

Laughing at God's Promises: Genesis 20-21  
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“Laughing at God’s Promises.” There is a wrong way to laugh at God’s promises, and there is a right way. In the story of Abraham and Sarah there is both unbelieving laughter at the shocking promise of God, and then there is joyous laughter when God fulfills the promise. And as we continue to look at the ups and downs of faith in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, we need to look at our own lives and discern whether we are laughing in unbelief at the things God has promised to do, or if we are laughing with thanksgiving and joyful anticipation, believing that God is doing and will do what He has promised.

Let’s start in chapter 17 where God promises that Sarah will bear a son. Remember, before this, in chapter 16, Abraham and Sarah tried on their own to produce a son. Since Sarah was barren, she told Abraham to sleep with her maidservant Hagar in order to produce a son. Hagar got pregnant and gave birth to Ishmael. The plan worked.

But God had a better plan. A bigger plan. A miraculous plan. In chapter 17:16 God says to Abraham, “I will bless [Sarah], and moreover, I will give you a son by her.” Do you know what Abraham’s response was? He laughed. Verse 17 says he “fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” Abraham laughed in unbelief. God was talking in terms that were way outside the box of Abraham’s comprehension. This isn’t how it works, God! What you’re saying simply cannot happen. What God says to Abraham is so bizarre and ridiculous that Abraham laughs at it. And then he tries to reason with God in verse 18, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” But God says, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.” Do you know what the name Isaac means? It means, “he laughs.” Isaac is the name God gives to this child. The promise of Isaac’s birth was laughed at, but when the promise was fulfilled it brought a different kind of laughter, as we’ll see in chapter 21.

In chapter 18 Sarah, like Abraham, laughs at the unbelievable promise of bearing a son. In verse 10 the Lord says, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” Then verse 12 says, “Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. He said, ‘No, but you did laugh.’”

Abraham and Sarah both had their doubts. They doubted the promise of God. They didn’t think it could happen. They were settling for what they could produce by their own scheme rather than trusting in God to do something so much greater.

The narrative shifts then to the tragic events of Sodom and Gomorrah. God judged those wicked cities, and He mercifully delivered Lot and his two daughters. Just like in the story of the Flood, in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah we see both judgment and deliverance.

And then in chapter 20 the narrative shifts back to Abraham and Sarah again. This chapter and chapter 21 is what I want to focus on this morning. I have two points. In chapter 20 we'll talk about Old Sins. Abraham and Sarah tell the same lie that they told earlier in their lives. They sin in the same way, and it's evidence of the same unbelief that has gripped them before. The same unbelief that was evident when they laughed at God's promise. Old sins. Sins that so easily entangle us. Sins that continue to entangle us. That's what we'll see in chapter 20.

But then we'll see how God's Promises Are Bigger Than Our Sins. That's the second point I'll talk about. In spite of our sin, in spite of our unbelief, in spite of the fact that we laugh at God's promises, He accomplishes His purposes and gives us reason to laugh joyfully, seeing that God really is true to His Word. God's promises are bigger than our sins, and He turns our unbelieving laughter into surprised, joyful laughter.

### **OLD SINS**

First, old sins. Turn back to Genesis 12 for a moment. In verse 11 Abraham says to his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." And apparently that's exactly what happened. They went into Egypt, and the Egyptians noticed her beauty. And as Abraham had instructed, she must have told them that she was his sister, because she was then taken into Pharaoh's house and Abraham was treated well because of her. But then God brought plagues on Pharaoh's house, and Pharaoh realized what was going on, and he said to Abraham, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?" Get out of here! And he sent Abraham and Sarah on their way.

That event happened shortly after God called Abraham out Haran. He was about 75 years old. And he should have learned his lesson. Like all of us, right! We should have learned our lesson. We've gone down that sinful road. It's wrong. God chastises us for it. But we still do it again.

In chapter 20 Abraham and Sarah, 25 years later, try the same old trick. The old sin crops up again. Let's look at chapter 20.

The story has a happy ending because, as we'll look at in the next point, God is bigger than our sins. But we need to learn from Abraham's bad example here of how old sins will continue to plague us if we are not vigilant in putting them to death. This is a sin that Abraham and Sarah had agreed upon decades before. Abraham describes this in verse 13 where he's trying to justify and minimize his sin to Abimelech. He says, "when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'" This is what they did in Egypt. And now, in a moment of temptation, they give in to it again. Just like in Egypt, Abraham feared man and failed to trust God. So he took matters into his own hands, following the same old deceptive plan.

#### There are 3 things I want to say about old sins, recurring sins.

**First, these old recurring sins affect the people around us.** Every time we sin, we dishonor God, first and foremost. That's the most grievous offense of our sin. We also bring harm to ourselves, AND we harm those around us. The ripple effect of our recurring sins extends far beyond what we might imagine. Abraham was only thinking of himself. He didn't think about the obvious likelihood that Abimelech would end up

sleeping with Sarah. God made sure that didn't happen, but it doesn't seem like it was a concern to Abraham. He would rather sin and try to save his own life, than protect Sarah.

Nor did Abraham think about Abimelech, and the agony this caused him. Abimelech had to experience this terrifying dream in which God confronted him about having another man's wife. And Abimelech defended himself and demonstrated his innocence. And he was rightfully angry at Abraham for deceiving him. In verse 9 he says to Abraham in disgust, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." I find it humorous that a few verses later when Abimelech is giving gifts to the couple, he says to Sarah in verse 16, "Behold, I have given *your brother* a thousand pieces of silver." I can just imagine that Abimelech used this sarcastic remark to remind Abraham of his spineless and hurtful act.

Abraham didn't think about Sarah or Abimelech, and he probably would have never imagined that his sin would affect even Abimelech's wife and female slaves. We read in verses 17-18 that "the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife." Fortunately this was reversed, and God healed them all when Abraham prayed. The point is that the impact of Abraham's sin was far-reaching.

And the impact of my sin and your sin is far-reaching. Think about how the old recurring sins in your life affect your spouse, and your children and your friends and your co-workers and even people you don't know. There is a ripple effect that stretches beyond what we can see.

**The second thing I want to say about these old recurring sins is that they are passed down to our children.** Turn over to chapter 26:6. Years later, Abraham's son Isaac settled in Gerar. And there was another Abimelech, probably the son or grandson of the Abimelech in chapter 20. Look at what Abraham's son Isaac did. "So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' for he feared to say, 'My wife,' thinking, 'lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah,' because she was attractive in appearance." Do you see? The same fear of man and unbelief in God that reared its head in Abraham's life, is now rearing its head in Isaac's life. Abraham compromised the truth for comfort, and Isaac followed suit. The sin of the father was passed down to his son.

Fathers, what a convicting word this is for us. May God have mercy on us, that we will not lead our sons and daughters astray. Fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, we are the examples that these little ones are looking up to. And if they see moral compromise, if they see a fearful spirit, if they see that we laugh at the promises of God and take matters into our own hands, we can be sure that they will do the same, apart from the grace of God.

Sometimes when I'm putting my son Noah to bed and praying for him, I'll pray for myself that God will protect me from sin in order that I can be an example to my son and pass along a godly legacy to him. As Noah grows up I want him to see that his Daddy loves Jesus and trusts Jesus and even if life itself is at stake, the truth is more important. I want to model godly manhood for my little boy. Stand up for what's right, tell the truth, protect the women and children, be brave and courageous, and trust that God's in control. As I strive to be that kind of man, my prayer is that Noah will grow up saying, "I want to be like my Daddy." And my prayer is that my little girl, Milaina, will

grow up saying, “I want to marry someone like my Daddy.” Parents, let’s be godly examples for our kids. We don’t realize how deeply our lives affect their lives, and that influence can be for good or for bad.

**The third and final thing to say here is simply to exhort us to cut ties with old sins.** James Montgomery Boice wrote, “Is it not that an old sin, committed in one’s youth, often recurs in later life if it is not firmly dealt with and constantly resisted?” (Genesis, vol. 2, pg. 191). Then he says, “Many people, Christian people, have built-in compromises with evil that were made in their lives when they were young—an agreement to do what they knew then and still know to be wrong, a failure to do what they knew then and still know needs to be done, an agreement with someone else not to be too rigorous about their faith, willing to bend the commands of God in one area of their relationship. And now this secret sin, this hidden flaw in faith, lives on to mar the present.” What is it in your life? What compromise did you make in the past that is still hindering you today? God, I give you my life, but I’m going to keep this one thing. I’m still going to enjoy this sinful pleasure. God I give you my life, but don’t ask me to do this one thing. I won’t ever do that. Those old compromises with evil need to be broken. They have gone on far too long. They dishonor God. They bring harm not only to us but also have a ripple effect in the lives around us, we pass them along to our children, and we need to be done with them.

If there is an old recurring sin in your life, bring it to the light. Confess it to a trusted friend or someone in your small group, and ask for prayer. Deal with that sin firmly and fiercely, and be vigilant in resisting it. And, oh, the joy that will come as you confess and are freed from that sin! Cut ties with those old sins.

### **GOD’S PROMISES ARE BIGGER THAN OUR SINS**

The second main point that I want to make in this sermon is that God’s Promises Are Bigger Than Our Sins. In spite of our sin, and even using our sin in His plan, God accomplishes everything that He has promised to do. God’s sovereignty is evident in chapter 20:6 when God says to Abimelech, “it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.” It wasn’t just a happy accident that Abimelech didn’t sleep with Sarah. It was God’s providential care that protected her, and protected Abraham, so that chapter 21 could be a reality. And in the last two verses of chapter 20, just before we come to the miraculous birth in chapter 21, we see that God was also in control of whether or not the women in Abimelech’s household could bear children. God opens and closes the womb. That, of course, reminds us of a key theme in the Abraham narrative, the fact that Sarah was unable to bear children.

That is the thought put into our minds as we move to chapter 21. Look at chapter 21:1-7.

God keeps His promises. However bizarre they may sound. However unrealistic they may seem, God keeps His promises. He does just what He says He will do. Notice how verses 1-2 emphasize that God is fulfilling His promise. “The Lord visited Sarah *as he had said*, and the Lord did to Sarah *as he had promised*. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age *at the time of which God had spoken to him*.” Three times this verse makes the point that God is accomplishing just what He said He would do.

It is amazing what God does here! He takes frail, fickle, up and down, wavering, fearful sinners, and He makes His grace and His power shine through their weakness.

God carries out His purpose, in spite of their doubt and in spite of their sins that jeopardized the very possibility that the promise could be fulfilled. How could Abraham and Sarah have a son if Sarah belonged to Abimelech? But God was sovereign over all those details. And since God is sovereign over every detail in every situation throughout the entire course of history, we can be sure that He will fulfill all of His promises.

I'm so encouraged by this in the life of our church right now, because God is going to glorify Himself and sanctify His people, and there's no way our sin can thwart His plans. There's a problem with this church: it's that we're all sinners. And yet God's promises are bigger than our sins.

We just celebrated the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this church. I've only been here for the last year and a half, but from what I understand of the history of the church, it's been a rough road from the very beginning. And yet in spite of our sin and the problems that our sin causes, God WILL accomplish His purposes. And I believe He has a plan for us. He has a future for us. He will not leave us to ourselves to let us ruin His plan. He will work through us, and in spite of us, to bring about His will. Be encouraged, Grace Church, not because we are anything to boast in, but because we can boast in our Lord who always keeps His promises.

He has promised, for instance, that the gospel "will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14). We get to be part of that. We get to be used by God as God saves the elect from every people group of the world. And even when we do stupid, sinful things, God's promises are bigger than that. He is not surprised or caught off guard. He doesn't have to scramble for a plan B. He remains in control and will do what He has said He will do.

God's Word also promises that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). That's a promise that we may be tempted to laugh at sometimes, just like Abraham and Sarah laughed in unbelief. We might question, how could God use THIS situation for good, or THAT situation? It just doesn't make sense. But in God's plan it makes perfect sense, as the dark threads are woven into the beautiful tapestry of God's grace.

On the other side of glory, and even now as God gives us eyes to see, we will laugh in a very different way at God's promises. We will laugh with the kind of laughter that's in Genesis 21:6. Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." This is the laughter that comes when God accomplishes the impossible. The laughter that comes when God shatters the box we have put Him in. The laughter of awe and delight at God's marvelous power. This is the laughter that is appropriate for God's promises.

Many, many years after Isaac was born, another miraculous birth took place. In fact, it was even far more extraordinary. Because this time a son was born to a virgin, and he was not a mere human child, but He was humanity and deity united together in one person. He was the God-Man, Jesus the Messiah. Unlike Isaac, this child never sinned. But like Isaac's birth, the birth of the Messiah brought much rejoicing, and it brings rejoicing still. May this be a day of rejoicing in the promises of God, the promises that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1:20).

God keeps His promises. He always has, and He always will. This is the point I hope you take away today: God is faithful to His promises. If you are not a believer, it

means you are laughing at God's promises, in the wrong way. You think God isn't who He says He is. Or you think He will not or cannot do what He says He will do. But God's Word is true. And those who live in rebellion against God will be punished forever, while those who repent of their sin and turn to Jesus in faith will receive eternal reward. Romans 10:9 says, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That's a promise to believe today. Rest your life on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. You will no longer be an enemy of God, but you will be a friend of God.

If you are already a believer, the message is same: Trust in the promises! God is faithful. So be encouraged in the midst of trials. Be encouraged in evangelism and missions and all kinds of ministry, because God is at work. And be encouraged in the fight against sin, because "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

Don't laugh in unbelief. Laugh in wonder and awe at God's faithfulness to His promises.