

Genesis 21:1-7

I went to a little get together on Friday night to help a friend celebrate his upcoming wedding. As it turned out, I couldn't stay for a long time, but it was nice to be able to get together and share the moment with him, as well as getting to catch up with some good friends. I don't know how the night ended up, but the part I attended was pretty calm.

And as I sat there, appreciating the moment, I thought back to right before my own wedding, when some of my closest friends got together and did the same thing for me. And for us too, the night started out pretty calm, eating some dinner together, having some good conversation. And then things became increasingly crazy as they carried out this elaborate plan to make sure that I would not soon forget that night. And I don't think I ever will. Thankfully, it was nothing immoral, just amazingly embarrassing.

But when it was all over, I promised myself that if I ever had a chance to "help them remember their weddings" I would take it. And so, as the years went by, and the chances came along, I took them. And a lot of crazy things were done to them as, one by one, I returned the favor to my friends who had taken such "good" care of me years before.

And out of all the pranks that were pulled, probably the best one of all was for a friend named Tim who I had known ever since Junior High School. And Tim was one of the smartest guys I've ever known, graduating near the top of our class of 400 seniors from Slidell High School, in 1979. And because he was so smart, I knew that if we were going to get him it would have to be up here - in his mind.

So, I conspired with a few other friends who were going to his wedding - which took place in Dallas, Texas - and this is what we did: When it was about 6 months before the wedding, each of us started making little phone calls or sending letters and all we would say to him is "When you least expect it, expect it". That was it. And so about four or five of us were doing this, randomly, for about six months up to the time of the wedding. Finally, the weekend arrives and by this stage Tim has received dozens and dozens of communications saying "When you least expect it, expect it".

When the time for the Rehearsal Dinner finally rolled around, we all showed up and smiled and laughed - and gave each other a lot of knowing glances. And at one point in the evening, Tim discovered a note in his pocket that said, "When you least expect it, expect it". And after the dinner, we all took Tim out somewhere together and just talked and visited - had a nice night - and went home. But nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Well, the next day is the wedding, and that all goes really well - a very nice wedding - and we're at the reception afterward. And Tim's there, enjoying his guests, but he's watching us like a hawk because *nothing's happened yet*. And he knows it's coming. About half-way through the reception, four or five of us disappear from the room and come back later on. When we do - one of us has grease on his hands and his sleeves are rolled up, and he's wiping the grease off, and making sure that Tim sees all of this.

Now, you'd have to know Tim, but he absolutely LOVED his car - this old Volkswagen

beetle that he had beautifully restored. So now he's there at the reception, he's been told for months to be ready for the un-expected, he doesn't know WHAT is going on and now he's wondering if we've done something to his precious car. Well, the reception comes to an end and they get all changed, do the whole rice thing, and hop in the car and drive off - and nothing happens. We haven't done anything to his car.

So, they make an un-eventful drive to the airport, on their way to a honeymoon in Hawaii. And Tim is still trying to figure out what's going on or what's going to happen. As they arrive in the airport they hear over the public address system someone calling his name to come to the Information Desk in the main airport Lobby. When he does, he gets this message from the receptionist there that says, "When you least expect it, expect it".

Well, more time passes, still nothing happens, and they eventually get on the plane to Hawaii. After they are airborne and the plane reaches cruising altitude, one of the stewardesses comes to Tim and hands him a note that says, "When you least expect it, expect it". And his wife told me later on that at that point he started looking around the plane to see if he recognized anyone. In fact, she said that when they got to their hotel, *in Hawaii* mind you, he spent the first five minutes checking all around the room, looking under beds, looking in closets, trying to make sure that there were no surprises. I think in the end it took about two full days before he finally let his guard down and realized that nothing was going to happen.

And so, in the end, the plan worked, even better than we had hoped. To be sure, it was something pretty trivial - nothing more than an elaborate wedding prank between high school buddies. But I have to admit there was something satisfying about pulling it off. It was one of those rare moments in life when something you plan falls together, pretty much the way you planned it. And when things come together like that - when things work out the way you envision them, it's a pretty special thing.

Obviously, it is far more satisfying and amazing when things of much greater significance come together - a long term goal is finally reached, a degree is finally achieved, a difficult project is finally finished, a work of art is completed, a child is "raised" and successfully moves into adult life - It's a rare and beautiful thing when a plan comes together - especially a complex one.

In the passage before us this morning, we see the culmination of one of God's plans and purposes - one that we have been talking about for a number of months now, one that was filled with countless intricacies and details. Nevertheless, it all comes off, just as God intended it. It's just a few verses, and there's not a *great* deal that needs to be said about them. But it's worth our time to pause for a moment and reflect on the way that these particular promises worked out for Abraham and Sarah. Before we do that, let's pray together.....

Father in heaven, help us now as we pause to reflect for a few minutes on just one small

portion of a plan and purpose that is so amazingly comprehensive that we couldn't possibly imagine it in all its fullness, or anything CLOSE to that. But the part of this plan that you HAVE shown us is enough, as small as it might be, it is still enough for us to see a glimpse of your greatness. Please assure and comfort and strengthen your people this morning by these reminders of your sovereign power and wisdom. And we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

(Read Genesis 21:1-7)

The events recorded here, coming as they do after so much that has happened, almost come off as an *anti-climax*. So much has taken place, so much time has passed, so much anticipation has been built up that when we finally get to this long-promised, long-awaited moment, it comes and goes almost before you know it's there.

It's like being out on some highway somewhere and you start seeing signs that say something like "Lawrenceville 800 miles". And then you see signs at 700 and 600 and 500 miles saying the same thing. And this goes on until finally you see a sign that says, "Lawrenceville - 2 miles" - and two miles pass, and there's this little blinking caution light at a lone intersection with a gas station on the left and a hardware store on the right, three houses, and then a sign that says, "You are now leaving Lawrenceville". It's one of those places where, if you blink, you might miss it.

In some ways the arrival, finally, of Abraham's son here at the beginning of chapter 21 is sort of like that. It comes and goes so quickly that you could miss it if you're not careful. And because it is *so* quick, even if you catch it, you still might miss the significance of it.

But you have to think back to what has gone on before this. At least 25 *years* have come and gone now since God first called Abraham to leave his home land and come and dwell in a hostile and foreign place. During that time he has faced famine, gone to war against powerful kings, and struggled with his own extended family. He has, at times, shown great faith. And God has confirmed his promises many times.

And yet, at other times, Abraham has been faithless and un-believing. Twice he has put his wife - and other people - in jeopardy because he was not willing to believe God. He has attempted to circumvent God's purposes by fathering a child through his servant, Hagar and then later on by suggesting to God that perhaps he could just carry out his plans through Ishmael, rather than through the promised child that, as yet, had not materialized. And so, it has been a very up and down 25 years, an emotional 25 years, a very *long* 25 years.

And now here we are, at the end of all that has happened, and the long-promised and awaited son has *finally* arrived. And even though the length of the account is brief, nevertheless Moses - the writer of Genesis - goes out of his way to make sure that we understand that Isaac's arrival is nothing less than the flawless, perfect out-working of the Father's plans. Notice the language of the text.....

Vs1 *The Lord visited Sarah as he had said....*

What's Moses referring to here? He's referring to the promise made when the "visitors" came to Abraham and Sarah in chapter 18. Remember that? At that time the Lord said that he would return to them "in about a year". So the year has come and gone. And what a year it has been. Sodom and Gomorrah have been destroyed. Lot has been personally ruined. And for a big part of the past year or so, Abraham has been separated from his wife as a result of his deception of Abimelech.

But now she is back. And it is no accident. The Lord delivered her back to Abraham, in spite of himself, and has now come to "visit" her. And it is clear from the context here that the "visit" spoken of is different in character than the "visit" of chapter 18 - which was an actual physical manifestation of God, along with two other angels.

In contrast to that, the "visit" here seems to be more spiritual in nature - a visitation in terms of God's power and presence by which he made the impossible *possible* and, as a result, the post-menopausal Sarah, well beyond the years of child-bearing, nevertheless is enabled to conceive. This is the significance of the second half of vs 1 which says,

"...and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised..."

And then, in addition to these confirmations of God's purposes being worked out, there is the additional confirmation of vs 2,

*"...And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age **at the time of which God had spoken to him....**"*

And then, as the passage goes on we are told about Abraham's response to his son's birth, first of all giving to him the name which God had already determined - Isaac, and then going on to administer the rite of circumcision - when he was only eight days old. In doing these things, Abraham was simply keeping what God had commanded and, by doing so, was placing upon his infant child the covenant sign that indicated that he too was a beneficiary of God's covenant promises. And so the passage says,

*"...And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, **as God had commanded him...**"*

And what comes through in all of this, the *rhythm* of these phrases throughout this passage, is such that it conveys this strong message of God's sovereignty and God's purposes working out....

...as he had said...

...as he had promised...

...at the time of which God had spoken to him...

...as God had commanded him...

As you read through this short passage, and you feel the rhythm of those phrases, you get the sense that what you are reading about - the birth of this child - is not just some random event taking place but is the end result of a *carefully* designed, *well-orchestrated*, *perfectly* executed

plan. Moses wants his readers to conclude that the birth of Isaac, after all that has happened, and after all the waiting, was something that took place just AS it was supposed to and WHEN it was supposed to. *It was the right thing, at the right place, at the right time.*

In other words, what has been going on here is not like the TV show, “What’s My Line, Anyway?” where the actors make everything up as they go along. On the contrary, this is a drama in which there is a script and a playwright and which is going to turn out precisely as the playwright has designed it. Now the strange mystery of God’s providence is that although at times it *seems* like - to the actors on the world stage at least - that there’s no script and like things really are being made up as we go along - it nevertheless *isn’t* like that, in spite of what it feels like. That’s the big message of Joseph’s life, isn’t it? Joseph’s life, from a human perspective, appears random and tragic and yet we are told in the end that there was nothing accidental about anything that happened to Joseph. And we’ll see that when we get to chapters 37-50 one day.

But we don’t have to wait until then, because we can see that here. At several points along the way, as Abraham vacillated between faithfulness and faithlessness, obedience and disobedience, trust and mis-trust - as he went back and forth like that along the way, it would have been easy to conclude that “no one was minding the store” - so to speak. It would have been very easy to think that things were not going forward in any particular direction - they were just *going* - and who knows how they would turn out.

However, in the end, we come to the place where we see what Moses *wants* us to see - that there has been no lapse in God’s plan, no un-foreseen delays, no un-accounted for difficulties. Everything is right on schedule. Everything is happening *when* it is suppose do, and in the way it was intended to. *God is still on His throne.*

But it’s good for God’s people to see both sides of this reality - the human and divine. It was good for God’s people in Moses’ day - as the first recipients of these accounts - and it is good for God’s people in our own day - you and me. Because our own experience, like Abraham’s, is this mixed bag of faith and doubt, obedience and sin, belief and unbelief. Sometimes it seems so clear to us, and we experience the goodness and reality of God in various ways and we believe and have no problem believing. And at other times we watch and wait and wonder if anybody is captaining this ship at all. And we get impatient. And we take matters into our own hands. And we make the same messes of our lives as did Abraham and Sarah.

And yet, somehow, some way, *none* of this catches God out. None of this throws him for a loop. None of this comes as a surprise to Him. None of this results in God’s having to scramble and adjust and shift things around in order to insure that he still gets the same result he was aiming for. Just as it was with Abraham and Sarah - so it will be with all of God’s people. The final perspective on our lives will be the same as for theirs - that God’s purposes for us and promises toward us will all be worked out - just as he said, just as he promised, at just the time he wanted it to happen.

It’s not just a select few people in the Bible about whom these things will be true. *It is true for every person in this room.*

Even in the naming of their son - Isaac - we see the coming together of both these

realities: God's steady purposes being worked out in and through and even in spite of the frailty and un-predictability of human flesh. For the name "Isaac", as you may already know, means "laughter". And in God's commanding them to give their child this particular name we see something of God's sense of humor coming through. As you may remember, both Abraham and Sarah, at different times have laughed in response to God's seemingly impossible promise that they would be the parents of a natural-born child. The thought of two people their age, and in their condition, conceiving a child just seemed outrageous.

And yet, truly, God has the last "laugh" - giving them a child and endowing him with a name which, every time they spoke it they would remember at least two things: Firstly, they would remember the laughter of their unbelief and in doing so, would be gently, and likely *gladly* rebuked. But secondly, and more importantly, they would remember the laughter which came later on that was the laughter of joy at receiving this improbable child through such an impossible birth.

And beyond all this, if the various individual aspects of this story highlight for us the sovereign purposes of God, so too does the story as a whole, serving as a kind of paradigm, or model that prepares us and points us forward to *another unlikely birth* that was the fulfillment of *another promise* that was not a mere 25 years in the making but was, in fact, hundreds and hundreds of years in the making. Of course, I am thinking here of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, which shares several parallels with the birth of Isaac.

As we saw earlier, when God came and "visited" Sarah roughly a year after appearing to Abraham in the wilderness, the "visit" that came about was clearly of a different sort - a visitation of the power and presence of God which resulted in Sarah being able to conceive when it would have been impossible to do so otherwise. To be sure, it was not an *immaculate* conception - Abraham was the father, as the text seems to want to make clear. Isaac had Abraham's DNA. But God's intervention was necessary in order for Abraham and Sarah to be made fertile and enabled to conceive and bear a child at their advanced ages.

If you then fast forward to the other end of the Bible, the NT, and look at the conception of Mary and the birth of Jesus, you see there that a similar "visitation" of God took place - this time, by God, the Holy Spirit. And the language used there is very similar,

Luke 1:30-37 *And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"¹ ³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born¹ will be called holy - the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."*

When the text of Luke's Gospel says, "the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you, the word used there, in God", the miraculous birth of this one who is the child of Abraham - that prior birth foreshadows for us the miraculous birth of Christ - also the descendant of Abraham. Even more than that though, he is THE child of promise, the promised seed, the culmination of the great promise of Genesis 3:15 that through a descendant of the woman, one would eventually come who would deal the decisive death blow to Satan, which Jesus did on the cross.

Talk about a plan coming together. Here's a plan to end all plans. A plan that is so detailed it involves all of human history, so expansive that it includes every fact in the universe, every object, every molecule. And not only are God's purposes *exhaustive in that way* - in terms of their detail, they are *also complete* in their *execution* and timing, in the way that they are worked out on this stage that we call "history".

Even further, as we have seen in the story of Abraham - God's ongoing purposes are complex, and multi-faceted. They are beyond us, but also include us. They invite our faithfulness, but when we are not faithful, they include the addressing of that faithlessness. IN other words, part of God's purposes includes his rooting out and exposing our unbelief and addressing our continued faithlessness. He is working ON us and IN us, and THROUGH us, even as he is working all AROUND US, and WITHOUT US and, often, IN SPITE OF us.

And the thing He is working toward is the redemption and reconciliation of all things to himself - inaugurated in Christ's coming and, one day, to be consummated at his return.

When will that be? Sometimes, as with the birth of Isaac, you have to wait 25 years for a plan to come together. At other times, as with the birth of Christ, you have to wait a lot longer. But however long it takes - God's plans are always worth waiting for.