

Genesis 21:1-8; Romans 4:17,18

Hoping Against Hope

Who against hope believed in hope... Romans 4:18

The very first time you find laughing in the Bible is found a few chapters earlier than what we've read from this morning. It's in Genesis 17 and it's the laughter of Abraham. Ge 17:17 *Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall [a child] be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?* This was the laugh of unbelief. Abraham was basically saying this couldn't happen. 100 year old men and 90 year old women don't become parents, the very notion is laughable.

The next time you find laughter mentioned is in the very next chapter, Gen. 18. Now it's Sarah. She too is laughing the laugh of unbelief. So we read in v. 12 *Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?* In Sarah's case the situation becomes a little scary when the LORD in the form of an angel asks Abraham about Sarah's laughter. Verse 13: *And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?*

There follows a word from the LORD that we all do well to take to heart when He says in v. 14 *Is anything too hard for the LORD?* Evidently Sarah was within earshot of this conversation between the LORD and Abraham for she then denies her laughter but the LORD won't have her denial. Verse 15 *Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.*

Perhaps you've heard the Proverbial saying: He who laughs last laughs best? In the case before us you could say that God certainly had the last laugh. And His laugh was certainly the best laugh. And it was a laugh that Abraham and Sarah were allowed to join. So we read in vv. 6,7 *And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age.*

According to A.W. Pink some 25 years had passed from the time Abraham was called to leave Ur of the Chaldees to the time of Isaac's birth. Listen to his summary analysis of that time:

Some twenty-five years had now passed since Abram had left Ur of the Chaldees, and during these years he had received promise from the Lord that He would make of him a great nation (Gen. 12:2) and that He would make his seed as the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16). But years went by and Abram remained childless: the promised seed had not been given and Abram was exercised and perplexed. "*And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezar of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me Thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir*" (Gen. 15:2, 3). To these questions the Lord returned answer,

"This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir" (Gen. 15:4).

Another interval passed and yet no child appeared, and *"Sarai said unto Abram, Behold, now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai, and he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived" (Gen. 16:2, 4).* A further thirteen years dragged their weary course and *"God said unto Abraham, as for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations: Kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before Thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac" (Gen. 17:15-19).*

Shortly after this the Lord, accompanied by two angels, appeared unto His servant in the plains of Mamre and, *"they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And He said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:9-14).*

And now the appointed hour for the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah had struck, and we read, *"And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him" (Gen. 21:12).*

I read to you in connection with this narrative in Genesis 21 Paul's analysis of the character of Abraham. So he writes in Rom. 4:18 *Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.* You see, don't you, a steadfastness to Abraham's faith but at the same time you discover in the narrative that it wasn't a perfect faith by any stretch of the imagination. He laughed in unbelief and he cooperated with his wife's plot to manipulate the promise. And yet in spite of his shortcomings even with regard to his faith he still believed. To use Paul's words from Romans 4:21 *And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.*

This is what I want to focus on this morning – this persevering faith that we find in Abraham. Though that faith had its ups and downs I don't think it ever lost hope. And

that's why I love that statement in Rom. 4:18 *who against hope believed in hope*. There are things that you and I hope for that in some cases we've been hoping a long time. If the narrative in Genesis 21 teaches us anything it should teach us to continue to hope. Don't ever give up hope – not even when things seem impossible. That's what I want to focus on this morning:

The Encouragement to Hope even When Things Seem Impossible

This account of the birth of Isaac reminds us of a number of things that should provide you with that encouragement.

I. We're Reminded that God's Timing is Always a Set Time

Notice the words of v. 2 Ge 21:2 *For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him*. Cf. this earlier word that had been given to Abraham back in Ge 17:21 which was the time of Abraham's laugh: *But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year*. And in Ge 18:14 in response to Sarah's laugh we have yet another reference to a set time: *Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed (same word in Hebrew) I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son*.

The Lord is never early and the Lord is never late. The Lord is always on time and His time is always the right time – right in the sense that it's set in such a way as to bring the most glory to His name. In the book of Habakkuk you find the prophet arguing with God. The prophet first complains about the extent of wickedness in the land of Judah and when God answers the prophet's complaint with the promise of judgment in the form of the Babylonian army the prophet then complains that that's not right either.

So when you come to chp. 2 we find the prophet Habakkuk saying in v. 1 *I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd. 2 And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. 3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry*.

And if I might add one verse from the New Testament. Paul makes reference to Christ's first coming as being in the fulness of time: Ga 4:4,5 *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons*.

So you get the idea when it comes to God's timing. The challenge we face when it comes to God's timing is the challenge of our own finiteness. Our time in this world is brief and there are things we want to see within that brief time of our occupation here. So the psalmist prays in Psalm 89:47 *Remember how short my time is*.

Waiting time for us so easily becomes the hardest of our times. This was certainly true with Abraham and Sarah. I cited that lengthy quote from Pink in my introduction in which he takes us through the 25 year time period between the time Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to the actual time of Isaac's birth. The longer that waiting time was extended the stronger the temptation became for Abraham and Sarah to take matters into their own hands which they did at one point when Sarah had Abraham take Hagar her servant in order to help God along.

From our vantage point God can't move quickly enough. I don't know that you ever find a case in the Psalms where the Psalmist complains that God moved too quickly but you do find a number of instances in which he wants to know *how long?*

- Ps 13:1 *How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?*
- Ps 35:17 *Lord, how long wilt thou look on?*
- Ps 74:9,10 *We see not our signs: [there is] no more any prophet: neither [is there] among us any that knoweth how long. O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? shall the enemy blaspheme thy name for ever?*
- Ps 94:3,4 *LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?*

Wouldn't you say that the Psalmists in these texts represent the way you very often feel? Why do you suppose this is? Why is it that God tries us this way? There's an entire epistle in the New Testament that in a sense is devoted to answering that question. Hebrews is addressed to those Jewish Christians who were so sorely tried that the temptation to abandon Christ altogether in order to go back to apostate Judaism had become very strong so that Paul had to admonish them in 10:35 to *Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward.* And then in the very next verse the Apostle offers a very concise explanation as to why the waiting time can be long and the time of trial can be severe: *For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.*

There's the explanation and there's our need – the need for patience. The word could be translated *endurance*. You need patience, you need endurance. And that exhortation and explanation of our need is what leads, then, to the famous chapter on faith in Hebrews 11. That's something to keep in mind the next time you read Heb. 11. The purpose of that chapter is to address the Christian's need for patience. Ro 15:4 *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Knowing this, James writes in James 1:3 that the trying of your faith worketh patience But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. And a few chapters later in that same epistle James 5:7,8,10,11 *Be patient therefore,*

brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. 8 Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. 11 Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

So we're to continue to hope even when the waiting time is long, even when circumstances become impossible. Hoping is just another way of exercising faith. And our text in Gen. 21 encourages us to persevere in faith because God's time is a set time. It's an appointed time and though the set time may tarry yet it will come. God's Word shows us that over and over again.

But would you consider with me next that our narrative also encourages us to hope against hope:

II. By Reminding Us that God is Almighty

Verse 2 gives us the words of a supernatural miracle when we read that *Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.*

Is anything too hard for the LORD the LORD had asked earlier and now at last when the set time had come the LORD was pleased to demonstrate that nothing is too hard for Him. He can bring life out of nothing. He can bring forth life from a dead womb. He can come forth Himself from a tomb after having lain in that tomb for 3 days. In these profound words of our text we are reminded that one of the most basic tenets of our religion is that Christianity is a supernatural religion.

The world scoffs at the notion that the Bible could be God's Word. It's so out of touch with reality, the reasoning goes. It's completely at odds with science. It's nothing but a book of superstitious myths and fairy tales. And the world's skepticism and unbelief would make perfect sense were it not for the one factor that they refuse to take into account – and that factor is God.

Why do we believe in a universal flood with one family being spared which family makes an ark and takes on board that ark a pair of every kind of animal? The answer is quite simple – we believe the account of Noah's ark because we believe in God. And why do we believe that a large fish could swallow a prophet and take him down to the depths of the sea for 3 days until that fish would at last spit out that same prophet onto dry land? Same reason – we believe in God.

Why do we believe in the parting of the Red Sea and children of Israel crossing that sea on dry land? Why do we believe in the dividing of the Jordan river so that the Israelites could cross that river on dry ground and enter into the promised land? Why do we believe that the sun could hold its place in the sky for several hours while Joshua conquered the kings of Canaan? It's all because we believe in God.

Our Bible begins with God. *In the beginning God.* What kind of a God are we talking about when our Bible begins that way? We're talking about a God so vast and so mighty that He could create the entire universe by the power of His Word. You think about that – man in all his puffed up pride with what he thinks is his advanced and ever progressing knowledge cannot even probe the vastness of this universe. We can't begin to comprehend that vastness with all its stars and galaxies. We can't really even come to grips with whether or not the universe is finite or infinite. And as I heard one preacher say many years ago – this universe in all its vastness amounts to what you might call the mere echo of God's voice.

Once you come to grips with the God of the Bible then there's nothing in the Bible that can intelligently be seen as impossible. But let me continue this line of thought in another vein. Why do we believe that Christ turned water to wine? Why do we believe that Christ could still a stormy sea? Why do we believe that Christ could walk on water or why do we believe that Christ could take a few loaves of bread and a few fishes and feed a multitude of thousands with it? It's because we believe that Christ is God.

Or why do we believe that the strongest antagonist to Christianity could be knocked off his high horse and could be found groveling in the dust and then go on to become the most powerful preacher of the gospel to the entire Gentile world? It's because we believe that the Holy Spirit is God.

Is anything too hard for God? Let me borrow from Christ's own words when he addressed the issue with his disciples of rich men entering into heaven. *With men this is impossible* He said in Mt. 19:26. And I might add that with men there are all sorts of things that are impossible. That's why when we make man the measure of the universe or when we make man the measure of reality the Bible will seem like a superstitious book of myths. *But with God all things are possible* Christ goes on to say.

This is why you should never lose hope and never stop praying for those souls that are near and dear to you. Though their hearts be ever so hard and though sin seem ever so strong in their lives and though salvation seems impossible for them – remember the birth of Isaac and remember the resurrection of Christ and remember your own spiritual resurrection which is every bit as supernatural as Isaac's birth or Christ's resurrection.

Oh the waiting time may be long and the circumstances may seem beyond you and the temptation may be very strong to either give up or find a way to try to manipulate things in your own wisdom and power. That was the case with Abraham and Sarah but in the end God proved Himself to be faithful and He proved Himself to be powerful and I might add that He proved Himself to be gracious and this is what leads to my final point this morning.

We've seen how this narrative of the birth of Isaac encourages us to hope against hope by reminding us of God's timing and by reminding us of God's power. Let's consider finally that this passage encourages us to believe against hope:

III. By Reminding Us of God's Grace

I think God's grace is magnified in the very name that Abraham and Sarah were to assign to this miracle baby. I call your attention back to that first mention of laughter that I pointed out earlier found in Gen. 17:17 *Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? 18 And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! 19 And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.*

God assigned the name *Isaac* to this child, Isaac meaning literally *laughter*. The thing I want you to see now is that it was when Abraham laughed in unbelief that God told him to name the child Isaac. And now in Gen. 21 we find Sarah, and I think she would undoubtedly express her husband's sentiment also, when she says in v. 6 *God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.*

Isn't this the kind of rebuke to unbelief that you would welcome? – a rebuke that has you laughing? You may recall in our studies of David when we made our way through 2nd Samuel that I made mention again and again the designation of David that he was a man after God's own heart. And yet we found so many instances in his life when he didn't seem to measure up to that designation at all.

So in the case of Abraham – he's the father of the faithful. *Therefore it is of faith*, Paul writes in Rom. 4:16 *that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all.*

So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham Paul writes in Gal. 3:9. Oh Abraham is noted for his faith. Indeed you might say that Paul defines the very meaning of faith by referencing Abraham when he writes in Rom. 4:18-22: *Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. 19 And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: 20 He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; 21 And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. 22 And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.*

If all we had were these words from Paul describing Abraham's faith then it might be possible to view Abraham's faith as a standard too high for any ordinary Christian to attain. But when you read the historical narrative and you see Abraham's laugh of unbelief which is followed by Sarah's laugh of unbelief and you note how they succumbed to the temptation of trying to manipulate the matter for God, then you may come away saying that's what more closely resembles my faith.

My heart cry and your heart cry is likely the same as that distressed man in Mark's gospel who was desperate for help for his son who, when challenged on the issue of his faith by the Lord, cried out *Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief!* And the Lord honored the faith that was tainted with unbelief. Can we not say the same thing with regard to Abraham and Sarah – they believed, and the Lord helped their unbelief.

And so there may be circumstances that you're facing today that are challenging your faith. Thank the Lord you have faith. You certainly have the faith to come to church and worship Christ. And you have the faith to pray to Christ and cry out to Christ. But on the other hand you may be facing circumstances that are impossible and you may be able in the face of such circumstances or trials to recognize the presence of unbelief with your faith and you're tempted, therefore, to give up on God or you're tempted to feel you must manipulate the circumstances yourself.

I would encourage you this morning to remember the birth of Isaac and in your remembrance of his birth remember the matter of God's timing and remember the matter of God's power and remember that though it may not seem like it for a time in the end God will be very pitiful and of tender mercy and will prove Himself to be gracious to such a degree that even your unbelief will be turned into laughter – laughter for the glory of God. May God be pleased to honor our faith and to rebuke our belief with such manifestations of grace that we are indeed compelled to laugh.