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Divine Power and Human Reason
Genesis 18:1-15

My most dear Friends,

One of the most pervasive themes throughout the scriptures is the all-powerful nature of God. From the creation of the world in Genesis 1 to the purification and recreation of the cosmos in Revelation 22 we come to know that all things live, move, and have their being in the God of the scriptures. As Christian people we understand that there is an otherness and all powerfulness to God by which he upholds the universe. And yet there are times when what we know about God does not match what we feel about God. We see this in Genesis 18 we are introduced to a couple whose theological convictions did not fit their conception of what they believed to be proper or timely.

You see, at the age of 75 (12:4) God had promised Abraham that he would have a son, an heir to the covenant promise (12:2). This would have represented not only the joy of children, fatherhood and motherhood but the continuation of the Abrahamic family. And yet after 24 years since God's initial promise and still no children. Put yourselves in the sandals of Abraham and Sarah this morning, this would have been a huge disappointment. Don't you think after 24 years you would just be accustomed to barrenness? Resigned to a closed future? Accepting hopelessness as normalcy? I don't want to be insensitive, but for those of us who have struggled with barrenness, don't we know that it can be an unbearable weight that seems to suck the joy out of our lives? 24 years of trying to muster up the courage to believe, for disappointment.

Just think of how our dear sister must have felt when Abraham comes running to her and tells her (as we read in Ch. 17) that God has promised him again that a Son would be born to them, and he was given the sign of circumcision as a promise of this son. I wonder what she was thinking? (It's ambiguous - but was she cynical like Job's wife, did she doubt, did she care?).

Yet God displays that he is tender hearted even towards the meekest of Bible characters(John Calvin). He repeats the promise, he stutters, that he might give renewed assistance for the sake of Sarah.

Thesis: The power of God is not limited to human reason

Headings:

1. Divine visitation (vv.1-8)
2. Human Reason (vv.9-12)
3. Divine Assistance (vv.13-15).

Point 1: Divine visitation (vv.1-8)

The first means by which God confirms his promise is in the revelation of himself by way of theophany. The word theophany is a combination of two Greek words meaning God, and appearance. A theophany is a visible display of God to human beings (think Ex. 3; 19; etc). And as God reveals himself to select individuals throughout redemptive history in such an intimate way, he communicates to his people his will concerning his promises.

1.1 - The LORD's Appearance (v.1).

So verse one tells us, “*And the Lord appeared to him*” (v.1). To the Christian reading through the book of Genesis you may have a double take in chapters 17 and 18. They start the same way, are concerned with the same promise, why does God repeat himself in this way? We should notice the difference in audience in each of the chapters. In chapter 17 the promise is made only to Abraham, yet where is Sarah? Last I checked it takes two to tango... I think John Calvin is right that the emphasis in this second vision was to assure Sarah that she too is part of God's covenant and the promise would be fulfilled through her.

1.2 - The Servants Hospitality (vv. 2-8).

Moses goes on noting that this appearance takes place “*by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day*” (v.1b). This setting is a reminder that Abraham forsook the land of Sodom for the promise of God (Gen. 13), this is the location of the giving of the covenant sign of circumcision (Gen. 17). Again at this place, “*behold, three men were standing in front of him*” (v.2).

Abraham's lengthy section on hospitality is marked with a flurry of activity. *Wash your feet*, rest in the shade, bake cakes with 20 liters (5.2 gallons) of flour, slaughter the young calf, *milk, cheese curds*. This would have been an incredible meal displaying his wellbeing and wealth but also his hospitality and generosity.

Now what is interesting is that if we look at the first time this promise is given (17) Abraham's response is not thanksgiving, he seems to be concerned/doubting the promise of God (17:16 - read). The question becomes, is Abraham an example of unbelief or faithfulness?

What seems clear to me is that Abraham struggled or doubted the promise of God. Yahweh appeared with the sweetest of promises concerning his wife, "*I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her*" (Gen. 17:16). And what is Abraham's response? *Shall a child be born to people so old... O that Ishmael would walk before you* (17:17,18). It is clear that Abraham has yet to grasp the promise of Isaac. Yet failing to understand the greatness of God's grace does not make someone's faith vain. **Weak faith is still faith.** Weak faith ought not to discourage us from coming to the Lord. Nor ought it to discourage us from coming to God's covenant meal (Of which this text speaks of).

The URCNA forms and prayers say this "We do not come to the supper (God's presence) as though we were righteous in ourselves, but rather to testify that we are sinners and that we look to Jesus Christ for our salvation. Although we don't have a perfect faith, do not serve and love God with our whole hearts, and do not love our neighbours as we ought, we are confident that the saviour accepts us at his table (presence)". Why? **Because of who God is.** It's not what we have done, who we are or our righteousness, what makes us worthy to be in the presence of God is his grace in the person of Christ.

Abraham's is still among the *Oak of Mamre* the promised land of God! He provides a host of food, the best of calves, hospitable service. The text is ambiguous concerning the state of his faith, but it is not ambiguous concerning the greatness of the God in which Abraham serves.

Application:

1. (For our Dutch Reformed friends). Are we ready for when the Lord comes to our house?

But notice that the tents didn't need to be cleaned for God to meet with his servant. He didn't come for the coffee, or to see if the countertop was spotless, or the children well behaved. When the Lord came to Abraham he was not concerned with what he could offer him, he was principally concerned with their hearts (Eyes of God not on external but internal).

2. Isn't this beautiful? Returning to the question, is Abraham & Sarah's faith weak? Yes, of course yet God still comes near to his servants to assure and assist them of his promise.

Point 2: Human Reason (vv.9-12) - Internal dialogue in Sarah's own mind.

What is more highly regarded than human reason? According to man it is our rationality that makes us the highest of creatures. It is our logic that has propelled us to scientific heights. Yet we often are so quick to forget the fact that God created man's mind, his logic, his reason, to glorify him. Yet in a twist of irony our reason and logic often is one of the greatest distractions from the gospel... You see, God has come to Abraham and Sarah to issue a gospel promise it's not met with receptive hopefulness but with resistant hopelessness. This story is marked by an irony, Abraham is known for accepting the call (Heb. 11:8) looking for a city whose designer and builder is God (11:10). Yet, here the call to believe is rejected as nonsensical. Is the power of God limited by what we can believe God can do?

2.1 - The visitor's identity (v.9)

First, we should see the visitor's identity. They say, "*Where is Sarah your wife?*" (v.9). This is the first indication to Abraham and Sarah that their visitors are not merely human but are divine. Sarah as a proper middle eastern woman would have remained in the tent and would not visit with male visitors. So how did they know that Sarah was even present in the camp?

Our second clue is to notice how she is referred to - not *Sarai* but Sarah. Her covenant name (17:15) is the name she was given by Yawheh when he indicated that she would be the mother of the son of promise.

These clues show us both that these visitors are no mere travelers just passing by, but divine in nature. And their address is not meant for Abraham but Sarah.

2.2 - The visitor's announcement (v.10)

"The Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son" (v.10).

Here we have the most explicit promise of a son in the Old Testament. This again is the reiteration of the promise made in Genesis 3:15 that there would come a Son unto Adam and Eve who would crush the head of the serpent and his heel would be bruised. We see this lineage being traced from Genesis 3 to 18. This promised son must come through his covenant people. But if this promise must come through a covenant people, why would you choose a barren 75 year old? Not only this but Abraham through all the ups and downs seems to hinder this promise himself.

Twice trades his wife for freedom (12:10-20), has a child with another woman (16), and now nearly 25 years later still no son of promise. And seemingly in the last hour God makes this promise (v.10).

What is God saying here to Sarah? I have not forgotten you. I know about your barren years, I know about the bitterness, I know about the tears you have shed, I know about the silent cries, (maybe in some ways God is saying “I know you doubt the promise but I have not forgotten you”). The verb used here expresses the intensity or certainty of what God has promised. God has staked his claim on this promise, it is as certain as he is certain. It will come to pass. The verb **וַאֲנִי יָדָעְתִּי** is used elsewhere to describe God’s gracious intervention (Zech. 1:3; Ps. 80:15(14)), God is saying “I will graciously intervene in your barrenness”.

Don’t miss this beloved. Here is our dear sister in the faith, an old woman, year and years of disappointment, and God makes a promise to graciously intervene in her hopelessness.

2.3 - Objections to the visitors power (vv.11,12).

And so we see that God makes as sure of a promise that he can make, so the question is, what will Sarah’s response be to such a promise? We know that she *laughs*. This is all you have ever wanted, this is the Lord, and you laugh?

Look at her logic, first she says *I am worn out*. This in an analogy is a used up, tattered piece of clothing. She is well past the age of child bearing and her body is breaking down due to old age. She then notes, *my Lord is old*, Abraham has fared no better. He too is beyond the age of rearing children. And finally, she notes, *shall I have pleasure*. Referring to the virility of Sarah and Abraham (not many opportunities in your late 90s).

The author also notes, “*The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah*” (v.11b). She was past menopause. This reveals to the reader that the couple did not simply struggle with infertility but that conception and birth were simply impossible at this point. According to human reason.

Application:

1. While the eyes of the world are on Kenosha, or on the new omicron variant, the eyes of the Lord are upon his servant. Though Sarah was acting according to custom, she did seek to hide herself from the visitors, but you cannot hide from the eyes of the Almighty.
 - a. This ought to bring us both conviction and comfort. Conviction in the fact that God sees in the dark, he knows our hidden faults, our deleted browser history.
 - b. This also should bring us comfort in the fact that there is no saint lost to God. We can never escape his all seeing gaze (Ps. 139). He knows our brokenness, our tears, our sins, and failures and loves us in Christ.
2. God is never late, his timing is perfect. Though according to our human reason would consider the fulfillment at the proper time in their lives. And yet it is the right time, because through the miraculous birth of a child to an elderly couple he attests to the certainty of God’s promise. Beloved, God’s promises to you are sure and steadfast.

Point 3: Divine Assistance (vv.13-15).

We have heard God’s promises and Sarah’s reasonable objections to the promise, but God has come to the *oaks of Mamre* not to chastise but to offer assistance. Assistance to help Sarah

believe the promise. Now, you have heard her objections, menopause, *worn out*, old husband, a frequent sex life is a thing of the past. Put yourself in her place, what would you need to hear to believe the promise? **May it not be lost on us that God grounds his assistance towards Sarah in his own person** (v.14).

3.1 - Divine help

You see beloved, Sarah's response to God's promise is not receptivity but incredulity. In other words - the promise has fallen on hard soil. She laughed not out of cocky arrogance but because a life of long disappointments had taught her not to clutch to straws. Hopelessness, not pride, underlies her unbelief.¹

As one commentator points out, Sarah's laughter shows us the "scandal and difficulty of faith. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. [[The]] embrace of this radical gospel requires shattering and discontinuity".² What does this mean? They were resigned to barrenness, they had made peace with normalcy, accepting of the fact that God's promise was impossible.

But the focus of this passage is not on the helplessness of the situation but the person of God himself. "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" The Hebrew word used here is *Pala* meaning wonderful or miraculous. The sense of the question is this, is there anything so wonderful so miraculous that I can not do it? It is as if God has said to Sarah, "is there anything more wonderful than me?" "Is there anything so miraculous that I couldn't do it?"

¹ Gordon Wenham Genesis 16-50, 48.

² Brueggemann, *Genesis* 159.

What a wonderful comfort that is. That there is no sin so heinous, no person so far gone, no relationship so broken, no church so shattered, for the long arm of God not to redeem them. He is wonderful. I ask the question, what makes God wonderful? While I confess that God is worthy of wonder & adoration for all that he is, the tenor of scripture, which has astounded saints old and new is grace. It is not surprising that we fail, or that we succumb to difficulties, what is surprising is that God's response is grace. He is *wonderful*. How is this grace ours? **Isaiah 9:6** - in Christ's incarnation we are given wonderful grace.

It is through Christ that God offers us not retribution for sins, not punishment, not wrath for our doubts but grace. God still yet offers us his promise despite our weakness despite his certainty. Nobody doubts too much for the Lord to redeem. Including Sarah! Hebrews 11:11 "*By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised*". What's remarkable about this chapter is that it uses examples of faith that don't seem to be examples of faith. In Genesis 18 she seems to doubt, have weak faith, even scared of the idea of child birth at 90. How is this by faith? How was her faith made real? Heidelberg catechism Q&A 21 "wholehearted trust", it may be wrong for us to try to pinpoint when she trusted in the Lord but what we should come away with is that she did trust the Lord, God did make her promise, and she did receive it with a believing heart. And through Sarah the seed of the woman would not be lost, not because of providence, or Abraham or Sarah were able to make it work, but that through Isaac the blessing of the promise of a son would come Jacob, and through Jacob - David, through David -exile, but through it all came Christ.

Conclusion:

Luke 1:34-37. The most important question every Easter and Christmas is “Why?” What could compel the prince of heaven to condescend to us? It comes down to this truth, Christ came because he loved you. Because God loves his church, and that truly is beyond all human reason.