

By Grace Alone
Genesis 21:1-14
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Dr. Jerry Nelson

When I was growing up... (That reminds me. Maybe I already told you about the little boy who said to his mother that when he grew up he wanted to be just like his father? To which his mother said, you can't do both!)

When I was growing up I got saved several times.

That will sound heretical to some of you.

But what I mean is that I had a hard time coming to grips with the concept that hinders many people from becoming true Christians.

Apparently one of the most difficult things for most people to truly accept, regardless of their age, is that a relationship with God is established and maintained solely on the basis of God's grace.

When I was very young I heard that if I "asked Jesus into my heart" I would become a child of God, a Christian, and would be assured that I would go to heaven when I died rather than to hell.

If the formula of "asking Jesus into my heart" could produce all that, then "ask" I would, and I did.

But as I grew older I began to doubt whether I truly understood what it meant to "ask Jesus into my heart."

And I doubted whether or not I was a Christian.

A little later I observed that people who said they got saved, became Christians, were born again, were those who "went forward" in a public religious meeting – at church or an evangelistic meeting.

I figured that if "going forward" is what it took to become a child of God, then I would "go forward".

But then later I would doubt whether I had gone forward with the right motives.

And I doubted whether or not I was a Christian.

Then I learned that what I needed to do was pray a "sinner's prayer" and mean it and then I would become a true Christian.

And so I did.

But then later I began to doubt whether I had prayed the right prayer with the right degree of fervency.

And I doubted whether or not I was a Christian.

What was my problem?

In my thinking, where was my focus?

Was it on what God had done or what I was doing?

I was trying to find the formula that I could use to satisfy some divine requirement of me.

My faith was more in my ability to “get it right” than on God’s grace.

And since I was never certain I had it right, I doubted the result – I doubted whether or not I was a Christian.

Even when I would hear certain Bible verses I would wonder about my doing it right.

John 1:12 “as many as receive him to them he gives the right to be called the children of God.

John 3:16 “whoever believes in him will have everlasting life”

Rom 10:9-10 “if we confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved.”

Which is it? Do I receive, believe or confess?

Again the focus was on my ability to do the right thing instead of on the grace of God.

It was subtle but I was assuming that my relationship with God depended as much, or more, on me as on God.

Finally, one day, by God’s Spirit, I realized that I had my focus in the wrong place.

The issue was not what I would do but what God had done.

The issue was not in my “getting it right” but simply in accepting what God had already done right.

Remember those New Testament words about “Receiving, believing, confessing”, or some of our cultural responses of praying a sinner’s prayer, going forward, or even being baptized?

They were all equally valid ways of expressing the same idea.

I finally came to the understanding that here and now I simply trust God to save me, not on the basis of anything I have done, or ever will do, or even on the basis of asking in precisely the right way.

I simply trust him, here and now, to forgive my sins and bring me into his family forever.

As a result, I might say a certain prayer, just think it, go forward, throw a stick in the fire at camp, or raise my hand, or put my name on a card.

But the issue was not what I have done, but what God has done.

The problem in my childhood was that my faith was in me – in me “getting it right”.

The same focus on our actions instead of God’s can also confuse us even after we are Christians.

During the time in my growing up years when I wondered if I was “getting it right” to actually become a Christian.

I was also wondering if I was “doing it right” to remain a Christian.

I would go along for a while thinking everything was all right between God and me and then I would do something that would bother my conscience greatly.

When my conscience would bother me I would immediately begin wondering if I was still a Christian.

Now I was reared in a church and home that taught that once you truly became a Christian you remained a Christian.

But that didn’t stop me from wondering.

Why?

Because my focus was on what I was doing rather than on what God had done.

Though it was subtle, I was assuming that my relationship with God depended more on me than on God.

Now it is interesting that when I did something very wrong against my father, I never doubted that he was still my father – even though I knew he would be very angry and I would get severely disciplined.

I never thought to think that if I did something bad enough, I might no longer be his kid.

It never occurred to me that I had to maintain a certain standard or I'd get thrown out of the family.

But when it came to my relationship with God, I assumed it all depended on me.

Why?

Because my focus was on what I was doing rather than on what God had done.

Though it was subtle, I was assuming that my relationship with God depended more on me than on God.

My faith, my security was in me.

Now what is true of becoming a Christian and remaining a Christian – that it is all of grace – is also true of living life.

The future God has for us on this earth now and for eternity, is by his grace, not our efforts.

If we want what God says is best for us in life and eternity, we must stop trying to make the best happen by our own means, and instead, trust in his grace.

And what we are going to learn today from God's word is that you can't have it both ways.

You are either trusting in yourself or you are trusting in God.

In fact we will see that God forces the issue.

You who are familiar with the book of Genesis know that, beginning in Chapter 12, we have the story of Abraham.

Right from the beginning we, the readers, are enticed into wondering how the story will turn out.

In the prologue to the story, we are told that Sarah, Abraham's wife, cannot have children.

So when Abraham becomes the center of the story in chapter 12 we immediately sense a tension.

Because we hear that God's plan is to use Abraham to begin a great nation of people through whom all the people of the world would be blessed.

God is hanging his plan for the world on one man and his wife.

He's already 75 years old and she's 65.

And the man's wife is unable to have children in fact has never been able – she is barren.

Now that's a problem!

So when Abraham leaves his father's household and his country to go to the land that God would show him – we are wondering either what is wrong with Abraham or how this is going to work out.

As soon as Abraham obeys God and moves to where God tells him, God comes to him again to reiterate his promise – “To your offspring I will give this land.”

Again we have to wonder “What offspring?” Sarah is barren.

The next thing that happens is that Abraham and Sarah wind up in Egypt and he and she are telling the Pharaoh that she is Abraham's sister.

Now it appears that what hope there might have been for a miracle to work out God's plan, has dried up in the sand.

But God got them out of that jam and then after Lot and Abraham divide up the land, God comes again to Abraham and again promises, “All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth (in number).”

Well, Abraham is back on track but there is still that “little” problem of Sarah being unable to have children.

As the story progresses, Abraham rescues his nephew Lot from captivity and again God comes to Abraham to restate his promise to him and make a covenant with Abraham.

“This man (Eliezer, Abraham’s chief servant) will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir... Look up at the heavens and count the stars... So shall your offspring be (in number).”

And God sealed that promise with a dramatic covenant ceremony.

Again we have to wonder how God is going to “pull this off”.

In chapter 16 Abraham is now 86 years old and Sarah is 76.

It has been 11 years since God said Abraham would have many children and nothing has happened.

So, as we have seen, they take matters into their own hands.

Sarah decides that if Abraham is ever going to have a child it will have to be by someone other than herself and so she gives Abraham her servant girl, Hagar, to produce a child.

Nothing but trouble came from that arrangement.

When Hagar got pregnant she got uppity, Sarah blamed Abraham and forced him to get rid of Hagar.

God intervened and told Hagar to return and submit to Sarah but it was undoubtedly not a happy home.

So when Ishmael (Abraham’s and Hagar’s child) is born we are told that he is not the way God’s plan will be carried out.

So what will God do?

In chapter 17 God comes to Abraham again.

Abraham is now 99 years old.

Once again God reiterates his promise and this time adds something that is humanly impossible.

Genesis 17:4 “This is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations...I will bless her (Sarah) and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be mother of nations.”

You remember the story.

Abraham fell down with laughter, the laughter of doubt I believe.

He said what we think as we read the story.

“Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old?
Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”

Then again, Abraham says what we are thinking.

“If only Ishmael might live under your blessing.”

“That’s it!” we think. Ishmael is the way for God to accomplish his plan for Abraham.

And we listen, as God says, “No”.

Sarah will bear a son and you will name him Isaac and it is through **him** that I will fulfill my promise to you.

Not only did God tell Abraham this, but he also told Sarah.

Within weeks God came again to Abraham so Sarah could hear and became even more specific.

Genesis 18:10 “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Not only Abraham and Sarah, but we the readers also, are asked to believe the impossible.

But, the author doesn’t finish the story right away.

He takes time to tell us about Lot and his family in Sodom.

And when he comes back to Abraham and Sarah, we don’t hear about a miracle, **instead we hear again how Abraham and Sarah mess up.**

In Chapter 20, as we saw last week, Abraham and Sarah moved to a city named Gerar and, like 20 years earlier, told the King of the region that Sarah was Abraham’s sister.

The King knowing no better, took her to be his wife.

As readers, we are again led to believe this must be the end.

God’s plan has been finally ruined.

Even if Sarah, could get pregnant, it would be King Abimelech’s child not Abraham’s.

But again God intervened.

The king never touched Sarah and she went back to Abraham.

But the problem still remains.

God's promise to Abraham hinges on him having a son and Sarah is barren.

Thus far in the story of Abraham two themes have woven their way through the story.

One is the promise of God – stated, restated, covenanted, and stated again.

No matter what happens, God keeps coming back to reiterate his promise – that God is going to do a great work in Abraham's life.

The other theme woven through the story is that Abraham and Sarah seem almost intent on either destroying any hope for a future by their sinful actions or they want to take over the plan and make it happen by their own efforts.

They say they trust in God but every time they turn around it seems **their focus, maybe even their trust, is on or in what they will do** rather than on the promise and grace of God.

By the time we get to chapter 21 we don't know what to expect.

Between Sarah's barrenness and Abraham's self-help efforts, and both of their sin – we don't know if God's plan for their lives will ever work out.

Then in almost anti-climactic fashion, what we have waited for, so long, finally happens.

READ Genesis 21:1-8

Moses, the author, takes great pains to insure that we see the irony of the matter.

For all of Abraham's sin, for all of his efforts at getting God's best by his own means, **the future for Abraham came only by God's grace.**

Genesis 21:1

"Now the Lord was **gracious** to Sarah as he had said..."

"And the **Lord did** for Sarah what he had promised."

Genesis 21:2

“Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham...at the very time **God had promised** him.”

The author wants us to know that the entire promise was fulfilled by the Word of the Lord (“as he had said”), the power of the Lord (“And the Lord did for Sarah”) and the timing of the Lord (“At the very time God had promised”).

The fulfillment of part of Abraham’s dream, and the evidence that the rest of the promise would be fulfilled, had come about not by Abraham’s efforts but solely by the grace of God.

Who do we trust – ourselves or God?

The author also emphasizes the laughter surrounding this entire event.

Abraham **named** his son, “Isaac” which means “he laughs”.

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.”

When Abraham first heard, a year before, that Sarah would have a son, he laughed.

When Sarah heard it a year earlier, she laughed.

The laughter is in the oddity of such an old couple having a child.

The laughter is in the miracle that Sarah **had** a child.

The laughter is in the joy that Sarah and Abraham have the son of promise.

The laughter is in the grace of God that in spite of their laughter of doubt and cynicism earlier, God, solely by grace, gave them real laughter.

This scene of laughter is a little like the epilogue of some television programs.

The Cartwrights on Bonanza stand around after solving some life-threatening situation and laugh at Hop-Sing’s frustration with them. And the television screen fades to a commercial.

Everyone is laughing with joy with Abraham and Sarah and it feels like the tension that began in chapter 12 has now been resolved – the story is over.

Not so!

Because Moses isn't just telling a story, he's making a point.

Listen to what happens next!

READ Genesis 21:8-14 (Important to start at v8 even though it was read earlier.)

We are told, from other sources, that children were weaned at around three years of age or even a little older in those days.

That would mean that **Ishmael** was 16 or 17 years old.

While the party for Isaac was going on, Sarah noticed that Ishmael was “mocking” Isaac.

The Apostle Paul in Galatians 4:29 said he was “persecuting” Isaac. Here a new threat is introduced into the story.

Sarah's demand that Abraham get rid of both Hagar and Ishmael, seems sever until you remember some things.

Like mother like son.

Hagar had mocked or “despised” Sarah when Hagar became pregnant, so here Ishmael is mocking Isaac when he is born.

It is not a stretch to think that Hagar is very threatened by the birth and weaning of Isaac.

That Isaac was born was a threat, that he survived infancy was a greater threat.

And Ishmael is certainly old enough to understand something of what his mother is thinking (and maybe even telling him).

Hagar and Ishmael both know that Isaac displaces Ishmael as the primary heir of Abraham's fortune and future.

What mother wouldn't want her son to inherit Abraham's blessing?

After all, Hagar had served this family for years, had survived Sarah's earlier anger (forgetting that she,

Hagar, had provoked it), and now had a son who for 13 years was the heir-apparent.

So did Hagar put her son up to this malice toward Isaac?

Did she tell Ishmael to do something that would hurt Isaac or did he just develop the attitude out of what she constantly told him about how unfair it was?

Back in 16:12 Hagar had been told what kind of man Ishmael would become. “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand will be against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”

Here in 21:9 the boy is living up to his nature.

Wordsworth wrote, “The child is the father of the man”.

And in Genesis 25:18 we are told that his descendants (like father like sons) “lived in hostility toward all their brothers.”

Neither Hagar nor Ishmael are innocent victims here.

What happens to them is not unjust.

When God rescued them later in the story, it was not justice it was mercy.

The non-elect are not treated unfairly – they are getting exactly what they deserve.

It is pure undeserved mercy that moves God to do anything at all for them – as he does for Hagar and for Ishmael later in the story.

This “mocking/persecution” of little Isaac was apparently very threatening to Sarah.

We don’t know how severe the actions of Ishmael were toward Isaac but Sarah was afraid.

Imagine a 16 year-old boy playing roughly maybe even meanly with a 3 or 4 year old.

But this is not just sibling rivalry.

Sarah recognizes it for what it truly is.

One author put it this way:

“The truth comes to her in a flash as she watches the two boys fighting; she suddenly sees them as the products of two completely incompatible outlooks and ways of going about life and of trying to do service to God. Isaac, beyond all doubt now, is the product of their waiting on God, of the word of God and the way of faith. But now, suddenly, Ishmael rises before her mind as the product of an entirely other way - of the way she herself and her husband took – the way of human wisdom, the way of confidence not in the word of God, but in what the New Testament calls the ‘flesh’, meaning by this term everything centered on the independent, self-determining human will.” (from Wallace 113)

Several times in the New Testament, Paul and others, refer to this time in Abraham’s life.

And they make the point that the birth of Ishmael represents Abraham’s and our efforts at getting God’s blessing by what WE do.

And Isaac represents God’s blessing, given solely by grace.

Whether Sarah’s motives are pure or not we can’t tell but when she tells Abraham to get rid of that slave-woman and her son (refusing to even call him by his name), we know she’s right because God tells Abraham she is.

Chapter 22, which we will look at next week, is often referred to as **the great** test for Abram, and it is.

But what happens next in chapter 21 is **the first** great test.

The issue is this: Who will Abraham trust – himself or God?

God had said the future would come through Isaac.

But Isaac was only three years old, still vulnerable – what if he didn’t live.

Here I have Ishmael, 16 or 17 years of age, strong, and healthy.

In which of these boys is my future most likely - the future I have dreamed about for 25 years?

God is asking Abraham to let go of his own way to the future and trust God's way.

He is asking Abraham to trust in God instead of himself.

Maybe the next chapter is the sacrifice of Isaac but this chapter is the sacrifice of Ishmael.

Abraham loved Ishmael.

Genesis 21:11 "The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son."

The truth be told, Abraham had once hung his future on Ishmael (Abraham's self-help program) rather than on God's promise.

Now God was asking Abraham "Who will you trust?"

It is a poignant story but the battle in Abraham's soul is the most important element of the story.

And remember, lest you think God is unjust, Hagar and Ishmael are not innocent victims.

So back to the crucial issue now before us in the story:

What do you say to your 16 or 17 year old son as you send him and his mother out into the desert with no destination in mind and no evidence they will even live?

Who will Abraham trust?

Genesis 21:14 "Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy."

Jesus said, in Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

Either our trust is in him or it is not.

It cannot be a little in him and a little in something else.

Trust cannot be divided.

And anything else we would trust, instead of God, must be put away.

If we have a “fall back position” or an ace up our sleeve, then our faith is ultimately in us not God.

And as God forced Ishmael out of Abraham’s life, so he will force out of our lives, those other things in which we trust instead of him.

In adult life as in my childhood, to which I referred when I began this sermon, I must choose – in whom will I trust?

Will it be me and my ability to make things happen?

Or will it be God and his promise?

That applies to becoming a Christian and to living as one.

Prayer Chapel