

Laughter

Genesis 18:1-15

Both Abraham and Sarah responded to God's promise of a son with laughter. We read last week of Abraham's response,

Gen. 17:15 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."

Then we read that,

Gen. 17:17 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?"

Then we read of her laughter in our text this morning,
v.12

When we read of the inspired evaluation of Sarah in Hebrews 11, we discover that she, too, was a woman of faith.

Hebr. 11:11 "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore."

Abraham is the subject of that sentence, and he, by faith, begat Isaac, even though his body was as good as dead. But obviously two people were involved, so that Sarah, too, conceived by faith. Thus Isaac was born as the result of a physical union between a man and his wife, both believing in God's promise by

faith, such that we can say that the child was conceived by faith. And his very name means "laughter."

Sarah's response was at first one of wavering unbelief, emphasizing that this appearance of the Lord is, most of all, designed for the building up of her faith. And this appearance of God is in the form of three angels, who themselves are in the form of men, in the flesh. This is a personal appearance. The text tells us that it is the Lord who appears to Abraham. As obvious as that might be, the Lord removes any lingering doubt.

v.1

I. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF WITH A PERSONAL APPEARANCE.

And this appearance of the Lord was actually accompanied by two angels, all three appearing as men.

v.2

Looking ahead briefly to the next chapter, we read that, Gen. 19:1 "Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground."

So it would seem that we have the Lord himself accompanied by two angels. And for Abraham, and for us as we read this passage,

A. Identifying God is obvious.

Abraham responded to the men in,

v.3

"My Lord," there could and perhaps should be capitalized, as an immediate reference to God. We don't know exactly how

God's revelation was made clear to Abraham, but every indication of the text was that it was. Abraham knew he was talking to the Lord, his Lord. He readily and properly accepted the position of a servant. For Abraham, as it should be,

B. Service to God is instinctive.

Look at what Abraham did, partially explainable by cultural social customs of hospitality, but with such extravagance, such immediacy, and such devotion. Surely Abraham is considering himself to be serving the Lord in the flesh. He starts with the most menial of tasks, feet-washing.

v.4

Then food. v.5-6

And then a great feast, with a choice, tender calf as the main course.

v.7-8

There is no comment on what provokes Abraham to such extravagance. But since he has become accustomed to the Lord's appearances, since he has been the recipient of such gracious revelations of God in the past, he is prepared to respond properly to this one.

Now, many people see the Lord and the other two angels as together representing the trinity, which I believe goes beyond what this passage allows us to say. However, since it is the Lord who appears, in the flesh, it is proper to see this as a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God in the flesh. This is an OT appearance of Jesus Christ in the flesh, though in this case, his flesh is temporary, for he has not yet been born of a woman. The flesh is, at it were, the clothes which he wears, for in his essence, as God, he is spirit and has not a body like man.

But he appears to man in a body, prefiguring the greatest of all miracles, the actual incarnation, when Jesus did not merely appear in the form of a man, he became a man, as we read in John 1, "The Word became flesh."

In Genesis 18, the three men are actually all spirits, two angels along with Jesus. And in Abraham's response there is shown to us a lesson clearly emphasized in the NT regarding the reality and the presence of angels. They are real creatures, and from time to time, they make real appearances to be seen by God's people. Do you remember,

Hebr. 13:1 "Let brotherly love continue. 2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels."

To entertain strangers means to love strangers, and it is the word usually translated hospitality. Hospitality means that you enjoy taking care of people whom you don't know. You enjoy serving strangers, new people, and we are exhorted unto that end with such powerful words, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels."

But again, the main point. In anticipation of Jesus Christ, as a type and a shadow of the incarnation, God reveals himself with a personal appearance. But more than his mere appearance is revealed here. God speaks.

II. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF WITH INFALLIBLE PROPHECY.

The message of a promised son is made explicit. It is made personal. And it is put into a set time.

v.10

This, too, prefigures Jesus Christ, for OT prophecy, all of it,

every single example of it, lays the foundation and provides the preparation for God's final word of revelation, the word made flesh. But again, back to Genesis, prefiguring Christ, we have infallible prophecy. God speaks.

A. God prophesies the exact circumstances of Isaac's birth.

v.9-10a

Then again, he says,
v.14

What is the point? Well, this promise isn't new. We've seen it several times already. But there are new details added. The time. Next year. That's pretty limiting, isn't it? If the son didn't come the next year, no longer could Abraham say, God's time hasn't come yet. Now, God defines his own time. What authority.

God has put himself out on a limb, so to speak. He has put himself under the constraint of a time schedule. But for God, of course, it is no restraint at all! This is inspired prophecy. Isaac would be born the following year. And then the Lord prophesies again, this time revealing the hidden thoughts of Sarah's heart.

B. God prophesies the secret thoughts of Sarah.

v.12-13

Inspiration includes the supernatural ability to know the thoughts inside a man's heart, and God alone possesses that ability. That is so troubling to one with a guilty conscience, for nothing can be hidden, nothing is protected from the all-knowing gaze of Almighty God.

Remember what happened to Adam and Eve, immediately

after their fall into sin? With a guilty conscience, this awareness of God's gaze upon them cause them to feel shame for the first time, the guilt of their own sin was expressed by their awareness of the shamefulness of their nakedness.

Gen. 3:6 "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. 8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Fearful shame of a guilty conscience--such is the inevitable result of a soul made unclean by sin.

So at this moment, think about God, knowing perfectly your secret thoughts, thoughts you can hide from me, and from your husband or wife, from your parents or your friends. But not one thought in your mind, not one desire in your heart, not one motive or intention within you is hidden from God. Not one. Make yourself aware of that.

Such was the painful realization which came upon Sarah, and she could only offer a pitifully weak lie attempting to cover up her shame,

v.15

Do you remember Jesus doing this very same thing with the Samaritan woman at the well? We usually think of that encounter

as an effective example of evangelism, which it is! But the context of that encounter is to expose sin! Right after inviting that Samaritan woman to drink from the “spring of water welling up to eternal life,” he said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

That’s evangelism! That’s prophecy! That’s what Jesus does to Sarah here in Genesis 18 as well. He reveals the doubting and disbelieving laughter that she had attempted to conceal in her own heart.

As a preacher in this current age, after the foundation of the apostles and prophets was completed and thus without any supernatural gifts of revelation, I myself cannot reveal the thoughts and intentions of your hearts. But the Holy Spirit still can and does. And he does so through the preaching of the word, which is described to us this way in,

Heb.4:12 “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

And so, you are standing before the Lord naked today. At this very moment, everything in your heart and everything in your mind is fully and completely exposed before the Lord. Therefore, repent! Please don’t attempt to defend yourself like Sarah did. Don’t lie. Don’t pretend. Don’t ignore. Just repent. Confess your sins to the God who already knows every one of them, and ask him to cleanse you and forgive you. AND HE WILL. Don’t play religious games with God. Beware of that danger, for we see in

this passage that,

III. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF WITH ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY.

Absolute authority!

What does God say to Sarah? It is a gracious rebuke.
v.15

A. God rebukes Sarah’s wavering unbelief.

Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.” And God said, “NO.” He absolutely, unmistakably, unhesitatingly contradicted her and silenced her lie. “NO,” he said. “NO, you are not telling the truth.” “You did laugh.”

With infallible authority, God rebukes her.

Sarah laughed at the ridiculousness of what God had promised. She laughed with cynical awareness of the impossibility of what God suggested. After all, she was barren. She had been unable to conceive a child all her life. Not one. Her womb had been closed by God himself. And now, after all these years, she is passed the time when she is physically able to bear children. She has passed into her change of life. There is an obvious biological implication to what is said here. She is no longer producing eggs, her bodily reproductive cycle has ended. We’re clearly told that in,

v.11

And Sarah can only think in physical terms,
v.12

That verse is, I believe, in the Hebrew words, somewhat of a crude sexual reference, really not very polite or proper for a

woman to repeat. As one commentator puts it, “the matter is not put very delicately by Sarah.”

Obviously, her understanding of the covenant God made with her husband Abraham is not yet complete. Her thinking is restricted to that which is physical or carnal, that which is natural or earthly. And just at that point, God interjects what must be seen as the focal point of this whole occasion, “one of the mountain-peak verses of the Bible,” as another commentator describes it.

v.14

The whole point of this encounter, as was also the case for Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, was to bring her to faith. And he does so by declaring his unlimited and unrestricted power.

B. God declares his omnipotence.

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

In grammar books, that is called a rhetorical question, which means to ask the question is to answer it. The question is put in such a way that the obvious answer is the point of the question. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” NO.

The birth of Isaac would not be too hard for the Lord.

It was too hard for a man. Sarah was barren, or infertile. Unable to conceive children. Any number of modern day medical diagnoses might have been the actual barrier, but the fact of the matter, God closed her womb. And, to make it even more humanly impossible, God waited until she was past the age of childbearing. So the situation was doubly impossible. But not for God.

Now, I want you to make a connection here, because this is a recurrent OT theme that points to Jesus Christ along with everything else in the OT. Jesus Christ was also a product of God’s omnipotent power, but in his case, the human, physical impossibility was made one step greater.

The impossibility of Sarah to conceive was two-fold, here infertility and her age. Only one circumstance would make it MORE impossible for a woman to bear a child, and that would be if the woman was actually a virgin!

With Isaac, there is no question that Abraham fathered him. But with Jesus, even that human father is removed from the equation. Just as Isaiah would prophecy, “the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son.” And of course, the prophecy continues, “[you] will call him Immanuel.”

Mary herself was told of that promise, and she was told that she would be that virgin.

Luke 1:35. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. 37 For with God nothing will be impossible.”

So, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

That rhetorical question is a definition of God’s own attribute of omnipotence. God can do anything! And he is the God whom we are to worship, the God whose strength and power give us comfort and courage. Listen to the prophet Jeremiah describe this God and his omnipotence,

Jer. 32:17 “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the

heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You. 18 You show lovingkindness to thousands, and repay the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children after them—the Great, the Mighty God, whose name is the LORD of hosts. 19 You are great in counsel and mighty in work, for Your eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of men, to give everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings. 20 You have set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, to this day, and in Israel and among other men; and You have made Yourself a name, as it is this day. 21 You have brought Your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and wonders, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and with great terror; 22 You have given them this land, of which You swore to their fathers to give them—“a land flowing with milk and honey.” 23 And they came in and took possession of it, but they have not obeyed Your voice or walked in Your law. They have done nothing of all that You commanded them to do; therefore You have caused all this calamity to come upon them.”

And again,

Jer. 32:26 Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, 27 “Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?”

NO. Nothing is too hard for God. Nothing is beyond his power. Do you believe that?

Indeed, what you think and believe about the ability of God’s power is quite accurately revealed by how you pray, what you pray. If you believe that nothing is too hard for God, then you will be free to pray for impossible things. If you believe that nothing is too hard for God, then you won’t get stressed when some circumstance is beyond your control.

So pray without consideration for what think might be possible, for nothing is too hard for God. Nothing is too difficult for God. That is especially true regarding our salvation, the salvation of anyone, the worst rebel. Remember what Jesus told that rich young ruler?

Mat. 19:21 “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

And the man went away sorrowful, unwilling to submit to such a demand.

Matt. 19:23 Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The obvious question was asked,

Matt. 19:25 “When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?”

And the answer.

Matt. 19:26 But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” The answer to that question comes jumping out of every page of Scripture. The answer is NO.

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” The answer to that question will determine just how bold and persistent you will be in your prayers. The answer is NO. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” The answer to that question will determine the strength of your faith. The answer is NO.

Sarah had a great lesson to learn, and I believe that she learned it, for she is praised as a woman of faith. May we learn the lesson that Jesus came to teach her. This is that lesson: “Nothing is impossible with God.” “With God all things are possible.”

May we learn that lesson as well, and take great hope and confidence from it. There is nothing too hard for the Lord.