

SESSION #7

The next part of Abraham's story could be titled...

“God's Astonishing Promise” (or perhaps The *Laughter* of Faith)

- Dwight L. Moody once said, “*God never made a promise that was too good to be true.*”
- in the previous sessions we looked at the story of Abraham & Sarah, and God's promise to them which for years seemed “too good to be true”
 - but in the Genesis passages we consider now, the promise finally takes shape: baby Isaac is born!
- let's begin with the story of how God chooses to reiterate the promise to Abraham and announce this event to Sarah

A. Laughter #1: Announcement of Isaac's Birth

- God appears to Abraham now, not in a vision nor simply as “a word” from Him, but in person as a **guest** (accompanied by 2 angels)

Gen 18:1-2

Then the Lord appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. ² So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him...

- and Abraham responds like a good host:

Gen 18:2-5

And when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, ³ and said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. ⁴ Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts.

- Abraham invites the 3 men (as he supposes) to stop on their journey and have just “a bite to eat”; but then he rushes around getting a sumptuous meal together...!

Gen 18:6-7

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead *it* and make cakes.” ⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave *it* to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it.

- he didn't want to scare his visitors at the beginning by revealing his full intentions, but he is a generous Middle Eastern host

- this picture of 99 yr old Abraham “hurrying”, “running” & urging 90 yr old Sarah to be “quick” is rather humorous – maybe his operational motto has been, “*Forget the health food. I need all the preservatives I can get!*”

...at any rate, he's certainly zealous to do his best for his guests

- and as it turns out, of course, this was absolutely the right thing to do because 2 of them were angels, and one turned out to be the Lord himself!

- in fact, this is the only time that the Lord actually *ate* food set before him, prior to His incarnation in Christ
 - ...it was an indication of the kind of special relationship God had with Abraham, a relationship characterized by the Bible phrase: “**the friend of God**” – Abraham is the only person called by this term in the whole OT (see Isa. 41:8 for one example)

In a TV series a few years ago, two of the main characters are discussing a prison chaplain who claims that God speaks directly to him. When the guy expresses skepticism that such a thing could ever happen, the woman asks, “Don’t you think God can talk with people?”

The guy replies, “**God is just a spectator**. He only reads the box scores.”

- it’s a common idea
 - perhaps you may remember Bette Midler’s “*From a distance, God is watching us*”
 - ...the thrust of the song is that the world looks very nice “from a distance” but reality is not nearly as attractive
 - and the songwriter’s concept of God seems to be that He remains at that ‘safe distance’ and doesn’t get involved in the nitty gritty tough stuff of life; He just “watches”
- the truth – the Biblical Truth – is the very opposite
 - God *did* get involved in the ‘tough stuff’ ...right up to his neck! – He lived among us in the Person of Jesus Christ and then died...for his friends, *and* for his enemies
 - it was the only way to establish a relationship with humanity
- in the Abraham story, 4000 years ago, God Himself shows up in the noonday heat haze at the doorway of one man’s tent as an astonishing evidence of his desire for intimate friendship with mankind
- Abraham didn’t recognize God yet, apparently; but when the meal was over, the chief visitor made a remarkably strange statement:

Gen 18:10a

And He said, “I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.”

- God’s surprising announcement once again **shatters the normality** of life for this old couple
 - the life of **faith** is like this – it doesn’t fit into the normal scheme of things
 - embracing God’s call to walk with him by faith means responding to something that is radically different from our usual norms & expectations – it means responding to *Someone* whose power is radically different from anything *we* can demonstrate or generate
- Annie Dillard, an award-winning author, writes in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: “Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ...
 - On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

- Abraham & Sarah are beginning to know something of this God who has *drawn them out to where they can never return*
- but as yet their response, at least in what is recorded about **Sarah**, is still one of startled incredulity – she has given up hope of ever seeing this promise come true and can only laugh with bitter despair at this point

Gen 18:10-12

(Sarah was listening in the tent door which *was* behind him.) ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; *and* Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.* ¹² Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

- before we get too ‘down’ on **Sarah**, consider her viewpoint at this stage:
 - God had never spoken directly to her; only to her **husband**
 - (and to **Hagar**, her Egyptian slave girl – that must have been a bitter pill to swallow!)
 - she had left her home in sophisticated Chaldea and followed Abram to live in an unknown place among rather uncouth peoples;
 - during their brief stay in Egypt she had been humiliated by being taken into Pharaoh’s harem
 - for 25 yrs she has lived in a tent, having left behind her nice residence in Chaldea; but she still hasn’t seen any evidence of the promise that her husband would own this new land – he doesn’t own a single sq. meter of it yet!
 - she tried to help her husband out by the culturally-acceptable practice of giving him her servant Hagar with whom to father a child – but the result was a disaster for Sarah: the servant now despised her, Abraham doted on the child, and Sarah’s position in the family clan seems to have declined
 - Sarah has borne the cultural shame of being barren all her life; and on this particular day, as usual, she “is in the tent” (as Abraham says in vs. 9 in answer to the visitor’s question, “Where is Sarah your wife?”)
 - this is not just a statement of location; the great Jewish scholar Shadal said that in this OT context it infers “she is **withdrawn**, because she has no offspring”
 - and now to hear again this crazy idea that she & Abraham will have a child when she, the ‘barren Princess’ (Sarah), is now 90 years old!
- her laughter of skepticism is understandable, to us; but *not to God* for whom ‘nothing is too hard’

- so the Visitor shocks her with his second question:

Gen 18:13-14

And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

“Why did Sarah laugh?”

- she had obviously laughed & spoken to herself alone, in the tent, *behind* the visitors; but this One had known! ...he had known something only *God* could know
- and God now begins to spark the flicker of faith that would soon burn brightly in *her* heart as it does in Abraham’s (Heb 11:11 tells us clearly: “It was **by faith that Sarah** together with Abraham was able to have a child, even though they were too old and Sarah was barren.”)

- Sarah's response of skeptical laughter isn't the best one; but her response at this point isn't the whole picture – God will still press forward with His purposes, and the promise will come to reality in due course

- so He then repeats the promise:

Gen 18:14

At the appointed time I will return to you,
according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.”

- the premise of the promise is that **pivotal question** God slots in just prior to repeating His astonishing news: “Is anything **too hard** for the **LORD**?”

- Brueggemann wrote that “*it is the fundamental question every human person must answer. And how it is answered determines everything else.*”

- how do people respond to God's power? – sometimes with the **laughter of amazement**

- the first time that God had clearly told **Abraham** the promised child would come from Sarah, Abraham's response had been to “laugh” like this

Gen 17:15-17

Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶ And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother *of* nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.”

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall *a child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?”

- now it's **Sarah's** turn to hear this astonishing promise, and her response is a **laughter of unbelief**

- the announcement was marvelous news but Sarah simply couldn't take it in

- and this part of the story ends with a rather unresolved **tension**:

Verse 15

But Sarah denied *it*, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid.

And He [the Lord] said, “No, but you did laugh!”