

Let me begin this morning by reminding you of three consequential truths that you already know: **#1.** Heaven is a place of unending joy... (You did all know that... right...?) **#2.** Hell is a place of unending suffering... (An unpleasant thought that we don't like to focus on for very long)... **#1.** Heaven is a place of unending joy... **#2.** Hell is a place of unending suffering... **#3.** but while we are here on earth... we must expect both... (joy and sorrow)... (laughter and tears.)

(LISTEN!) Another way of saying #3 is "You cannot have hills without valleys." [PAUSE]

This truth (that you cannot have hills without valleys)... is especially true of family life... for the same people who bring us joy can also bring us sorrow. ... Relationships can become strained and then change overnight... and we wonder what happened to a happy home. ... A Chinese proverb says, "*Nobody's family can hang out the sign 'Nothing the matter here.'*" OK... Now let's be very truthful. We can say the very same thing about church family... can't we? ... But – (HEAR ME AGAIN) You cannot have hills without valleys.

In our passage today in Genesis... we will see that the coming of Isaac into their home brought both tremendous joy... and anguishing sorrow to Abraham and Sarah. ... Genesis 21 first takes us to the extreme joy... in verses 1-7.

It was a red-letter day in Abraham's life. ... It was a chapter in his experience to be written in bold capitals... underlined and framed... and

hung forever in the gallery of faith. ... There had been other notable days... but never a day like this one. ... For on this day... Isaac was born!

For three chapters of Genesis... we have been dealing with one of the saddest and most sobering portions of the Word of God. ... Scripture has taken us through a deep and dark valley. ... For the last eighty-nine verses we have covered in this book... there has been nothing but one grim revelation or act after another.

First... there was the announcement of Sodom's impending destruction; second... Abraham's ineffectual intercession for it; third... the deliverance of Lot and his family followed by the destruction of the cities on the plain; fourth... Lot's sin with his daughters; and fifth... Abraham's shameful attempts to deceive Abimelech.

These are all tragedies. Abraham have experienced valleys so deep... that once they got to experience the hill – it was magnanimous! ... If there was ever a time to break out of gloom and into laughter... it is now... (Genesis chapter 21)... now... when Isaac... the son of promise... is finally born. Abraham and Sarah name their son – the Hebrew word for “*laughter*” ... and Sarah says... “*God has brought me laughter*” (Genesis 21:6).

Up in heaven... the angels must have smiled to see Abraham skipping and hopping around his compound... like a five-year-old.

Every Christmas season (it seems) at least one television sitcom does a satire of Charles Dicken's play “A Christmas Story.” One of the sitcom's main characters usually re-enacts the part of Ebenezer Scrooge. If you are like me... you have seen countless re-enactments of old Ebenezer

Scrooge... being taken through three soul-shaking hauntings... showing him the adverse effects he has had on others. But then he wakes up... and finds out it is still Christmas Day. ... He still has time to correct his selfish ways. And so He is so transported with joy... he could hardly put his clothes on. ... *"I don't know what to do"*... cried Scrooge... laughing and crying at the same time. ... *"I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy, I am as giddy as a drunken man."* ... He pranced around the rooms of his house. ... He burst into a laugh. ... *"Really,"* wrote Charles Dickens in his famous Christmas story... *"Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh, the father of a long line of laughs."*

And so it must have been with somber old Abraham. ... A boy had been born into his home. ...His boy! ... Sarah's boy! ... God's boy! ... And... had it been possible for us to be there that day... we might have seen him popping in and out of his tent... laughing and chuckling... and beaming... and embracing everyone within reach.

Genesis 21:1-7

As I said, the name "Isaac" means "laughter."

When Sarah at age eighty-nine had overheard the angels talking about her giving birth to Isaac the following year... Sarah laughed then... too. But it was a laugh of **unbelief** (Gen. 18:12). ... Even when Abraham had heard God repeat the promise of a son being born to Sarah... he had laughed in a kind of half-incredulous... half-believing acknowledgment of God's truthfulness (Gen. 17:17). ... Now... however... Abraham's and Sarah's

laughter is believing... spontaneous... and uncontrolled. For Isaac has been born. The son of the promise has been given.

And it is Sarah who properly leads the rejoicing. It was she who had been barren and who now... having at last conceived and given birth to Isaac... can hardly believe her good fortune or control her joy. ... The reason for the joyful laughter... is that God had done a great miracle.

There are several lessons Abraham and Sarah were learning. ... One lesson they learned... is that God is faithful to His promise. They had believed God (partially)... but they had doubted Him too. ... At times they had tried to take matters into their own hands... thinking it was necessary for them to help God out. (“We do that sometimes... too... don’t we...? *Lord... I believe You... I just want to make sure...*” and then we act in ways that are not His ways...)

A year earlier... Sarah had utterly discounted the promise. But God was faithful in spite of human unbelief. ... Aren’t you grateful for the grace of God — the fact that He does not make His promises to us conditional upon the strength of our belief... ?

Has God made a promise to you? ... If He has... you may be sure that He will keep it. ... You may waver... but He will not waver. ... (You may disbelieve; He remains faithful.) ... The day will come when you will laugh with joy at the fulfillment.

God keeps His Word... His promises... but (as our passage illustrates for us)... God sometimes delays His promises. The reason he did so with Abraham... is the same reason He delays with us. ... We need to grow in our faith... we need to learn more endurance... to become stronger and

more determined... to learn to trust and hope more in God... to pray and fellowship more with God.

There are a multitude of reasons why God may not immediately fulfill His promises in our lives. But two facts are **always** true: **1) God is faithful to His promises.** And **2) God is powerful enough to keep His promises.** ... He has the power to do exactly what He says He will do... the power to fulfill His promises in our lives.

God will always do exactly what He promises He will do. He may delay for a while in order to strengthen us or to teach us some lesson. But God keeps His promises... in His Own way... and in His Own time. ...

Abraham and Sarah had to wait (now... get this)... **twenty-five years** for their son to be born... because it is "*through faith and patience [we] inherit the promises.*" (Did you get that...? **It is through faith and patience that we inherit the promises.**) ... Here is a passage from our New Testament that teaches this...

Hebrews 6:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Hebrews 10:36 (ESV)

³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

Faith is a journey... and each happy destination is the beginning of a new journey. ... When God wants to build our patience... He gives us promises... sends us trials... and tells us to trust Him. ... And then... once

we learn our patience... He sends us new trials... and tells us to trust Him. (Each happy destination is the beginning of a new journey...)

So we might experience a purposeful delay... before we experience God's answers... but... **1) God is faithful to His promises.** And... **2) God is powerful enough to keep His promises.** He has the power to **do** exactly what He says He will do.

Abraham and Sarah learned that nothing is too hard for Him. This is a major emphasis in the passage. It is stressed by a threefold repetition about Abraham's age at the time of the birth: "*Sarah... bore a son to Abraham in his old age.*" (v. 2) "*Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.*" (v.5) "*Sarah said, 'I have born him a son in his old age.'*" (v.7).

Humanly speaking... there was no possibility at all that Abraham could have a child at this age. But although this was impossible with men... with God all things are possible. ... God is sovereign... and He can do what He will in His universe.

But let's be very honest here... When you and I read a passage like this... we tend to say, "*Well, that was all right for Abraham and Sarah. God certainly did a miracle for them. But God can't do that for me. My situation is different I am too old. I am retired...*" ... Or... "*I am already established in my career ... Or, 'Those who are opposing me are too strong.'*"

But my question to you is this: *Is God sovereign? Is God all-powerful?*

Then He **can** and **will** do what He has promised.

Some of us think that it is too late for God to work... that if He was going to use ME in some significant way... it would have happened by now. ... But let me remind you of a few things:

Moses was forty when he fled Egypt after killing the Egyptian. The then after another forty years had passed... at age eighty he began to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. ... As for Abraham... he lived seventy-five more years after the birth of Isaac.

(LISTEN!) We are not finished with Abraham in the Biblical narrative. ... Abraham finally died at the age of one hundred and seventy-five. – So don't use age... or retirement... or a settledness in a career' as an excuse! ... God may well have important work ahead for you to do.

Fatigue isn't even a valid excuse. Sarah stands as an example for why you cannot say, "*But I don't have the strength to do it.*" God will give you whatever strength is necessary. I notice from this passage that God did not merely give Sarah the strength to conceive and bear a child. He gave her the ability to nurse the child too (v. 7). If God gives you a task... He will give you the strength and time you need to do it.

A third lesson Abraham and Sarah learned... which is also emphasized in this account... is that **God is in no hurry in carrying out his promises but rather has a set time for their fulfillment.** The text says that "*Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in old age, at the very time God had promised him*" (v.2).

This time had been mentioned first in Genesis 17 ("*My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year*" (v. 21). It was reiterated twice in Genesis 18 ("*I will surely return to you about*

*this time next year, and Sarah, your wife will have a son.”- **v.10**) ... and (“I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son” - **v.14**). God was not ‘playing the situation by ear’ There was **certainty** to His plan. When the promise is fulfilled – it is neither early nor late. It is “at the very time God had promised him.”*

(LISTEN!) Be assured that God is not “*playing it by ear*” with us. He is very purposeful in His timing and method. But one of the hardest things we have to face – as Christians – is God’s Own sense of timing. There seems to be many delays in God’s actions. He just doesn’t act quickly enough for our liking. ... But just like Abraham and Sarah... His timing is perfect.

The birth of Isaac is the picture of the joy of fulfillment. We see that here in Genesis. But now we have 2 sons of Abraham living side by side... Isaac and Ishmael. You cannot have hills without valleys.

In his letter to the Galatians... the Apostle Paul tells us that there are significant implications of the conflict of Isaac and Ishmael living side-by-side... to yours and my life of faith. He says that **Isaac** is a picture of that which is born of the **Spirit**... and **Ishmael** is a picture of that which is born of the **flesh**.

Galatians 4:22-23 (ESV)

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Galatians 4:28-29 (ESV)

²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.

Life born of the Spirit... is a **new nature** that is given to us. It is what God supernaturally produces... a life controlled by the Spirit. ... God produces in us... love... joy... peace... patience... goodness... faithfulness... gentleness... and self-control. ... Ishmael represents our self-efforts at trying to **force** these elements into reality in our lives.

The fruit of the Spirit in our lives... will never come from the flesh. It will never come from self-effort... nor by positive thinking... nor by perpetual trying. ... Love... joy... and peace... those wonderful gifts of God... never come from any attempt on our part to imitate them. (You CAN imitate them... but they will never be anything but an imitation.) ... You can**not** produce the fruit of the Spirit by the flesh... because that fruit is the **supernatural** gift... from the life lived in the power of the Spirit of God... born as Isaac was here. ... It comes simply by taking on the life of Jesus Christ.

But having this new nature... which is a miraculous birth in us... is not the whole story. There must also be a putting **away**... a putting **out** of our lives any **Ishmaels** which may exist.

So... now we come to the **valley** portion of today's passage.
(Remember!)... We have to have valleys... in order to have hills.

Genesis 21:8-14

So... if Isaac represents the gladsome fullness of the fruit of the Spirit in the life... then Ishmael represents some manifestations of our self-life... (something in which we find comfort and delight - and which we do **not** want to surrender- but we need to.)

(The chances are) that your Ishmael is probably something of value to you... which you have long suspected is not what God wants you to have... but which you are reluctant to give up. ... There can be habits or values in our lives which God may allow for a time... but the time comes when He says... *“Now, these have to go!”* It can be anything – even good things in our lives.

There was certainly nothing wrong with Ishmael or Hagar. ... As a matter of fact... what we will see in next week’s passage... is that God reaffirmed their worth. ... After Abraham sent them away... and they were in the desert thinking they were about to die... God spoke to Hagar and reassured her of His love and care for her. ... He provided her with water. He even promised to make Ishmael into a great nation. ... Hagar and Ishmael were not bad. (They were good people.) ... But Abraham was told to choose – (now get this!)... not God’s good - but God’s best.

What I am trying to say is... if you have lived with the Lord for any length of time... you have undoubtedly faced situations like that. There have been things in your life (perhaps even now there are things in your life) that are good — there is nothing wrong with them in themselves — yet God is saying, *“I want that thing to go because I have something better for you.”* It might be friendships who you have relied on... in some way... (God may be saying... *“Let them go. I have something better for you...”*) ... It may be a dream... a job... a hobby... a ministry... or some material possession.

A number of years ago... when I was a college student... an older student who disciplined me... (a fellow by the name of Ken Lotze)... told me something that I will never forget ... **“IN GOD’S ECONOMY – GOOD IS THE WORST ENEMY OF BEST...”** ... We often settle for good...

rather than **BEST**. (...And because we are so fallible... as human beings... it is often impossible for us to recognize what is good and what is best.) Abraham... like us... could not tell the difference. He did not want to let Ishmael go.

But why did **God** want Hagar and Ishmael to go? ... We do not know for sure... though we can imagine some things. ... Since God saw the future... He may have seen that the friction between Ishmael and Isaac would get **worse** and disrupt the household. ... It might be better to have the separation now rather than later.

In view of what is going to come in Genesis 22 — when Abraham is going to be tested in his willingness to offer up his son Isaac... having another son in his household... Abraham... would not have been given the supreme test that it was.

We do not know what was in Abraham's heart... but it is possible that he would cling to Ishmael as a possible plan B... in case anything ever happened to Isaac. ... After all... Isaac was just a boy. Accidents do happen. Something might happen to that son... and if it did... he could always fall back on Ishmael. ... Perhaps God sent Hagar and Ishmael away as a means to close-Abraham-up... to only **one** possibility... Isaac!

All these things may be answers... but I think it significant that the reasons are not spelled-out This is because... in the choices we face... and the partings we are often led to make... God quite frequently does not spell out His reasoning. ... We may be able to guess why He is doing it. ... We may be right or wrong. ... But God often does not say why He is doing it. He just wants us to **trust Him**.

Notice some things about God's call for Abraham to choose: First of all... this was a distressing matter to Abraham. ... He had to go through an agonizing reappraisal when the word came from the LORD, "*Ishmael must go.*"

He loved this boy and I think it is quite possible that Abraham may have been angry with God for bringing the matter up. He might have considered replying to God... as we frequently are prone to say ourselves: **Oh, this is really nothing, it is such a trivial thing. Why bring it up, why bother with it? Let's go on the way we were. We have been getting along for quite a while with Ishmael, why change now?*

The agony of his heart showed that this task was not a trivial matter to Abraham. It was something that would cost him deeply. ... The things that God sometimes asks you and I to give up... are not always easy. They may cause us some grief.

How many of you have heard a fellow Christian's testimony about how the Lord miraculously took a desire of some sin in their life away – just like that!...? ... Maybe you have heard about or experienced the Lord removing a desire for a habit such as smoking... or drinking... overeating or lust. ... But let me be very honest – God **does** sometimes deliver us by taking the desire out of our hearts... but in most cases... I think... God leaves the desire right there and tells us to obey anyhow – even though it costs us some heartache and anguish.

Ishmael needed to go. – AND Believers! We sometimes have our Ishmaels... don't we? ... You cannot have hills without valleys.

I want you to notice that this was a delayed judgment. Ishmael is estimated to be around seventeen years old at this time... and Abraham had known from the beginning that Ishmael was God's choice. ... He had come from Abraham's deliberate choice of self-indulgence. ... Since God had not chosen this boy... he would not be Abraham's heir. ... Yet God permitted him to stay... saying nothing to Abraham about it... until Isaac came along.

When we come to choices like this... and the Spirit of the Lord speaks to us about a matter... we tend to think God is very harsh... (very cruel... and very demanding)... when... in reality... He has been patient... forbearing... and tender. ... For seventeen years Ishmael was allowed to stay in the house without a word... but when Isaac came... then Ishmael had to go at last.

Thinking... once again... of how the Apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 4 used Isaac and Ismael as an illustration of a Christian's two natures... until you are converted... you have an old nature... and that old nature controls you. ... You do what you want to do... simply doing what comes naturally... but that can often be cruel... mean... nasty... and very selfish... harmful to yourself and to others. ... But when you are born again... you receive a new nature. And when you receive a new nature... that is where the trouble always begins. ... Paul writes in the seventh chapter of Romans of the battle going on between the old nature and the new nature: "*For the good that I want to do, I do not do: but the evil; which I don't want to do, that I do*" (Rom. 7:19). ... That is... the old nature is in control.

So the time comes... when you have to make a decision as to which nature you are going to live by. ... You must make a determination in this matter of

yielding to the Lord. ... You either have to permit the Holy Spirit to move in your life... or else you have to go through life controlled by the flesh. ...

(LISTEN!)... There is no third alternative for the child of God. The son of the bondwoman must be put out. ... That is exactly what we have here in Genesis: the son of the bondwoman Hagar had to be put out.

As a believer you cannot live in harmony with both natures. You are going to have to make a decision. James says, "*A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways*" (James 1:8). This explains the instability and the insecurity among many Christians today. They want to go with the world... and yet they want to go with the Lord. They are spiritual schizophrenics... trying to do both -- and you cannot do that.

I don't know what form Ishmael may be taking in your life... but I know there are times when God says to us... simply, "*This must go; no longer may it be permitted. There can be no manifestation of the life of the Spirit any longer until this is dealt with...*"

You know how Abraham obeyed. You know... also... how you must obey!

I urge you to prayerfully consider if there are any Ishmaels in your life that you know God wants you to send off. Is there an improper use of your time?... a selfish use of your schedule?... a negativity toward others?... a lack of prayer focus...?

Former Chaplain of the U. S. Senate, Vance Havner, years ago, wrote an article entitled, 'Why the Wheel Won't Work'. He began his article describing a boyhood experience of his, when his father took him to an old country mill that was operated by a large water wheel alongside of a river.

He recalled how the river's natural stream flow would push the giant wheel which powered the mill and allowed the miller to grind wheat into flour.

The older Mr. Havner told his son that sometimes – even when the river should have its strongest flow of water – there wasn't enough water to turn the wheel. He explained that at such times, the miller could go out and heave and ho and strain to shove the wheel into action... and he might even call some of his neighbors to come help him turn that giant wheel so that he could continue his work. But the miller knew such activity would not be the best effort. Instead the miller would walk upstream to find the dead logs and debris that were clogging the river, keeping it from flowing, and bringing the wheel to a halt. Once he removed the debris, his wheel turned freely again.

There are a lot of believers who are, spiritually speaking, trying to force their wheel to turn. God's work in their life has come to a standstill so they load their schedules with church activities, Church boards and committees, Bible studies, singing, and prayer meetings. All of this is good – but very often... their best effort is to remove the hindering debris from their life that God has been asking them to remove.

Do you have any dead logs that need removing... ? Are there any Ishmaels you need to send away... ? They are the reason "Why the Wheel Won't Work" ... You cannot have hills without valleys