

SESSION #8

In our last session we saw that the announcement of Isaac's future birth caused **laughter #1**: Sarah's laughter of unbelief
Now we come to...

B. Laughter #2: the Arrival of Isaac

Gen 21:1-7

And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. ² For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. ³ And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him – whom Sarah bore to him – Isaac. ⁴ Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, *and* all who hear will laugh with me." ⁷ She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne *him* a son in his old age."

- a story is told of 4 husbands who were sitting in the hospital maternity wing awaiting word of deliveries; each was reading a different book;
- a nurse came in & told the first man that he had a son
 - he jumped up and the other husbands notice that he had been reading "**The Lone Ranger**";
- a little later the nurse came back and told the 2nd man that he had twins – it turned out that he had been reading "A Tale of **Two Cities**";
- later, the 3rd man was told he was the father of triplets – and yes, you guessed it: he had been reading "**The Three Musketeers**"
- ...but the 4th husband, upon hearing this 3rd announcement, dropped off his chair in a dead faint – when the nurse rushed over to help him she discovered that he had been reading "**The Birth of a Nation**"!

- Abraham, & especially Sarah, had ‘dropped off their chairs’ with earlier announcements about this promised child
- but in the process of all the waiting & wondering, often with doubts & sometimes despair, the faith of Abraham & Sarah matured – as Rom. 4:19-21 makes clear: “Without weakening in his faith, he [Abraham] faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that *God had power to do what he had promised.*” (NIV)
- as a result, those earlier laughs of incredulous unbelief have now been displaced by the laughter of pure joy, as “Isaac” – whose name means “**laughter**” – finally shows up!
 - so in 21:6 Sarah declares: “everyone who hears it will ‘Isaac’ with me”
- the birth of baby Isaac is a crucial fulfillment of the promises which God has been making to Abraham for the past forty years (ever since Genesis 12:1)
 - and yet it is recorded in understated terms in 3 short verses

- if we didn't know the convoluted background we would think this was no big deal!
- Scripture *emphasizes* that this event is in **fulfillment** of the promise of God
 - 3 times we read: "as he had said", "what he had promised", "God had promised him"
- and "**grace**" too is very much involved: "the LORD was *gracious* to Sarah"
- Brueggemann tells us that the Bible has 3 ways of speaking about radical **newness**:
 - “(a) creation out of nothing,
 - (b) resurrection of the dead, and
 - (c) justification by grace through faith...
 In the Abrahamic narrative, it is the **birth of Isaac** which points to all three. We have before us [Brueggemann says] a God for whom there is no analogy or parallel.”
 - there is “nothing too hard” for Him
- while Laughter #2 had to do with the *Arrival* of Isaac...

C. Laughter #3 concerns the *Departure* of Ishmael

Gen 21:8-14

So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

⁹ And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. ¹⁰ Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *namely* with Isaac." ¹¹ And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son.

¹² But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. ¹³ Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he *is* your seed."

¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting *it* on her shoulder, he gave *it* and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away.

- the crucial incident which sets this expulsion of Hagar & Ishmael into motion is another instance of 'laughter' – this time it's Ishmael, the 17-yr-old firstborn son of Abraham
- Ishmael's "mocking" is from the same root word in Hebrew as "Isaac" and is used in the sense of "constant" laughing/ridiculing his step-brother
 - Ishmael 'laughed' in scorn at baby Isaac (Paul in Gal. 4:29 uses the word "persecuted"); and thereby scorned the promise, and the God of the promise
- in this situation Abraham – out of love for Ishmael – was in danger of not committing himself to Isaac as the promised son
 - so Sarah, who was normally submissive to Abraham (1 Peter 3:6), **stood up for what was right**
 - her words & actions seem harsh to us; but God Himself agreed with the main point she was making – cf. 21:12 – God said to Abraham, "Listen to whatever Sarah tells you..."

- Why was Abraham in danger? - because “even this father of faith flinches from the radicalness” of the word of God (Brueggemann)
 - he finds it very difficult to release Ishmael
 - a few years before he had said to God: 17:18 “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!”
 - now we find that “the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son”
 - but God reminds Abraham that *Isaac* is the son of **promise**, and also assures Abraham that God will look after Ishmael and make him a great nation as well
 - and so Abraham did an extremely tough thing and sent his eldest son & Hagar away
 - ...for us too, embracing the life of faith will often involve a *willingness to let go* of something precious to **us** in order to receive the astonishing promise that is precious to **God**
 - a little girl was with her mother at the checkout stand when she saw a little pearl necklace in a pink foil box – “Oh please, Mommy, can I have them?...” Mom looked at price and said, “Jenny, these pearls cost \$1.95 – if you really want them I’ll give you some extra chores for more allowance; you’ll soon save enough to buy them yourself.”
 - after 2 weeks Jenny had enough money, went back to the store and bought the pearls
 - she loved them – they made her feel pretty & grown up – she wore them everywhere...except swimming or in the bath because mother said if they got wet they might turn her neck green
 - Jenny had a very loving daddy – at bedtime, daddy would stop what he was doing & read her a story; one night when he had finished the story, he said, “I love you, sweetheart. Do you love me?”
 - “Oh yes, Daddy,” Jenny replied, “you know I love you.”
 - “Then give me your pearls,” her father said.
 - Jenny was confused – “Oh Daddy, not my pearls...
 - you can have Princess, the white horse from my collection – she’s my favorite.”
 - “That’s OK, Honey, Daddy loves you. Good night.”
 - a week later, after story time, they had the same conversation...daddy asking for the pearls and Jenny responding with: “you can have my baby doll – it’s brand new & beautiful...”
 - “That’s OK, Honey, Daddy loves you. Good night.” As always, he gave her a kiss.
 - a few nights later, daddy came in and found Jenny sitting on bed – her chin was trembling, and a tear ran down her cheek
 - “What is it, Jenny? What’s the matter?”
 - Jenny didn’t say anything – she just lifted her little hand up to daddy – when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace – with a quiver in her voice she finally said, “Here, Daddy, it’s for you.”
 - with tears in his own eyes, Jenny’s daddy reached out with one hand to take the necklace – and with other hand reached into pocket, pulled out a beautiful jewelry case, & gave it to Jenny
 - when she opened it, she found a beautiful strand of pearls...real ones this time, not a toy
- ...what are you hanging on to? ...what feels risky to let go of? ...what is preventing you from receiving the blessings your heavenly Father wants to pour out on you?
- sometimes faith means a willingness to let go of something precious to us in order to receive the promise that is precious to God

Before we wrap up this session, let's take a look at possible responses we can make to what we've learned here, with two different questions...

D. Our Response

1. *In the ongoing Middle East crisis, who gets our smile?*

- **Ishmael** became the father of the **Arab** nations; and Mohammed himself claimed direct descent from him
- **Isaac**, of course, became the grandfather of the 12 tribes of **Israel**
- in God's purposes, Isaac is clearly the **son of promise**
 - "faith begins where man's power ends" – and since the promise was welded to faith, *Isaac* (not Ishmael) had to be the "miracle baby" whom only God in his divine power could produce
 - but that doesn't mean that **Ishmael** was worthless or someone to be despised
 - God himself promised to make him a great nation too; and He did

Gen 17:20

And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

- moreover, the rest of chap. 21 shows God's care for Ishmael & his mother Hagar
- in today's harsh continuing conflicts between Israel & the Palestinians (Ishmaelites) we must not assume, as some Western Christians do, that God only loves Israel, and therefore relegate Palestinians & Arabs to some area of 'outer darkness' beyond the circle of God's love
- yes, Israel does have a special place in God's plans but that doesn't mean the descendants of Ishmael are not valued
 - in the Isaac/Ishmael story, Isaac *is* the "elected" one but Ishmael is also the "treasured" one
 - ...God loves the Arabs too!

2. *And our second question is: In our response to God, with whom do we identify?*

- our response to this powerful God could take any of the forms we've seen expressed by these Genesis characters:
 - (a) we could '**laugh**' with sheer disbelief, tinged with the bitter despair of waiting too long for God's promises, like **Sarah** did behind her tent door; and then quickly deny that we had ever done so
 - (b) or like **Ishmael**, we could '**laugh**' with the scorn of disdain, not wanting God's interference in our well-ordered lives of privilege; not believing His promise nor wanting anything to do with it or with Him
 - ...this kind of 'laugh' doesn't even have to be *aggressively* scornful; it can take the form Wilbur Rees described when he wrote:

"I would like to buy **\$3 worth of God**, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine... I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please."

...there is, of course, no such thing

- God cannot be parceled out in handy, safe little packages
- nor can He be domesticated to our control
- He is the God for whom “nothing is too hard” – the awesome, Almighty LORD who is in the business of transformation

(c) we could laugh in disbelief or disdain; or thirdly...

we could ‘**laugh**’ with amazement that God could be so great & so good, as **Abraham** did in 17:17, falling face down in faith-filled humility

- which brings us to: **Isaac** himself, whose own name means “laughter” and whose miraculous arrival produced peals of joyful laughter from his mother
 - responding to the promise of God with faith, like Abraham did, resulted in Isaac
 - and when we respond to God in a similar manner, the result is a miraculous new life
 - no wonder Paul said, “Now you... *like Isaac*, are children of promise.” (Gal. 4:28)
- God makes us members of His ‘forever family’ when we respond to His promise by “believing” in Jesus and by “receiving” Jesus as God’s gift to us; to all who do, God “gives the right to become children of God” (John 1:12)
- Abraham’s two sons highlight the hazards before us
 - **Isaac** pictures incarnational faith – believing the promise of God that produces life, and allowing that promised life to be worked out in the physical reality of our lives
 - and this is not an easy thing, as Oswald Chambers warned: “Beware of worshipping Jesus as the Son of God, and professing your faith in Him as the Savior of the world, while you blaspheme Him by the complete *evidence in your daily life* that **He is powerless to do anything in and through you.**”
 - God wants to transform us by His power thru our cooperation by faith, which goes against our natural tendencies – it’s tough!
- but the alternative is worse: **Ishmael** pictures what happens when even the well-intentioned like Abraham & Sarah work out their own ‘answer’ to the promise through skillful planning
- we have been born again, not by works but by **faith** in the powerful faithful God of the promises
 - and the result is ‘Laughter’ indeed – the inexpressible joy that into our deadness and barrenness such a gift of wonder could ever come!