

Genesis 20-21

Introduction

A. Last week we finished the first cycle in the promise of a son

1. So, to review, Genesis 12-14 was the story of a promise of a land
 - a. God called Abraham and promised him a land at the beginning of chapter 12 and Abraham obeyed
 - b. But at the end of chapter 12, Abraham fails to trust in the land and goes to Egypt
 - c. In Chapter 13, though, the promise is restored and Abraham returns to faith
 - d. And Abraham is shown to be blessed by Melchizidek and a blessing to Lot and the King of Sodom
2. And Genesis 15-21 is the story of a promise of a son
 - a. God made a covenant with Abraham promising his own son would be his heir and Abraham believed
 - b. But, in chapter 16, Abraham fails to trust in the promised son and takes Hagar as a wife
 - c. In chapter 17, though, God proclaims Himself as God Almighty and restores the covenant
 - d. And Abraham is shown to be blessed as God reveals His purpose and a blessing as he intercedes
3. Since we have gone through the full cycle, we expect the promise of a son section to be done
 - a. But if you recall from the introduction sermon, the second promise - the promise of a son - has a double cycle
 - b. So, this morning we are going to see the second cycle of failure, restoration, blessed and blessing

B. Why is there a second cycle in the promise of a son?

1. I'm honestly not sure I can give an adequate answer to that question, but I have a couple of thoughts
2. First, at the end of chapter 19 we can't be done, the promise is still a promise - there is no promised heir
 - a. So, the story has to continue because Abraham has to have a son to push the story forward
 - b. So, the promise is encased in the first cycle and the first fulfillment of the promise in the second cycle
3. Also, the double cycle in the promise of a son makes it appear more important than the first cycle
 - a. The double cycle emphasizes this promise
 - b. On contemplation, I think this makes sense because the promise of a land is subservient to the promise of a son
 - c. And both are fulfilled in Christ whose identity is the promised son who inherits the promised land
4. There may be more answers to this question that I can't see yet, but we can see that the fulfillment of the promise of a son is emphasized in this second cycle

C. Second cycle in the promise of a son

1. Promise is the same (Chapter 15, repeated in 17/18)
2. Failing in faith (chapter 20)
3. Restoration (that is fulfillment) of the promise (chapter 21:1-7)
4. Blessed and a Blessing (chapter 21:22-34)

D. Read Genesis 20:1-21:7, 21:22-34

E. Organization

1. First two stories (Failure and Fulfillment)
 - a. Faith is...
 - b. Because Christ is...
 - c. Two sets
2. Last story (Blessed and a Blessing)
 - a. Two Christ is... Statements

I. Faith is... believing in God not in men. (Sarah and Abimelech)

A. Abraham failed in faith yet again

1. This episode may surprise us greatly, because we feel like Abraham should have learned his lesson in Egypt
2. But Abraham is never going to be the one who earns the promises
3. And Abraham has recurring weaknesses, among which appear to be fear of man and quickness to deceive
4. In fact, Abraham's failure here ought to remind us that we all have special weakness that even after having fallen to them and repenting we have the propensity to return to again
5. We must continually be on guard against our besetting sins, the sins which cling so closely to us

B. But God once again demonstrated His power and His purpose to protect His promise

1. This is the real meaning of this story - to keep the focus on God who will fulfill His promise
2. The promise got one step bigger in Genesis 18 with a time put on the birth of a son
3. To remind us that it is not Abraham's actions but God's that will obtain the promise, Abraham fails again and endangers the promise, but God acts to preserve His promise
4. So, God appears to Abimelech and protects Sarah and the promise from destruction by Abraham's actions
5. A lot of the end of chapter 20 is emphasizing that God did truly protect His promise - the son born by Sarah would be Abraham's son, the son of promise

C. The emphasis of the passage comes in Abimelech's and Abraham's discussion

1. Abimelech, the Philistine, reproves Abraham, the man of God, for his sin - *"You have done to me things that ought not to be done."*
2. All Abraham does is make excuses: *I did it because I thought, "There is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife."*
3. The root of Abraham's failure lay here: Abraham believed something about men (there is no fear of God in this place) instead of something about God (He will accomplish His promises)
4. In other words Abraham feared men not God - he focused his eyes on what he thought men could do, not what he knew God could do
5. He spent his time meditating on the dangers, real or perceived, not the promises of God that hedged him in

D. This is a continual danger for God's people - to fear men rather than believe God

1. Matthew 10:26-31 - *"So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."*
2. Our focus must be on God who is sure to fulfill His promise, not on men who may try to thwart the promise
3. Assuredly you will run into dangers and trials because the world hates the promise of God, but don't worry about them, focus your eyes on God and remember that He will assuredly keep His promises
4. In the end, men can only kill you - if you think about that long enough in light of Christ, it is a great comfort

II. Because Christ is... the Son given by God.

Genesis 21:1 - *The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.*

A. The amazing thing about Genesis 21 is that Sarah, an old barren woman, gives birth to a son

1. We've already seen that this is related to God revealing Himself as God Almighty who does the impossible
2. But as we see God do the impossible here, I want to stop and meditate on the meaning of God's action
3. I want to stop here and meditate, because Sarah is not just an amazing story of God's power, but Sarah's barrenness and the birth of Isaac is part of a theme and pattern across Scripture that points us to Christ

B. The theme of the barren woman

1. The types of the barren woman in the Old Testament
 - a. Eve was not a barren woman, God intervened and gave her a third son after she lost the first two
 - b. Sarah was barren for ninety years, yet God visited Sarah and gave her a son of promise
 - c. Rebekah also was barren, as we will see in a few chapters, but after prayer, God grants two sons
 - d. Rachel again is barren, but God eventually gives her sons who become the people of God
 - e. Samson's mother was barren but God visited her and gave her a son who became a deliverer of Israel
 - f. Ruth was not barren, but a childless, Moabite widow, yet God provides for her a child who sired kings
 - g. Hannah was barren but God gives her a child who becomes the prophet who anoints Israel's kings
 - h. The Old Testament portrays the theme of the barren woman bearing children over and over
2. The background of the barren woman
 - a. Why does Scripture tell us about barren women who bear children so much? The answer lies all the way back in Genesis 3 and the promise of a savior
 - b. The promise of a savior was given, amazingly, to the woman and was phrased like this
 - i. Genesis 3:15 - *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*"
 - c. The problem, though, is that no woman could bear such a child
 - i. How could humanity provide their own savior - it is impossible
 - ii. The barren woman represents all of humanity - we must provide but we cannot provide a savior
 - d. So, the barren woman teaches us of our inability to obtain the promise but also highlights God's intervention to fulfill His promise
 - i. Humanity could not obtain the promise, but God intervenes to give us the promise
 - ii. The barren woman who could not conceive is given power by God to conceive a child
3. So, the theme of barrenness also continues through the prophets
 - a. Isaiah portrays Israel as a barren woman in Isaiah 49 because they had not been able to obtain the promises but promises that God will intervene - Isaiah 49:20-22 - *The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears: 'The place is too narrow for me; make room for me to dwell in.' Then you will say in your heart: 'Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; from where have these come?'" Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.*
 - b. So, in Isaiah 54, Isaiah tells barren Israel that her children will be counted as more than any who had born children - Isaiah 54:1 - *"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the LORD.*
 - c. Though Israel had been barren and unable to provide a true heir, God's promises will be fulfilled and an heir will be born who will inherit the land, barren Israel and barren humanity would yet bear a son
 - d. But the most amazing development of the theme in the prophets is the promise of a birth even more miraculous than the barren woman bearing a child - Isaiah 7:14 - *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*
4. The theme of barrenness continues into the beginning of the New Testament as well where it is fulfilled
 - a. So, Elizabeth who is barren is visited by God and bears the last prophet who will make straight the way for the Messiah, partially by recalling the theme of the barren woman bearing children
 - b. And then Mary, who is more than barren but a virgin, is visited by the Most High and given a child, a child whom humanity could not bear but God provided, a child who could fulfill the promise of Genesis 3, a child from the woman who would crush the serpent's head
 - c. This was impossible, but God has done it - Christ is the Son who is provided by God not gained from man, our faith is in Christ because God has done it

C. The barren woman reminds us that God must act to fulfill His promise because we are completely incapable

1. The theme of the barren woman is summed up in Christ's words in Mark 10:27 - *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."*

III. Faith is... honestly reporting our laughter

Genesis 21:7 - *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."*

A. Sarah's reaction to Isaac's birth is an honest assessment of what has happened so far in the story

1. Sarah looks back on the fact that both she and Abraham had laughed at the promise
 - a. Genesis 17:17 - *Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*
 - b. Genesis 18:12 - *So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"*
2. Sarah probably remembers God confronting her about her laughter less than a year ago
 - a. Genesis 13:13-15 - *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."*
3. Laughter has been the theme of Isaac's birth, whose very name means laughter

B. So when Isaac is born, Sarah honestly admits that she had trouble believing in the promise

1. Who would have thought it? Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?
2. Both Abraham and Sarah had struggled to believe such an apparently outrageous promise
3. But God fulfilled His promise even when Sarah and Abraham struggled to believe
4. And Sarah tells everyone that, though she doubted, God fulfilled

C. Sarah publishes her failure to trust in order to glorify God

1. She had laughed and disbelieved the promise, but this only serves to glorify God more
2. God had fulfilled the promise that was so impossible Sarah laughed

D. Sarah's actions here remind us that it is right to be honest about our failures because they point to God's glory

1. I think here especially of Paul who was very honest about His failures and used them to point to God's grace
2. I Timothy 1:12-17 - *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*
3. Paul honestly assessed who he was and how impossible it was for him to receive the promise, but then he takes that and uses it to point to God's great power, grace and glory - God is glorified in Paul's honesty

E. So we ought to be honest about our former and continuing failures and point to God's grace

1. I'm not suggesting that we sensationalize sin or treat it lightly, nor do we need to always go into details
2. And I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't be constantly growing in grace and becoming more holy every day
3. But we can be honest about our weakness and failures to the glory of God
4. The opposite of this is to be a 'white-washed sepulcher' who tries to glorify himself for his perceived self-righteousness - instead of pointing to our goodness we can point to our weakness in order to glorify God
5. II Corinthians 11:30 - *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*
6. II Corinthians 12:9 - *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

IV. Because Christ is... our laughter

Genesis 21:6 - *And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."*

A. The two laughter points this morning go together, but depend on a play on words

1. Laughter can refer to scorn and disbelief, laughing at something in derision
2. Or laughter can refer to joy and mirth, laughing at how good something is
3. The word laughter in English and in Hebrew allows this play on words, and this play on words is important in the passage
4. Sarah and Abraham laugh in derision, but God provides for them laughter of joy
5. So Isaac is named laughter in order to capture both sides of the story

B. Sarah's laughter now over Isaac is joy

1. When Sarah says, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." she is referring to this joyful laughter - God gave barren Sarah joy and laughter in the birth of Isaac
2. And Sarah's joy and laughter are so contagious that everyone will laugh with joy at Isaac's birth
3. Psalm 113:9 - *He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!*

C. As with everything pertaining to the promised son, this joyous laughter finds its culmination in Christ

1. Luke 2:8-11 - *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*
2. Matthew 2:10-11 - *When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*
3. Christ's birth, like Isaac's was an occasion for great joy, the impossible promised Son had been born
4. Although the promise had waited long and at times looked dead and barren, God had fulfilled His word and brought good news of great joy for all the people

D. So now our goal is to find our joy in Christ even to the despising of the world because He is our laughter

1. Matthew 13:44 - *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*
2. John 15:11 - *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*
3. Romans 15:13 - *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*
4. Colossians 1:11 - *May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy,*
5. Zechariah 9:9 - *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

E. And it is this joy that allows us to be honest about our failures

1. Faith is honestly reporting our laughter because Christ is our laughter
2. Unless you put the two statements together the first honestly doesn't make any sense
 - a. We ought to be ashamed and mortified of our failures before God; we ought not to publish in them
 - b. If faith is honestly reporting our laughter, this is to our great shame and discouragement
3. But when the second half is added, Christ is our laughter, the faith makes sense
 - a. When Christ is our laughter, when we rejoice in His salvation, our shame is swallowed up in His joy
 - b. Christ has become our great joy, so we can be honest about who we were, and even who we still are as we are not fully sanctified, because our joy is not in who we are, but in who Christ is

V. Christ is... the one who God is with in all He does

Genesis 21:22 - *At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do."*

A. As Abimelech approaches Abraham at the end of our text this morning, his opening line is very significant

1. Abimelech notes that God is with Abraham in everything
2. Abimelech had been watching Abraham, his neighbor, and concluded that God was with Abraham
 - a. Perhaps he saw and heard about the birth of Isaac, Abraham's heir, when he was 100 years old
 - b. Perhaps he saw Abraham's divinely guided success in the land (related to the theme of water)
 - c. Perhaps he saw Abraham's worship in the land (verse 33 - Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of the Lord)
 - d. Honestly, we're not sure exactly what he saw, but he looked at Abraham and saw the evidence of God's work in his life
3. This statement falls squarely in the theme of blessed and a blessing
 - a. Abimelech sees that Abraham is blessed by God
 - b. God is with Abraham, God is blessing Abraham, with land, with a son and with success
 - c. God has already blessed Abraham so much that those around him could clearly see it

B. And, at the risk of repeating myself one too many times, the 'blessed' theme must find its culmination in Christ

1. As God is with Abraham to bless him and to demonstrate Abraham's blessed character to the nations, He is pointing forward to Christ whom He will be with completely to bless and to demonstrate His identity
2. Jesus clearly claims God's work is evident in His ministry
 - a. John 10:24-38 - *So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came--- and Scripture cannot be broken--- do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."*
 - b. God is not only with Christ in everything Christ does, God and Christ are one
 - c. And, as God works in Christ He is demonstrating to us who Christ is - the blessed one
 - d. So, God's works in Christ ought to show us that God is with Christ in all He does
 - e. This is what Christ is faulting the Jews with, for not seeing that God is with Him
3. Some of the Jews do understand this, they are able to see that God is with Christ
 - a. John 3:1-2 - *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."*
 - b. Nicodemus comes to Christ because he can look at Christ and see that God is with Him

C. So, God is with Christ in all that He does

1. Abraham's blessedness points to Christ's blessedness
2. Abimelech's sight calls us to see Christ the blessed One
3. We ought to be able to look at Christ, to look at Him in the Gospels and meditate on Him in the Epistles and see that truly God was with Christ in everything

VI. Christ is... the protector with whom we must seek peace

Genesis 21:23-24 - *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."*

A. Abimelech not only recognizes Abraham as blessed here, this morning, but He seeks a blessing from Abraham

1. As Abimelech sees that God is with Abraham, he realizes that he needs to make peace with the man of God
2. So Abimelech approaches Abraham to make a treaty of peace with Him
 - a. The treaty is first negative - that Abraham will not deal falsely with him - that is as Abraham grows greater and greater Abimelech wants to know that Abraham is not going to turn and destroy him and his people
 - b. Then the treaty is positive - that Abraham would deal kindly with him in the land - beyond simply not destruction, Abimelech wants to ally himself with Abraham and receive a portion of his blessings
3. And Abraham responds simply - "I will swear"
 - a. As God's chosen one, Abraham shows and showers God's favor on Abimelech when Abimelech approaches him - Abraham demonstrates great grace to Abimelech in his simple words
 - b. Abraham makes a covenant of peace and blessing with Abimelech again fulfilling the theme of blessing - Abraham is blessing the nations with the blessing God has given him

B. Looking forward, Psalm 2 calls us to make peace with God's king

1. Psalm 2:12 - Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.
2. Psalm 2:12 contains all of the same themes
 - a. There is a danger of destruction if we are not at peace with God's chosen one - His wrath is quickly kindled
 - b. But there is also a promise of blessing if we come to seek refuge in God's chosen one - Blessed are all who take refuge in Him
3. But Psalm 2 connects the peace-bringing man of God with God's anointed king
 - a. The one who will truly bring peace is the ruler of God's people

C. And, again, this is fulfilled in Christ the great king who brings peace

1. Christ can give us peace with God because of His work of atonement
 - a. Romans 5:1 - *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
 - b. Colossians 1:19-20 - *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*
2. And Christ offers peace to His people - As God's chosen one, he shows and showers God's favor on us
 - a. John 14:27 - *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.*

D. So, we must run to Christ and seek peace with the one who brings peace

1. Abraham the covenant-maker points to Christ the covenant-maker
2. But where Abraham could only promise peace and blessing in a temporal realm with men, Christ promises peace in an eternal realm with God
3. Christ is the one who brings eternal blessing to those who seek peace with Him
4. So when we see that Christ is the great king whom God is with, we must run to Him and seek peace knowing that He is ready and willing to shower blessing on us if we will only come