

Is it true that faith is always a good thing? Can we say that the most important thing in life is having faith? We are called to live by faith. Having faith is a good thing, isn't it? The answer is yes and no. We are called to exercise faith but not faith in anything or anyone. It's sad and even dangerous to put your faith in what is not worthy of faith. A 150- kilo man may believe with all his heart that a small child's chair can hold him, but he will quickly find that his faith is misplaced. To see followers of false religions with their very sincere faith is extremely sad. Their faith is very real but it is often placed in their own efforts, therefore, misplaced. And one of the central messages of the first chapters of the Bible, of God's revelation to this world, is that God is worthy of all our faith. We can and must live by faith in the promises of God. God is faithful to his word. There will always be this struggle in the heart of the human being: to live by faith in God, to place one's trust entirely in God or to live by human wisdom, to put one's trust in the human being. We see this again and again in the story of Abraham's life, God seems to want to tell us: Trust me. I am trustworthy. I am faithful to my word, to my promises, to my covenant of grace. And why do you think God needs to repeat the same message? Why should God emphasize and reemphasize his faithfulness? This is because we have this natural tendency to forget it, to rely on our own wisdom. And the message that is announced at the very beginning of the Bible is the message that is announced throughout the Bible. God is faithful. God is trustworthy. God keeps his promises. Trust him with your life, with your death, with your eternal salvation. Trust him. He is worthy of it. Let us see how this message is communicated in chapter 21 of the book of Genesis.

A promise fulfilled

Last Sunday we saw together the importance of the words "But God". God intervenes in lives, in apparently hopeless circumstances, God acts and God transforms lives. He transforms darkness into light. So when we read the first two words of verse 1: "The Lord visited", we can't wait to see what God is going to do. We can't wait to see how God will act, under what circumstances, for what purpose. And we find our answer right away: 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." Finally, the long-awaited son is born. Finally the promise is fulfilled. Let me ask you a question about these two verses: What strikes you when reading these verses? What is emphasized in these verses? Look at the sentences: "As he had said", "According to his Word", "at the time of which God had spoken to him"

God had promised. God had said. God set a time and God accomplished exactly what he said. In chapter 17.21 and 18.14 God said exactly when the birth would take place. And now we see the fulfilment. So what is emphasized in these verses is God's faithfulness to his Word. What God promises, God accomplishes. The whole word of God is trustworthy. Everything he says is reliable. He doesn't make mistakes He does not forget. He does not promise things that he is unable to accomplish. If God says it, God will do it.

The text also underlines that the birth of this boy is a miraculous birth. Watch how the text speaks of the age of Abraham and Sara: V2 "In his old age", V5, "Abraham was 100 years old", V7, it is Sara who speaks: "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." Listen to what the apostle Paul said in Romans 4: "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb." The Spirit of God works in this situation of death to give life. The Spirit of God acts to do what man is unable to do.

And of course, this birth is the source of joy and wonder and gratitude. The child is given the name Isaac which means "He laughs". It is true that Sarah laughed in chapter 18 at God's announcement concerning the birth of Isaac. She laughed because she didn't believe it was possible! But these are not the same laughs here in verse 6: And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."

This miraculous birth, this long-awaited birth, this birth promised 25 years previously, it is the subject of great, great joy. Yes, it took many years for the promise to be fulfilled. And we can ask the question, why did God take so long to fulfill his promise? Why didn't God give this son right away after he gave the promise in chapter 12? What did he gain by imposing these years of waiting? The text does not say so explicitly, but it is not unreasonable to say that God wants Abraham and Sarah to learn to live by faith. God wants them to understand to trust in the sovereignty of God. They have to see that God is perfect in everything he does, even if he does not act at the time of their choice, at the time that they would have chosen. God waits until natural birth is impossible for this old couple in order to manifest his faithfulness and his divine power at the face of human helplessness.

And it would be remiss on my part not to make the link between the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus. There are all kinds of similarities. It is a birth foretold by God, announced by the prophets, announced by the angel Gabriel to Mary. It is a miraculous birth, the fruit of divine activity, the activity of the Holy Spirit in Mary: "The Holy Spirit will descend on you, and the power of the most high God will cover you with his shadow". (Luke 1.35)

It is a birth that takes place at the time chosen by God: "When the times were fulfilled, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law," (Galatians 4.4). Isaac and Jesus too, their names were already chosen by God. Both were circumcised on the eighth day. And then, as we know, the birth of Jesus was a subject of wonder and great joy. Think of the joy of the angels, the joy of the shepherds, the joy of the wise men. Think of your joy if you are in Christ. Think about what the birth of Jesus means for you, in your life. It's a subject of joy and wonder.

And one could also say that we still see such births. Every spiritual birth, every person who is born again, is a miraculous birth promised by God in eternity past. It is a birth accomplished by God, a birth which is the fruit of the activity of the Holy Spirit of God. And every time a man, woman or child is born again, there is joy on earth and in heaven. Maybe I'm talking to you this morning and you've never experienced this joy, the joy of a new life in Christ, the joy of knowing that your sin has been forgiven, blotted out, the joy of knowing that you have been adopted by God, that he gave you eternal life. There is a promise for you. If you repent and put your trust in Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord, you will experience this joy. God promises it to you and God is faithful. The promise fulfilled.

Conflict and separation

Some people have read verses 8 to 21 and said that it is simply a lesson on conflict within a family, rivalries between brothers or half-brothers. But even if we can learn such lessons from this episode, there is something much more important to see and understand. In verse 8 we see a great feast organized by Abraham to celebrate the weaning of Isaac who is 3 or 4 years old. But in verse 9 we see friction, something sinister. "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing." And the laughter of Ishmael is not the same laughter of joy from Sarah and Abraham. In his laughter there is mockery. There is enmity. This is

the laughter of hostility. How do we know? The apostle Paul tells us about this in Galatians 4:29 where he says that Ishmael "persecuted" Isaac. This is not innocent teasing and Sara sees it.

Is it just jealousy? We could understand if it were but the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians, he helps us to understand that these two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, they represent two ways of approaching God, two ways of living, two groups, two sides of humanity. On the one hand, there is Isaac. Paul describes him as the child who was born under the promise, the child born of the Covenant of Grace, the child born of a free woman. He represents, if you will, the believing descendants, the blessed descendants, those who approach God by faith in the promises, by faith in Christ. This is what Isaac represents. But Ishmael is described as the child of the slave woman. He was born according to the flesh. He is the fruit of human effort and not the promise of God. He represents human solutions, purely human endeavors, human wisdom, all who are outside the Alliance of Grace. If we can go back even further in the history of redemption, we can say that in Isaac and in Ishmael, we have a fulfillment of the promise in Genesis 3.15 - the descendants of Satan and the descendants of the woman. And in this first promise given in Genesis 3.15 what do we see? We see hostility, enmity between the two descendants.

In Ishmael, we see an enemy of grace, an enemy of the fulfillment of the promise, we see Satan who opposes God, who opposes God's plan for the salvation of the world. And that's what Paul saw at Galatia. In the church there were those who were enemies of the grace of God. The Judaizers claimed that new pagan converts had to submit to the whole Mosaic law if they really wanted to become Christians. For them, salvation did not come only by grace by faith but by the works of the law. And Paul says that those who oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ, received by grace, are like Ishmael who persecutes Isaac.

And dear friends, this mockery and hostility is still part of the life of God's people, 4000 years later. There are always those, often very religious people, even in the church, who oppose the gospel of grace, who insist on works to be saved. Rites must be observed. You have to be good. You have to do this, do that. And there is still persecution. We know very well that often the mockery and the opposition, the hostility, come from those who are closest to us, members of the same family. This passage helps us to understand what is going on. Ismaël lives with us. Ishmael still lives in the church. And Ishmael always stands against Isaac. He still persecutes him. But behind Ishmael who persecutes Isaac there is Satan who fiercely opposes Jesus Christ and his church. There is a conflict.

But there is also separation because of the conflict. Some commentators accuse Sara of being mean to Agar and Ishmael when she asks Abraham to drive them out, but God confirms that Sara is right to ask Abraham to act. Sara sees what Abraham does not see or does not want to see. Sara sees that these two boys who represent two ways of living, by faith in God or by human wisdom, they have nothing in common and they must separate.

Abraham, since he is the father of Ishmael, wants his son to stay there with him. But God says no. The presence of Ishmael in this home represents a real danger for the family of faith.

Abraham had already been tempted to see Ishmael as the son of blessing. He asks God in chapter 17.18 in a moment of unbelief that God take Ishmael as the beneficiary of God's promises. He prays "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" And while Ishmael is still there, there will always be the temptation not to trust 100% in God and in his promises for Isaac. Abraham must get rid of Ishmael. He must get rid of everything that could prevent him from living by faith. And, encouraged by God's promise to make Ishmael a great nation, Abraham obeys the voice of God. He puts his trust in the promise of God. And from verse 14 to verse 21 we see that God shows himself faithful to his word. He doesn't let Ishmael die in the desert. V 17 is the key: "God heard the boy's voice." God in his common grace, even if Ishmael is not the child of promise, even if he represents opposition to the covenant of grace of which Isaac is the fulfillment, God pours out on him his common grace. Speaking of God's goodness to all, Jesus says in Matthew 5: "God makes his sun rise on the wicked and on the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust." He repeats his promise in verse 18 to make Ishmael a great nation. He provides water to keep Ishmael alive. But despite the goodness of God, the common grace of God poured out on this boy of 16 or 17 years old, what we read in verse 21 does not bode well: "His mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt."

Another step on the path of separation far from God.

What is the application here for us? God asks Abraham to send Ishmael away. It is not at all easy for Abraham. After all, he's his son! But God explains to him why he asks him that. God gives promises and God takes care of the rest. It is a painful separation but total obedience because Abraham believed. And God still asks us to get rid of Ishmael, anything that could weaken our faith, anything that could prevent us from living by faith. Is there a relationship, an activity, an attitude, and if you do nothing, it will destroy your faith, it will do great spiritual damage in your life and in the life of your family? Perhaps, like Abraham, you do not see the danger but your loved ones see it, your wife sees it, your husband, your parents. I heard this week from two young people I know well, young people who are wandering very far from God, who are no longer living by faith because they have not sent Ishmael away from their lives. Their loved ones implore them to do so, but "this thing is very displeasing" to these young people. And they maintain a very, very close relationship with Ishmael. Let's take a close look at our hearts this morning. Are we too attached to Ishmael? Promise fulfilled, conflict and separation.

Faithfulness underlined

There are a lot of things I would like to say about the last part of the chapter. Perhaps when reading these verses you wondered why they are there. It's a little-known episode in Abraham's life, a dispute over a well, a covenant made between Abraham and Abimelek. But again, we see in these verses the faithfulness of God. God had promised Abraham in chapter 17.7: "I will be your God and the God of your descendants after you". And there, in verse 22 Abimelek recognizes God's faithfulness to Abraham: "God is with you in all that you do". And the fascinating thing is that the same thing is said to Isaac, the descendant of God in chapter 26.28: "We see that the Lord is with you." And then in Genesis 30:27, Laban clearly sees the presence of God with Jacob. And finally in Genesis 39.3 we read of Joseph, great grandson of Abraham: "His master saw that the Lord was with him". What did God promise? "I will be your God and the God of your descendants after you" And God is faithful to his promise. And Abraham knows it. In verse 33 he calls on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God.", He calls on El Olam. Abraham calls on the name of the unchanging eternal God who entered into an eternal and unchanging covenant.

And then in verses 33 we see again, that Abraham has to exercise faith. He must still wait for the promises to be fulfilled: "Abraham stayed many days in the land of the Philistines." Even if Abraham has now a descendant, even if God is with him, there is still the question of the land. The land is not yet his. He lives in peace. God provides for his needs but it is not the total fulfillment of the promise. And one commentator says on this last verse of the chapter: "With Abraham, we receive the promises of God, we see them fulfilled but for the moment, we are still strangers and travelers on earth. We look for a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

Abraham still has to wait. Abraham still has to believe and so do we. God has given us the descendant of the promise, the son, his Son Jesus. God calls us to put all our trust in him, in Jesus, the one who died on the cross in our place. God says to us, Send Ishmael away, get rid of your own efforts to reach God, to receive the promise. Send Ishmael away and put all your trust in Jesus. Ishmael looks very impressive, but he will take you far from God. Put your trust in the Son of promise. And God promises: I will be with you, I will be for you. You can trust me with everything. Even if for now you have to stay in the land of the Philistines, you will soon have a better homeland.

Dear friend, is your faith placed in God, in his Son Jesus? He is faithful. He is reliable. He calls you to trust him.