

## AVOIDING THE PARIS EFFECT

Genesis 21 - 14<sup>th</sup> in a series on Abraham

A couple of months ago Laurie and I were on vacation staying for a few days in an area where there were mostly only expensive restaurants. There are a couple of low end places there like a hot dog establishment, but little in the way of mid-level affordable places to eat. We had, in visits past, and through diligent effort, found two places that we liked. We had our first disappointment when we saw that one of the two places had gone out of business. Then I happened to see on my cell phone that the other one was closed for renovation. However, we happened to notice when we were driving by that there appeared to be people going into the restaurant. We decided to try it that evening and found that it was actually open. The place isn't exactly heavy on romantic atmosphere since it's actually a sports bar. But it has a little ocean view and we have had some very good food there before. On our previous visit we had noticed they had many televisions, but they had turned the sound off. When we went to the restaurant this year it was Monday night. They had Monday Night Football on all of the TVs and they had piped the sound up to a level that rivaled a fighter jet afterburner. Saying it was loud would be an enormous understatement. It was right at the level of my maximum pain tolerance. I thought we could just push through it until I noticed Laurie's ears were bleeding.

Well, actually that's an exaggeration, but it was really unpleasant. We decided to just gut it out. We looked at the menu. I was dismayed to find that the item I had before there that I really liked was no longer on the menu. I settled for ordering a hamburger, figuring a sports bar is bound to have great burgers, and Laurie got a steak. Here is my question: how can you ruin a hamburger? They managed it. The bun was dry and awful. The meat was terrible. I ate most of it because I was hungry, but it was easily the worst hamburger I've ever had in my life. The French fries were literally inedible. As for Laurie's steak, if you had a choice between it and the sole of my flip flops you'd probably take the flip flops. We should have gone to the hot dog place.

When you have a reasonable expectation, and that expectation is not met, what happens? You experience disappointment. I hate disappointment. Obviously, no one likes disappointment. Our disappointment about a restaurant is trivial. What is not trivial is when you have some expectation of God and that expectation is not met. That this is a real problem is made evident by the fact that best-selling author Philip Yancey wrote a book titled, *Disappointment With God*. Such disappointment

can sour us in many ways, so what can help us avoid that? Let's look at Genesis 21 and see if there's anything here that can help us handle disappointment with God.

### GOD GAVE A SON

How likely do you think it is that in a few years when Philip Rivers finally retires that I will become the next quarterback for the San Diego Chargers? Rate your answer on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being “highly likely” and 5 being “not likely at all.” Um, can I answer with 1 million? Are you kidding? The word “likely” should not be used in any way whatsoever. That is not merely unlikely, it is utterly impossible! What is the strongest word for impossible that you can think of? Whatever it is, it is not strong enough for that scenario. That will happen when pigs fly. No, I’m pretty sure pigs will fly long before I become an NFL quarterback.

How likely do you think it is that I will win \$100 million in the lottery? Well, how many tickets have you bought, Rick? I haven’t bought any tickets. You haven’t bought any tickets and you want to know how likely it is that you’re going to win the lottery? Yes, exactly. Do you know that you’re an idiot? There is no chance that you’re going to win the lottery. It is impossible to win without entering.

How likely was it that Abraham and Sarah, at the age of 100 and 90 respectively, were going to have a child by natural birth? They lived longer than we do and they apparently aged slower than we do. However, at those ages the possibility of them having a child was not just remote. It was in the league of those first two scenarios that I painted for you. In other words, it was totally, absolutely impossible.

Both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the very idea, for the thought of it was absurd. And yet in chapter 21 it happens as God promised! The son is born despite their advanced years. As God instructed, they named him Laughter, which in Hebrew was Isaac. God was faithful to his promise. Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not human that he should lie, not a human being that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” The answer to those last two questions is no. What God promises he fulfills. 2 Timothy 2:13 says something amazing. It says, “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” We have seen that in the life of Abraham. On a couple of occasions he has failed to act faithfully before God, and yet God has continued to keep his promises to bless him. God was faithful no matter what they did.

### GOD GAVE AID AND A FUTURE

The arrival of the promised son, Isaac, had an unfortunate side effect. Because of Abraham’s and Sarah’s earlier efforts to help God out, there was another boy in

their camp. His name was Ishmael. He was in his early teens when Isaac was born and he was not happy. It's not hard to understand why he was less than thrilled. Isaac is the promised son. Isaac is going to be the heir. Isaac is the one through whom God is going to work in the future. And what does that mean about Ishmael? He's chopped liver. Except liver isn't kosher, so he's totally not included. In fact, he's kind of an embarrassment.

Generally, kids at that age, particularly boys, are not exactly sensitive and understanding. Ishmael wasn't exactly sensitive when it came to Isaac. He was a lot closer to cruel than sensitive. He immediately started venting his feelings about the situation. Verse 9 tells us that he started mocking this new arrival. So how do you think that went over with Sarah? Let's put it this way: how do you think mama bear is going to act if she perceives that her cub is threatened? I'm thinking that the person doing the threatening is about to have a really bad day. Sarah reacted the way any mother would act. She was not going to put up with Ishmael and his attitude. When he started his jealous sibling act he pretty much doomed himself.

Sarah presented an ultimatum to Abraham. There were no if's, and's or but's. She put it bluntly: *Get rid of that slave woman and her son or I will make sure that you hate your life.* Abraham was upset. After all, Ishmael was his son. Somewhat to our surprise God sided with Sarah. He stepped in at that point and communicated with Abraham. He told him that Sarah was right and Ishmael had to go. That seems a little harsh to some of us today, but God assured Abraham that he would take care of Ishmael and Hagar, and that he would make a great nation of that boy.

Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael packing. He gave them some provisions but there was no way he could give them enough. So, the time came when the water had run out and Hagar was sure they were going to die there in the wilderness. That's when God showed up. He told Hagar not to be afraid. He assured her that her son was not going to die and would, in fact, grow up and God would make him into a great nation. Then he opened her eyes and she saw a well close by. There was water, so they were saved. God provided food and sure enough, Ishmael did grow up to be the progenitor of many people. Once again God provided. He was faithful to provide for Hagar and Ishmael so that they could survive in a harsh wilderness. And he provided a future for the young man.

### GOD GAVE PROTECTION

The end of this chapter is curious. Abraham and Sarah were living in the area of Gerar which was ruled by a man they called Abimelech. Abraham and Sarah are

still living in his territory. After the birth of Isaac, Abimelech shows up to talk to Abraham because he wanted to set up a treaty with Abraham.

Abimelech brought along with him a man named Phicol. He was Abimelech's military commander. Why was he there? We are not told but I can give you my guess. Abimelech said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do." Abimelech had seen firsthand that God had taken care of Abraham even when Abraham messed up. I think that Abimelech was afraid of Abraham. He knows that Abraham has God backing him up, and the implications of getting sideways with Abraham are pretty ominous. So he wants to have a treaty with Abraham. But he doesn't want to set up a treaty from a position of weakness, and so he brings along his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in an attempt to impress Abraham and maybe intimidate him a little bit. Maybe there was a little bit of a threat there. *Make a treaty with me or there could be trouble for you.* It was a bluff because Abimelech had no intention of fighting against God, no matter how powerful his military. But he hoped Abraham didn't know that.

The treaty finally is made when Abraham gives Abimelech some sheep and cattle. There had been some disagreement over a particular well and so Abraham essentially bought off Abimelech by also giving him seven lambs. By accepting the lambs, Abimelech was acknowledging that Abraham, in fact, had found and dug the well and that it belonged to him.

Why is this curious passage in the Bible? There is a message for us here. We see that Abimelech is afraid of Abraham. Even though he had more military forces, bringing his general along was nothing more than a bluff. He was shaking in his sandals at the thought of having Abraham, who clearly had God on his side, become an enemy. He wanted to avoid that at all cost because he knew all of his military strength would do him no good against God. God was keeping his promise to Abraham that he would bless him and protect him. This is a significant reminder for Abraham, who in the previous chapter thought that his safety was something up to him. He could only count on himself to come up with some scheme to protect himself. Now he is reminded once again that God will take care of him and that all he needs to do is to be faithful to God and trust him. God provided for him again.

## APPLICATION

### PREMISE: GOD IS FAITHFUL TO PROVIDE

As we've seen in the book of Genesis, the consistent theme has been that God provides. What God provides is enough. In this passage we saw God provide the

fulfillment of his promise to give Abraham a son, help for Hagar and Ishmael, and protection for Abraham. But that raises the question, *yes what God supplies is enough, but enough of what?* What can we trust God to provide for us? What exactly has God promised us?

## UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD DOES NOT PROMISE

What do you want God to provide for you? I want God to keep my loved ones and me from any harm. I don't want any of them to ever hurt and I don't want to hurt either. I don't want them to even experience disappointment. I want God to give me and my loved ones success. And by success I mean to do well in whatever endeavor they are pursuing and to have material blessing. I want God to protect me and my loved ones and to defeat any who would oppose them and me.

I am not the only one who wants God to provide these things. There is a large segment of the church that totally buys into the health and wealth gospel. That is the message that God has promised that you will be healthy all the time and that you will have lots of stuff in this world. You know who Joel Osteen is. He is a pastor in Texas of the largest church in this country. Our daughter and son-in-law live in Meridian, Mississippi, population just over 40,000 people. Do you know how many people attend Joel Osteen's church every Sunday? It's 43,500. More people attend his church than live in the entire town of Meridian. Oh, and let's not forget the millions of people that he influences through his best-selling books and his television broadcasts. It is very clear that people are lapping up his message. And what is his message?

In his book, *Your Best Life Now*, he wrote, "God wants to increase you financially." He also said, "God wants you to go farther than your parents." He also wrote, "It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty. It's God's will for you to live in health and not sickness all the days of your life." He claims that God has promised us these things and we just need to have faith and believe in what he promises.

If we are honest, we all want that, and if God fails to deliver, we feel like he has abandoned us. He has not come through for us. After all, if God loves us doesn't he want us to be happy? Doesn't he want us to be blessed and have the good life? There is a great deal in the Old Testament that sounds like Osteen is right. Deuteronomy 28:11 says, "The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground." That's a promise of physical prosperity. Psalm 25:13 says of those who fear the Lord,

“They will spend their days in prosperity.” Proverbs 3:10 says that if you honor the Lord with your wealth, “then your barns will be filled to overflowing.”

Many of us expect that this is what God will do in our lives. Dr. Hiroaki Ota is a Japanese psychiatrist who works in France. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article (9/17/2015) relates that he has noted a syndrome that most often affects women. They come to Paris expecting to experience “an affluent and friendly European capital where slim, beautiful Parisians walk around smelling of Chanel.” They expect a place full of romance, beauty and wealth, because this is what they have seen in movies and television. But the reality doesn’t match up with the image they have in their minds. The disappointment produces in some cases irritability, depression, insomnia to the extent they seek medical help. Dr. Ota calls it “the Paris Effect.” I fear we might experience a theological version of the Paris Effect when our lives don’t come close to what we expect God to do.

Can we claim these promises of a long and healthy life, of success at whatever we attempt and of abundant prosperity? Has God promised us these things and all we need to do is just trust that he will fulfill them? These promises were given to ancient Israel. Israel was a physical ethnic group to whom God gave physical land to inhabit and physical blessings of great prosperity and security. We would like to claim these promises. But are you a member of that physical nation? Can you claim Palestine as your home? For most of us the answer is no. Most of us are not physically part of the Hebrew nation.

Personally, I am offended every time I fly on an airline because I am not offered those nice wide seats that have spacious legroom that the people at the front of the plane get. On our recent 5+ hour flight I also wanted to claim the food that they were given. I got hungry. And I wanted to claim the same ratio of passengers to restrooms that they had up there in the front of the plane. Ungraciously, the airline employees informed me that I was not entitled to any of those things, because I was not a part of that first-class group. *So sit down in your little sardine-can seat, eat that stupid little package of pretzels we gave you, and shut up.*

The airline promises all of those nice amenities to those who are in the first-class group. If you are not, then you are not entitled to those amenities. Similarly, if you are not a part of the group to whom God made those promises of prosperity and health, the physical nation of Israel, then you are not entitled to those promises.

The physical blessings promised to the physical nation of Israel were intended to be an illustration. They were a picture of the *spiritual* promises that God has given to a *spiritual* people. What promises can we who are in the church of Jesus Christ

claim? Ephesians 1:3 says, “Praise be to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every *spiritual* blessing in Christ.” Spiritual blessing has nothing to do with money and success in this world.

Someone might ask, “What about messianic Jews?” They are Jewish people, a part of that physical nation, who are also now part of the spiritual people, the church of Jesus Christ. Can they claim both the physical and the spiritual blessings? This year our church had to change how it handles paying for the health insurance premiums of our church staff. The old way worked well and I would’ve liked for us to keep doing it the way we used to. However, things have changed. In case you weren’t aware of it, which could only be true if you’ve been living under a rock, when it comes to health insurance there is a new covenant. This new covenant has replaced the old one. The new covenant is called the Affordable Care Act, possibly the most ironic and inappropriate name for a law ever, otherwise known as Obamacare. Under Obamacare what we used to do is no longer allowed. The old covenant has been replaced. I may have liked that old covenant but that is irrelevant. I must now live with things as they are under the new covenant.

All of those physical blessings promised to that physical nation were part of the old covenant that God set up. Even in that old covenant, God promised that he would someday give a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31 says, “Days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” God has done that through his son Jesus Christ. So if there is a new covenant, what happens to the old one? It is no longer in effect. Were the promises of prosperity and health a part of the new covenant or part of the old covenant? They were part of the old covenant and therefore, are no longer in effect.

It is disappointing for many of us to learn that God has not promised us success, wealth, health and long lives. Those are all a part of the old covenant that no longer applies. There are some who will say that those are the things they care about. If God doesn't promise those things, if they can't count on him giving them, then they're not interested in him. But God does promise us some things that are even more important than those physical blessings.

## KNOW WHAT GOD DOES PROMISE

What promises are there in the new covenant? What can we believe that God is going to supply us? It’s great to say that what God supplies is enough, but what exactly has God promised to supply? Ephesians 1:7 says, “In him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” God has promised us forgiveness.

Researchers tell us that all of us go around carrying a load of guilt. For some it is just vague background awareness, while for others it is acute and crippling. But it is there in all of us. And it does great damage to us spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. James Gandolfini is the actor who played Tony Soprano in the popular *Sopranos* television show. He said, “We show people sometimes being at their worst and regretting it. And people identify with that because we’ve all had times when we were at our worst.”

Marghanita Laski was a popular British journalist and novelist in the last century, and she was an avowed atheist. However, near the end of her life she said, “What I admire most about you Christians is your forgiveness. I have nobody to forgive me.” She lived trying to be free of guilt, telling herself and others that there was no reason to feel guilty and no one before whom we were guilty. But she could not get away from her need for forgiveness.

In Jesus Christ, God has forgiven those who put their trust in him. Have you ever encountered someone with whom you had a conflict and that person said finally, “Well, I forgive you, but...”? We all know that if forgiveness comes with conditions, if it is not complete, if it is, “I forgive you... but,” it is not forgiveness at all. I don’t know what you call that, but it is *not* forgiveness.

Do you know what God says about our forgiveness? In Romans 8:1 he says, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Do you know what that means? That means there are no “buts” in God’s forgiveness. We are forgiven completely. So in Romans 8:39 God says that nothing can ever separate us from his love, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This has huge implications for us. In his book, *Love Does*, Bob Goff tells of a humiliating moment in his life. His first big job came at a very upscale restaurant, the kind of restaurant where the waiters wear tuxedos. He started out as a busboy but dreamed of the time when he could finally be promoted to a waiter. He imagined himself in his tuxedo waiting on wealthy customers and raking in generous tips. Finally after he had worked there for a year he was given the job of being a waiter. He immediately went out and bought himself a tuxedo to wear his first night on the job. That first night he was so nervous he could hardly eat. However, he needed to eat something, so he quickly grabbed some Mexican food at a little place near his apartment before rushing into work in his brand-new tuxedo. At his first table, he served a wealthy doctor and his business guests. They were dressed to kill. The men in their suits looked impressive and the women looked like they had stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine. Everything started off



just fine. He got the customers' orders and sent them into the kitchen. All was going well until the unthinkable happened. As he was reaching across the table to deliver the food, he said, "I felt this massive grumbling somewhere south of my stomach, down as deep as one could imagine. There was no time to react. At the pinnacle of my full extension across the table with a plate of prime rib, out came the most impressive gassing you can ever imagine." He said it went on forever. He could see looks of absolute shock from his guests. He said he thinks he heard a woman's scream. And he was fired on the spot, which was no surprise.

We know how things work in this world. If you fail, you experience the consequences. He failed spectacularly, so it's no surprise that his termination was instant. We are used to that being the way things work. You have to perform and, if you fail, then you're out. It works that way in school, at work, in sports, and unfortunately, in almost all of our relationships.

But God says we are forgiven. But what if I...? There are no "buts." God says there is now no condemnation. No condemnation means no "I forgive you, but." It means that nothing can separate us from his love, ever. This is a promise that we not only can claim, but we must claim. It is utterly essential for our emotional, psychological, spiritual and relational well-being to found our entire existence on this one promise. We are forgiven in Jesus Christ, we are totally accepted, and nothing can change that. That is a promise we can claim.

What other promises can we claim? John 10: 27-28 contains a huge one. In those verses Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." God has promised us eternal life if we put our faith in Jesus. 1 John 5:13 says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." We are all desperate to have some answer for our biggest problem: death. In Jesus Christ we have been given a promise that we can count on every day of our lives, and it is the most important promise we could ever have. It is the promise of eternal life. The grave is not the end for us. There is hope and that is worth more than anything else you will ever have in life.

Here's another huge promise. It is a familiar one that is found in Romans 8:28. That verse says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." What a powerful promise that one is. It says that God will never waste anything that happens in our lives. He will bring some good out of every single

thing that happens to us. We may not know immediately what that good is, but we can know that God is somehow working good for us in everything that happens.

It is important for us to be very clear what this *does not* mean. This verse does not promise us that nothing bad will ever happen. That's what we want it to mean. Unfortunately, if we think that's what it means, we are going to be sorely disappointed. Jesus himself warned us that in this world we will have trouble. In his letter that we call 1 Peter, the apostle told us to not be surprised at the fiery ordeals that come upon us in this world.

I have shared with you numerous times about the worst thing that has ever happened in my life. It happened 31 years ago. If I were to rate the bad things that have happened in my life on a scale from 1 to 1000, the death of our first son, Joel, would be a 1000. To this day if I think too long and too deeply about that event I start getting choked up. The amazing thing about that is that I have grown more and learned more through that incident than anything else in my life. From those events I gained a new perspective on life that I would never have had otherwise. It reminded me of when I first got glasses at the age of 18, and suddenly the world came into focus. What I learned through that awful experience was that dramatic. The perspective I gained is much more in line with reality than I ever had before. I have gained an appreciation for the gift of eternal life as the most precious possession one could ever have. I have learned what matters in life and what doesn't. God has made my heart far more tender and compassionate. And I have understood what it means to live by faith in a new and powerful way. These are just a few of the good things that God has brought out of a horrible occurrence in my life. Would I choose to go through that awful experience again in order to get those good things? Absolutely not. That was an awful, devastating experience. It was not good. But God has used that terrible thing to bring about good things for me and I'm very thankful for them.

Philippians 4:19 has another terrific promise that we can claim. It says, "...and my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Well, all right, now we're getting somewhere. We're talking about stuff, right? I need a job, I need love, I need a house, I need food to eat, I need respect, I need health. God is going to give me all that stuff, right?

Let's be clear about what God actually promised there. He promised to supply our *needs*, not our *wants*. There are an awful lot of things that I have wanted in life. You know, I really wanted the books I've written to become bestsellers. I think it would be really cool to see one of those titles on the New York Times bestseller

list with “by Rick Myatt” included with it. I even suggested to the Lord that this would be a good idea for lots of reasons. Think of the opportunity it would give me to talk about Jesus. And it would certainly solve any financial issues for me. *So how has that worked out, Rick?* Let’s just say that my books have fallen just a bit short of the bestseller list. How far short? Let me put it this way: the sales of my book are here on earth, and the bestseller list is somewhere out beyond Pluto. My most recent book is at number 1,039,000 on the Amazon list. If you think that’s bad the other two are at number 2 million and 5 million. That’s the ranking, not the sales. I did just get a royalty check last month. It was for \$4. But I have plenty to eat. I have a house to live in and clothes to wear. I even have a good car to drive. I have all I need, so God has kept his promise to me.

There are many other promises that God has given to us that we can claim. He has promised to be with us and never leave us, according to Matthew 28:20. He has promised to give us peace, according to John 14:27 and Philippians 4: 7. He has promised to give us strength to do what we need to do, according to Philippians 4:13. In fact, he has promised that nothing will ever happen to us that is too great for us to bear with his strength, according to 1 Corinthians 10:13. He has promised to give us rest for our souls according to Matthew 11:28. He has promised to give us freedom according to Galatians 5:1. He has promised to give us everything we need for life and godliness according to 2 Peter 1:3. These are the things that we can believe that God will supply every day of our lives. Life to the fullest has been promised to us by Jesus Christ in John 10:10, and it comes to us by trusting that God will keep his promises and being content with what he gives us.