

Text: Gen. 21:1-8

Title: "The One Thing You Can Always Count On"

Time: 9/7/08 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Reliability is a great quality to have. I have a very reliable car that I am thankful for, a 1995 Chevy Geo that has about 175M miles on it. The arrangement I have with that car is simple. I turn the key, and it starts. Change the oil and do regular maintenance, and that car will continue to run for who knows how long.

A while ago it had a bad battery cable that needed to be replaced, so it wouldn't start, and I had to call for a tow truck. But when the tow truck came, the car even decided to start then. It is a great car. But the day is going to come eventually when even the Geo does not start. Even the most reliable things we know in this world eventually fall short. But there is one thing that will never fail, one thing we can always count on to be eternally reliable – the sure promise of God.

C.H. Macintosh gleans this truth from our passage with the following commentary: "Here we have accomplished promise – the blessed fruit of patient waiting upon God. None ever waited in vain. The soul that takes hold of God's promise by faith, [*sic*] has gotten a stable reality which will never fail him. Thus was it with Abraham; thus was it with all the faithful from age to age; and thus will it be with all those who are enabled, in any measure, to trust in the living God. Oh! It is a wonderful blessing to have God Himself as our portion and resting-place, amid the unsatisfying shadows of this scene through which we are passing,--to have our anchor cast within the vail,--to have the word and oath of God – the two immutable things – to lean upon, for the comfort and tranquility of our souls" [*Notes on the Book of Genesis, 217*].

Tranquility comes when we understand how God keeps his promises, and our passage teaches us five principles about the way He does exactly that.

I. God keeps His promises one person at a time (v. 1).

Illustration: It is the season of presidential politics in our great land, and the political parties just finished their conventions. We have seen candidates solicit votes with soaring promises to vast masses of people. Each politician hopes to keep these far-reaching promises on a grand scale, and yet as you sit as one of the twenty million viewers at home, you must come to the conclusion that they really do not know you individually, and you should not expect to personally hear from them any time soon regarding how they intend to keep that promise to you.

Application: God's promises are not like that. They are promises made and kept one person at a time. You must personally hear God's promise, trust God's promise, and God must personally accomplish His promise in your behalf.

You never hear of a politician making a specific promise to secure the vote of fundamental Baptist church members, do you? Well, you do not hear those promises because that constituency is not big enough for politicians to bother with. God is not like that. You and I as individuals are plenty big enough for God to bother with.

The text tells us that God *visited* Sarah. This is a special Hebrew word that means *come to take care of*. Like our English phrase *take care of*, it can have both a positive and a negative connotation. We drop off our little ones at the nursery so that they will be taken care of. We also speak of the need to take care of a problem; a child can be dropped off at a principal's office to be taken care of in this way.

In the same way, God can visit an individual to deal with that one in judgment or in blessing (see Jer. 23:2 for the usage of this word in both a positive and negative way). Here in Gen. 21:1, God cares for Sarah in a positive way. He keeps His promise to her. Understand this. God will take care of you too. He keeps his promises one person at a time.

II. God keeps His promises right on schedule (v. 2).

Illustration: I was teasing Bonnie last Sunday evening about the fact that timing is often the key to success. She was emerging from the church building while I was making my way through the parking lot to the church, and in my chivalrous and selfless manner, I offered to help Bonnie bring in all the heavy goodies from her car that she brought for our singspiration time. The trouble with my offer was that it had come too late. The goodies had been brought in already. My promise to help came in time to make me sound chivalrous, but not in time to do Bonnie any good.

Application: The Lord is never late when it comes to making and keeping His promises. He is always right on schedule to meet the need. Although old age indicated to Abraham that the Lord was too late to bless him and faithfully keep His promise, the indication was wrong, and God was not late. God was right on schedule.

Now God's schedule is often not the same thing as our schedule. Whose schedule is wrong when that is the case? Ours is wrong. Abraham tried a number of things along the way to substitute for God's timetable for his life, but every time he did so he messed his life up and suffered serious consequences. We need to have the patience and faith required to stay on God's schedule of promise.

Illustration: Remember the Olympic relay races in which the USA teams failed to pass the baton correctly. They rushed the

exchange, dropped the baton, and so for a lack of correct timing and patience they lost the race, in spite of the fact that they were the better runners.

We often disqualify ourselves from effectiveness in the race because we are unwillingly to be patient with God's schedule. Then we drop the baton and have to go back and pick it up again, and it takes even longer for God's blessing to blossom in our lives. Let's stay on course and stay on schedule, patiently obeying the Lord. Macintosh described the faith we need in this regard this way: "This wondrous faith! It brings into our present all the power of God's future, and feeds upon God's promise as a present reality" [217].

III. God keeps His promises after the preparation of testing (vv. 3-4).

Illustration: Have you ever heard it said by a Grandparent that they wished they knew as parents what they know now as grandparents? Well, Abraham and Sarah never had to say that, did they?

Application: The blessing of Isaac came after a lifetime of the preparatory refinement of testing in their case, and we see the results of that in Abraham's obedience. Rom. 4:19-21 gives us some important insight into why the fulfillment of God's promises seems delayed sometimes: "And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform." The Lord wants us to grow in this way. The goal is to become fully assured that God is able to keep His Word, and this full assurance yields the fruit of a strong and obedient life.

Abraham's obedient example teaches us as parents some important lessons about our kids.

(1) First, our kids are a gift from God who ultimately belong to Him. We have a stewardship to care for these gifts, but they belong to the Lord more than they belong to us.

Did you notice who named Isaac? (Gen. 17:19). The right to give something a name is a right of ownership. If I were to suddenly decide that the name of Merrick's dog is going to be Myrtle from now on instead of Megan, the dog's name would still be Megan. If Merrick decided to make the change, it would be Myrtle. The right to name is a right of ownership. God gives Isaac his name because Isaac belonged to God. Our kids belong to the Lord. That's what baby dedication is all about here.

(2) Second, we need to obey God's commands when it comes to raising our kids (v. 4).

There is a whole lot of "well I just think that" and "well my opinion is" and "this is what will work for me" in the approach of parents to parenting in our world today. As Christians, we need an entirely different process. "We have made this parenting decision because here is what God has commanded on the topic." That is the kind of parenting that is going to truly care for the needs our kids have for parents. This thing called the parent-kid relationship is God-designed, and we ought to use His owner's manual in making it work, not our intuition and personal preferences.

IV. God keeps His promises to display His glory (v. 5).

Application: Now God could have given Abraham a son prior to the age 100 like He has done for many of us. Remember that it was Abraham who prayed for Abimelech's household in this regard in the previous chapter.

Yet the goal of glorifying Himself is always a part of God's plan to keep His promises, and this most often involves accomplishing things that can only be explained as a work of His supernatural power.

Hear Macintosh again: "Nature can never do aught for God. The Lord must 'visit,' and the Lord must 'do,' and faith must wait, and nature must be still,--yea, must be entirely set aside as a dead, worthless thing, and then the divine glory can shine out, and faith find in that outshining all its rich and sweet reward."

But understand too that we have a role to play when it comes to glorifying God when He fulfills His promises in our lives. Note the role of glorifying God in Rom. 4:20, "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God."

Often the fulfillment of God's promises awaits our willingness to humbly give God the glory. The blessing of fulfillment will destroy us if it makes us brag about what a wonderful job we have done. God keeps His promise to display His glory, and we need to be in line with that wonderful purpose to participate in the fulfillment of these promises.

V. God keeps His promises to give His people joy (vv. 6-8).

Illustration: The joy of childbirth is one of the greatest joys a home can experience, and that greatest of joys must have been even greater in this home that had for so very long done its best to believe God's promise of a coming child. I want us to learn some lessons about godly joy from this home.

(1) Godly joy includes the ability to laugh at self (remember 17:17-19; 18:9-15). Jokes can seem less funny when they are on us than when they are on others. Why is that? Well, it takes a certain humility or spiritual maturity to laugh at yourself. We

are naturally selfish and naturally self-defensive. Abraham and Sarah willingly followed the Lord's direction and called Isaac *laughter*, a reminder that even though they had laughed at the promises of God, God had made them to faithfully laugh with joy at the promise fulfilled. Laughing at themselves was a part of their joy.

(2) Godly joy is contagious. It spreads. A good question to ask ourselves as we try to understand how joyful we are is whether or not we make other people more or less joyful (v. 6).

(3) Godly joy focuses on God's goodness (v. 7). Each of us has experienced enough of the goodness of God in what we have done together just this morning to give us joy. The problem is we so often lack eyes to see and focus on it. Our reasons for joy escape our notice. We do not have a sufficient attention span to give to the source of our joy. Sarah could not help but see God's goodness here, and it made her joyful.

(4) Godly joy celebrates (v. 8). Make the most of the great opportunities for joyous celebration that God provides to you. For some people special events like holidays or birthdays or anniversaries are times of great misery. For some reason what for others is a time of celebration can make some focus on pain or difficulty.

But still, godly joy celebrates. Work to make the special times of life memorable times of joy for the glory of God. Isaac was only going to be weaned once, and Abraham made the most of it. May we determine to live with the same kind of godly joy, ready to celebrate the goodness of our God whenever we can.

Conclusion: The promises of God are reliable in this world of unreliability. Most of what we count on is like a sand castle on the seashore, ready to crumble at the first rise of the tide of trouble or wind of change. Ps. 18:2 assures us of the truth that

Abraham finally found fulfilled in the Lord's promise of Isaac: "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower." Abraham could say that in faith. Can you?

If your faith in God's promises has waivered, confess your sin of unbelief and unfaithfulness, and embrace again this confession of the faithful. Tell the Lord, "In you I will trust."

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching