

Funny Bone

Dr. Bruce Hedgepeth



Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

I. LET IT WALK

You know, some people think church should be a serious place where laughter is inappropriate. Some people think you're always supposed to be quiet and reverent in church. But not everyone thinks that way. In fact, there are some congregations that are "talk back" congregations – where it's expected that the worshippers will respond verbally to what the preacher says in the sermon. Have you been to that kind of church? Well, I have.

The pastor was preaching on how the congregation could become the great church God wanted it to be. He talked about the gospel story of the four friends who removed a section of roof to lower the paralytic on his mat in front of Jesus. He told about how Jesus said to the paralytic, "Take up your mat and walk!" And he did. The preacher said to the congregation: "If this church is going to become the great church God wants it to be, we will have to take up our mat and walk!" Several worshippers responded, "Let it walk, preacher, let it walk!"

If you've been to that kind of interactive service, then you know that the response of the congregation encourages the preacher to speak with greater force and animation. This preacher really wanted to encourage the church to live up to God's calling. So he began to speak with great feeling about the passage in Hebrews 12 that talks about laying aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely in order to run with perseverance the race that God has set before us. And many in the congregation responded with feeling, "Let it run, preacher, let it run!"

By now the preacher was really worked up, so he went

back to the Old Testament – from the part in Isaiah 40 when the prophet talks about mounting up on wings like eagles. He said, "If this congregation is going to be everything God wants us to be, we will renew our strength. We will mount up on wings like eagles. We will fly!" And the congregation responded enthusiastically, "Let it fly, preacher, let it fly!"

The preacher was on a roll. He was energized by the congregation's response, so he brought the message home with a passionate appeal to Jesus' interaction with the rich, young ruler, telling him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. Sweat was visible on the preacher's brow and he was gesturing excitedly as he exclaimed to the church: "If this congregation is going to be everything God wants us to be, each one of us will sell what we have and give the money for the Lord's work!" This time there was silence in response. After several awkward seconds, a voice called out, "Let it walk, preacher, let it walk."

Well, the good news is that we're only in the second week of our sermon series on "Preparing the Way of the Lord" so we're going to keep on walking through the book of Genesis. Today our focus is on Abraham and his wife, Sarah, and God's promise that he would make of them a great nation. If you were here last week, you know that we began in the creation account in Genesis 2 and connected it with how the Bible talks about God's ultimate victory that's described in Revelation 21 with the new Jerusalem descending to earth to re-establish what the Lord intended in the beginning. One of the purposes of this series is to help us get ready for that coming reality – to prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and minds and lives.

II. A LAUGHING MATTER

The story of Abram, as he was then known, begins back in the twelfth chapter of Genesis when the Lord called him to take his family, leave his home, and set out for the place God would show him. The Lord also promised Abram that God would make of him a great

nation, and through Abram all the families of the earth would be blessed.

So Abram went, as the Lord instructed. God showed the man the land he would live in. But then Abram and his family had to leave Palestine for Egypt because of a famine. After the famine, Abram returned to Palestine. Because Abram's family had grown wealthy in money and flocks and herds, he and his nephew, Lot, had to settle in different places in the land. In Genesis 15, the Lord speaks to Abram again and promises to

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protect him and reminds him that he will have many descendants – more than the number of stars in the sky. Genesis tells us that Abram believed God's promise and it was credited to him as righteousness.

By this point in the story, Abram and his wife Sarai were getting older and they still didn't have any children. Perhaps, they thought, they needed to take a more active role in making sure that Abram fathered children. So Sarai gave her slave-girl, Hagar, to Abram so that he could have a child. You can read about this part of the story in Genesis 16 – how Ishmael was born to Abram by Hagar. But the birth of Ishmael was not the fulfillment of God's promise.

We know that because in the seventeenth chapter of

Genesis the Lord renewed the covenant with Abram. God emphasized the renewal of his promise by changing the man's name to Abraham – which means ancestor of many nations. It is in Genesis 17 where the laughter begins. Verse 17 tells us: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old bear a child?'" The Lord's answer to Abraham is in verse 19: "... your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as

an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him." Do you know what the name Isaac means? It means, "He laughs." Abraham laughed at the ridiculousness that would have to happen for the Lord's promise to be fulfilled, so God said to name the boy, in effect, "Chuckles."

That's where we picked up the story this morning. The Lord has repeatedly promised Abraham that he will be the father of many nations. God has even told the man what he is to name the son who will be born to him by Sarah. But the elderly couple is still childless when the three mysterious, unnamed visitors show up at their encampment near the oaks of Mamre.

Did you notice in the first several verses we read how

deferential Abraham was to his guests and how all his activity seemed rushed? He ran from the entrance of his tent to greet them. He hastened to Sarah's tent and told her to make bread. He ran to the herd and picked out a choice calf to be prepared for their meal. All the deference, all the scurrying around is supposed to let us readers know that something very important is about to happen. These visitors are special.

Then in verse 9, the story slows down and the visitors take center stage. They ask about Sarah. In verse 10 one of the visitors speaks God's promise: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah will have a son." This time it is Sarah, eavesdropping on the conversation from within the tent who laughs. The text tells us what Sarah already knows: she is way beyond menopause; her time for having a baby is long past; it is laughable to even hope for a child at this point in her life. The only reasonable response to such a ridiculous promise was for Sarah to laugh – just like Abraham did when God told him the same thing previously.

III. A DIFFERENT KIND OF LAUGHTER

So this faithful elderly couple, who had trusted the Lord and followed where God led for many decades, both laughed because they just didn't see how it was possible for the Lord to fulfill his promise of giving Sarah a son in their old age. That's why the key sentence in the whole passage is in verse 14: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" When it comes to matters of life and faith, that's the question each one of us has to decide for ourselves in our heart of hearts. When it comes to life's most important decisions, when it comes to one of those defining moments, do we put our faith and trust in God or not?

Please understand that the point of this part of the biblical story is definitely NOT that the Lord will give us whatever we ask for. That's just not how life works. A main point of Abraham and Sarah's story is that what God wills will be accomplished, regardless of how illogical or unreasonable it may seem.

To find out what happened for Abraham and Sarah, all we need to do is turn to the first few verses of Genesis, chapter 21:

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."

This time Sarah laughs, not because of a promise for the future that seemed too good to be true, but because the Lord brought about a present reality that was so much better than she dared to hope for – so all she could do was laugh.

That's how God works sometimes. He brings his will to pass in a way that is so amazing, so unexpected, so ridiculous that all we can do is laugh. I've had that experience. Forgive me if you've heard this part of my story, but it has to do with trying to discern if the Lord was calling me to leave a perfectly good career in IT, go to seminary, and become a pastor. It wasn't an easy decision for my wife, Cindy, and me. It took us about three years as a couple to get to the point of visiting seminaries to test my sense of call. We were living in the Orlando area at the time and loved it, so we assumed if God was calling me to go to seminary he would be reasonable enough to send us to the closest one – Columbia Seminary in the Atlanta area.

But before we went for the real seminary visit to Columbia, we decided we should do a practice visit to a seminary in a place we'd never heard of before – Dubuque, Iowa. That way I could get all the kinks out of my interviewing skills with professors and admissions people. We went to Dubuque in September and had a great visit there. We felt a sense of community. The faculty was strong. We liked the housing options. We thought, "Wow! If Dubuque is that good, imagine how

excited we'll be after visiting Columbia!" Except we weren't: the next month we visited Columbia and it was a flat experience for us. So we left Atlanta feeling unsure.

As we drove down I-75 heading back to Florida, I told Cindy we could gut it out for the three years of seminary at Columbia. But my Orlando-native wife who loves living in Florida said, "No – if God wants us to go to Dubuque, Iowa for seminary that's where we should go." A few hours later we pulled off the interstate at a McDonald's in Gainesville, Florida to get a bite to eat and for our toddler son, Will, to stretch his legs on the Playland. While we were there, we ran into the nurse who had taught our Lamaze class before Will was born. Her family was there because her husband was a pastor and they were in the process of moving from Florida to a new call for him in Ohio. What are the chances of us intersecting there? God used that conversation on the rubberized surface of that McDonald's Playland to confirm his call for us to go to Dubuque for me to attend seminary and become a pastor. All I could do in response was laugh.

Friends, here's the key question for each one of us to answer: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Sarah's laughter says "No." Abraham's laughter says "No." What do you say?



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