

Laughing at God's Promises

Genesis 17:1-18:15

Introduction

Comedy: I'm a nerd about a lot of things, but maybe one of the surprising ones is "comedy." I love comedians, funny movies and TV shows, etc. Some stand-up comics are the prophets (others the jesters) of the modern world (only a few places that crowds gather to listen to someone's thoughts: professors, preachers, and comedians).

- What makes you laugh? AFV (youtube on a schedule)?
- Why is something funny?
 - Groups (bonding/community)
 - Defense (defuse/deflect, make them laugh so you don't get beat up)
 - Relief (break tension, Dory in Finding Nemo, Hulk and Loki in Avengers, etc.)
 - Cope (Gallows Humor: surgeons, firemen, cops, soldiers). "If you can laugh at it, you can deal with it" (Joan Rivers).
- Humor (when it's not just silliness or slapstick) is at the border of offense and surprise (didn't see it coming; anticipate one thing and another happens).

Laughter: What is the appropriate response to something funny? **Laughter.** Laughter is the body's automatic, uncontrolled response to something we think is funny. It's a physical tell that reveals how you feel about something.

- Laughter forms a surprising thread pulling the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac together. But the laughter we see here is a particular kind, it is **incredulous laughter**. It is laughter that comes from doubt, disbelief, and cynicism (e.g., the most important election of your lifetime, etc.)
- Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen 17:17).
- The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" (Gen 18:13).
 - "Good one, God. Very funny."

What is your response to the plan, promise, and Word of God?

- Is it incredulous laughter? Disbelief? Doubt? Or simple trust and joyful obedience?

1. The Covenant Refreshed and Applied (vv. 1-14)

^{17:1} When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you

and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” ⁹ And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

God Speaks: God is the one who initiates everything in these passages. He speaks, he appears, he sets the terms. He starts the conversation and he ends it. All that happens is his sovereign choice.

- Here we see YHWH, described by the name “God Almighty” (*El Shaddai*). Rabbinic discussion has focused on the idea of God’s self-sufficiency. God is the only being that exists in and of himself, not derivative of anyone or anything else.
- All that is, begins and ends in the power and will of God.
- For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. As soon as God speaks it, it’s as good as done.

Covenant: We see God reminding Abram of the covenant he has made with him, the promise he has made to him, and, in the process, he expands and clarifies the terms of their relationship.

Genesis 12 (Call and Promise): God **called** Abram and **promised** to make him into a great nation, a blessed nation that would be a blessing to the nations.

- Despite this promise, a lot of “life” happens. Abram and Sarai live through a famine, and we see Abram’s obedience falter in Egypt. Abram also has successes, he rescues Lot (imagine Abram as a powerful warrior).

Genesis 15 (Covenant and Land): Then God comes to Abram again to formalize the promise as a **covenant**. This fascinating ceremony involves cutting sacrificial animals in half and then the weaker partner of the agreement walks through the sacrifices, symbolizing what will happen to them if they fail to uphold their end of the agreement.

- This is actually a ceremony familiar in the ANE. But this moment between God and Abram is different. Here, Abram (the weaker party in the agreement) is sedated. God initiates and confirms the covenant. Abram is unconscious (we are as good as dead in the process of our own righteousness). And God (the ruler) walks through. God is saying that, if the covenant is not upheld, *he* will have his flesh torn to pay the price. *And isn’t this what happens? God’s flesh was torn to pay the price of our failure.*

We learn more about the promise. Abram will not just be great but the father of a **multitude** (i.e., stars) and his descendants will inherit a prosperous **land**.

- And again, we see, as time passes that Abram and Sarai start doubting God's promise. They try to produce an heir not via God's promise but by their own ideas (e.g., Hagar and Ishmael).

Genesis 17: Here we come to Gen 17. After another failure of Abram and Sarai God clarifies and, in some senses, doubles down on his plan. It's a renewal and reminder, but also an invitation.

- He calls Abram to new **obedience**.
 - He calls him from inward faith to outward obedience, from imputed righteousness to expressed devotion.
- He marks this turning point with a new **identity**.
 - He changes both Abram and Sarai's names.
- He expands the **covenant**.
 - This new identity corresponds to new dimensions of God's promise.

Identity (Name): Abram's name is changed to Abraham (sound similar because they are). One mean's "exalted Father" and the other means something like "Father of a multitude." I think the name change marks the moment more than the meaning. But, if anything, the new name is the same promise (i.e., Father) but **escalated**.

- Now he is not just a *father* but a father to *many*. He is not just the father of a great nation but many nations (why not just one nation?).
 - God isn't going to let him off the hook with a loophole promise-fulfillment. "Go big or go home."
- Think about how insulting this must have been for Abraham. Before he had Ishmael, he was walking around with the name "exalted father" but he didn't (and couldn't) have any kids. Now he has a son in Ishmael (by trying to go around God's plan) and God changes his name to include a *multitude*!

Expansion (Eternal): The previous promise was a covenant of blessing for Abraham and his family, but now God is saying it is an *eternal covenant*. The blessings continue to grow (as well, we can imagine, Abraham's doubts).

Obedience (Circumcision): And God calls Abraham to **obedience** in a particularly difficult way: circumcision (Pastor James get out the flannelgraph). For a chapter all about laughter, this must not have been funny to Abraham. When I was a youth pastor, this is when I'd tell kids to ask their parents what this means. **Circumcision** is a very prominent theme in Scripture.

- Circumcision becomes an important theme and type in Scripture. Paul uses Abraham and circumcision in Romans 4 to show that faith precedes righteousness and obedience.
 - And there's lots of discussion about the physical vs spiritual circumcision (cf. Rom 2, Col 2, Phil 3). The theological development of this theme is important but more than we can tackle in the time allotted (we'll have to cut it short).

- God makes it clear that this physical sign is meant to be a symbol of the promise he has made to them. They have been marked in their flesh, distinguished as the people of God. It is also a picture of what will happen if they fail to obey God, *they will be cut off* (not completely unlike the covenant ceremony in Gen 15).
 - This is an opportunity for them to demonstrate their obedience in a way that is costly (this is no laughing matter).
 - This is a covenant in the flesh, carried about in the body.
- For Abraham it would probably seem crazy to take a knife to the organ necessary to fulfill this promise (humanly speaking). But it makes sense that God would mark the vehicle for begetting with a sign of his promise to make Abraham the father of a multitude.

2. The Covenant Clarified and Obeyed (vv. 15-27)

¹⁵ And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” ¹⁹ God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. ²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹ But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

Drifted from the Promise: It had been some time since God’s initial promise and this moment. Abraham’s certainty in God had drifted (Doesn’t ours?). We are complex followers with moments of triumph and doubt, both). When the promise was made, Sarah was *relatively* young, but now there is *no* chance for a child. The bright hopes of earlier days have faded.

- It’s been decades, he’s now an old man. His faith in the specifics of God’s plan certainly has faltered. The fulfillment of God’s promise continues to be delayed, delayed so much that Abraham thinks it can’t happen (we can see that God’s delay is to make it clear that only God could make it happen, human ingenuity and power will not do).

Plan B: All along the way Abraham is trying to figure out another way to accomplish God’s plan. God promised he would be a Father.

- In Gen 15 he asks God just to make Eliezer (of Damascus) (someone in his household, maybe even a servant) to be his heir (at least it stays in the house). God tells him, emphatically “no.”
- Last week’s sermon looked at Sarah’ and his attempt to start a family through Hagar, Sarai’s handservant (now Ishmael is 13). That whole plan goes terribly wrong (as it does anytime we try to shortcut God’s plan or make our own path).

In this part of God’s promise he focuses specifically on Sarai. He changes her name to Sarah!

- The new name is basically a synonym for her previous name but it marks her new identity in God and his promise. And God doubles down: not only will she have a son, but her descendants will be kings!
 - The promise is not just for and through Abraham but for and through Sarah!

Abraham Laughs: How does Abraham respond? **He falls down in laughter.** Whereas before he bowed in reverence, now he doubles over chuckling. This is the laughter of disbelief. This has to be a joke (and a cruel one at that).

- Some have even made the point that he falls down with a posture of compliance (like before) but inner thoughts of hopelessness and doubt (that fits so much of our behavior).
- Abraham is an old man (a 99-year-old father would be a trip) but *biologically* speaking, a 90-year-old mother, decades past menopause would be impossible.

Abraham has “done the math” and knows this door is closed.

- So he asks God to make Ishmael the child of promise. Isn't that an easier path? He's already there, a 13-year-old son of Abraham.
- Abraham is still trying to follow God according to his own understanding. He relies on his vision and expectations, not God's plan and promise. He is “[domesticating] the wild promise of God by viewing it from a strictly earthly horizon.”
 - So much of obeying God is seeing the world with eyes of faith in the plan and promises of God, rather than in our limited human perspective. Can you envision a world in which God's promises are real and true?

But God says “no.” He will bless Ishmael but the covenant will be through Abraham and Sarah to their son, Isaac (ironically named “laughter”).

²² When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. ²³ Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. ²⁷ And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Done Talking: Think it's hard to get your teenager to clean his room? How did that convo go? “It is God who closes the conversation, as it was He who opened it.” Now it is Abraham who must obey. Something seems to change. He does what God says, and the Apostle Paul tells us that Abraham “in hope... believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told... [and] 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. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be

counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:18-25)

- But the story isn't over.

3. The God of the Covenant Visits (vv. 1-15)

^{18:1} And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³ and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵ while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶ And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. ⁹ They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” ¹⁰ The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

A Pursuing God: God continues to initiate the relationship with Abraham and Sarah. **It was not them who sought God, but God who sought them.** And this has always been the order.

- We know it is God who comes and speaks, so that at least one (or all) of these messengers are the manifest presence of God.
- I love how they “sneak up” and surprise Abraham (during his siesta). He didn't see it coming (I love how God's presence surprises me when I least expect it).

Hospitality: We can get a hint as to Abraham's change of heart by his hospitality to these visitors (in sharp contrast to Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19).

- Hospitality was a value of the culture (cf. West Africa) but Abraham goes above and beyond (99 years old, running, killing a calf, having his wife bake enough bread for a small army, standing by and serving while they ate, etc.). Abraham demonstrates generous and enthusiastic hospitality to these visitors.

Visiting Sarah: The purpose of their visit is to share the message of promise with Sarah (not just Abraham). Abraham has done all the hearing so far but now Sarah gets to hear the Lord herself. “Either Abraham had not yet told her of the promise or he had failed to convince her.”

- She's listening from in the tent when the LORD tells her that a son will be born to her and Abraham that time next year.
- Her response? (You got it) **Laughter**.
 - Again, this is physically impossible. Her husband is old and she is old (and she knows it)! This is not unlike the virgin birth, it's a human impossibility.
 - Her laughter and unbelief bring us to some clarity.
 - Every promise that God has made is *impossible* apart from God himself. God has them exactly where he wants them to be. When this promise is fulfilled (and it will be), it can only be explained by the miraculous power of God.
 - Sarah and Abraham's laughter highlights the fact that "what the Lord was about to do to fulfill his promise was too wonderful even for his own people to imagine" (Sailhamer). Faith gives us the ability to see God's promises with a sanctified imagination.

Impossible: 'Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you (Jer 32:17). Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me? (Jer 32:27). But Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). For nothing will be impossible with God (Lk 1:37).

- Can I really change? Not in your power but in God's.
- Can that person, so far gone, really be saved? Nothing is too hard for the LORD.
- Can God really bring good out of this situation? Nothing is impossible for God.

"God never out-promised himself" (Thomas Boston).

Situation of Sarah: I think all of us in our sin and many of us in our current situation are in the position of Sarah and need to ask the same question: Is anything too hard for the LORD?

- Do we try to find another way apart from God? A plan B to secure salvation and joy?
- Do we laugh in cynicism at the promise of God thinking his provision will fall short and his plan will fail?

Doubt and Joy: We all, like Abraham and Sarah, doubt. Doubts are normal, not commendable. God calls us to faith. "Doubt says 'I'm not going to take one step forward until I'm certain.' Faith says, 'Help my unbelief as I venture'" (Bowen). Doubt cripples us from trying and faith frees us to risk because we live in dependence on God rather than our own understanding.

- The Lord hears Sarah's silent laughter of disbelief. Even when she tries to deny it.
- And his grace reverses the situation: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Lk 6:21).
 - After Isaac is born, Sarah will laugh again, not in bitter disbelief but in genuine joy.
- You and I are invited to the joy of God's promises fulfilled in Christ? Will you trust him completely?