

The Round Church
at St Andrew the Great
Cambridge



10p

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 13th June 2004
by Mark Ashton

Genesis 17:15 - 18:15

Laughing at the Promises of God

The Ambiguity of Laughter

“Yes, you did laugh.” Laughter is one of the most ambiguous of human activities. It is joyful and contagious—it engenders camaraderie: ‘Laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone.’ And we often feel we can’t get enough of it. A French writer said, ‘The most wasted of all days is that on which one has not laughed.’ But then, mockery can lurk so close beneath the surface of laughter—laughing with other people turns so easily into laughing at other people. There can be a sort of self-indulgent ribaldry that rides roughshod over other people’s feelings. This means there is also a sinister side to laughter: mockery and scorn. We may not agree with the Earl of Chesterfield who wrote to his son (back in the 18th Century): ‘In my mind there is nothing so illiberal and so ill-bred, as audible laughter . . . I am sure that since I have had the full use of my reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh.’ I think that might be to go a little too far! But even the sound of laughter can vary between something happy and infectious that you long to be a part of, and something that is excessively irritating. ‘There is nothing sillier than a silly laugh,’ said Catullus in the 1st Century B.C. And that certainly has not changed: you hear plenty of silly laughter at May Week cocktail parties and on Suicide Sunday here in Cambridge.

The Bible reflects this ambiguity about human laughter, particularly in these chapters about the birth of Isaac—whose name means ‘He laughs’. The announcement of his forthcoming birth to his prospective parents cause each of them to laugh in turn and we are going to look at their slightly different reactions to that news now—not primarily to learn something about Abraham, or about Sarah, or anything more about the ambiguity of human laughter, but to learn something about God. Because the sort of questions we have in our minds all the time as we read these chapters are, *What sort of a God was the God of Abraham? Is He recognisable to me today, some 4,000 years later? Could He be my God?* Maybe you wonder if He could ever be relevant to you.

Well let’s have a look at this passage: we’re starting in the middle of an encounter that God had with Abraham when Abraham was already an old man—most of which we looked at last week in chapter 17 of Genesis. After renaming Abraham, reaffirming His covenant with him, and initiating the rite of circumcision, God then drew Abraham’s wife Sarah (Sarai) into the covenant as well (at verse 15 of chapter 17).

(1) Abraham’s Laughter

(Genesis 17:15-22)

sharing our doubts with God

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that you will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her”. (vv. 15, 16). Well, there isn’t actually any difference in meaning between those two names: Sarai and Sarah. They both mean ‘Princess’. But, by changing her name, God is claiming Sarah for His own purposes. Her destiny is now in His hand. This is the first time that God has identified Sarah as the mother of the promised son for Abraham. And, notice, it caused an immediate reaction in Abraham: *Abraham fell face down, he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”* (v. 17). He prostrated himself before God in awe and amazement; and he laughed, and he expressed to himself his incredulity: . . . *he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah*

bear a child at the age of ninety?” That there was more than an element of doubt in this reaction is apparent from the next verse: “. . . ***if only Ishmael might live under your blessing!***” We recognise that attitude from the previous chapter (two weeks back in our sermon series). It is the attempt to steer God away from what He has said He will do to something that looks a bit easier, something a little more reasonable, something that allowed what Abraham had already done to contribute to God’s scheme: Won’t Ishmael do? Can’t he be the promised heir through whom all the nations will be blessed?

We have already noticed (when we studied chapter 15) that whenever Abraham expressed his doubts to God, God revealed greater truths to Abraham. That is the right thing to do with doubts, with our inability, our reluctance to believe what God says to us. And that is present in all of us—all of us when faced with the statements of God about His purposes for us find them hard to believe. There isn’t one person here who finds it easy to believe the promises of God. We always battle, and the right thing to do with that battle is to share it with God. If you have ever had the very unpleasant experience of having a boil or an abscess lanced by a doctor, you will know the wonderful and immediate relief it brings to intense and throbbing pain. There are some things like pus that need to be expelled from the human body. If you will forgive the revolting analogy, unbelief is like spiritual pus, we need to bring it out into the open—to God—as Abraham did here. And see how God responded: ***Then God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendents after him. . . . But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year”.*** (vv. 19, 21).

God had never been so specific in all His dealings with Abraham up until this moment. He repeated the promise here more clearly and more specifically than ever: the child is named (Isaac, ‘He laughs’—remember), his mother is named, and his birth date is fixed. All in reply to Abraham expressing his honest reluctance to believe what God was saying to him. And lest Abraham should think that there is a limit to God’s grace, there is a blessing pronounced for Ishmael as well (in that verse I jumped): ***“And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation”*** (v. 20). An overflowing, superabundant blessing. God has so much more to give than we dare to dream of. But will we be honest with Him? (We will return to that question at the end of the sermon.) Let’s move on to Sarah’s laughter in the next chapter—but it comes in the setting of a delightful scene of oriental hospitality, which we must consider briefly.

2) Oriental Hospitality

(18:1-8)

entertaining angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2)

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. (18:1, 2). We know that this is an appearance of the Lord, but Abraham only saw three strangers waiting at a polite distance from his tent. Later, as the narrative goes on, we will discover that one is the Lord Himself, and that the other two are the angels who have the task of reconnoitring Sodom and rescuing Lot. And yet Abraham’s generous hospitality suggests that he, too, must have had some inkling of whom it was he was entertaining at this point: ***‘He [Abraham] said, “If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.” “Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.” So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree’*** (vv. 3-8). ‘Something to eat’ (back in verse 5) turned out to be a lavish feast of vast proportions: three seahs of fine flour is well over 20 litres of flour, and a young bull-calf from the herd for three guests suggests Abraham must have thought they would have gargantuan appetites (perhaps they were undergraduate angels!).

It is a striking thought that when God visited Abraham in the middle of his ordinary, everyday life, Abraham’s hospitality was such that it was appropriate for even such heavenly visitors. If the Lord came incognito to your door or mine in the midst of our everyday busy-ness, would He get such a welcome? Hebrews 13:2 exhorts Christians not to neglect to entertain strangers: ***Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.*** That is certainly a warning to me, as somebody who fills his diary far too full to cope with the unexpected and who thinks all too often that a busy life is a God-pleasing life. I sometimes think that if the Lord

Jesus were to announce His return, I would have to ask Him to schedule it for three weeks hence, so as to fit in with my other appointments. I need to learn to be ready for the visits of God in the ordinary circumstances of life: He comes to you and me when we don't expect Him—perhaps even today.

But, at verse 9, here, we discover the real reason for this noontide visit.

3) Sarah's Laughter (18:9-15)

trying to lie to God

“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There in the tent,” he said (v. 9). It would not have been appropriate in that culture for a male stranger to speak directly to another man's wife, so the conversation continued between Abraham and his guest, but it's actually intended for Sarah: ***“Then the Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him’*** (v. 10). There is nothing inappropriate in this sort of eavesdropping. There are plenty of cultures today where the women listen in when guests are being entertained, from behind a screen or a curtain, or in this case a tent flap. ***Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing*** (v. 11). (Notice that that verse states the same idea three times for emphasis.) ***So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?”*** (v. 12). Now that wasn't a very different reaction, I think you'll agree, from Abraham's (back in chapter 17:17 which we've just been looking at). Sarah didn't fall face down; and she did express her doubt rather more sensuously and cynically than her husband had. But, as Abraham did initially, she kept her thoughts and her laughter to herself: ***So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’*** (vv. 12, 13). If there had ever been any doubt in either Abraham or Sarah's mind as to the heavenly nature of their visitor, it must have been dispelled by His precise knowledge of what was going on inside Sarah's head. His next remark showed that He knew, not just what Sarah had thought, but why she had thought it: ***“Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord?”*** (v. 13b-14a). Clearly Sarah doubted God's power to cause her to give birth to a son. If Abraham had actually conveyed to Sarah the earlier promises he had received from God (and we are not told that he had said anything about them to her; though I think it's probable), he had certainly failed to convince her of them. We have seen his failure in spiritual leadership before: back in chapter 16 we saw him failing in spiritual leadership within the marriage. So perhaps he was somewhat to blame for Sarah's doubt. Or perhaps it was her own sinful nature. How often in life we find a husband and wife in different situations spiritually, and what grief it gives rise to in a marriage! Ponder that if you are a believer and not yet married. And what a challenge it is to believe that God will work in those who are nearest and dearest to us!

But let's also remember what this woman, Sarah, had been through. She had endured decades of childlessness, while every repetition of God's promise mocked her inadequacy and added to her shame in a culture that put such a high value on child-bearing. And now with the onset of the menopause, it would be hopelessness more than pride, I think, that caused Sarah's unbelief. It is hard for me, as a man, to enter into the pain of a woman's experience of childlessness. But I think I can understand a little of Sarah's fear of clutching at another straw: of having her hopes raised again only to find them dashed, after so much bitter disappointment. And let's notice, then, how gently God deals with her. What does He do when His omnipotence is called in question? Look at the verses again: ***“Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son”*** (v. 13b-14). He repeats the promise: ***“I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.”*** The promise repeated in order to answer human reluctance to believe it - that is a pattern we have observed many times in these chapters, and we ought to have noticed by now that when we find it hard to believe His promises, God repeats them to us. And we do well to ponder that repetition—to keep coming back to the facts of the Bible and thinking them through.

“Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh” (v. 15a). That may well have been an impropriety: it probably was inappropriate for Sarah suddenly to speak from behind the tent flap to this visiting stranger, even though He had been speaking about her, to her husband, in her hearing. Obviously, to discover that He knew her innermost thoughts was too disconcerting for her, too frightening indeed, and she blurts out her reaction: ***Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”*** Now that fear in Sarah suggests that she knew whom she was addressing—she was aware this was a heavenly visitor, perhaps the Lord Himself. And if she did sense that it was God, the more fool her for trying to lie: ***Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.” But he said, “Yes, you did laugh”*** (v. 15). And those are the only words that the Bible records God as ever addressing to Sarah—a firm, but gentle correction:

“Yes, you did laugh.”

Well, what are we to learn, looking back thousands of years to this story recorded for us in God’s word? I guess both Abraham’s and Sarah’s laughter had an element of doubt, of disbelief, within it—and perhaps of mockery—just as human laughter can so often be ambiguous. But, as we’ve seen, Abraham voiced his doubt, even if a little obliquely, (**“If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!”**); while Sarah denied hers (**“I did not laugh.”**) And Abraham was answered by God’s repeated promise; while Sarah was rebuked for her lying. The lesson is very simple: you and I must be honest with God (it’s not exactly rocket science, is it?). We may be able to deceive other people; we may even be able to deceive ourselves (many of us certainly do), but we cannot deceive God. So, if you are not a Christian at this moment, is it time you admitted as much to God? It was an enormous breakthrough to me, as a non-Christian, when I first said to God, “God, I know I’m not a Christian. I know I don’t have any sort of relationship with you. I know I’m actually against you, rather than on your side.” In human terms, that was an enormously important step forward for me. It could be a breakthrough for you: if it’s the one thing you do when leaving this church today is to say, *“Well, I know I’m not a Christian. I heard those four give their testimony, but that’s not for me. I’m not where they are”*; and that you relate to God from now on, on the basis of honesty not on the basis of ‘maybe’ and *“Well, I’m hoping for the best and I’ll keep my fingers crossed. I’m a pretty good person and I do as well as anybody else does”*. Relate to God on the basis of honesty: *“I know I’m not a Christian.”*

But the lesson is there for us as Christians, too, isn’t it? Are we being honest with God?— about our doubt, our disbelief. Can we just bring that out into the open with Him? Remember that man in the New Testament who prayed: **“I believe, help my unbelief”** (Mark 9:24b). Doesn’t that need to be a prayer on your and my lips most days of our lives?—*“I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.”* Maybe it’s other factors of our lives: we pose as a wholehearted Christian, but we know how many areas of disobedience there are in our lives, how many cupboards in our heart that God has never had the key to.

I have to say that I’m on the side of laughter. I know it’s a bit ambiguous; I know the Bible’s a bit ambiguous about it; but I personally am pretty keen on it. I love laughter: even this afternoon I was watching a session of *Fawlty Towers*. But the Bible teaches me that honesty is far more important (there are plenty of folks who are very good at laughter but not very good at honesty) because if there is a God, He knows everything and we need to start relating to Him on that basis. Total knowledge, so total honesty.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)