

As the traditional adage tells us, a promise is only as good as the person who makes it. That saying rings true because we will inevitably come across those who cannot be trusted to fulfill their promises. However, a promise from God is one we can rely on, even when external circumstances seem to suggest otherwise.

We find an example of that truth here in Genesis chapter twenty-one, as God demonstrates His faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah...

“And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him” (Genesis 21:1-2).

Earlier in Genesis chapter seventeen, God spoke these words to Abraham...

“As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you” (Genesis 17:4-6).

So now, the long-awaited moment had arrived for God to honor this promise. In fact, there was an approximate gap of twenty-five years from the time Abraham first received God's promise to the time of its eventual fulfillment. Abraham's experience thus serves to remind us that God always fulfills His promises, even in times of apparent delay.

Next, Genesis 21:1 tells us that “...***the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said***” (NIV). The word translated “gracious” means “to be concerned with” or “look after.”⁽¹⁾ This tells us that God did not fulfill His promise to Abraham and Sarah because they followed Him perfectly. Instead, God graciously looked after Abraham and Sarah and kept His promise to them despite their mistakes.

(1) H6485 paqad *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words* W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., Thomas Nelson Publishers.

So Abraham and Sarah welcomed this new addition to their family and gave him the name “Isaac.” Isaac's name means “laughter,” and while that might seem to be an unusual name for an infant, it may correlate to two events from earlier in the book of Genesis.

When God made His [initial promise](#) to Abraham regarding the birth of his son, Abraham responded in the following manner...

“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'” (Genesis 17:17).

God then spoke with Abraham again in Genesis chapter eighteen and [conveyed the news](#) that Sarah would bear their long-awaited son in the following year. But Sarah was secretly listening to that conversation, and here is how she reacted...

“So Sarah laughed silently. ‘A woman my age have a baby... And with a husband as old as mine?’” (Genesis 18:12 TLB).

Perhaps Isaac's name reflected Abraham and Sarah's response to the thought of receiving the miraculous gift of a child in their twilight years. In fact, that is essentially what Sarah said next...

“Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, ‘God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.’ She also said, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age’”
(Genesis 21:4-7).

So, at an age when most would be living in retirement, Abraham and Sarah entered the realm of parenthood with the arrival of their newborn son. Isaac's birth was a time of joy and laughter for these new parents as they expressed their appreciation to God in fulfillment of His promise.

However, Isaac's birth did not evoke a similar response from everyone.

“So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned” ***(Genesis 21:8).***

The events that unfold over the next few verses likely took place about two or three years following Isaac's birth. By that time, Isaac had graduated from drinking milk to a diet of solid food. In an era when infant mortality rates were quite high, that was cause for celebration. Thus, Abraham held a feast to commemorate that event. Unfortunately, one person was not in the mood to join those festivities...

“And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing”
(Genesis 21:9).

The “*son of Hagar the Egyptian*” was Ishmael, [whom we met](#) earlier in Genesis chapter sixteen. Ishmael was probably about sixteen years old during that time, and it appears that he wasn't pleased with the attention that had been given to his half-brother. That provoked a firm response from Sarah...

“Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac’” ***(Genesis 21:10).***

The fact that Sarah used such emotionally charged terms as “*slave woman*” ([twice in the ESV](#)) and “*her son*” (who was Abraham's son as well) tells us that she took this personally. [Hagar had acted arrogantly towards Sarah](#) when she was pregnant with Ishmael and now it seems that Ishmael continued that behavior pattern with Isaac.

So Sarah's preferred solution was to eliminate both of them- but that wasn't so easy for Abraham...

“And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son” ***(Genesis 21:11).***

It's easy to understand Abraham's displeasure at this turn of events. Ishmael was Abraham's first-born son and the idea of sending him into exile must have been difficult. However, God intervened and spoke to Abraham regarding that situation...

“But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed’”
(Genesis 12:12-13).

While Sarah may have been driven by a different set of motives, her directive to Abraham aligned with God's will for that situation. And even if Abraham was concerned about sending Ishmael out on his own, he could do so with confidence in God's promise that He would eventually build a great nation through him.

“So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba” (Genesis 21:14).

By ensuring that Hagar and Ishmael left early with food and water, Abraham provided them with the best opportunity to find a place to stay before the intense heat of the day began. Nevertheless, Abraham was a man of great wealth and could have provided them with additional supplies for their journey if he wished to do so. So why would Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away with such limited resources?

Perhaps the best way to answer that question is to view Abraham's decision as another expression of his faith in God. Since God had already assured Abraham that He would build a great nation through Ishmael's descendants, it appears that Abraham understood that there was little he could do to help them if God didn't come through on their behalf.

However, the fulfillment of that promise lay in the future. In the meantime, Hagar and Ishmael had more immediate concerns...

“And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, 'Let me not see the death of the boy.' So she sat opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept” (Genesis 21:15-16).

While Hagar had the freedom to go where she wished, the bad news was that she had apparently become lost in the desert. Perhaps she had been trying to reach a nearby settlement but had somehow gotten lost along the way- and being lost in the wilderness with no water is a dangerous place to be.

Nevertheless, there is something unusual regarding this narrative if we stop to consider it. For instance, Ishmael was approximately sixteen years old and his mother Hagar was probably thirty to forty years old as they made this journey into the desert. However, it appears that Ishmael was the one who was so physically drained by this excursion that he couldn't travel any further.

Since it's reasonable to assume that an average sixteen-year-old male could probably survive longer than his mother under those conditions, why did Hagar have to place him into the shade?

One possibility is that Hagar was more accustomed to the challenges presented by that environment. That doesn't say much for Ishmael, but there is another possibility that reflects much better upon him. Perhaps Ishmael let his mother have most (or all) of their remaining water until he became so dehydrated that he just couldn't go on.

In any event, it seemed as if the end was near for both mother and son, until God stepped in to make good on His promise...

“And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, 'What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink” (Genesis 2:17-19).

The name “Ishmael” means “God shall hear” ⁽¹⁾ and that's exactly what God did in directing Hagar and Ishmael to a water source they couldn't find without His help. It also seems as if God allowed them to come to a point where they could no longer make it on their own. That placed Hagar and Ishmael in a position where they could learn to trust and rely on Him, just as Abraham had done.

(1) Ishmael (1) - *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible.
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?topic=IT0004681>

“So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt” (Genesis 21:20-21).

It's difficult to understand why Hagar selected an Egyptian wife for her son when she already had extensive experience with the one true God through her relationship with Abraham. That experience was something that should have led her to make a better relationship choice for her son.

For instance, Hagar saw how God miraculously fulfilled His promise to Abraham and Sarah when [Isaac was born](#). She was also with Abraham when God [took action](#) against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In addition, the angel of the Lord spoke directly to Hagar twice; once when she ran away from Sarah ([Genesis 16:7](#)) and once again in [Genesis 21:17-19](#).

Therefore, Hagar's knowledge and experience with God should have led her away from the nation of Egypt, a place where there were seemingly few (if any) prospective marriage partners who followed the one true God. At a minimum, Hagar could have sent a message back to Abraham asking him to select a God-honoring wife for his son. But she chose to avoid doing so. Thus, we have no knowledge of Mrs. Ishmael's spiritual beliefs, or if she had any concern for God at all.

This reminds us that it's usually a bad idea to become involved in romantic entanglements with those who do not follow the God of the Scriptures. Israel's King Solomon offers a case in point...

“The LORD did not want the Israelites to worship foreign gods, so he had warned them not to marry anyone who was not from Israel. Solomon loved his wife, the daughter of the king of Egypt. But he also loved some women from Moab, Ammon, and Edom, and others from Sidon and the land of the Hittites. Seven hundred of his wives were daughters of kings, but he also married three hundred other women. As Solomon got older, some of his wives led him to worship their gods. He wasn't like his father David, who had worshiped only the LORD God” (I Kings 11:1-4 CEV).

That was a mistake on Solomon's part...

“In this way, Solomon did what was evil in the Lord's sight; he refused to follow the Lord completely, as his father, David, had done...The Lord was very angry with Solomon, for his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. He had warned Solomon specifically about worshiping other gods, but Solomon did not listen to the Lord's command. So now the Lord said to him, ‘Since you have not kept my covenant and have disobeyed my decrees, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants’” (I Kings 11:6, 9-11 NLT).

This is something we can avoid simply by choosing to enter dating relationships with others within the family of God.

“And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, 'God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt.' And Abraham said, 'I will swear'” (Genesis 21:22-24).

This passage features the return of someone who appeared earlier in Genesis chapter twenty. That person was Abimelech, now accompanied by Phichol, his military commander. Abimelech was the king over the region where Abraham had earlier taken residence.

He was also the one who brought Abraham's wife Sarah into his harem when Abraham misled him into believing that Sarah was his sister instead of his wife ([Genesis 20:1-2](#)). God ultimately resolved that situation by personally visiting Abimelech in a dream ([Genesis 20:3-7](#)).

When we last saw Abimelech, he dismissed Abraham with the following offer: "***Look, here's my land. Live anywhere you like***" ([Genesis 20:15 GW](#)). Abraham apparently took Abimelech up on this invitation and settled in an area that was under his control. But if that was so, why then would Abimelech approach Abraham to request a peace treaty?

There were several factors that may have influenced Abimelech's decision to establish a peace accord with Abraham. First, God's earlier destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah had undoubtedly become common knowledge among the people of that area. That information likely included [the report of the Lord's visit to Abraham](#) in advance.

If that wasn't enough, Abimelech had his own personal experience with Abraham's God through [his earlier dream](#). This apparently led Abimelech to decide that it was good policy to establish a political alliance with Abraham. Thus, it seems that Abimelech wanted to ensure that he wouldn't end up on the wrong side of Abraham's God.

That brings us to Abimelech's request for Abraham to take an oath. Remember that Abraham created trouble for Abimelech by misrepresenting his relationship with Sarah. So when Abimelech said, "...***swear to me here before God that you will not deal falsely with me***" ([NIV](#)), we might understand his meaning to be this: "*Abraham, promise me that you will never lie to me again as you did before.*"

As mentioned earlier, this should serve as a warning and example for those who claim to follow God today. As representatives of God, we should be careful not to misrepresent Him to those who do not have a relationship with Him.

"Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized. And Abimelech said, 'I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today.'

So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Then Abimelech asked Abraham, 'What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?' And he said, 'You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well.' Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there.

Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phicol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines." ([Genesis 21:25-32](#)).

So Abraham promised Abimelech that he would live peacefully within Abimelech's territory and would not deceive him. But Abraham also took the opportunity to bring up a subject that was clearly bothering him: "***Some of your servants have taken over one of my wells***" ([Genesis 21:25 CEV](#)).

Apparently, some of Abimelech's laborers claimed ownership over a well that Abraham's men had built, thus preventing Abraham's servants from drawing any water from it.

As the reigning monarch over that area, Abimelech probably did not burden himself with the details of every construction project within his kingdom. So he responded as we might expect a national official to respond to a local issue: ***”This is the first I’ve heard of it... and I have no idea who is responsible. Why didn’t you tell me before?” (Genesis 21:26 TLB).***

This was an important concern, for a reliable source of water in the desert was (and is) a critical need. So to resolve this situation, these two men made a compensatory arrangement. But instead of exchanging a monetary payment for the right to this well, their agreement specified an exchange of valuable livestock.

“Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days” (Genesis 21:33-34).

So Abraham established a type of memorial to commemorate his relationship with God. A tamarisk tree is a small tree with thick foliage and spikes of pink blooms. ⁽¹⁾ This tree served as an excellent choice to serve as a memorial to God because, *“...its long life, hard wood, and evergreen leaves (made) this tree... a type of the ever-enduring grace of the faithful, covenant-keeping God.”* ⁽²⁾

This section also introduces us to another name for God: “the eternal One” or “Everlasting God.” In the original language used to author this passage, this term is “Yahweh El Olam” which means, *“the forever One”* or *“God of eternity.”* This helps to identify God as a Being whose eternal, never-ending existence transcends the distant past and the future yet to come.

God’s eternal nature is additionally demonstrated in a conversation He once had with Moses...

“Then Moses said to God, 'Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?’

And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And He said, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:13-14).

“I AM” identifies God as the self-existent, eternal Being. In every time and in every place, God can thus say, “I AM.” Because of this, He can rightly be described as “the forever One,” “the God of eternity” or “the eternal God.”

(1) “Tamarisk” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers

(2) “Tamarisk” *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. Originally published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois. Copyright © 1988.