The sermon

Intro

God keeps his word.

This says a lot about God.

It means he's a communicator. He makes himself known to us sinners.

It means he gives promises. He urges us to act on good things he offers to us. He offers stability by saying this is who I am for you.

It means he's able to do what he says. There's no greater power that can thwart him.

It means he doesn't change his mind. No plan B.

It means he doesn't make mistakes. He doesn't backtrack foolish statements.

It means he tells the truth. We can bank our lives on God's word!

This morning we see God keeping his word in multiple ways.

Body

READ 21:1-7

Point 1: God keeps his word by providing Isaac (21:1-7)

There's a theme here.

1. ***"as he had said"*** (21:1)
2. ***"as he had promised"*** (21:1)
3. ***"at the time which God had spoken to him"*** (21:2)

God keeps his word.

Visitation

"The LORD visited Sarah" (21:1).

God visited Sarah in that he was powerfully present to act for Sarah in a special way: he made a barren, worn out, too old for children woman pregnant. God acted on Sarah's physical body such that she was now able to conceive with Abraham. And she did. And she gave birth to a living baby boy. Right at the time God said it would happen (21:2). At the oaks of Mamre, when God visited with two angels, God told Abraham, *"I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son"* (Gen 18:10).

Obedience

"as God had commanded him" (21:4) highlights Abraham's obedience.

Following the birth of Isaac ("he laughs"), Abraham obeyed God. First, he named his son Isaac (21:3), as God ordered previously (17:19). Second, Isaac was circumcised on his 8th day, in accordance with the covenant God made with Abraham (17:10-14).

God blessed Abraham with an heir through Sarah. Abraham responded with obedience. Obedience is the natural response to God's blessing!

If we understand the extent of the love of God in Christ (predestining us, dying for us, making us alive, indwelling us, the imperishable inheritance that awaits us where we'll experience God's kindness forever and ever), if we understand who we were apart from Christ (rebel, darkness, dead in our sins, enslaved to sin, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope), if we understand these things, we'll be thankful, we'll believe God is for us, we'll see ourselves as the recipients of God's unmerited, unearned blessings. And we'll respond in faith-fueled obedience.

Abraham responded to God's blessing with obedience.

From contempt to laughter to joy

Hagar had looked on barren Sarah with contempt (16:4). Then Sarah laughed when hearing God's announcement that she'd have a son within one year (18:10-13). Now Sarah's laughter has turned from that's so ridiculous, that could never happen to joyful laughter: wow, I can't believe what God has done for me! Sarah's laughter is now celebration, awe over what God has done!

Ever looked at your life and laughed at how amazing you've been blessed in Christ? Ever said, I can't believe God did this for me?

Application

God keeps his word. God never ceases to amaze. As we look back at our lives, we should be able to say things like, I can't believe God acted for me in this way. I can't believe God sustained me in that trial. I can't believe how God provided for me in that spot. In amazement, we say to ourselves, God kept his word.

Christian, some day, when you're in the new heavens and new earth, you're going to say God kept his word. And you're going to say, I can't believe how kind God is to me!

Meditate on God's word. Fight to be amazed. Fight to believe God keeps his word.

Practical question: am I amazed at what God's done for me? Or is it no big deal, nothing special?

READ 21:8-14

Point 2: God keeps his word by sending Ishmael away (21:8-14)

Now Isaac's weaned (21:8) = two or three years old generally. Sarah was done nursing Isaac. Cause for celebration (***"great feast"***) because the mortality rate in infants was high in those days.

Sarah's displeasure/Abraham's distress

Sarah's troubled because ***"the son of Hagar the Egyptian"*** = Ishmael laughed (21:8-9). Not playful, joyous laughter. ESV has a footnote "Possibly *laughing in mockery*." Paul confirms adversarial behavior in **Galatians 4:29** where he says, *"he who was born according to the flesh* [Ishmael] *persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit"* [Isaac]. Ishmael persecuted Isaac = some form of harassment. Interestingly, Ishmael isn't named once in the chapter.

Sarah demanded, *"Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac"* (21:10). Sarah's concerned that Ishmael's a threat to Isaac's inheritance. Abraham's displeased/distressed because of his affection for his son (21:11). Ishmael's about 16 years old at the time (Gen 12:4; 16:3-4; 21:5). You can imagine Abraham's heartbreak, the thought of having to separate from his teenage son who's lived with him all these years. The slave woman is Hagar, Ishmael's mother, Abraham's wife, and Sarah's personal servant.

God speaks

God speaks to Abraham (21:12). Don't be distressed over Ishmael and Hagar. Do what Sarah says.

God's reason? ***"for through Isaac shall your offspring be named"*** (21:12). Which means a number of things:

1. God's making a determination between Isaac and Ishmael.
2. God's narrowing Abraham's genealogy.
3. Abraham's genealogy will flow through Isaac, not Ishmael. Ishmael's descendants won't be included among Abraham's ethnic offspring.
4. The covenant blessings will be passed on to Isaac, not Ishmael. Ishmael is Abraham's physical offspring, but not Abraham's covenantal offspring.

One implication. Isaac's descendants, Abraham's ethnic offspring, the Jews, will possess the land of Canaan in this age, not Ishmael's descendants.

5. The line of promise comes through Isaac, not Ishmael (Rom 9:7-8).

Blessing will come to all the peoples of the world through Isaac, not through Ishmael.

6. The seed of the woman who will deliver a fatal blow to Satan, Jesus (Gen 3:15), will come through Isaac, not Ishmael.
7. Ultimately, Abraham's spiritual offspring will come through Isaac, not through Ishmael.

Those who trust in Isaac's descendant, Jesus Christ, will become Abraham's spiritual offspring who receive everlasting possession of the land = eternal life.

Sarah wants to protect Isaac's inheritance. God planned from before the foundation of the world to bless peoples from all the families of the world through Isaac's descendant, Jesus Christ (Gen 12:3).

In sending Ishmael away, God's keeping a prior promise to Abraham.

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. – **17:19**

God's consolation to Abraham

God consoles Abraham by repeating a promise (see 17:20).

And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." – 21:13

The stress is on God's activity. From Ishmael's offspring will arise a nation. God will make it happen.

Abraham's response

Abraham's faced with a choice: will I obey God or keep Ishmael? Abraham obeys. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away the next morning with minimal provisions (21:14).

Abraham's response is both faith and self-denial.

Faith in that Abraham's willing to entrust Ishmael and Hagar to God's care. If God's going to make Ishmael into a nation, surely he'll protect them in the wild.

Self-denial in that Abraham doesn't want to separate from the boy he's raised from infancy. About four years back, Abraham assumed Ishmael would be the heir (Gen 17:18). Abraham had big plans for Ishmael. Now he needs to send him away. Great loss because of great affection for his son.

God tells Abraham to do what distresses him. Abraham casts aside his feelings in favor of obedience. Abraham accepts God's decision, even when it distresses him! That's faith!

This is a unique situation in salvation history. We shouldn't expect God to command us to send away our 16 year old son. But there are relational consequences of faith. Like faith cost Abraham relationally, our faith can cost us relationally.

Jesus said:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. [35] For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. [36] And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. [37] Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. [38] And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. [39] Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. – **Matthew 10:34-39**

Following Jesus can have relational consequences. Things like before you were a Christian, you did stuff with your friends every Sunday. Now you prioritize church over activities with your friends. A missionary following Jesus' leading to Japan means leaving family and friends behind.

Personally, becoming a Christian required relational changes. I was in a college fraternity. I had lots of friends. I was always doing things with people. Now I couldn't do the things my friends did anymore (mainly getting drunk, college parties, bars, clubs). I couldn't spend Friday nights with my friends because they were doing things I could no longer do. I had to sit in my apartment all by myself because I was a single Christian man without Christian peers. I would get calls on Friday night. Why are you in your apartment all by yourself? Come and join us. I found ways to spend time with my non-Christian friends, but much of the social life revolved around drunkenness. I turned a few off because I evangelized. They were loyal friends. They didn't shun me. I stopped participating in things because I was following Jesus.

What I longed for throughout high school, to fit in, to be an insider within the cool community, was taken away from me. Relational loss. Because I was trusting Jesus.

Practical question: is obedience to God more important than human relationships?

If you trust that God is good to you and God's ways are good, you will be willing to suffer relational disruption. We deny ourselves because we first trust God!

READ 21:15-21

Point 3: God keeps his word by hearing Ishmael's voice (21:15-21)

Explanation

Hagar and Ishmael are in the wilderness, they've exhausted their rations, and there's no water to be found. Assuming death is imminent, Hagar places Ishmael under a bush and separates herself by ***"the distance of a bowshot"*** so she doesn't have to see her boy die (***"Let me not look on the death of the child"*** – 21:16).

Hagar's crying (21:16). Ishmael's talking (21:17). We're not told whether he's praying, crying, talking to himself, talking to his mother? Whatever the case, God hears Ishmael's voice (Ishmael = "God hears"). An angel, God in angelic form, calls to Hagar. Don't be afraid. God's heard the boy. The promise given to Abraham is repeated: ***"I will make him into a great nation"*** (21:18). God then supernaturally moves on Hagar so that she sees a well of water (21:19). Death averted.

Then we're told a little bit about Ishmael (21:20-21):

1. God was with him.
2. He lived in the wilderness.
3. He developed skill with the bow.
4. He married an Egyptian woman.

Ishmael isn't left to fend for himself. God's with him. Protecting him, giving him practical skills, providing a wife, making Ishmael into a nation. God's keeping his promises to Abraham. **Application**

What's your first response to God's command to Abraham? Was it cruel and heartless? At the outset of Genesis, I said everything belongs to God. He can do whatever he wants with us. He blesses whom we wants to bless. He gives land to whom he wants to give land. That's what it means to be God. On the other hand, we see pictures of God's compassion in Genesis. God hears a weeping mother and a boy's voice. God sees their desperate condition. God preserves life. God prospers the boy. God keeps his word.

Practical question: what does God's response to Hagar and Ishmael say about God?

READ 21:22-34

Point 4: God keeps his word by blessing Abraham (21:22-34)

Those who've encountered Abraham recognize something special about him: ***"God is with you in all that you do"*** (21:22). God's keeping his word found in Genesis 12:2-3: *"I will bless you…I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse."* Abimelech's the king who took Sarah in Genesis 20. Because Abraham's blessed by God, Abimelech wants a covenant with Abraham (21:23). An agreement to deal honestly. Dealing kindly with one another = non-aggression pact. The pact will live on with their descendants after them.

Abraham agrees (21:24).

One concern. Unknown to Abimelech, Abimelech's servants had taken a well from Abraham's entourage (21:25-26). After resolution, Abraham and Abimelech sealed their covenant formally with sheep and oxen (21:27) = the covenant was ratified with animal sacrifices. On top of that, Abraham gifts Abimelech seven ewe lambs (female lambs vital for reproduction) as a sign that the well in question did indeed belong to Abraham (21:28-30). The covenant/oath took place at Beersheba (21:31-32) = "well of seven" or "well of the oath."

This covenant is a voluntary covenant between two men/their descendants. They bound themselves by oath to relate to one another in particular ways. Kind of like a church covenant or marriage covenant.

God is called ***"the Everlasting God"*** = God is without end. God is without end because he's eternal. Who made God? No one. God has always been. Better question. Where did the earth, the animals, the people come from? Creation is because God is. Everlasting possession of the land requires an ***"Everlasting God."***

And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. – 21:34

"sojourned" = Abraham was a foreigner, an outsider, living among a people not his own, outside his homeland. A Somalian living in Maine.

Application

God's blessing was on Abraham. Likewise, to be a Christian is to be under God's blessing.

We're not under the same Genesis 12:3 arrangement as Abraham. In this fallen world, we're not promised great wealth or perfect health or absence of difficult relationships (as Jesus said). Nevertheless, we're under God's blessing. There's the hope/certainty/expectation of everlasting possession of the land. There's the assurance of forgiveness of sins. Confidence that God's for us and not against us. Confidence that God's with us wherever we go. There's the peace the Holy Spirit works within us. There's the protective wisdom God provides in the Scriptures.

Practical question: do you view yourself as blessed by God?

Conclusion

To believe in Jesus is to escape God's curse and to come under God's blessing.

The first man, Adam, broke God's command and subjected our world to God's curse. As a result, sin and death came into the world. We come into the world with a sinful nature. We sin. Our bodies decay. We die.

To rescue sinners from the curse of sin and death, God the Father sent God the Son, Jesus, into the world to die for sinners such that whoever believes in Jesus will be forgiven of their sins and receive eternal life. God furnished proof by raising Jesus from the dead!

There's two ways to live. We can keep on doing life our own way, not God's way (sin). Or we can humble ourselves, concede our sin, and turn to God for mercy by trusting in the merits of Jesus' death, not ourselves.

Tell us if you believe.