



Part 41 – Audacious Grace and Struggling Faith

Genesis 17:15-27

Audacious – Bold, unflinching, daring, fearless

Abram, whose name meant exalted father, spent 86 years of life without a child. Unfortunately, even after God promised him offspring, Abram took matters into his own hands and had a child through his wife's maid servant named Hagar. For 13 years Abraham assumed that the promise God made to make him a father of many nations was going to be fulfilled through his son with Hagar; the boy Ishmael. By the time we reach Genesis chapter 17 Ishmael is 13-years old and Abraham has reached the age of 100. God had not abandoned his sovereign plan to bless the world through his chosen seed.

God changed Abram's name to Abraham, the meaning of which is even more audacious: "father of nations." Certainly Abraham bore that name as a reproach, given his childlessness. But God assured Abraham that he was indeed going to keep his promise by making him the progenitor of many nations (17:9-14). Despite the impossible odds, God was not finished. His plan had not changed nor had his power to carry it out.

1. God's grace is expansive.

Vs. 15 – Sarah's importance to salvation history is underscored by the fact that she is the only woman in the Bible whose name was changed.¹ Sarai and Sarah are likely versions of the same name meaning Princess.

Vs. 16 – Sarah will indeed be the progenitor of nations and kings.

- By renaming Sarah, God signals her place of significance in the covenant of grace. Though Abraham will have a place of headship, the promise belongs no less to Sarah. Indeed, in God's economy, Sarah is necessary for the covenant to advance. In the paganism of the surrounding peoples women were treated either as objects of worship or mere property. The Scriptures correct these errors. Humanity – both men and women – are created beings, sinful, yet possessing great dignity as God's image-bearers.
- As we will see in the final section of this chapter, the sign of the covenant is placed upon all the members of Abraham's household: men, slave and free, infants and the aged.

2. God's grace is audacious.

Vs. 17 – Abraham's reaction was incredulity as shown by his effort to steer God into a more reasonable path.

Vs. 18 – Abraham's doubts were honest doubts and God dealt gently with him as he always does with those who prove their readiness to believe with their obedience, as Abraham will in vv. 23ff.

Vs. 19 – Isaac means "he laughs," or "he smiles." Isaac's name likely reflects God's gracious intentions toward his people.

- It is understandable why Abraham desired that his son Ishmael to be the heir of the promise. But because of Abraham's choice to act outside of God's will, his life and those of many others will be more complicated. However, God's compassion for Ishmael is consistent with his character. God is compassionate and longsuffering. He bears with us even in our sin. Though God will not adulterate his saving grace with human merit, he will also not punish Ishmael for his parents' sin. As we are about to see, he will even direct Abraham to place the sign of the covenant upon Ishmael.
- Isaac's name will stand as a perpetual reminder of how God did the impossible in bringing about the covenant of grace. "The laughter of God in the Bible...invariably expresses his reaction to the ludicrous attempts of men to act independently of his will...(Ps. 2:4; 37:13; 59:9)."²
- Abraham's faith faltered in the face of what seemed impossible. Remember that the covenant announced to Abraham is a picture of the coming salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ. That is why Isaac

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A New Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 262

² N. Sarna *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Society, 1989) p. 127

was given to Abraham and Sarah so late in their lives; beyond their ability to naturally conceive. He could have been given to them when they were much younger. But God delayed through decades in order that it might be clearly seen that God was doing the impossible, that he was doing what Abraham could never do. The rhetorical question the Lord asked Abraham in 18:14 was, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" This is the testimony of God's dealings with his human creatures. God can do what we cannot. He can do what is literally impossible for us to do. To put it in the language of the Protestant Reformation, what we are taught here is that salvation is *sola gratia*, by grace alone, which is to say by the gift, the work, and the power of God alone. For those who know themselves to be sinners such grace is nothing less than audacious. How is it that our Holy Creator God can and does save rebels apart from anything they do? God's grace to sinners ought to leave us awed in grateful praise. Abraham and later Sarah laughed in doubt that God would do something so impossible. It is not hard to imagine them laughing in grateful faith once they held the baby Isaac in their arms.

3. God's grace is sovereign.

Vs. 20 – God is compassionate toward Ishmael. Though he is the product of Abraham's doubt and fleshly attempts to bring about God's promise, God will not forget Ishmael. (The twelve sons of Ishmael are listed in chapter 25.)

Vs. 21 – Though God was generous to Ishmael, he did not make his covenant with him. Isaac is the child of promise, the one in whom the covenant of grace will carry on to the succeeding generations.

- Abraham's doubt and misdeeds will not change God's sovereign plan. The covenant of grace cannot come to fruition through man's scheming. If sinners are to be saved, then it must be by grace alone or not at all. Hagar (and Ishmael) represented Abraham's attempts to have God's gracious promise by works (**Galatians 4:21-31**).
- Ishmael was born first in Abram's household. By legal right of the first born (*primogeniture*) the expectation would have been that Ishmael would be the heir of all that Abraham had. But once again in the book of Genesis we see a younger son supplant an older son. It will not be the last time in Genesis that we see this choosing of the younger over the older. That scene is repeated throughout Genesis in order to stress God's sovereignty in election. The Lord chooses those through whom he will bring his blessing and promise. God will not have man dictate to him the terms of his gracious purposes (**Romans 9:6-18**).

4. God's grace is signed and sealed.

Vv. 22-27

- Our attention is directed to the scrupulous nature of Abraham's obedience to the commandments that God had given him. As outrageous as God's promise was, Abraham believed and obediently circumcised his household. In verses 23-27 we see the obedience of Abraham's faith. That is, we see the obedience which flows from faith. Abraham believed God's promises, and so he did what God commanded. Saving faith displays itself in trusting obedience. The stress of this passage is that men of every age and status and background and spiritual experience were gathered into this covenant.
- This event has been referred to as the birth of the Old Testament church. Notice the diverse circumstances of the people of the covenant: a community of various ages, stages of life, and of those who came into Abraham's household in different ways. This is the idea featured at Pentecost but on a still larger, grander scale. Both the elect and the non-elect within the covenant receive the sign of the covenant, as they have ever since. For the believing the sign is a promise of blessing. For the unbelieving it is a sign of God's judgment.
- Derek Kidner writes: "Abraham's laughter, to judge by God's reply and by Paul's words in **Romans 4:19** and following, was a first, incredulous reaction, real enough, as is shown by his gentle attempt to steer God into a more reasonable path, but he was open to correction. On such genuine struggles of faith God is never hard." Genuine saving faith will struggle at times. It will even falter and fail. When we consider the audacious promise of God that he will save for eternity the worst of sinners who believe, it is understandable (to us) how such a promise can stretch the bounds of credulity. Only the God of Abraham offers such a comprehensive, beautiful, and perfect salvation to sinners. Only the gospel of the Lord Jesus proclaims such a great salvation given by grace alone through faith alone. The mind of man could never concoct such a bold promise. The mind of man could never invent such hard-to-believe good news. May we laugh in joy that God made possible the impossible by saving us.