



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Laughing with God
Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Almost everybody enjoys a good laugh.

And the fact is that it's good for us! Proverbs 17:22 tells us that ***A cheerful heart is a good medicine***,¹ or as the King James Version translated it, ***A merry heart doeth good like a medicine***. A cheerful or merry heart is one that laughs often. Medical science has confirmed the healing and health benefits of laughter over the past couple of decades. When I keyed in an internet search this week for "laughter and healing," my query returned 10,800,000 results in just under one second!

Now there are many reasons to laugh. Sometimes we laugh *at* something or someone, like someone clowning around or making a silly mistake or telling a joke or a funny story. The country comedian Jerry Clower was a master at making people laugh at his stories about growing up on Route 4, Liberty, Mississippi, and the doings of his neighbors, the Ledbetter family. But he could answer serious questions with a wit that drove home a serious point—like when he was asked in an interview the year he and his wife Homerline had celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary and shortly before he died how they had stayed married that long. Jerry thought a few seconds and responded, "Well, we just done what we promised. Them vows ain't long. They ain't hard to remember!"²

Sometimes we laugh with people, rejoicing with them over something good that's come their way, or just enjoying being together. That's one of the things that has struck Jo Ann and me so much in the short time we've been with you now—how much Temple folks genuinely enjoy being together. And it shows in the laughter—it's not nervous or forced, it's relaxed and genuine.

Our text this morning is a story about laughter, or really about two very different kinds of laughter.

Laughing at God's promise in disbelief

In Genesis 18:1-15, we read about how ***the LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre***. Abraham was resting in the heat of the day when he ***saw three men standing near him*** (18:1-2). As it turns out, though the text never states it explicitly, it implies that the LORD was appearing to Abraham in human form, accompanied by two angels who also looked like humans.

Abraham was quick to lavish his hospitality on them, offering them water to wash their feet, a tree to rest under its shade, and a meal. He had his wife Sarah to bake cakes of bread and a servant to prepare a tender calf he had selected, and set it before the men to eat, along with curds and milk (18:3-8).

As they ate, they asked where Sarah was, and Abraham replied that she was in the tent. So one of them (apparently the LORD) told him that in due season, Sarah was going to have a son.

Now that was not the first time Abraham and Sarah had heard the promise from God that she

would have a son. Nearly twenty-five years earlier, God had promised to make Abraham a great nation. When Sarah had not been able to have a child, they took things into their own hands rather than trusting God. Her servant Hagar bore Abram (as he was then known) a son. But the Lord had told them that his covenant with Abraham would not be fulfilled through this son, Ishmael, but that he would give him a son by Sarah. At this point, God changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's to Sarah. By then, Abraham was almost a hundred years old, and Sarah was almost ninety.

So you can kind of understand how in Genesis 17 he laughed in disbelief when God told him that. But then he believed it and acted in obedience.

Now the LORD was again promising to give Abraham and Sarah a son. She was doing what a lot of us would have done—she was standing at the tent door listening. She was eavesdropping! She wanted to hear what these men were talking with Abraham about. And she couldn't help herself. She **laughed to herself** in disbelief. And you can understand why. Remember, Abraham was almost a hundred, and she was almost ninety. She said to herself, **"After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"** (18:9-12).

Unbeknown to her, the LORD had heard her laugh, even though she laughed to herself. He gently rebuked her, and said, **"Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"** Then he reiterated the promise. Out of fear, Sarah denied laughing, but the Lord said, **"Oh yes, you did laugh"** (18:13-15).

Laughing with God over his promise fulfilled

Fast forward almost a year to Genesis 21:1-7 (*read*).

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised (21:1). She had a son with Abraham, ***at the very time God had promised him*** (21:2, NIV).

And when it came time to name the baby, what do you think they named him? Abraham named him ***Isaac***. And what do you think Isaac means? It means "he laughs"! Not "I laugh"; not "We laugh"; but *he* laughs (21:3-5)!

Were they talking about the baby laughing? Probably not at this point, not this early. Babies usually start laughing at about three or four months old.

So who was doing the laughing? Was it the LORD?

Parents, you know how you laugh for joy when you get to do something good for your children, especially if it's a surprise or something they just can't believe you'd do? Just imagine the joy God had as he fulfilled this promise that Abraham had believed despite those times when doubt crept in. Abraham was a hundred years old now, and Sarah was ninety. And here God was giving them a little boy!

And Sarah was laughing with God for joy and in amazement.

All those years she had longed to have a son with Abraham, and hadn't been able to. But now in her old age when everyone and everything said it was impossible, here she held her little boy! She was laughing *with* God now, rather than *at* him and his promise! She said:

"God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me . . . Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age" (21:6-7).

Sarah first laughed *at* God's promise in disbelief; now she laughed *with* God over its fulfillment!

Max Lucado has written about Sarah:

Consider the case of Sarai. She is in her golden years, but God promises her a son. She gets excited. She visits the maternity shop and buys a few dresses. She plans her shower and remodels her tent . . . but no son. She eats a few birthday cakes and blows out a lot of candles . . . still no son. She goes through a decade of wall calendars . . . still no son . . .

Finally, fourteen years later, when Abram is pushing a century of years and Sarai ninety . . . when Abram has stopped listening to Sarai's advice, and Sarai has stopped giving it . . . when the wallpaper in the nursery is faded and the furniture is several seasons out of date . . . when the topic of the promised child brings sighs and tears and long looks into a silent sky . . . God pays them a visit and tells them they had better select a name for their new son.

Abram and Sarai have the same response: laughter. They laugh partly because it is too good to happen and partly because it might. They laugh because they have given up hope, and hope born anew is always funny before it is real . . .

They laugh because it is what you do when someone says he can do the impossible. They laugh a little at God, and a lot with God—for God is laughing, too. Then, with the smile still on his face, he gets busy doing what he does best—the unbelievable . . .

He changes their faith. He changes their names . . . He changes the way they define the word impossible.

But most of all, he changes Sarah's attitude about trusting God.³

Laughing with God

What a marvelous story!

But Abraham and Sarah aren't the only ones who've ever laughed with God. Just as he's done time and time again for his people throughout history, *God makes us laugh with him as he does the impossible to accomplish his purpose!*

God laughs *over our salvation*. He rejoices when he brings sinners to himself, and according to Jesus himself, the angels of heaven rejoice with him (Luke 15:7, 10). He's like a father who is so joyful over a wayward son who returns in repentance that he kills the fatted calf and throws a party! As the King James Version renders it in Luke 15:32, ***It was meet that we should make merry and be glad . . .*** You know there would have been joyful laughter in this celebration!

God laughs *as he works in our lives and our circumstances* to accomplish his will in us. Now it's not all smiles and laughter. He feels our pain and helps us bear our load in the times of heartache and trial and suffering. But it brings joy to his heart when we trust him no matter what we're facing and he works it all together for our good. Just as we human parents find joy and celebrate when our children come out of struggles better, stronger, and wiser, so does God with his children—even more so, especially when he has worked in ways that seemed impossible to bring it all about.

But God's greatest laugh is *the resurrection*—Jesus', and ours which is yet to come! Several of the Church Fathers like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom sometimes spoke of how God played a practical joke on the devil when he raised Jesus from death. The “Easter

Laugh,” as they called it, “was God’s laughter at the divine triumph over the powers of death and violence!”⁴

Episcopal Bishop William C. Frey once wrote:

What, after all, is a joke? Isn’t it something that turns the tables on the expected, something that hinges on the unpredictable or unreasonable? There’s nothing more unreasonable than the resurrection of Jesus. And to believe in it is to be part of that huge practical joke that God plays on those who trust blindly in the sufficiency of human reason to unravel all problems and to answer every question.⁵

Presbyterian pastor Frank Yates once said that

Easter is the morning when the Lord laughs out loud, laughs at all the things that snuff out joy, all the things that pretend to be all-powerful, like cruelty and madness and despair and evil, and most especially, that great pretender, death. Jesus sweeps them away with his wonderful resurrection laughter.⁶

And when he does, then just as Sarah first laughed at God’s promise in disbelief, then laughed with God over its fulfillment, *God makes us laugh with him as he does the impossible to accomplish his purpose!*

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.

² I heard this interview on television sometime around 1999.

³ Max Lucado, from *The Applause of Heaven*, excerpted in *The Inspirational Study Bible*, ed. Max Lucado (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 23-24.

⁴ Cal and Rose Samra, *Holy Humor: Inspirational Wit and Cartoons* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1996), 66; also Daniel A. Smith, “The Laughter of the Universe,” <http://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/media/the-laughter-of-the-universe> (accessed 07-21-2017).

⁵ Samra, *Holy Humor*, 71.

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