

Our Gracious God (Genesis 21:1-34)

Christian life is a journey filled with highs and lows. Our goal is to grow in our faith so that we represent God well. The key to growth is how we respond to trials. Abraham had just had a humiliating experience with Abimelech. But he learned from his mistakes and embraced God, who demonstrated His grace and power.

INTRODUCTION: The past 12 months have been the most challenging and difficult time that I have experienced in my whole life. It started when my dad's Alzheimer got out of control, when he attempted to assault my mom. Although my parents were 95 and 94 at the time, they lived independently in their condo. Through the pandemic, my sisters have helped my mom take care of dad. All three of them were burnt out. As a result, I quickly flew out to California to take care for my parents last summer. After 4 months, my separation with Ellie affected our marriage. We all decided that it was not sustainable. Therefore, we decided to move my dad into a facility. However, my brother objected to that option. He felt strongly that family members are responsible for taking care of their aging parents until they pass. There was great tension between my brother and the rest of the family.

My brother volunteered to take care of my parents by inviting them to live with him in San Antonio. It was quite a process to move my parents. Unfortunately, my dad fell several times and within a few weeks, it was too much for my brother to handle. I had to move my parents to Houston, where I had to take care of them. Two weeks later, I ruptured my Achilles tendon at the Father/Son Retreat. It was challenging having one good foot. Three months later, I re-ruptured my Achilles a second time and I had a second surgery. When one thing went wrong, a whole series of negative problems followed. How do we respond when things go haywire? Do we react in anger and frustration or do we respond with patience? Life is filled with unexpected turns. How we respond to challenges will determine what kind of life we will have. Trials and mistakes are normal, but what makes a difference is whether we learned from our past mistakes or not.

We have seen last week that Abraham had a humiliating experience with Abimelech. The question is whether Abraham would learn from his mistakes. Was he going to let his fears dictate his behavior or was he going to trust God in difficult times? Would he fall back into his bad habit of yielding to his fear? In Genesis 12, Abraham put his wife, Sarah, in harm's way in order to save his own life. He pretended she was his sister, which resulted in her being taken into Pharaoh's harem of concubines and likely being forced into adultery. Again, in Genesis 20, out of fear, he repeated the same mistake by claiming that Sarah was his sister. Apparently, he did not trust the Lord to protect him. In our study today, we will see how Abraham bounced back from his moral failure and embraced God as his Eternal God. He got himself back on the right track.

Many of us have made mistakes in life. It might be procrastinating on a project and it came back to bite us. It might be jumping to a conclusion without hearing the whole story. It might be yielding to the temptation of pornography. Are we going to learn from our mistakes or not? Are we going to bounce back and get back on the right track? Thank God for his grace. His love for us is not dependent on how good we are. He loves us unconditionally. God's grace is clearly displayed in this passage.

Before we jump into this passage, I want to give you some context. God has promised Abraham a great descendent and a great nation, but he did not have a son. After many years during which his wife was barren, Sarah took things into her own hands, feeling that God needed some help. She suggested to Abraham that her handmaid would lie down with him to bear them a son and he consented to do so. Both demonstrated a lack of faith in the Lord

God in Genesis 17:16, said to Abraham, “I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Here God make it clear Abraham will have a son from Sarah, his wife. Interestingly, we see that Abraham just laughed it off in disbelief v.17. It is like a teen rolling their eyes stating you must be kidding. Not only that, but Abraham said to God in 17:18, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

If I was God, I would be ticked off at Abraham’s response of using Ishmael instead of God’s promised child. Instead of judging Abraham, God demonstrated grace by doubling down on his promise in Genesis 17:19, “God said, “No, but 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.” In 17:21, God made a clear time frame when she would bear a son. “But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.” Up to this time, there was no clue when the son would come. However, God states that Sarah would bear a son in a year from now.

Not only did Abraham laugh at God when God promised him a son, but we also see Sarah responded similarly in Gen. 18:12, “So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” Sarah questioned God. The Lord responded in 18:14, “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.” There is nothing too hard for the Lord. As a matter of fact, the harder it is, the more glory will be displayed when He resolves it because no one else can get that credit.

ILLUSTRATION: Back in the mid-1980s, our church decided to expand our facility in the midst of the worst recession in Houston. Almost 200 members lost their jobs. People thought we were totally crazy to attempt to raise a huge sum of money under these terrible economic conditions. The question before us was, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” The Lord rallied HCC members to give generously as well as to lend money to the church through church bonds. God made what appeared to be an impossible task a reality.

Here in Gen. 21, we see the fulfillment of the promise from God. Indeed. After 25 long years, God blessed Abraham with a son just as He promised according to His timing. In spite of Abraham and Sarah’s lack of faith, God demonstrated His grace by still keeping his promise. God always keeps His promise, but it is in His own way and in His own time. From verses 1-21, we see how Abraham grew in his faith as God demonstrated His grace. [Let us dive in as we read vv.1-5, “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.”]

A. Abraham Grew in His Faith as God Demonstrated His Grace

1. God is gracious by fulfilling His promise in spite of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief (21:1-7)

- a. The Lord fulfilled His promise by providing the child for Sarah and Abraham in their old age (21:1-2)

Not only did we witness God's grace, but also God's power. Sarah in verse 5-7 basically said that no one would believe that Abraham, who is 100, and Sarah, who is 90 would bear a child. They were way beyond child bearing age. Yet God made something impossible a reality. There is nothing too hard for God, who specializes in miracles.

APPLICATION: Although some people have laughed at God thinking it is impossible to raise the funds for Mattress Firm's property and its operational cost, we need to remember what God said, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

- b. Abraham Obeyed God's Word by naming the child, Isaac, and by circumcising him (21:3-5)

When God demonstrated His grace by providing Abraham a son, Abraham responded in faith to God in obedience: First, by naming the newborn Isaac. That was the name that God wanted Abraham to name his first born. Isaac literally means "laughter." God has such a sense of humor. Although Abraham and Sarah laughed at God in a derogatory way, now they laugh with great joy because God's grace has poured upon them as they celebrate the birth of their son. The second way how they demonstrated obedience is by circumcising Isaac on the 8th day according to God's commands.

This whole first section really focused on God and his grace. We have seen how God is gracious by fulfilling His promise in spite of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief (21:1-7). In addition, we have seen how God is gracious by approving Sarah's instinct to protect the child of promise and by providing for Hagar and Ishmael in spite of being rejected (8-20). Let's read vv. 8-13, "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."

2. God is gracious by approving Sarah's instinct to protect the child of promise and by providing for Hagar and Ishmael in spite of being rejected (21:8-21).

- a. God approves the removal of the threat to the promise (21:8-13)

Isaac was about 3 years old, when he was weaned. Abraham and Sarah had a big feast inviting many guest to witness this happy occasion. What was a joyous event turned sour when Sarah saw Ishmael laughing at Isaac. The word "laughing" has the same root word as joyous laughing, but in this context, it has a very negative connotation. In NIV, it is translated "mocking." Ishmael was around 17 years old. Before Isaac arrived into the scene, he was the main focus. Now Ishmael might be jealous. He taunted and mocked Isaac. In a cross reference in Galatians 4:29, the apostle Paul says that Ishmael "persecuted Isaac."

Sarah had the foresight of knowing God had promised her son a great nation. She saw Ishmael as a threat to the promised child. Therefore, she told Abraham to cast both Hagar and Ishmael out because both of them could not coexist. Abraham initially was very unhappy about this request. However, God quickly stepped in to approve Sarah's instinct to protect the child of promise as recorded in vv. 12-13. Abraham was comforted by God promising both of his boys would have a great nation.

God did not forget His promise to Ishmael in Genesis 17:20, "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation." Again, we witness God's grace. In spite of the great mess that Abraham and Sarah had made by taking things into their own hands with Ishmael being born, yet God kept His promise. Although we make mistakes, God can still display grace upon us by giving us something that we do not deserve. God's grace is enough.

b. God protects and provides for the outcasts in the wilderness (21:14-21)

From vv.14-21, Hagar and Ishmael were sent off into the wilderness. Before long, their food supply and water ran out. It appeared to be a hopeless situation as Hagar was weeping. Let us read vv. 17-18, "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."

While Hagar does cry out to God, it is the boy's cries that God hears. This offers special meaning to the fact that Ishmael means "God hears." Names in Scripture are important. Although Ishmael was a sign of distrust toward God as well as rejection from Abraham and Sarah, God was still gracious toward him and Hagar. God stepped in to protect and provided for the outcasts in the wilderness.

APPLICATION: In spite of whatever mistakes we have made, God is a gracious and loving God. God loves us so much that He sent His only begotten son to die on the cross to pay the penalty of sin on our behalf. Anyone, no matter what terrible background we have had, God has offered us salvation. If we place our faith in Jesus, then we will be saved.

[Abraham grew in his faith as God demonstrated His grace by fulfilling His promise in spite of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief. God shows His grace by approving Sarah's instinct to protect the child of promise and by providing for Hagar and Ishmael in spite of being rejected. We come to the last section of our passage this morning, where we see Abraham grew in his faith as Abimelech recognized that God was with Abraham.]

B. Abraham grew in faith as Abimelech recognizes that God was with Abraham

The previous encounter Abraham had with Abimelech was a negative one in Genesis 20, where Abraham lied to Abimelech claiming that Sarah was his sister in fear of the foreigners of killing him. God had to step in to protect Abraham in spite of throwing his wife under the bus. What an act; instead of being a strong husband that protected and defended his wife, he acted cowardly.

There is massive change one chapter later as Abimelech encountered Abraham. Let us read v. 22-24, “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.”

Earlier, Abimelech saw Abraham as a liar and deceiver, a weak man without any backbone. However, now, he says, “God is with you in all that you do.” Wow, this is probably one of the best compliments we can receive from an unbeliever. As a matter of fact, do your classmates know that you are a Christian? Do your coworkers know that you love God? Do your family members and relatives see clear evidences that God is ruling in your life?

ILLUSTRATION: Minister Mark Poon, our Cantonese pastor’s parents came last summer to visit him. He stayed for several months. Although he was adamantly against Christianity, he did visit HCC. He was surprised at how well he was treated. He could not believe the consistent demonstration of love toward both he and his wife. Through time, he concluded that God is with the Cantonese brothers and sisters. He wanted to understand what caused them to be so kind. It was because Christ has changed their lives and Mr. Poon recognized their behavior was contrary to the ways of the world. It caused him to embrace God and he placed his trust in Jesus Christ’s work on the cross.

We see that King Abimelech witnessed that there was something different about Abraham; God was with him and God has blessed Abraham. It motivated him to seek Abraham out to make a treaty between them. He requested for a peaceful relationship. We witness here how God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham to be a blessing to others.

Abraham has changed a lot; he responded properly to the mistakes that he has made. He has learned to grow in his faith in the Lord. Instead of trusting in himself, Abraham trusted in God. As a result, God blesses him. It was so clear that God is with Abraham that the ruler of the Philistines also acknowledges him directly. They wanted to live in peaceful co-existence.

We see another change is that Abraham moved from being a coward to being a courageous leader. In the previous chapter, Abraham was afraid of Abimelech, but here in verses 25ff, “When Abraham reprovved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized.” Wells are very critical during the early days. To maintain continuous peace between relationships, one needs to restore peace when it is disrupted. Abraham was willing to bring up a controversial topic. Abimelech’s servant has stolen a well that belongs to Abraham. Abraham rebuked the ruler for letting his servants steal the well. Abimelech claims that he did not know about this incident. Instead of keeping quiet, Abraham brought up the problem with Abimelech.

ILLUSTRATION: We need to correct another brother. May we do it out of love. Various times, it might be a blind spot and they are not aware of it. This week, I approached a leader to correct him in how he dealt with another leader. I was thrilled that he accepted the admonishment well. He thanked me for letting him know. This brother seeks to learn from his mistakes.

Abimelech and Abraham were able to settle their difference. It all starts with bringing it up to the person that offended you personally; various times, they might not even be aware of this problem. Open communication is critical.

In order to ensure that peaceful relationship continue into the future, they made an oath. By taking this oath at the enactment of the covenant, Abraham secured his legal right to the well and his permission to dwell in the land in peace. With his present of the seven animals to make the oath, Abraham convinced Abimelech that he had dug the well.

Abraham concluded the agreement with Abimelech by naming the place Beersheba, which means “they swear.” They wanted a visible landmark to remind them that God has brought them together for peace. The dispute between the men was resolved by an oath that formalized by seven lambs, which symbolized a mutual oath. Naming this critical place is to preserve for future generations the record of how that property was secured.

ILLUSTRATION: In 2008, I went on a mission trip to Uganda, where I taught church leaders the Word of God. While driving to a small warehouse where I was going to teach leaders that traveled by foot for several hours, someone throw a rock at us and it went through the opened car window and it hit me right between my eyes. If it went in either direction, it would have damaged my eyes. I kept the bright brown rock so that I can recall God’s protections. If there is something significant that happens, keep an object as a reminder of God’s grace.

Conclusion:

Christian life is a journey filled with highs and lows. Our goal is to grow in our faith so that we represent God well. The key to growth is how we respond to trails. Abraham just had a humiliating experience with Abimelech. But he learned from his mistakes and embraced God, who demonstrated His grace and power.

Although this past year has been most difficult one, God has stretched my faith. I had to learn to trust the Lord. Although my original plan did not work out, God is a sovereign God. He provided a great residential place for my dad 10 minutes away from where I live. My mom is staying with me and the transition has been very good. She has told me numerous times that God is with HCC. Believers have demonstrated consistent love toward her. It has caused her to embrace God. After I ruptured my Achilles, so many brothers and sisters offered to help me. I sense the love of Christ.

God has called all of us to present Hi well on earth. May we recognize that God is gracious and powerful. May it cause us to trust God and to obey Him. For God is the waymaker, the miracle maker, promise keeper, the light in the darkness. Even though we do not see it, He is working. Even though we do not feel it, He is working.