

“HOPE FOR WEARY WAITERS” **(Genesis 21:1-7)**

This morning I want to talk to you about waiting. Waiting is not a trait we are born with, and our impatience has only increased in a world where we expect everything to happen quickly. With just the click of a button Amazon Prime will deliver just about anything to your doorstep in just a day or two. Fast food restaurants make billions of dollars getting you high-caloric, high-cholesterol food to you in a matter of minutes. Internet services advertise super-quick accessing speed so that you do not have to wait an extra second getting to your website. I read about a church one time in Florida that offered a 22-minute church service – they had one hymn, one prayer, one scripture reading, and a six-minute sermon. You’re probably thinking that’s not such a bad idea...

Yet despite all of these modern conveniences, most of life is spent waiting – waiting to graduate – waiting to be accepted into college – waiting for the right person to marry – waiting for a child to be born – waiting to hear back on a job interview – waiting to see if the bank will give you a loan — waiting for an appointment to see the doctor – waiting for you loved one to be saved. The list could go on and on.

Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.” How true that is. You hope for something, you pray for something, you expect God to come through – but when what you long for is put off or delayed – it makes the heart sick and you lose hope. But a longing fulfilled is wonderful – it’s a tree of life – when that check arrives, that baby is born, that cancer is cured, that relationship is restored, there is unbelievable joy.

While we view waiting as one of the worst things in life, waiting is one of the primary ways by which God develops our spiritual maturity. There’s a good chance you are waiting on the Lord for something and in our passage this morning from Genesis 21 we learn five things to remember while you wait – five things that give you hope when hope is deferred.

In the first seven verses of chapter 21 we read... “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’ And she added, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’”

These verses perfectly describe Proverbs 13:12 and how Abraham and Sarah go from sick hearts to inexpressible joy as their greatest longing is fulfilled. Chapter 21 is a major turning point in the book of Genesis in regards to the theme that dominates the book. The theme is God’s promise of a deliverer who will save mankind from the curse of sin.

This promise is first seen in Genesis 3:15 where God curses the serpent after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. He says, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The child of the woman will come and restore all that had been lost in the fall.

Adam and Eve then have a child named Cain, and they wondered, “Is this the promised child?” Their hope is crushed with Cain kills his brother Abel. Adam and Eve go on to have another son named Seth, and you begin to see a lineage go from Seth all the way down to Noah. Then after the flood you see a line go from Noah’s son Shem all the way down to Abraham. The book of Genesis goes from this big, global focus on all of creation and zooms in on one man named Abraham.

By the time we get to Abraham’s story, we’re still looking for the child who will crush the head of the serpent. In Genesis 12 God chooses Abraham to be the one who brings the Savior into the world. He says to Abraham, “I’m going to bless you with a huge family who will live on a promised piece of land in Canaan, and through your family I will bless the whole world.”

The only problem is that Abraham and Sarah are 75 and 65 years old when God makes His promise, and its physically impossible for them to have children. But, despite all odds, they believe God and that somehow, someday, He will give them a child. And since they are advanced in years, they assume the child will come soon. A year rolls by, two years, three years, five years, ten long years they wait and there is no child.

Sarah grows impatient, and decides to take matters into her own hands. She suggests to Abraham that he have a child with her servant Hagar, and he complies. When Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Abraham assumes that he is the son God promised, but God reiterates to Abraham that the promised child will come through Sarah. And so they wait... 15 years go by, 20 years, 24 years – hope deferred makes the heart sick. Finally, in chapter 18 the Lord appears to Sarah and announces a due date – by this time next year, the Lord says, you will hold a baby in your arms. And now in chapter 21 that moment finally arrives.

There is no better case study for waiting than Abraham and Sarah, and in these verses we learn five important things to remember while we wait. The first is to remember that **God has not forgotten you.** Verse one begins by saying, “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as He had said.” Some translations say, “The Lord visited Sarah” or “took note of Sarah” or “remembered Sarah.”

It’s a wonderful phrase that speaks of God’s intervention on behalf of those who have been waiting upon Him. It’s the same phrase used in Exodus when the Children of Israel cry out to the Lord in their bondage, and the Lord remembered them – He took notice of them – and He acted to deliver them.

When you’re waiting on the Lord to intervene, there’s a temptation to think that God has forgotten you = that He’s abandoned you. King David felt this way... after running for his life and hiding in cave after cave, he cried out, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). Jeremiah the prophet lamented, “Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?” (Lamentations 5:20). When we most need God to act on our behalf, He seems silent.

I have a book I bought some years ago, and I love the title of this book. It’s called *God Works the Night Shift*. It’s based on Psalm 121:3-4 which says, “He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers.” Isn’t that an awesome verse? You can be assured that God is working for you even though you may not see it. In the midst of your darkness, God is working the night shift.

The author of this book says, “Have you ever considered all the people who work during the night? The garbage man makes his way from house to house to pick up the trash that was set out the night before. The nurse at the hospital moves from bed to bed checking on the monitors and IV bottles of her sleeping patients. At 42,000 feet, the pilot of a jumbo jet guides his aircraft through an area of turbulence while 300 people sleep behind him. A deputy, a dispatcher, a prison guard are all one duty. God works the night shift, too. He’s busy while we slumber.”

But from our perspective, we no idea what God is doing behind the scenes – it’s a mystery. There are seasons of life when He doesn’t seem to be doing much of anything. We say, “God seems to be working in other’s people’s lives, but not mine. I pray and there’s no answer. I wait and nothing happens. If God is at work, I sure can’t see it.” That’s when you need to remember and cling to the promise that God has not forgotten you – he takes note of you – and He is continually working on your behalf.

While you wait, you not only need to remember that God has not forgotten you, but secondly, that **God keeps His promises**. Verses 1-2 say, “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.” Notice the reiteration used in these verses... “as he said,” “as he had promised,” and “at the very time God had promised Him.”

When God makes a promise, He keeps it – and when you read through the Bible you find God making a lot of promises. Someone calculated that there are over 8,000 promises made by God in the Bible, and He has either fulfilled a promise, is in the process of fulfilling a promise, or will fulfill a promise in the future.

Each promise that God makes is unique – some are universal promises made to everyone, and some are made to a specific person or group. For example, God promised Joshua that He would “give him every place he set his foot.” This doesn’t mean that I can go out and claim a piece of property just by stepping on it – it’s a promise given specifically to the people of Israel. God promised Paul that no one would harm him when he preached in the city of Corinth. This doesn’t mean that I can go preach to a gang of bikers and be assured that I won’t get beat up. Paul was beat up on many other occasions – but in particular city, his protection was guaranteed. Likewise, because God promised Abraham and Sarah a baby does not mean that every couple will have a child. We set ourselves up for disappointment when we claim and promise that isn’t given to us.

At the same time, the Bible is full of universal promises made to everyone, such as Matthew 11:28 where Jesus says, “Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest,” or Romans 10:13 which says, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” To every believer God promises to take care of your needs, to give you peace and joy, and to provide a way of escape from temptation. He also makes many promises in regards to our future – that He will come again for us, that we will be raised from the dead, that we will have new, glorified bodies, and that we will live in heaven with Him forever. There are many promises in the Bible that every believer can claim and believe.

Some of you might remember the little chorus that says, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” Because God is holy and true and faithful, He cannot lie. People make promises all the time and fail to keep them, but whatever God says you can take to the bank and put your full trust in.

The third thing you need to remember you wait is that **God is able to do the impossible**. Three times in this passage the age of Abraham and Sarah is highlighted. Verse 2a says, “Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age.” Verse 5... “Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.” Verse 7... “And she added, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’”

You’ll remember back in chapter 18 that when Sarah was told she would have a child in her old age, she laughed... “It’s crazy to think a woman my age will have a baby.” God rebuked her and said, *“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”* In contrast to Sarah’s human inability to have a child, nothing is beyond God’s divine power and ability to accomplish.

Billy Graham said, “There is no promise too hard for the Lord to keep, there is no prayer too hard for God to answer, there is no problem too hard for God to solve, and there is no person too hard for God to save.” When, like Sarah, you are waiting for God to act, you can grow weary – you can grow discouraged and cynical – you can give up hope that anything will change. All you need to do is go back to the very first verse of the Bible and read, *“God created the heavens and the earth.”*

Imagine reading this and saying, “God created the entire universe, but I don’t know if He can solve my problem – it’s too big, too insurmountable.” If God made the heavens and earth by simply speaking them into existence, then giving Sarah a child in her old age is no problem. If Jesus can walk on water and make a blind man see – if He can rise from the dead – there is nothing too hard for the Lord. God simply asks that you trust Him – that you place your problem in His hands and never give up hope in what He can do. However He chooses to handle your problem, you can trust the sovereign Lord of the universe.

The Apostle Paul highlights the faith of Abraham in Romans 4:18-21... “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”

It’s no wonder that Abraham is called the father of faith. For twenty-five years he hung in there – not perfectly – but he hung in there and trusted God to do the impossible. I love the phrase, “He faced the fact that his body was as good as dead.” He didn’t deny the facts – there’s no way I can produce a child – but he was fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised.

Over and over in the Bible God places His people in dire, desperate circumstances in order to display His power – so that they will say, “It was not by might or my power, but it was 100% the Lord. Nothing is too hard for Him to do.”

The fourth thing you need to remember while you wait is that **God’s timing is always perfect**. Verse 2 says, “Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.” Some translations say, *“at the appointed time.”* Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” We have our timetable for when we think things should happen, and we can’t understand why it takes God so long to act. But Solomon notes that God has a divine timetable and God is not bound by time – to Him a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day – He sees everything from an eternal perspective and ordains the perfect timetable for waiting and fulfillment.

We want the fulfillment to come as quickly as possible with the least amount of pain, but God likes to take His time. Phillip Brooks, a great New England preacher in the late 1800s, was pacing the floor one day when his wife asked what was wrong. He said, "I'm in a hurry and God's not." God is never in a hurry. I can't think of one thing He's done in my life I could classify as quick. God is just as interested in developing our faith as He is the end result.

Most, if not all, of God's servants in the Bible had to go through a time of waiting. Noah waited 100 years for the flood to come. Joseph spent the prime years of his life waiting for God to give him justice for all the wrongs done to him. Moses spent forty years preparing to deliver Israel from bondage and waiting for God to give the green light. David spent at ten years running for his life before ascending to the throne. Jesus spent the first 30 years of his life in obscurity waiting for the Father's timing to begin His ministry.

Why does God wait so long to act? One reason is because He knows from His eternal perspective the perfect timing for everything. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." God has a perfect plan for everyone and everything, and He alone knows the best timing for when things should take place. It's like looking at a puzzle. From our human perspective we only see a small piece of the puzzle, but God sees the whole picture. We look at our circumstance and say, "Where are you Lord? Why are you taking so long?"

If we could for one second be able to see the whole picture, we'd see what God sees and understand His timing. The last phrase of Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "*Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*" God's sovereign plan for what happens under the sun is largely hidden from our view. We're trapped in time and can't see the full picture of what God is doing. This can either lead to frustration and anger at God, or it can lead to faith and trust in God.

God has a track record of keeping His promises and we must trust in His plan and His timing. Sometimes God says no to a longing or prayer because He has something better for us. It's like the Garth Brooks song, "I Thank God for Unanswered Prayers." The song talks about a guy who goes to his class reunion and sees his old high school sweetheart. He remembers praying years earlier that God would give them a lifetime together, but God said no. Then he looks at his wife and thanks God for "unanswered prayers." There are many things we long for or pray for, and are able to look back in the passage of time and know getting them would have harmed us more than helped us.

Another reason God has us wait is to develop our faith. The only way our faith can grow strong and persistent is by being tested, and the best way to test the depth of our faith is to wait. Waiting strips us of our pride and self-dependence, and develops within us a character that we would never have without waiting. Paul Tripp says, "Waiting is not just about what I get at the end of the wait, but about who I become as I wait." We learn things through waiting that we would otherwise never learn. Our job is to hang in there and trust. The Psalmist says, "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14). Use your time of waiting to lean into the Lord and wait hopefully for what He's going to do.

The fifth thing you need to remember while you wait is that **waiting is worth the joy that comes when your longings are fulfilled.** Verse 3 says, “Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.” Isaac means “laughter” and every time Abraham and Sarah looked at their son, they would remember the joy they felt when, after years and years of waiting, he finally arrived.

Verse 6... “Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.’” For twenty-five years Sarah did not enjoy laughter – the only laughter she had was a cynical laughter of doubt in God’s promise of a child. But now her long wait is over and her longing is fulfilled, and she is beside herself with joy.

Most of the promises God made to Abraham were not realized in his lifetime – he died waiting. Hebrews 11:13 says of the Old Testament heroes of the faith... “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.”

God, in His perfect timing, may see fit to fulfill a longing in this life – and when He does you can rejoice like Sarah and give Him praise – but many of your longings will not be fulfilled until you die and you’re with Jesus. That gives me great hope – that no matter what happens or doesn’t happen in this life – everything will come full circle and be realized in the life to come. Knowing the joy that awaits us in glory makes it worth the wait.

Paul said in Romans 8:18 these incredible words: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Our suffering here on earth may be considerable but it is nothing compared to the glory of eternity. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Our troubles may seem heavy and unending, but when Jesus comes again, the transformation we will experience will make our present troubles seem like a blip in time.

While you wait, remember that God has not forgotten you, God keeps His promises, God is able to do the impossible, God’s timing is always perfect, and waiting is worth the joy that comes when your longings are fulfilled.