



When Jonathan preached last week on Abraham’s failure in trusting the Lord, Jonathan connected Abraham’s story with the New Testament book of Romans. I want to highlight what he said particularly from Romans 7. In Romans 7, the apostle Paul is giving a sort of diary-like description of the struggle and fight he has with his own flesh. Paul says, <sup>18</sup>**For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.**<sup>1</sup> A few verses down, Paul adds, <sup>22</sup>**For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,** <sup>23</sup>**but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.**<sup>2</sup> Notice, he doesn’t say that he’s completely evil. He says nothing is good in his FLESH. And therefore, he has these internal competing desires. Can you relate to that? Paul then says, <sup>24</sup>**Wretched man that I am!** Can you relate to feeling that way at times?

But Paul doesn’t stop at “wretched man. . .” He goes on to say, **“Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** <sup>25</sup>**Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**<sup>3</sup> Last week, Jonathan said that he believes that the apostle Paul would have been bothered by how many professing Christians might interpret Romans 7 today. And, I agree. I’ve sat down in meetings with people who are weary in their sins, and give off this vibe like they actually believe that sin will win. But is that true?

I’m saddened and burdened because, instead of thanking Jesus Christ our Lord who gives us victory, it feels like many practically believe that sin is going to win and have the victory. But the apostle Paul goes on in chapter 8 to say these words, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** <sup>2</sup>**For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.**<sup>4</sup> We have been set free from condemnation, and we have been set free to obey! And not only that, Paul goes on and declares these words to us in verse 15. I’m reading from the NLT here because I love the practicality of its translation: <sup>15</sup>**So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.”**<sup>5</sup>

Now, what does this have to do with Genesis and the life of Abraham? Everything! Last week, I asked one of my children if they understood the point to Jonathan’s sermon. Part of the response was “Don’t live in fear.” And they added that this has essentially been the point each week. Yes! They’re right! But, of course, there’s more. As we look at Abraham’s life, we realize that God has been testing Abraham over the course of decades. God has proven his faithfulness to Abraham again and again. And God’s intention has always been for Abraham to draw closer and closer to the Lord relationally. Each test

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 7:18.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 7:22–23.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 7:24–25.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 8:1–2.

<sup>5</sup> Tyndale House Publishers, [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), Ro 8:15.

seems to reveal aspects of Abraham's faithlessness, but it also refines Abraham's faith in the Lord. Each test reveals Abraham's fear. And each test calls Abraham to have a healthy awe and fear of the Lord. Each test reveals how Abraham can still turn to bondage. And each test sets him more free in the Lord. At each test, Abraham could say, "Wretched man that I am!" And "There is therefore now no condemnation. I'm no longer a fearful slave!" Abraham didn't say, "Well, I guess sin wins and I'll just stay the way I am." No! If the Lord had saved him, the Lord will continue his work to save him. And the same is true for all who trust the Lord!

When we hear this of Abraham, we ought to think of ourselves as well. Christian, sin doesn't win in your life. Jesus does! The gospel of Christ sets you free in all aspects of life so that you can truly live. You are no longer bound to sin. You are bound to Jesus, bound to God – who is your freedom and loving Father! These realities ought to (and will) transform you if you have genuine faith in the Lord. Praise the Lord for his patience in transforming us. Even if it takes decades (which it always does). Praise his name! And so, we enter Genesis 21 where we get to discover ways in which God has grown Abraham's faith in the Lord.

With that, let me give you the main idea of the sermon today: **God's faithfulness to his Word should lead us to joy, dependence, and confidence in his promises, provisions, and presence.** This is a lengthy main idea, but we'll break it down, and I pray that you would be nourished and comforted in the Lord as we travel through Genesis 21 this morning. As we move forward, I want to move to the ending of the chapter first. The ending of the chapter actually gives us the cultural setting and context of the events that take place. And the ending reveals

### 1. Political tension, Abraham's confidence, and God's provision (vv. 22-32).

Let's read verses 22-32 together: <sup>22</sup>At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do. <sup>23</sup>Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned." <sup>24</sup>And Abraham said, "I will swear." <sup>25</sup>When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, <sup>26</sup>Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today." <sup>27</sup>So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. <sup>28</sup>Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. <sup>29</sup>And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?" <sup>30</sup>He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well." <sup>31</sup>Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. <sup>32</sup>So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines.<sup>6</sup>

What's going on here, and why am I reading this first? The phrase that starts verse 22 is important. We read, "At that time. . . ." That means that these political tensions were taking place during the same time period as Isaac's birth, weaning, and Hagar and Ishmael being sent away. These political tensions didn't happen overnight. Abraham talks about a well he dug, and then citizens of Abimelech's city took it over. Abimelech and the commander also acknowledge they've been watching Abraham and they see how God has prospered him, and they want a guarantee that Abraham isn't going to hurt them.

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<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 21:22–32.

Clearly God has made Abraham prosperous if the ruler and the commander are coming to ask for mercy. Clearly this is happening over the course of time because a well had to have been built, used by Abraham's people, and then taken by Abimelech's people. And, by the way, to have the well taken from you is like taking someone's life from them. We in America generally take water for granted. We have easy access to it. But good water was absolutely vital and prized by people groups when they got it. It communicated their continued survival.

As I read this encounter with Abraham and Abimelech, I can't help but see a difference in Abraham. In the previous chapter, Abraham resorted to his faith in himself and his own schemes. He was afraid of death and became bound to his sin. But where's Abraham's faith here? Do you see a change in this man? He has amazing confidence. He tells Abimelech what has happened to his people and requires the well be given back. Whether Abimelech was telling the truth about not knowing about the well-scenario is up for debate. But what's so intriguing is that Abraham doesn't simply declare and demand. He then provides animals as a part of a covenant between him and Abimelech.

Instead of Abraham resorting to the anger of man and demanding, he gifts Abimelech. This seems to surprise even Abimelech because he asks what this is for. And right there, Abraham is the blessing to a nation that God promised that he would be. Abraham was promised God's provision and Abraham can bless because he's been blessed by God.

Ventura, I'm going to take a quick side note here. We're given a wonderful example here of how we as Christians ought to live in this world, too. The New Testament – especially the apostle Peter – states that we are to live like sojourners and exiles (not like Israel living in the promised land, but like how Abraham ought to have lived in his sojourning or like Israel was commanded to live in Babylon). Take note then of Abraham's confidence in the Lord and his grace towards Abimelech. We're told by our Lord Jesus that we are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and do good to them who hurt us. That's not our natural tendency, and Jesus says that, too. But Jesus also says that if we just treat people nice who treat us nice, then what difference are we from the world? Jesus came to this world full of enemies and loved to the point of sacrificing his own life. How could he have done that? Because God the Father and Spirit were his portion and strength. Isn't that what we get glimmers of with Abraham? And isn't that how we ought to be as well? We are set free to be both confident and free to lay down our lives – even if a king or a commander hurt us? Because we have been freely given by the Lord, we can freely give to the world! Abraham's faith here is made evident, and I'm convinced he wouldn't have responded this way had not the Lord continued testing him. We saw how he behaved in chapter 20. Here, he's completely different!

Now, knowing this political context, let's move back to the beginning of the chapter to see:

## **2. The promised child, Sarah's joy, and Abraham's obedience (vv. 1-7).**

When I say "the promised child," I hope you hear an emphasis on God being faithful to his Word. God is faithful to whatever he speaks. What he says will happen. Always. He never renigs on a promise! Do you believe that? Ok, you can say that here, but how many have you ever doubted or lamented that God didn't seem to be following through on his promises? Everyone. The emphasis in the first two verses is that the Lord accomplished what he said, exactly the way he said. With that in mind, let's read verses 1-7 now: The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. <sup>2</sup> And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. <sup>4</sup> And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. <sup>5</sup> Abraham was a

hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. <sup>6</sup> And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>7</sup>

Abraham and Sarah have been waiting 25 years for God to fulfill his promise to them of a son. Twenty-five years! Many of you here haven't even lived that long. But now, what probably felt like “Finally,” Sarah conceived and had a child. Now, you may remember back in chapter 18, God (with two angels) visited Abraham and told him that Sarah would conceive and have a child. And do you remember Sarah's response when she overheard that? She laughed to herself. That laugh was one of disbelief. She even lies to the Lord saying she didn't laugh. But what's interesting about this is that in chapter 17, when the Lord changes Abraham and Sarah's names, he says they will have a son named Isaac, which means laughter. So, in chapter 18, Sarah's laughter is one of disbelief. Is Isaac to emphasize a joy of disbelief? No. So, we enter into chapter 21, and Sarah is laughing at the birth of her son Isaac. What kind of laughter is this? Is a joy in God truly following through on his promise and giving them the son – and this isn't just any son. This is a seed of the woman who will continue with the promise given to Adam and Eve. This son will be a seed to lead to *the* seed that will someday crush the serpent. Therefore, Sarah says not only will she laugh, but so will anyone who hears of this! The phraseology here indicates that people will have a joyous laughter even over and above hers!

Has God tested Sarah's faith? Yes. Her laughter switched from disbelief to belief. This is what God does in the heart of his people. Has God done that in you ever? But notice here in this section that joy and obedience go hand-in-hand. What's emphasized from Abraham is that he circumcizes his son and also follows God command to name him Isaac. As I think about the wandering Israelites being the first to read this, I can't help but think that God is revealing to them that **faith flows into joy and obedience**. Think back to Paul's words in Romans. There's struggling with his faith. But he's reminded of the Good News of *the serpent crusher, Jesus*. And in the good news of Jesus' victory, he says “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,” and then he moves into a chapter on how the Lord empowers a believer's obedience. The purifying of our faith leads to greater dependence and obedience and joy in the Lord! So, think of the psalmist in Psalm 5:11a who says, **“But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. . .”**<sup>8</sup>

Ventura, do you live this way? Do you know the joy of the Lord, and do you rejoice? If I was going to ask your children or grandchildren if you have joy in Jesus, what do you think they'd say? When people look at you during corporate worship, do they see a person who longs to more deeply commune with the Lord or someone who is playing religion? Do you *know* our Lord? If so, know the joy of the Lord as your strength!

But I want to go a little further. I know for me, and for other Christians, we've had times where we can feel spiritually high, but then quickly turn back to sin – maybe a short temper or porn or finding your comfort in money. The apostle James talks about this in his letter to the churches. He says that people can praise God with their lips, and with the very same mouth, they put down people who are made in God's image. He then goes on to say that this ought not to be so. Why? Because if we really know the Lord and rejoice in him, we would not jump into sin. If we know and love the Lord, we will then want to follow his commands to love him and love others. Do you see here that Abraham and Sarah's faith in the Lord is being revealed? And in their faith being revealed here, do you see the Lord's faithfulness to his

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<sup>7</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 21:1–7.

<sup>8</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 5:11.

word – not only in bringing a son, but in also growing Abraham and Sarah. There’s no condemnation. They’re not slaves. They’re set free to praise and obey him.

And the same is true for all of us who have turned from our sins and turned to Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. The apostle Paul connects the ideas of joy and obedience at the end of his second letter to the Corinthians: **Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.**<sup>9</sup> Let rejoicing fill you and then love for others because the God of love and peace is with you. The good news of the seed of the woman causes this change, impels change: joy and obedience. We see this in a small way with Abraham and Sarah. And we ought to see this in large ways with those of us who know *the* serpent crusher, Jesus. Now, we can move to the second section of this chapter, where we will see:

### 3. Ishmael’s laughter, Abraham’s dependence, and God’s presence (vv. 8-21).

<sup>8</sup> And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. <sup>10</sup> 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.” <sup>11</sup> And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” <sup>14</sup> 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. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. <sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup> He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. <sup>10</sup>

Isaac grew up and was weaned. Hold on! Twenty-five years of waiting, and Isaac’s birth to weaning gets 8 verses?! Then this scenario gets 13 verses?! Why? I think it’s because there’s more God is teaching here. So, let’s just be patient to watch it unfold. There are records in the ancient realm that a child was weaned around three years of age. If that’s the case, then Abraham is around 103 years old, and Ishmael is around 16 years old. On the feast day of Isaac’s weaning, Sarah saw something happen between Ishmael and Isaac. In our English translations, we could be tempted just to think that Sarah is jealous and doesn’t like Ishmael. But then when we hear the Lord affirm Sarah’s request to send Hagar and Ishmael away, we’re left wondering, “What’s going on?”

Well, when we look at the text a little more, we notice some clues that something isn’t right. Notice in this text that Ishmael is never named by name. Then, we have in the ESV, that Ishmael laughs. This is an ok translation to the word, and I think it’s put here to help us see a contrast with Sarah’s laugh. But the

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<sup>9</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 13:11.

<sup>10</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 21:8–21.

two words are different. There are two other instances in Genesis where this Hebrew word for laugh shows up. One is when Abimelech later sees Isaac with Rebekah and concludes that she is his wife. Another time is with Potiphar's wife accusing Joseph, and she in 39 that Potiphar has brought this Hebrew to their house to laugh at them. The ESV is consistent until you get to the scenario it's used with the Israelites in Exodus 32:5, where we're told the Israelites create a golden calf while Moses is on the top of Sinai. We're told that the Israelites rose up to "play." This is not a positive term. And, actually, based on the study of this word, it often has connotations to abuse. To add to that, in the Bible, it is often used in context related to sexual activity. That may not be the case, but the minimum understanding of this Hebrew word is that of abuse. And the apostle Paul agrees. In Galatians, he says that Isaac was persecuted by Ishmael (Gal 4:29). So, what happened here? Sarah saw Ishmael abusing a three-year old child, Isaac.

This cannot happen. But this has been happening since Adam and Eve's sin, hasn't it? The seed of the woman arrives, and the seed of the serpent seeks to destroy. Ishmael is a type of the seed of the serpent. And just like Adam and Eve should have banished the serpent; so, Abraham is challenged here to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Now, please hear this. Don't use this as a defense for rejecting people who hurt you. We have to understand the context. God promises to take care of Hagar and Ishmael. And, here Abraham's faith is tested once again. We're told he loves his son. But now God tells him to let him go to the wilderness. In any other circumstances that would have been a death sentence, but God promises to care for his son and Hagar. And guess what? Abraham believes the Lord. He trust. He sacrifices his son. Do you see how God's faithfulness in testing Abraham has drawn Abraham to trust the Lord more? Abraham is depending on the Lord, and the Lord follows through with Hagar and Ishmael.

In earlier chapters, God made himself plain to Hagar. She named him the God who sees. And she's tested again. Does God see? Not only does he see, he hears. And he even hears Ishmael – the one who was threatening the seed of the woman. Do you see God's grace? God is gracious to all kinds of sinners. He is gracious – and just like his grace to Abraham drew Abraham closer to himself, so his grace to Hagar and Ishmael ought to draw them to the Lord. And the same is true for us here today.

Where are you today? Have you been like Ishmael and abusing image-bearers with sexual immorality, laughing and mocking at things you ought not to? Are you like Abraham who turned to his own ways to protect himself? Are you like the Israelites, creating things in your life to stabilize you – all the while you're not relying on the Lord? Do you see God's patience and grace to you? **God's faithfulness to his Word should lead us to joy, dependence, and confidence in his promises, provisions, and presence.**

The final words of the chapter are found in verse 33-34: <sup>33</sup> Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. <sup>34</sup> And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.<sup>11</sup> These statements reveal Abraham's rest in the Lord. Beersheba became the southernmost area of the nation of Israel. The tree was symbolic of life and growth that is based in the faithfulness of God. He's the Everlasting God – meaning, he will always remain and always keep his promises. So, even though Abraham sojourns and longs for his eternal home, God is always with him. Will the Israelites believe? **Will we believe? We have the Savior Jesus who came in tumultuous political times. And his arrival, like Isaac, seemed to be overshadowed by the politics and circumstances of others. Yet, in that humble arrival, he revealed he is not just a perfect person. He is God come in the flesh to conquer sin and death – and to draw humans to find their joy, dependence, and confidence in the Lord who fulfills his promises, provides eternally, and grants his presence forever. Do you believe? Do you see? He sees and hears you.** Praise his name.

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<sup>11</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 21:33–34.