

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17
God's Promises Are a Laughing Matter
January 3, 2016

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you"...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 she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell facedown; 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?" (NIV84)

A number of years ago—in the mid 1990's, I think—there was a phenomenon among some churches called "holy laughter." At worship, people would fall to the ground, laughing uncontrollably, sometimes being unable to even stand up. Some people unquestioningly endorsed this as the work of God and implied that "holy laughter" was something for which all good Christians ought to strive. Others, however, asked what purpose holy laughter served and why, if this was indeed a gift from God, the Bible never mentions people in the Bible being given the gift of "holy laughter." The fad appears to have done as fads usually do—that is, it quickly lost popularity and appears to have almost died entirely.

And yet there **is** a holy laughter spoken of in the Bible.

Before we dive right into our reading, some background is necessary. Although Abram is 99 years old when the reading begins, the story really began when Abram was 75. At that time God came to Abram, who was then living in Haran, and he told him to pack up his stuff and to move to a land (Canaan) that God would show him. (Genesis 12:1)

This was quite an act of faith on Abram's part. When my grandpa was 75, you could barely get him to leave the county, much less the state or the country! It wasn't that he was a hermit or that he was scared to move, but just that he was comfortable and happy where he was. And settled in. Abram may have felt the same, but he uprooted himself, changed his entire life, and got up and followed God's command, moving to Canaan.

Besides the promise to give Abram this land which he would show him, God made another promise to Abram—that he would make Abram a great nation. (Genesis 12:2) This must have come as somewhat of a surprise to Abram since he and his wife Sarai had no children yet. But Abram took God at his word.

Some years passed, and God came to Abram again. By this time Abram had done some thinking about God's promise. He and Sarai **still** didn't have any children, and Abram was trying to figure out exactly what it was that God was thinking here. (Note: This is usually not a good idea.) He decided that God must mean that one of his household servants would be Abram's heir. But when Abram suggested this to God, God told him that not only was he still promising to make Abram a great nation, but that this heir would be Abram's own biological son. (Genesis 15:2-4)

After God had left, Abram must have thought some more about how in the world God was going to accomplish this. It wasn't enough for Abram to hear the promise. He had to know exactly how. He was still kind of hung up on the idea that this child certainly wasn't going to come from him and Sarai, and he was still thinking about other possibilities. Finally it hit him! God had said that this child would come from Abram, but he had not said that this child would necessarily come from Sarai!

And apparently Sarai had been thinking the same thing, too. Reasoning that her biological clock had stopped ticking entirely, and reasoning that Abram's was pretty close to winding down, it seemed to her that the time for action was now! She came to Abram and told him to sleep with Hagar, her servant, and to produce the child of God's promise in this way. Abram saw things the same way, and he agreed. The result was a son named Ishmael.

There don't appear to have been any messages from God for the next 13 years. You have to wonder what Abram was thinking. I suppose it was possible that he believed Ishmael was the child that God had promised. But I suspect not. I suspect that Abram knew in his conscience that God's plan was not to provide the child of promise through an act of adultery. I suspect that the lack of approval from God concerning this action confirmed Abram's fears. And I wonder if Abram had given up hope that this promise would be fulfilled, wondering if by his action he had caused God to withdraw his promise.

Perhaps you have been in a similar situation. Impatient of waiting for God to fulfill his promises to you, you've laughed an unholy laughter that suggests that God writes checks that he has no intention of making good on. And then you've taken a situation into your own hands and handled it your way, ignoring your conscience which was telling you that you cannot do good by performing an act of evil. But your conscience continued to accuse you, leading you to see your guilt and to wonder if God had withdrawn all his gracious promises from you.

Abraham certainly had to wonder if the time for God to keep his promise had come—and gone.

But God tells Abram that in fact the time is still coming. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, *"I am God almighty...I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."* Then he goes on to say, *"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 she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."*

And at this Abram laughed. He fell facedown, 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?"*

Surely it was a laugh of amazement at such an incredible scenario. But it was a laugh of joyous trust. Abraham's laugh wasn't saying, "Hoo, boy! I'll bet! That's a good one!" He wasn't saying, "Well, I sure hope so. Then again, I've heard an awful lot of talk, but I haven't seen a whole lot of action on these promises."

Abraham wasn't laughing like we sometimes do about people's promises when we say, "Oh, yeah. Yup. They assured us that they would have that work done by tomorrow"--even though this person has proven themselves time and time again to be unreliable. He wasn't even laughing the way we might laugh when some kind-hearted soul makes a well-meaning, but seemingly impossible promise. Maybe you have a spouse who can't ride in a car at night for more than 10 minutes without falling dead asleep, but on an overnight trip--a trip that will last till 6 in the morning, they assure you that they will stay awake and keep you company. You laugh at that promise--not because you think they're being deceptive, and not because you doubt whether they desire 100% to keep that promise, but simply because everything in past history

has proven them to be incapable of keeping such a promise.

No, Abraham laughed because he believed the promise. Abraham believed that the fact that he was 99 and the fact that Sarah was 90 did not make the promises any less likely--simply more wondrous.

And Abraham had every reason for believing this.

Abraham could draw special assurance that God would keep this promise--and all the promises that were a part of the covenant--from the name that God gave himself when he appeared to Abraham. He said to him, "I am *El Shaddai*." The NIV translates this, "*I am God Almighty*."

Or in other words, "Don't worry about me making promises and then not being able to keep them. I can do anything I want to."

And not only did Abram have the assurance that God had the **power** to do such a thing, but also that God had the **commitment** to do such a thing. For immediately after saying that he was God Almighty, the Lord said, "*I will confirm my covenant*."

Because God had both the power and the commitment to fulfill his promises, Abraham laughed at God's wonderful promises--not only because they were amazing, but because they were certain.

And the fact is, of course, that God did every seemingly unbelievable thing that he said he would. Abram and Sarah conceived and had a son. The descendants of that son would eventually become a great nation. And from that great nation would come the one through whom all nations would be blessed--the Messiah, Jesus Christ. If you really stop and consider it all and what it all means, it makes you want to laugh, realizing that God always, wisely, wonderfully keeps his promises.

Of course he does so on his timetable--certainly not Abraham's timetable, and often not ours either. And sometimes God's timetable takes a while, doesn't it? **Twenty-four** years Abraham waited.

But that was nothing compared to how long Eve waited. When she gave birth to Cain, it seems that she assumed that God had fulfilled his promise to send a Savior. Little could she have imagined that God was not going to do that for another **4000 years** later.

But God waits until the time is just right--or, as Paul said in Galatians, until "*the time had fully come*" (Galatians 4:4). Once the time had fully come, **then—and only then**—did God send his Son Jesus to redeem those under law, in order that we might be called sons of God, in order that we might be part of a "great nation" of believers who share the faith--and the forgiveness of sins--which Abraham had.

It should make you want to laugh a little. Oh, I don't expect that any of us will burst into laughter here within the next few moments, and truth be told, I think I'd find it somewhat distracting. But I hope that when you contemplate the wonderful promises which God has kept-- I hope that you feel a little giddy, I hope that you feel that joy, that release that happy laughter brings.

As we saw the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Savior at Christmas, we were overjoyed. Like Abraham, we may have laughed to ourselves, thinking, "The Son of God was born to an ordinary young woman? And he's my Savior?" It's too wondrous for words. And yet God did it.

And I hope that gives you confidence to trust in God's other promises. I pray that we don't just laugh joyously about the promises, the covenants that God **has** kept, but also about the promises that God **will** keep, the covenants that God **will** confirm.

Because like Abraham, we hold some amazing promises from God. Even better, those promises from God are certain. For he is **still** *El Shaddai*, and therefore he will and can keep his covenants with us.

For instance, God has promised that if we call upon him in the day of trouble, he will deliver us. That's a promise. And God keeps his promises. We might be tempted to raise our eyebrows and say, "Well, it doesn't look like he's delivering me this time, because I've been in trouble for quite some time."

Abraham thought God was taking an awful long time, too. But God delivered.

If this situation with your health, or this situation with your job, or this situation at home has been troubling you for quite some time, God will keep his promise to deliver you. And he will do that just as soon as the time has fully come. It won't take 4000 years for the time to fully come, as it did before the time was right for Jesus to be born. It may not take 24 years for the time to fully come, as it did for Abraham--although, in fact, it may take longer. But the time will fully come, and then God will fully deliver us. Perhaps he'll deliver you by taking you to Heaven, perhaps he will deliver you by removing the problem, and perhaps he will deliver you by giving you the strength to deal with the problem. But he **will** confirm his covenant, he **will** keep his promises.

And that means that Jesus will keep another promise--his promise to come again. Sure, that promise is 2000 years old, but all that means is that we're 2000 years closer to the moment when the time has fully come. Will God really take sinners to Heaven to be with him? Just as surely as God has forgiven sinners through Jesus.

Holding onto those sorts of promises, it sort of makes you want to laugh, doesn't it? Because those promises mean great security for you and me. They mean that as we face a new year, we have nothing to fear--nothing. Because God has promised to be with us and to care for us. Go ahead. Laugh if you want. But make a holy laughter—a laughter that comes because it's so amazingly wonderful, and so amazingly comforting to know that we are in the hands of a gracious and loving God--a God who calls himself *El Shaddai*. Amen.