

**2017-08-13 LAUGHING WITH GOD! Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7  
Fellowship Church**

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My Lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and he set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old and my husband 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 wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." Genesis 18:1-15

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac (Laughter) to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter to me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And

she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Genesis 21:1-7

Faith in God is a serious matter, so serious that some have made it into a somber matter.

Did you know that at some times during the Puritan era in England a person could be disciplined for laughing on Sunday?

Many people still have a hard time associating laughter with faith in God.

We are much more likely to associate laughter with doubt than faith. Those who have no faith in God are likely to laugh at those of us who do have faith in God.

This can even make us timid about our faith, because no one wants to be laughed at.

The Psalmists knew the pain of being laughed at and they mention it a number of times in their songs.

When Jesus went to the home of the Roman official, was told that he was too late because his sick daughter had died, and Jesus said that she was only sleeping, they laughed at him.

When Paul preached on Mars hill in Athens and spoke of Jesus and the resurrection, they laughed and scoffed at him.

Most of the time we think of laughter being in the throat of the doubter, not coming from those who have faith.

Then we come to passages like these we have just heard.

In these passages, there is both the laughter of doubt and scorn and the laughter of faith and joy.

**There is first of all the laughter of disbelief.**

Earlier in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter and 17<sup>th</sup> verse when Abraham was told by God that Sarah would have a son, he "fell on his face and laughed".

Here in Genesis 18 when this promise is repeated by the three visitors who come to Abraham's tent at noonday, Sarah, who was standing behind them at the tent door "laughed to herself".

There follows a battle of words here in the story that, in itself is funny. The Lord asks Abraham why Sarah laughed.

Sarah was afraid, and said she had not laughed.

The Lord says, "O yes, you did laugh."

"No, I didn't!"

"Yes, you did!"

"No, I didn't!"

It sounds like two children arguing.

The story begins with them laughing at God and the promise God is making about the birth of a son.

**Then there is the laughter that comes out of faith.**

When the son is born Sarah says that God has brought laughter to her life...and they name the baby Isaac which means "laughter".

She predicts that all who hear of this miracle will laugh with her.

Their laughter is the relieved laughter of those who have trusted in God and had their trust vindicated.

It is the laughter of those for whom God acted even when they had no faith, but now have come to faith.

The story ends with them laughing with God, and **laughing with God is at least one form that faith takes.**

The key to the whole passage is found in **Genesis 18:14:**

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

**One answer to the question is, "No!"**

There is nothing that God cannot do.

God is God, and whatever God promises God can carry out.

God can act beyond and even against common sense.

God is not bound by human reason in what God can do.

God does not even have to act by our human standards of morality;

God can even do what we think of as morally wrong.

It is the same question that was asked at the time of two other births.

It was asked in almost the same form before the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus.

Both of their births were startling and unusual.

God is God, and can do whatever God chooses to do!

**The other answer to the question is, "yes!"**

There are some things that God cannot do.

God cannot not be God.

God cannot break the word that God has given.

God cannot fail to keep the promises that God has made.

Jesus prayed that he not have to walk the way of the cross **if that was possible in the will of God...**but he ended up surrendering to what was not possible, and so brought salvation to all who believe in him.

Paul reminded the Christians in Rome and believers in all times that we are not immune to suffering...but also that nothing we suffer can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

You can put forth a case for both answers.

But Biblical history, the history of the church, and the experience of individual Christians all come down on the “No” side.

### **Just think of the stories that the Bible tells.**

There is the story of Isaac’s birth that we are dealing with here...

Frederick Buechner in commenting on this story said that Sarah and Abraham laughed about the impossibility of their having a child at their ages, but then they had to laugh all the way to the maternity ward!

Then there is the story of the Exodus in which Israelite slaves in Egypt escaped their impossibly strong masters.

Later there is the return of the Exiles from captivity in Babylon, which, in its way, was as amazing as the earlier Exodus had been.

Then there was the birth of Jesus that seemed impossible both in its cause and in its predicted results.

There was the resurrection that the disciples did not believe at first because, as Luke said, “it was too good to be true”.

And the birth of the church was like the coming to life of the people in the Exile that Ezekiel said was like the coming to life of dry bones.

The spread of the church and faith was so impossibly swift that Luke must have been delighted to write that the people in one place were saying, “Those who have turned the world upside down have come here also!”

### **And the story of the church since then adds its evidence also.**

In our own time we have seen an example of this in the opening of China after the end of the Maoist era.

The church had not only survived during those days of persecution, but had even prospered.

What has come to be known as the “three self” movement in the church – self-government, self-propagation, and self-support – rose in the isolated church and it actually grew.

The church in China today is evidence that nothing is impossible for God, and it is a church filled with joy and laughter.

The same is true for the church in Russia today.

It came through the long, Communist period with amazing strength and vigor.

One of the keys to this seems to have been the “babushkas”, the old women of Russia (does that remind you in some way of Sarah?) who are the poorest people in Russia.

They were the ones who remained faithful, who continued to worship, who sneaked the children off to worship, who kept the faith alive.

They are the forgotten group in Russia today, but they are having the last laugh.

Those who believe that nothing is too wonderful for God, that nothing is too hard for God, that nothing is impossible for God can laugh with God in the face of the difficult and the impossible.

In the Psalms there is a lot of this sort of laughter, the laughter of faith in the face of the impossible.

Why do the nations conspire,  
and the people plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the Lord and his anointed, saying,  
“Let us burst their bonds asunder  
and cast their cords from us.”

He who sits in the heavens laughs,  
and the Lord has them in derision.

**And personal experience adds its witness also.**

Paul could write from prison in Rome to the Philippian church,

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

“Christ gives me strength to face anything.”

We have all known people whose courage, faith, hope, patience, wisdom or love was impossible to account for apart from their faith in God.

Many years ago Gerald W. Johnson wrote about the life, times, and spirit of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

FDR had come from a wealthy family, but had been struck down by polio as a young man.

He overcame this crippling illness and went on to become governor of NY and eventually president of the United States.

Then the challenge came to him to lead the country through the difficult days of WWII.

Gerald Johnson described the spirit of the man by comparing him to the warhorse that the book of Job described in this way, "At the sound of the battle trumpets he says, "Aha!"

Often those in the most difficult situations find it not only possible but also necessary to laugh.

Everyone would say that funeral is a time to be serious, a time for solemnity, even at time for sorrow.

But in my family, and I would guess it is true in yours too, when we get together for a funeral there is a lot of laughter too.

Part of it is the laughter of family and friends getting together, a maybe one of the few times we are all together in one place.

However, another reason for the laughter even at a sad occasion is because, as Paul said, we Christians do not sorrow as those who have no hope.

Laughter in these kinds of situations is an act of faith and an expression of faith...an "AHA!" in the face of death.

In the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe they have a rather strange custom of gathering at the church on the Monday after Easter to tell jokes, to tell funny stories, and to laugh and sing.

It is their way of remembering that in raising Jesus from the dead God did the impossible, gave hope in the face of death, defeated evil and Satan, and brought faith and joy to all people.

The custom started with the idea that God played a joke on Satan, who thought he had defeated God and God's plan by the crucifixion of Jesus, but now the tables had been turned on Satan by the resurrection.

So they gather to tell jokes, laugh, and sing in a ridiculous affirmation of faith in the God who does the impossible.

**It is the sort of thing God keeps doing all the time!**

Faith is laughing with God.

Laughing with God, who keeps on keeping promises and doing the impossible and the wonderful.

Laughing with God at what we can do and what we can endure by the grace and power of God.

Faith is laughing with God.

**Have you had a good laugh lately?!**