** – We need to remember that in this life, we will only receive a fraction of what God has promised to us. **Hebrews 11:12** **There fore form one man, and him as good as dean** (meaning just too old to have children) **were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.** That is true.

But how many of those descendants did Abraham and Sarah see? Sarah saw one, Just Isaac. Abraham was apparently still alive when Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau were born, but that was all for him. They died totally ignorant of the 12 sons of Jacob, who would become the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. I am sure they were unaware of the millions upon millions of people, including those of us in this room, who would become spiritual descendants of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ.

God kept His promise to Abraham, but on this earth, in this life, Abraham just had a taste of what God was going to give him. This is true of not only Abraham and Sarah, but of all men and women of faith. **Hebrews 11:13** **These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exile on the earth.**

Friends, when we look around us and see all the craziness and chaos in the world or experience all sorts of different problems in our lives, we should not be discouraged. God has not forgotten us. He will keep His promises.

The Bible tells us (Ephesians 1:13, 14) that as Christians, as people trusting in Jesus, we have been given the Holy Spirit as a down payment, a deposit guaranteeing that in the future we will receive the entire inheritance God has promised to

us. So, even when we experience great blessings, as Abraham and Sarah did when Isaac was born, we need to constantly remind ourselves and each other, that this world is not our final home. We await our permanent dwelling in the presence of the Lord. More on that next week.

But today we have gifts and blessings from God, and great and precious promises. May God help us to trust Him and His promises each and every day.