

Too Wonderful!

Gen 21:1-21

Call: Ps 136:1-9, 1 (NIV)

Scripture: Gal 4:28-31 (NIV)

I. Intro

Good morning. Our theme today is wonder. Wonder refers to something extraordinary that surprises the soul and takes your breath away.

As tradition has it, the Welsh King Brude asked St. Brendan, a Columban Monk of the 6th century, “Supposing I accept your Gospel and become Christ’s man, what will I find?” St. Brendan famously answered him, “If you accept the Gospel of Christ and become his man, you will stumble upon wonder upon wonder and every wonder true” (The Open Gate, 2).

Today, we come to a wonder-filled text, Genesis 21, a wonderful climax in our studies of Abraham and Sarah. For the last two weeks, we looked mainly at Lot and the city of Sodom, chapters 18 and 19. Note we have skipped chapter 20. Chapter 20 is Abraham repeating his lie about Sarah being his sister. He did that the first time in chapter 12 on their way to Egypt. And, I’m sure you don’t remember, but we talked about both scenes when we discussed that chapter, so I will refer you to that sermon if you’re interested.

Today, in chapter 21, we come back to the main storyline of Abraham and Sarah. Back in chapter 18, God promised a son to Sarah the following year.

So, I invite you into our text today, Genesis chapter 21, verse 1.

II. The Wonderful Birth (1-7)

1 The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” 7 And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” (ESV)

A. God Visits Sarah

Twenty-five long years ago, Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65, God had promised to make Abraham a great nation. But, a great nation requires a child. And as the story has continued, God has made it clear that the child must come from the body of barren Sarah. During those long twenty-five years, I’m sure there were many times Abraham and Sarah had bad days. I’m sure there were many days of them questioning whether leaving Ur was the right move. I’m

sure there were many days full of doubt and uncertainty, skepticism, maybe even cynical comments regarding God's extraordinary promises. But, wonder upon wonder and every wonder true, God keeps his promise. The promise-maker is the promise-keeper. The day finally arrives. And, it's fascinating that it's narrated in only 7 verses. It's almost anti-climactic. Isaac is born. There are no birthday parties, no building altars, no presents, only circumcision. Welcome to the world Isaac!

B. Full of Wonder

Abraham says nothing throughout the scene, but he is obedient. He names Isaac and circumcises Isaac obediently. Sarah does all the talking. She acknowledges that God has changed her skeptical and disbelieving laugh from chapter eighteen into a joyful laugh of wonder and amazement. She thanks God. Isaac's name means laughter, as a reminder of all the laughs we have seen throughout the story. We will hear one more laugh coming up. "Hear" is a key word in our story, and all those who hear this story will laugh with Sarah in wonder and amazement. And, we, the hearers, today do laugh in joy and wonder with Sarah, and with thankfulness because we have felt her pain throughout the story.

C. Too Wonderful

The text clearly states that Isaac is from God. In his grace, mercy and faithfulness, God intervenes to bring forth a son. The story that began with a cul-de-sac has miraculously become a through-road. As we said back when we started our study, if this plan will work, it has to be God. And, God makes it work. Is anything too difficult for the Lord? Remember that line from chapter 18? God said to Sarah through Abraham, "*Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too difficult for the LORD*" (Gen 18:13-14)? And, I said back then that this word *difficult* in the Hebrew can also mean *wonderful*. "*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*" Answer. No. Wonder upon wonder and every wonder true.

D. Loss of Wonder?

And, yet, I feel like, generally speaking, we, as a culture, have lost our sense of wonder.

1. **Could it be that we are too *enlightened*?** Indeed the rise of rationalism beginning with the Enlightenment gave birth to a pervasive skepticism about God in western society. That has given birth to a secular, cynical, technological age, which squashes wonder. After all, we have unbelievable technology such as iphones, which has been called a "wonder killer." Nothing is as amazing anymore since we have these in our hands. But as Andy Crouch says, "Wonder doesn't come from bringing the screen closer. Wonder comes from opening our eyes wider" (Crouch, 13). This skepticism, even cynicism, has affected how we read scripture. For example, we read wonder-filled stories like the burning bush and ask for the scientific name of the bush. We read the parting of the Red Sea and make models to determine the amount of wind needed to push back the water. Or, we read the miracle stories of Jesus and simply dismiss them as incompatible with our enlightened reason. Now, all of that is not bad, but notice the loss of wonder of an all-powerful God. You may know that Thomas Jefferson is the poster boy for this kind of scripture reading. He actually cut out all the miracle stories in the Gospels

because of his skepticism. You do that and you lose the revelation, you lose wonder and you reduce Jesus to simply a good moral teacher. It's no wonder the modern, and now post-modern age has been called the age of skepticism.

2. **Or maybe we've lost our wonder because of our familiarity with the world or with Scripture?** We used to marvel at lightning and thunder and sunsets and waterfalls. Maybe the natural world is too familiar to us now. Or, if we've grown up in the church, we're too familiar with all the wonders in Scripture, maybe even with the birth of Isaac. As the saying goes, familiarity can breed contempt, but it most certainly dulls our wonder. When Jesus says that we would do well to become like little children, I've often read that as referring to the dependence of little children. But, perhaps, he also meant that we should become like little children to recover our wonder.
3. **Or maybe we've simply lost our wonder because of sin?** We've talked quite a bit about sin throughout our study. It is a deadly infection that infiltrates all of our flesh. As has been said, if sin were the color blue, we would be the very darkest of blue. We would look like those people from the movie Avatar. Sin numbs us. Sin numbs the soul's surprise. Sin turns everything gray, and it makes us skeptics, even cynics. And cynicism is the enemy of hope, and the enemy of trust in God.

When is the last time, you wondered in joy and amazement at the wonders of God in your life? Have you, like our culture, lost your wonder? Isaac is born to a 90-year old barren woman. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

E. Turmoil in the Household

But, not everyone is excited about the birth of this promised child. Our story now shifts to the household into which Isaac is born. As Abraham and Sarah pondered the fulfillment of God's promises, a whole new dynamic arises within their tent. Up until this point, life inside the tent had been going rather smoothly. But, now, there was a lot of crying, a lack of sleep and the "promised" son getting all the attention. This now blended family is thrown into great turmoil. For, within this tent, was another boy who for the last 13 years had been the pride and joy of Abraham. Ishmael had received all the attention for the last 13 years, but not anymore. You can imagine what that meant.

III. The Bitter Separation (8-14a)

8 And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. 10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." 11 And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, "Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. 13 And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring." 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. (ESV)

A. The Feast

This is a bitter separation. Weaning at that time usually happened at age three. And, Abraham prepares a great feast for the weaning. Of course he would. He is a man gifted with hospitality and was a proud papa.

B. The Mocking

But, the unnamed Ishmael, now a 16-year-old teenager, is tired of watching the world revolve around this promised son! So, on feast day, he mocks Isaac. Here is another laugh. This laugh, though, is a malicious laugh. As Paul said in Galatians in our Scripture reading, there is “persecution” behind this laugh (Gal 4:29). Isaac is the promised seed in which all families on earth will be blessed. It is through Isaac that God’s redemptive plan will be accomplished. So, a threat to Isaac is serious business. Sarah sees the mocking, then goes to Abraham. She instructs him to send Ishmael and Hagar away again. The reason is because of the inheritance; Ishmael cannot get any inheritance. And, indeed, it is the descendants of Isaac that receive the inheritance, not the descendants of Ishmael.

Abraham is greatly agitated. As a father, I can only imagine what was going through his mind. Ishmael was his son. He had taught Ishmael how to hunt. He had taught Ishmael how to prepare a goat. He had taught Ishmael how to brush the camels. He had just taught Ishmael how to drive the camels. All of that goes through his mind, as he ponders what to do.

C. The Consultation

And what does he do? Unlike back in chapter 16, this time he consults God. He goes to God in his agitation. God validates Sarah’s plan, but not necessarily her motives. It appears though that Ishmael has become a threat to God’s rescue plan. Abraham does need to send them away. But God comforts Abraham. He will bless Ishmael because of Abraham. Once again, God emerges as a good, gracious and blessing God. He will even bless Abraham’s natural offspring. Although Ishmael is not the son of the covenant promises, God will provide for him.

D. The Separation

The next day, Abraham rises early. This is the same word used in the next chapter when Abraham will rise early to take Isaac to Mt. Moriah. Abraham rises early, gives provisions to Hagar and Ishmael and sends them away. It’s a moving scene as Abraham says good-bye. Essentially, this is a divorce, severing all legal obligations toward Hagar and Ishmael, especially in terms of inheritance.

IV. The Hearing God (14b-21)

*14 And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God **heard** the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has **heard** the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great*

nation.” [19](#) Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. [20](#) And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. [21](#) He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

A. Desperation

So, Hagar and Ishmael head south into the wilderness, probably heading back to Egypt, Hagar’s homeland. After some time, the water is used up. Then, Hagar gives up. She sets Ishmael down in the bushes and hopelessly cries out to God through tears. We feel great sympathy for them in this desperate situation.

We have this saying in our culture, maybe you’ve heard it or even said it, “They don’t have a prayer.” It’s a cynical line for a person that has no hope. When Hagar was in the wilderness without water, we might have heard that line.

B. Do not fear

But, wonder upon wonder, Hagar *does* have a prayer because God is the hearing God. We hear the common refrain, “[Do not fear Hagar](#)” (17). Fear is anti-wonder. Why not fear? Because the living God hears. God hears Ishmael’s cry, which is what Ishmael’s name means, “God hears.” God hears *even* the prayers of the non-chosen.

C. God hears

In times of desperation, God hears. We *always* have a prayer because God is the hearing God. And, it is typically in times of great desperation and uncomfortable-ness that great discoveries are made about God and about ourselves. The last time we met Hagar, she was desperate, and she discovered God is a seeing God. Here, desperate again, she discovers God is a hearing God! God hears the cries. And, like last time, God doesn’t abandon Hagar and Ishmael as expendable or unimportant. God is at the ready to rescue them. Nearby is a well of water. They are wandering in a desert, and nearby happens to be a well of water. God opens Hagar’s eyes to see the well. And, the scene becomes “a woman at a well” (see John 4).

Wonder upon wonder and every wonder true, God is the hearing God. For, in fact, God is more ready to hear than we are to cry out to him. But, he is always listening, waiting, standing by. We never need to force our way in or compel him to listen. There is no such thing as an inopportune moment with God, nor an inappropriate manner of approach. He hears, and, he always hears the first time. The Psalmist even tells us that not only does he hear, but God saves our tears in his bottle, while drawing near to the broken-hearted (Ps 56:8; 34:18). This is the living God.

I remember when this truth first hit home for me. It was 1999. Suzanne and I were on a basketball mission trip to the Philippines. We were playing 2-3 games a day outside in the humid heat of Filipino jungles. After about a week of this, I didn’t realize it then, but I wasn’t eating or drinking enough. And one morning I passed out from heat exhaustion or heat stroke or something. We were in the middle of the Filipino jungles. I was in such bad shape I had no

energy to move. Quite honestly, I didn't know if I was going to make it. Suzanne didn't know if I was going to make it either. It was a desperate situation to say the least. And, as the team left us back at the hotel all alone, Suzanne prayed fervently that God would open her eyes in some way to show her that I would be okay. Like Hagar, she had no other option but to pray. And, she said soon after her prayer, I got up on my own and walked to the restroom. I hadn't been able to move, but for some reason I was able to get up at that time. That night the team was playing their second game in town and word got out that I was in bad shape. And, a doctor happened to be at the game and he opened our eyes to a Baptist hospital within 5 minutes of our hotel, in the middle of the Filipino jungle. It might as well have been a well in the middle of the desert. They saved my life. Wonder upon wonder and every wonder true, God heard our prayers.

Now I know that sometimes these kinds of stories can be discouraging to those of us who don't feel like God is answering our prayers. Although God hears all, the timing remains mysteriously his own, leaving many of us waiting and maybe frustrated, probably like Abraham and Sarah felt for 25 years. The lament Psalms repeatedly recount trusting men and women who are stretched to their breaking point by waiting for answers from God. Yet, they keep praying even when it seems God is not listening. One writer says it this way, "God is the ideal parent who hears every child's request the first time... Therefore, ask anywhere, anytime, in tears or dry-eyed, continually or briefly, passionately or calmly; when it seems convenient; when it appears impossible. Just ask! You are always heard, because you are always loved" (Crump, 81).

Andrew White, the vicar of Baghdad, was here two weeks ago and spent some time with the staff. And, he had amazing stories to tell of miracles in the midst of the Iraqi war. Amazing miracles where God heard and answered prayers, sometimes immediately. However, he also shared his broken heart of losing many friends, even children, to the violence. Not every prayer resulted in a miracle; not every prayer resulted in what he wanted. But, here's what he would tell everyone, "I will pray for you. I can't promise you how God will answer your prayers. But, I can promise you this – God will hear them." God is the hearing God. So, we persistently pray in trust, which means whether he will grant our requests or not, God will listen to our prayers and will take them into account (Lewis, 61).

Well, our story ends with God's presence with Ishmael as he grows. Wonder upon wonder God is with Ishmael, the non-chosen one. God has a special place in his heart for the fatherless and the suffering. And, Hagar eventually finds him a wife in Egypt.

V. Conclusion

So, when *was* the last time your eyes were opened to the wonders of God in your life? If we've lost our wonder, how can we recover it? Here are two suggestions.

1. **Encounter Jesus.** How were the people of the New Testament overcome with wonder? They encountered Jesus. Jesus impacted every single person he came in contact with. People were thrown off balance by an encounter with Jesus. They were amazed and astonished by what he was doing and what he was saying. So, we soak in the wonder-

filled Gospel stories to encounter Jesus, and not cut them out like Thomas Jefferson. This means we especially soak in them during the wonder-filled Christmas and Easter seasons. This December, make the Christmas story the center of life. Use the Advent reading guide if need-be. Soak in it. Throughout the year, make communion a priority, because it is the meal of wonder at God's sacrifice. And, Paul reminds us to never forget that Jesus rose from the dead. We are sons and daughters of the resurrection, the most wonder-filled event in history! Maybe put a stickie somewhere where you'll see everyday, "He has risen!" As one of my heroes James Stewart says, "In the day of man's terrible need a second Adam has come forth to the rescue! This is the most momentous message human lips were ever charged to speak. It is electrifying in its power, shattering in its wonder... Suppose Paul came back & saw us today? How can we be bored? How can we be lazy? [How can we be mildly approving?] What has happened? Christ has risen. Is it even possible to say it without shouting? Why seek the living among the dead? Our church must be tingling & vibrating w/ the wonder of our own evangel" (Stewart, 42, 45). We recover wonder by encountering Jesus in the Gospels, and asking the Lord to give us fresh eyes and a sense of wonder like the people who lived it.

2. **Cultivate Gratitude.** How do we recover a sense of wonder? We cultivate gratitude everyday. It's so easy to complain about what God is not doing and of things not happening in our lives. Those are the seeds of cynicism. But, gratitude helps us open our eyes wider to the wonders of God. Gratitude can be both a thermometer and thermostat of our wonder. It's a thermometer because it tells us whether our eyes are seeing the wonderful things God is doing. And, it's a thermostat because gratitude can command us to have wonder. I know in my life, I'm trying to cultivate gratitude. And, the way I'm doing it is by recounting 10 things every morning for which I'm thankful. And, you know, when I've been doing that, suddenly, wonder wells up in my soul. Wonder upon wonder and every wonder true. Amen.

Benediction (adapted from Rom 15:13)

“May the God of wonders grant you eyes to see his wonders and ears to hear his wonders, and may he fill you with the wonder of Sarah, and all his joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with thanksgiving by the power of the Holy Spirit.” For nothing is too wonderful for him. Amen.

Resources

Crouch, Andy. *Tech-wise Family*

Crump, David. *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: A NT Theology of Petitionary Prayer*

Lewis, C.S. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

Stewart, James. *Heralds of God*

White, Andrew. *Faith Under Fire: What the Middle East conflict taught me about God*