

Genesis 21 — Promises

March 6, 2016

With the election of our next president in the news, I was thinking of the campaign promises we hear from politicians at this time of year. I began wondering how many of those political promises don't come true. While I don't have an exact number, I did a little research on famous campaign promises that were broken. Here is what I found.

- While George Bush is a man I respect, he campaigned on the famous line, "Read my lips. No new taxes." During his presidency, there were new taxes.
- Franklin Roosevelt ran for president on the pledge that he would balance the federal budget. In office, he introduced the New Deal program and the national deficit ballooned.
- Bill Clinton promised a middle class tax cut when he ran for president. He never delivered.
- Woodrow Wilson won the 1916 election with the slogan, "He will keep us out of the war." After taking office, he took the country into the First World War.

Unfortunately, politicians are synonymous with broken promises. They have a reputation for being an unsavory breed of liars that say one thing and do another. No matter who we vote for in the next election, I guarantee he or she will break his or her word.

It is not just politicians that break promises. Any time we do business we sign contracts and legal paperwork rather than trust someone's word. Why do we do this? Almost everyone would break his or her word if he or she could get

away with it. The most famous broken promise of all is the one made in front of an altar before God. It is to promise to be there for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do you part. The promises made in marriage vows are broken all the time.

It is rare to find people that are good on their promises, people that keep their word, especially when they face great expense or personal loss to do it. Is there anyone we can count on to do what he or she says? This morning, we will find the answer.

As a church we are working through the book of Genesis. Today, we are in Genesis 21 where we continue to follow the story of Abraham. For 25 years, he waited for God to keep his promises. For 25 years, Abraham's hopes were up and down like a yo-yo when it came to trusting God to keep his word, especially the promise God gave him about having a son.

At one time, in desperation, Abraham and Sarah tried to help God keep his promise to give them a son by Sarah instructing Abraham to sleep with the maid so they could have a half-legitimate child. God was not happy with that idea. God was very clear. "Abraham, I don't need you to help me keep my word."

Then, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90, after they were long past child-bearing years and Sarah was post menopause — facing the biological impossibility of having children — Sarah conceived. She gave birth to the long-awaited son that God promised them 25 years before.

What God wanted Abraham, Sarah, you and me to learn from this chapter is that God keeps his promises. It doesn't matter how long the wait or what the obstacles, God's word will always prove true.

As we work our way through this chapter we will see three ways that God kept his promises even when it seems impossible to fulfill. Let's start with the birth of Isaac.

God kept his promise in the birth of Isaac.

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 eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years 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." Genesis 21:1–7 (ESV)

The Bible wants to be exceedingly clear about the way Isaac's conception took place. Three times it tells us how it happened. "The Lord visited Sarah *as he had said*," and "*the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised*," and "*she bore Abraham a son at the time of which God had spoke to him*."

Isaac's conception was not by chance. He was conceived exactly when God planned for him to be conceived. Isaac was not overdue. Sarah and Abraham were at the age when God planned for Isaac to be conceived. All the waiting and wondering if God would keep his word was foolishness. God had not forgotten them. God had ordained that Isaac would be born to them in their old age even before they were born.

I have an iPhone. I set alarms on my calendar to remind me of appointments. There is never a question of if my alarms will go off. It is only a

question of when my alarm will go off. They go off at the exact time I planned. In the same way, there was never a question if Sarah would get pregnant. It was only a matter of when she would be pregnant. Like a alarm on our phones, she was just waiting for God's present time. God's plan always works like clockwork. It is only a matter for the right time.

Are children ever conceived by mistake?

No. Just as Isaac was conceived in the womb of Sarah at the time God planned, ladies, all of your children are conceived at the time God has planned. They are never conceived by chance or mistake but every child is conceived by God's plan. There is no such thing as a child being a wrong choice. There is no such thing as a child being a mistake from of out-of-wedlock momentary passion. There is no such thing as a pregnancy that wasn't supposed to happen. Every child is a gift from God. Children may be conceived outside of wedlock but God still has a good plan written for their lives even before they are conceived.

Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Psalm 139:16 (NIV)

Why did God make Abraham and Sarah wait until their bodies were old and falling apart before he gave them a son?

God was teaching them, and he is teaching us, that his word is reliable, no matter what the odds. God's promises will always prove true no matter what the opposition against them. It doesn't matter if the odds against God's words proving true are biological, like Abraham and Sarah, or they are political opposition, like David experienced when he was anointed king as a boy and he was hunted down by Saul to be killed. It didn't matter what Saul did. David was to be crowned king. It doesn't matter if the opposition against God's word is the

might of an entire nation as Moses experienced when he spoke God's words to Pharaoh and told him that God told him to set God's people free. God's words would have been fulfilled even if God had to snap the fingers off Pharaoh's hand one at a time, he would have done it. Nothing can stop God's words from proving true. Nothing can stop God from keeping his promises. Abraham and Sarah now understand that in a new way. If God hadn't put them in a biologically impossible situation to conceive Isaac, they wouldn't have learned the power of God's word and to trust it in hopeless situations because it will prove true.

Why does God let us face hard times before answering our prayers?

Like Abraham and Sarah, we will face times when it feels like God forgot. Why does God let our lives spiral into these hopeless situations? It is in those times of brokenness that we develop our own stories and learn that God does indeed keep his promises. God has not forgotten to keep his promises.

Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Proverbs 30:5 (ESV)

We were never promised a child in our old age. What are some of the promises God made to us that we can hold on to every day that we know will prove true?

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

God promises that no matter what hits us, he won't drop us. He will use everything in our lives to make us more like Jesus. Just as a sculptor chips a rock with a glistening piece of steel, so the Lord uses hard times in our lives to chip away at our character and shape us into the image of Jesus.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV)

Every time we face temptation, God promises he is filtering the temptation so it is not more than we can bear. He also promises to provide a way out so we can escape from the temptation. Many times that way out is simply to get up and walk away. These are promises from God that he guarantees are true. Those promises were not spoken like a political candidate running for office. They were spoken by God and we know they will prove true.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)

When we talk about Christ returning, just like Abraham felt his son was a overdue, in the same way Jesus' return may feel overdue. Peter reminded us Jesus hasn't forgotten to return. Jesus will keep his promise. The only reason he hasn't returned is because he is patiently giving more people the opportunity to repent. God will keep his word. Jesus will return. Every promise in the Bible will be kept.

God kept his promise and made Ishmael a nation.

And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. 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." And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. 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. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." 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. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. 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. 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. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation." 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. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. Genesis 21:8–21 (ESV)

Let's start at in verse 8. Isaac was weaned. How old was Isaac when this happened? In this culture, children were not weaned until 3 years of age. Why did they breastfeed forever? There was a high infant mortality rate. The best way to have a healthy child was for a mother to breastfeed her child as long as he could take it. There were no Cheerios. There was no Gerber baby food jars with mashed green peas. Mothers breastfed constantly.

You have to picture Sarah nursing at 90. This is comical. For the three years, she changed Isaac's diaper then changed her own diaper. Isaac had no teeth. She had no teeth. Isaac drooled. She drooled. Nursing at 90 was comedic relief for the entire family.

When Isaac was weaned, this was a big day. Abraham, the richest guy in the neighborhood, threw a party. It was going to be a whopper of a birthday party. Everyone in the area was invited. Decorations were hung everywhere in the camp. I picture hundreds of people at the party. Ninety-three-year-old Sarah was in her glory. She waited forever for this day. A child's birthday party was something she dreamed of for years. As an elderly woman, her dreams were

finally coming true. Isaac, her baby, was the center of attention on that special day.

Things didn't go as planned. There was a major birthday party foul that ruined that special day and changed history.

Ishmael, the son of Hagar — a.k.a. Abraham's girlfriend — was about 16 or 17 years of age. In your Bible it says he was laughing at Isaac during the party. What kind of laughing was this? Was it a laughter of joy, like everyone else at the party, or was it a mocking laughter, like Sarah expressed toward Jesus when Jesus told her she would be pregnant at the age of 90 four years prior? What do you think? Was it joyful laughter or mocking laughter?

Ishmael mocked his younger half-brother. Right in the party, Ishmael insulted his younger half-brother Isaac in front of everyone. Paul talked about what happened in Galatians 4:29. He said that Ishmael persecuted Isaac. The Greek implies physical violence. You have 16-year-old Ishmael acting like a thug beating on his younger 3-year-old half-brother, making him cry at his birthday party.

God told us in previous chapters that Ishmael would be a wild donkey of a man. That means he was a fighter. He was a bully. That is the way 16-year-old Ishmael treated 3-year-old Isaac. He wasn't picking on somebody his own size. He was beating up a 3-year-old at the little guy's party! Can you imagine the horror of this day? How do you think that went over when Sarah saw the teenage son of Abraham's girlfriend that can shave throwing around her 3-year-old son in front of all of their friends at Isaac's birthday party?

I don't think I need to say much more. Everyone can picture that mama bear was awakened. Sarah may have been 93 but she was hotter than a fire cracker on this one. I picture her dragging Abraham by his ear into the tent and laying down the law. There was no discussion on this one. Married men, you know what your wives are like in one of these moments. The best thing you can do is say "Yes" and follow directions. Somebody is going to die. You don't want it to be you.

Sarah said, "Get rid of this slave woman and her son." I picture her pointing with her finger straight out the tent door. That woman and her son were out of there! Then she added, "The son of this slave woman will not be an heir with my son, Isaac. Abraham! He was beating up our son at his own birthday party! He is a bully. He is a thug. This is only the beginning of the beating Isaac will endure in his own home. To make matters worse, when you die, Ishmael is your firstborn. He is scheduled to get double the inheritance and control of the family. If this is what happens when Isaac is 3, imagine what Ishmael will do to him when Ishmael gets full control of the estate! Kick that slave and her son out of our family. This is not a matter of discussion."

As you might expect, this was not easy for Abraham to swallow. He loved both his sons. For the last 17 years every morning Ishmael followed Abraham on his morning chores around the ranch. Ishmael walked in his daddy's footsteps every day. Abraham loved running his hand through his son's hair. Abraham's heart burst with pride as he introduced Ishmael to all his friends in town saying, "This is my boy." Abraham and Ishmael were close. Then his wife told him to

kick Ishmael and his mother out of the house. There were too many wives and too many sons in this family. Something had to change. What should he do? Can you imagine the crushing tension in his heart?

As God often does in these situations, he came to the rescue. God told Abraham to listen to his wife. Sarah was right. Ishmael and Isaac could not grow up in the same home. The fighting between them and their descendants, that would last for centuries, had only begun. Ishmael had to go.

This is where it gets interesting. God promised Abraham that he would take care of Ishmael. God would make a nation out of Ishmael. God would look over him.

God essentially said, “Abraham, if you could trust my word when it came to the birth of your promised son, you can trust my word when it comes to caring for Ishmael if you send him away. Will you trust my word? Do you believe I will keep my promise?” Before the party guests had left in the morning Abraham faced the challenge of kicking his 16-year-old son and his son’s mother out of the house.

I sent one son to college. It was hard to trust him into God’s hands. I am not there to help him make right choices. Even though my son is at college, I still hear from him, usually whenever he needs money. I can pick up the phone and talk to him. Abraham would never hear from Ishmael again. He would never receive a phone call. He wouldn’t be able to come to his rescue in a crisis. This was an incredibly hard moment that tested Abraham’s faith and trust in God’s word. Imagine sending your son away to never hear from him again with only the

promise that God will take care of your boy. That was the crisis of faith Abraham faced. What would he do?

The next morning Abraham did one of the hardest things in his life. He took Hagar and Ishmael and pointed them to the desert. He gave Hagar a three-gallon sack of water and a loaf of bread and sent them into the ocean of boiling sand with only meager provisions. That was not easy.

As Hagar and Ishmael wandered around the desert, it wasn't long until their meager provisions were gone. Abraham was not there to save them. Eventually Ishmael hung between life and death from dehydration and the sweltering heat. Finally, in desperation thinking she would watch her son take his final breath, Hagar put Ishmael under a tree to die while she wandered away to cry the remaining tears in her heart. She couldn't imagine watching those final gasps for air and burying his body in the sand with her bare hands. It seemed God's promise to Abraham had failed.

Imagine the terrain of broken glass that littered Hagar's soul. For 15 years she thought her son would inherit everything from wealthy Abraham. She felt rich. She felt secure. Her son was the golden child. Everything was looking up. When Isaac miraculously arrived on the scene in Sarah's old age, everything twisted backward in ways Hagar couldn't have imagined. Ishmael went from the favored child to the outcast. They went from living with everything to these moments when they were dying with nothing. They went from happy and privileged to living as a single mother with a bi-racial child in abject poverty without a roof over their heads.

If you are a single mother, you know the feelings Hagar faced that day. You had a home. You had a family. You had a life. Your husband left you. Now you have nothing. You have nobody protecting you. You have nothing to pay the bills. No child support. No alimony. You are without hope, living on a prayer. That was Hagar. Maybe that is you. The only thing holding your life together and holding Hagar's life together is God's grace. God promised he would take care of Hagar and Ishmael. Where was he in these moments? Single mothers, God promises he will look out for you.

The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless... Psalm 146:9 (ESV)

I love what happened. As Ishmael cried, God heard his distress. The Bible says the angel of the Lord came down from heaven to be with this single mom. Whenever we see the phrase, “the angel of the Lord,” not “an angel of the Lord,” this is Jesus showing up in the Old Testament. Jesus came down to comfort this single mother and give her the hope and the future she desperately needed.

Jesus said to her, “Lift up your boy. It’s ok. You will make it. I am with you. I hear your cries. I will keep my promise. I will make Ishmael into a great nation. You will make it through your life in the desert.”

Look what Jesus did. After comforting her he opened her eyes to a well of water that was right in front of her the whole time. Hagar and Ishmael were dying of thirst. They were so broken-hearted they didn’t see that Jesus provided just what they needed to make it through that day. He put it right under their noses.

Isn't this what usually happens? We are so broken and emotionally distraught that we don't see God has provided just what we need to make it through the day. Many times he puts it right under our noses. God kept his promise to Abraham. Hagar and Ishmael didn't die in the desert. Hagar gave Ishmael the water he desperately needed to drink. God made Ishmael into a nation. God was good on his word.

Sometimes we are just like Hagar. We are so broken on the wheels of life that we don't see how God provides just what we need to make it through the day and it is right in front of us. Maybe you are praying for a friend and you are so distraught in loneliness that you miss the people right in front of you that God provides as our friends. Maybe you are praying for a different job and while you are searching across the country you forget to look at the amazing opportunities God provides in your own town. Maybe you are tired of loneliness and you are praying for a spouse. You are on Christian Mingle searching across the country, Are you looking at the singles in your own church right under your nose? That is usually the way God works. He puts the answers to our prayers right in front of us but, like Hagar, we become so overwhelmed by our problems we forget to open our eyes.

Like Hagar, we need to ask God to open our eyes to the answers to our prayers that are often too close for us to see.

God is not a politician. He keeps his word no matter what the obstacles and no matter how long ago he spoke his word. God is a promise keeper.

God kept his promise to give Abraham the land.

At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.” And Abraham said, “I will swear.” When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized, Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?” He said, “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well.” Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. Genesis 21:22–34 (ESV)

When you read this story, these final paragraphs feel out of place. How do they connect with God keeping his promises?

When Abraham began following God 25 years prior, God promised two things.

Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. Genesis 12:7 (ESV)

God promised him offspring and the Promised Land. After 25 years of waiting, God kept his promise and gave Abraham Isaac, his son. Up to this point in Abraham’s life, he didn’t own any of the Promised Land. In this culture, he was called a sojourner. He was similar to a hippie living in a van. He didn’t pay property taxes. He just wandered in the wilderness. As we saw, God is a promise keeper. It doesn’t matter how long in the past he made his promises, he will keep them. This is what God is doing.

While in the land of the Philistines, Abraham grew powerful and wealthy. How powerful had Abraham become? He was so wealthy that the king of the Philistines and the commander of his army wanted to make a peace treaty to guarantee there was no aggression between them. When somebody approaches and asks for a guarantee of non-aggression between you, that means you are powerful enough that you have that person's nation scared.

As they get ready to sign this non-aggression treaty, Abraham brings up a problem. Abraham's men dug a well in the desert. Water in the desert was essential to survive. Abimelech's herdsman were kicking Abraham's herdsmen off the well because Abraham was just a sojourner and didn't have official rights to the land. To iron things out, Abimelech agreed to sign the well over to Abraham. Abraham then owned his first tiny piece of property in the Promised Land. A well. God is a promise keeper. God didn't forget what he promised 25 years earlier. I will give you offspring, and I will give you the land. In this chapter, 25 years after God made those promises, we see the beginning of both. Abraham has only one son through Sarah. In the future, all Jews and Christians would call themselves descendants of Abraham. Abraham also owned a tiny piece of the Promised Land, a small well. In the future, God would continue to fulfill his promises and during the dynasty of King David they would own most of the Promised Land. God keeps his word.

To make this an occasion Abraham will never forget, he planted a tree. Why a tamarisk tree? This is one of the few trees that can survive in the desert. Every time Abraham saw the tree by the well he remembered that God is a

promise keeper. No matter what the odds, no matter what the length of time, God will keep his word. We can trust it. We can bank on it. God's word will always come true. It doesn't matter how long it takes or the odds against it happening, God keeps his promises.

Conclusion

God is not like a politician that says one thing and does another. When we feel he has forgotten us, he hasn't. God and his word are the only things we can be confident will always be true. God keeps his promises not just to Abraham but to you and to me.

This week in your Life Group Worksheets you will look at more promises that directly apply to our lives. As you study them, remember they will always prove true.



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