

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

A Preposterous Promise (Genesis 18:1-15)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 11, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ Over the last couple months, we've been walking through the middle chapters of Genesis studying the life of Abraham. I hope it's been helpful for you. **In many ways, he serves as a forerunner of the faith, setting the pattern for the rest of us to follow.** Perhaps you've seen a reflection of yourself and your faith journey within the highs and lows of his story.
 - But, of course, I hope you come away learning – not just more about this patriarch of the faith – but about his God. The God who called him. The God who covenanted with him. So far, in these chapters, we've encountered God a number of times. He has appeared to Abraham on a number of occasions. Usually as a voice. Sometimes in a vision. One time as a smoking fire pot.
 - Last week, in Genesis 17, God revealed one of his names. He promised Abraham that he and his wife Sarah would have a son in spite of their advanced age. To assure him, God told Abraham, "I am *El Shaddai*." God Almighty is backing these promises.

- ❖ **So we could say that what Abraham has encountered so far is a sovereign God.** A transcendent God. An infinite, omnipotent God. The smoking fire pot and flaming torch in Genesis 15 don't convey warmth and approachability. They communicate God's holiness. His set apartness. A smoking fire pot suggests someone, "*who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.*" (1 Tim 6:16) That's the vibe you get, so far, in all these encounters.
 - So that's what makes Genesis 18 so unique. **This is the first instance in Scripture of an anthropomorphic theophany.** That's where God visibly manifests to mankind as a man. If you want to convey warmth and approachability – if God wants to communicate with you his immanence (his nearness) – then showing up at your house in the appearance of a man is a pretty strong signal. You can't top that – unless God would somehow actually become a man. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

- ❖ **What's also different about this divine visitation is that, this time, it's more directed at Sarah.** It might appear that Abraham is the target, but by the end, we discover that it's Sarah. God's goal is to grow her faith. To turn her cynical laughter into cheerful laughter.
 - **Friends, I'm not surprised if some of you feel the same incredulity as Sarah when you consider the promises of God.** You've faced enough disappointment. You've gone through enough hardship. You've experienced enough loss. That now many of God's promises feel too good to be true. Too incredible for you to believe.

- ❖ God works all things together for good? (Rom 8:28) If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it? (Jn 14:16) Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart? (Ps 37:4) Really? Those are some pretty big promises. Pretty preposterous even. Perhaps that's where you're coming from. **Perhaps you'd laugh – scoff even – at those who so easily believe these promises.** Who are so quick to turn things over to God and trust in him to pull through. They're too wide-eyed. Too naive.

- ❖ I hope our look at this passage will particularly speak to you. **That it will encourage you and begin to transform any cynicism that you might carry into a childlike, God-honoring faith.** We have a fairly simple outline this morning. We're going to see Abraham and Sarah (1) Approached by God, (2) Challenged by God, and (3) Transformed by God.

Approached by God

- ❖ Let's begin in v1 by observing how Abraham and Sarah are approached by God. Let's start reading in v1, *"¹And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him."*
 - If you recall, at the end of Genesis 13, we're told that Abraham had settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at the town of Hebron. That was after he and his nephew Lot went their separate ways. Lot chose what appeared to be the more fruitful land in the Jordan valley, and he settled among the cities of the valley, specifically in Sodom. Abraham, on the other hand, settled in the land of Canaan – the land God promised to him and to his offspring as an eternal inheritance.
- ❖ So five chapters later, Abraham is still in the same place. One day he's approached by three visitors. Now, later, it becomes apparent that this a visible manifestation of Yahweh and two of angels. **But, at this point in v2, I don't think Abraham recognizes their true identity.**
 - But when you see his hospitality, it's easy to assume he knows who he's entertaining. It says he rushes to greet them. He bows before them. He addresses one of them with an exalted title of respect. He provides water for their feet and offers a morsel of bread. And that morsel of bread turns out to be a lavish feast.
 - He tells Sarah to take three seahs of fine flour to bake them into cakes. Three seahs amounts to over five gallons of flour. That makes far more bread than needed to feed three travelers. And then he takes a "*tender and good*" calf from his herd and has it prepared. And he serves "*curds and milk*" which are generous side dishes to go along with a choice calf.
- ❖ This turns out to be a banquet. Not a light snack for some weary travelers passing by. So I can see why someone might assume Abraham must have known he was hosting the LORD and his angels. But that's probably because we don't share the same assumptions with Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) culture.
 - **Abraham's hospitality might seem over-the-top to us. But his gestures were fairly normal expressions of ANE hospitality.** That's how you treated guests in those days and in that culture. I think it's a lot like when I visit my parent's house (or my in-laws). I have to remember that when my first-generation immigrant mother (or mother-in-law) asks me if I'm hungry – I need to be specific with my response. Because if I just say "yes" – I might be expecting a simple snack while she starts preparing a full-on meal. That's immigrant Asian culture.

- ❖ **Likewise, we have to understand that Abraham lived in a culture where it was expected to provide such hospitality for any guest in your home.** So from his actions alone, we can't assume he knew these guests were divine. He would have done the same for anyone.
 - **So if his gestures were fairly normal, then why are we talking about it?** Why is there so much attention to it in the text? One reason is because it's preparing us for the inhospitality of Sodom in chapter 19. So there's a literary purpose. **But another reason his hospitality is highlighted – especially in light of not knowing he was serving God – is that it demonstrates that Abraham is a genuine man of faith.**

- ❖ He didn't prepare a feast because he knew it was God and was trying to impress. He wasn't trying to curry favor. That's why this is an important point. **Abraham's true character is more clearly on display because he was ignorant of the identity of his guests.**
 - It's like how, in a workplace, you don't really know the true quality of the employees if the boss is always hanging around. **When the boss is visibly present, everyone is on their game, on their best behavior.** That's why I loved watching that show *Undercover Boss*. It's where they would go to these random companies and disguise the boss in Hollywood-quality makeup. And the boss, under the guise of being a new employee, is introduced into the workplace, and the boss finally gets to see everyone's true colors – their true work ethic. And it's hugely revealing.

- ❖ **In the same way, Abraham's true character is revealed.** In this case, it's encouraging. In Genesis 15, that's when he was saved by faith. He was justified. His faith was counted to him as righteousness (15:6). And since then – through highs and lows; through trials and tribulations – he's been progressively sanctified and conformed into that righteousness.
 - **When you think about it, it does make you wonder if God has ever showed up in disguise in our lives, in our church.** Has he ever approached uncover as a stranger? How did we do? What was revealed in our character – individually and corporately as a church? It makes real that verse in **Hebrews 13:2** that says, *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”*

- ❖ Now when we get to v10, I think that's when Abraham realized he was hosting the LORD. Because that's where God reveals his knowledge of a promised child. *“I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”* That's information no common traveler would've known. The LORD is revealing his true identity.
 - **And notice how the LORD wanted to make sure Sarah was in earshot before revealing himself and renewing his promise to grant them a son.** Look in v9 at how he asked Abraham, *“Where is Sarah your wife?”* He wanted to make sure she was present to hear what he was about to say. And we're told that she was there. Look at the end of v10, *“And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.”*

- ❖ **Now I think you can make an argument that God was there for Sarah more than for Abraham.** He already had a few experiences with the LORD. In chapter 17, last week, we saw a similar conversation where God promised him a son through his wife Sarah (17:15).

- ❖ So this one was for Sarah. And that's important. **Because it affirms the basic principle that it's not good enough to merely know God through somebody else's experience.** Up to this point, you could say that Sarah believe in God – because Abraham had shared with her God's Word and promises – but she didn't really *believe* God. She knew about God – but she really didn't *know* God. **What she needed was her own experience of him.** Because it's not enough to merely know God through someone else's experience.
 - But that's a problem in the church. **We've got a lot of people suffering from the effects of second-hand faith.** And maybe that describes you. There's certainly people around you with genuine, first-hand faith, experiencing a real relationship with God. **But have you experienced him yourself?** You've had other people tell you about God's Word and God's promises – but have you read it for yourself?

- ❖ **Don't be content with merely inhaling someone else's faith second-hand.** It's great that your parents have faith; your friends have faith; your spouse has faith. Faith is lingering in the air all around you. **But no one becomes a Christian by inhaling second-hand faith.**
 - **Just as Sarah needed a genuine, first-hand encounter with the LORD, all of us need to experience the same.** We can't rely on somebody else knowing God for us – trusting God on our behalf. We need to know the LORD and trust in him ourselves.

Challenged by God

- ❖ And that's why God approached Sarah. But any genuine relationship with the LORD begins with you being challenged by God. He doesn't show up in your life immediately affirming all your thoughts, all your opinions, all your actions. **No, the LORD shows up and you're immediately challenged.** Something needs to give. Something needs to change. So let's consider our second observation and see how Sarah was challenged by God.
 - Listen to vv11-12, *“¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?””*

- ❖ So when Sarah hears God's promise to open her womb and give her a son – her immediate reaction was to laugh to herself. Abraham reacted in the same way in Genesis 17:17. **The fact that laughter was their instinctive reaction is meant to suggest that what the LORD was about to do to fulfill his promise was too hard for even his own people to imagine.** Out of all people, you'd think that believers (the people of God) would have a fairly large imagination – believing God can accomplish some pretty amazing things. But apparently even the people of God have limits to their imagination. And this was going beyond it.

- ❖ Sarah looked at herself. She looked at her husband. And she couldn't see a realistic way for the two of them to have a child. In her eyes, she was *“worn out”*. Look at her words in v12. **She was “worn out” in the sense of her own body being physically unable to have children.** Not only had she struggled with infertility for all these many years throughout her marriage. Now she is ninety years old (17:17). Advanced in years. And post-menopausal. That's what v11 means when it says, *“The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.”*

- ❖ So physically (physiologically) she couldn't bear children. Her body was worn out. **But in another sense, you could say that Sarah was “worn out” emotionally.** She was emotionally spent from all those empty years hoping and waiting for a child.
 - I shared last week about how my wife and I struggled with infertility for years. And I know that's the story for many of you as well. You've prayed with tears. You've prayed for years. And nothing. Maybe you feel abandoned. You feel cursed.

- ❖ Well, you're not alone. I'm sure that's how Sarah felt. Even more so. **Considering how, from an Old Testament perspective, barrenness was a curse** (Deut 28:18). The inability to have children was interpreted as a sign of judgment.
 - **I think in our modern society – where some couples intentionally choose *not* to have children – we fail to understand why it was so devastating, in the OT, to be childless.** Why the worst predicament for female characters in the Bible was barrenness. We don't appreciate the gravity of the issue.

- ❖ We're so used to how it works in the New Testament. **Under the New Covenant, the people of God grows by means of regeneration.** By more people being born again by the Spirit of God. **But in the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant, the people of God grew primarily by means of reproduction.** By Jewish couples being fruitful and multiplying their family. As an Israelite, that was your covenantal duty.
 - That's why getting married and having offspring mattered so much. That's why it was the central plot line in so many of the Old Testament stories. **Because that's how you ensured the propagation and preservation of God's covenant people.** For an OT Israelite woman, that's how you contribute to the mission of God. So to fail to produce offspring was to fail God and the covenant people of God.

- ❖ So in Sarah's own eyes, she was a failure. **And by now, after all these years, she's worn out in every sense of the word.** So her laugh in v12 was more of a cynical laugh. Not a cheerful one. It was the laughter of incredulity. “Really, God? Really?”
 - Now remember, Sarah laughed to herself. She didn't intend for anyone to hear. So she was surprised when the LORD called her out in v13. He challenged her and her disbelief. “*The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’”*”
 - And because she was shocked and afraid, she instinctively denied it. Look at v15, “*But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”*”

- ❖ **Now the question is – why was her laugh so bitter? Why had it become a cynical laugh?** The LORD tells us why in v14. He tells us why in the form of a question. “*Is anything too hard for the LORD?*” **Apparently, in Sarah's eyes there was something too hard for the LORD.** Now that word for hard could also be translated as wonderful. Is there anything too wonderful for the LORD? Some English translations render v14 that way. I wish more did because I think that really gets to the root issue for Sarah.

- ❖ **She had lost her wonder. Meaning she didn't see the world with eyes of wonder anymore.** Her experience of God lacked any wonder. She no longer expected wondrous things to happen in her life. She was practical to a fault.
 - Friends, could the same be said about you? **Have you lost your sense of wonder at God? Is there any wonder in your walk with him?** Do you still expect to wonder at God's work in your life?
 - Or do you never step a foot forward in response to God's call until after you've mitigated all the risks? **Are you only willing to step out in faith and take a big risk for God because you were able to secure a safety net?**
- ❖ Think about it this way. **Would anyone look at your life; look at your priorities; look at the way you invest your time or money; look at the way you raise your kids and lead your family – and would they wonder?** Would they wonder at the way you're living your life in utter reliance on a God of Wonder? Or is your life fairly comprehensible to the world? Are your life choices easily explainable? Or do people scratch their heads in wonder?
 - **Look, if you want your own first-hand experience of God, then, just like Sarah, you should expect your lack of wonder to be confronted.** You should expect your faith to be stretched and challenged by God. Maybe your view of God has grown too small. Maybe, in your eyes, there are some things too hard for him – too wondrous.

Transformed by God

- ❖ If that describes you, then – in addition to be challenged by God – you really need to be transformed by God and his wondrous grace. That's what Sarah experienced next. This leads to our third observation. Let's see how Sarah was transformed by God.
 - We saw how he called out her laughter in v15. At first glance, it might seem harsh. **But if you look more closely, you'll notice that God didn't lash out in anger.** He simply responded with truth. *“But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.””*
- ❖ **The LORD certainly responds with truth, but his response is also filled with grace.** Remember, how in the last chapter, the LORD already told us how they should name this promised son. They should call him Isaac, which in Hebrew means *“he laughs”*. So as readers, we already know their son is named after their laughter.
 - **So God's words in v15 can be read as a gracious reminder that more laughter is coming.** And in the future it will be a different kind of laughter. When we arrive at Genesis 21, it begins by telling us, *“The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.”* And nine months later, Sarah has her son in her arms. And she laughs again. Listen to Genesis 21:6, *“And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.”*
 - This time the laughter is cheerful. It's no longer cynical. It's not a scoffing kind of laugh. It's the side-splitting kind. **Everyone is laughing with her at the wondrous work of the LORD in her life.**

- ❖ **In chapter 21, Sarah is laughing the laughter of grace.** *El Shaddai* pulled through. His almighty power overcame the physiological impossibility of post-menopausal, ninety-year-old woman having a baby. And now Sarah was filled with laughter and her relationship with God was filled with wonder.
 - Now, of course, we're wondering how this can happen to us. **How can we experience the same transformation? How can we regain our sense of wonder? How can we be filled the same laughter of grace?**

- ❖ Well, as hopeful and as encouraging as Sarah's story turns out to be – in the end, this story is not the story that's going to penetrate your heart and transform your cynicism into joyful laughter. **Sarah's story doesn't have the power to fill you with wonder and fill you with faith. But her story does point to the story that can.**
 - I think you know what story I'm talking about. When you get to Luke 1, you come across a very familiar scene. There's **another visitation by angels** (1:26). There's **another promise of a son** (1:31). And there's **another impossibility** of that promise ever coming true (1:34).
 - And this time it was a much harder thing for God to do. Much more wondrous. **If it was physically and physiologically impossible for post-menopausal Sarah to have a baby with her husband – then what about having a baby *without* a husband?** At least Abraham and Sarah can try to conceive even at such an advanced age. But Mary was a virgin.

- ❖ **Well, just as in Sarah's story, in Mary's story there's an assurance of God's mighty power to overcome impossible odds.** *"And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. . . . For nothing will be impossible with God.'"* (Lk 1:35, 37) **And in this story, like in Sarah's, the response of the mother-to-be is recorded.** In Luke 1:38, we read these words from Mary, *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."*

- ❖ Now why do you think Luke draws this parallel between the angelic visitation to Sarah and the angelic visitation to Mary? **Because he's trying to communicate the identity of Mary's Son. In other words, Jesus is the True and Better Isaac.** He's the ultimate Promised Child.
 - And because of Jesus, there's a power from the Most High, from God Almighty, that can overcome the impossible in our lives. And I'm not talking about infertility. I'm not talking about having a baby in your nineties. In the end, we realize that's not technically impossible.

- ❖ **But I'll tell you what is impossible.** It's written in **Hebrews 10:4**, *"For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."* No matter what we do. No matter how hard we work. No matter how much we sacrifice. No matter how much blood, sweat, and tears. **We can't atone for our sins.** We can't get right with God through anything we do.

- ❖ But the Son of Mary can. **He lived in a heavenly world of laughter. But for our sake, he entered a broken world of sorrow.** And he took our sins upon his shoulders; he climbed the cross of Calvary and shed his blood – the blood that made it possible to take away our sins.
 - **This was the mission of the True and Better Isaac.** He left a heavenly world of laughter. He walked the path of sadness and suffering. So that our sin and sorrow could be transformed into joy and laughter. Into the laughter of grace.

- ❖ Friends, if you're having a hard time laughing; if you can't remember the last time you had a good laugh; if your life feels marked more by sadness, by emptiness, by cynicism – then look to the Son of Mary. Look to Jesus.
 - **The kind of life transformation that captures the wonder of the world – that makes them think they're seeing the impossible – is available to all who put their trust in Jesus.** That's the good news of the gospel.
 - Now maybe you already knew that. Maybe you knew that's where I was going with this text. You believe in the gospel because you've heard it preached to you – maybe all your life. But don't be content to merely believe this good news second-hand. Make it firsthand. Be sure to make this gospel your own.