

A Heart of Hope

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[0 : 00] And it's my joy to bring God's word to you today. A special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace. And no one so bad that they can't have it. Which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us.

In his word. This week we're continuing our series in the book of Genesis. You'll remember the book of Genesis is a book of origins. In chapters 1 through 11, we're told the origin of the world. And then in chapters 11 through 50, we find the origin of God's people, Israel, starting with Abraham. In fact, that's our focus. We're only in chapters 11 through 25 in Abraham's story. And we're there for two reasons. First, to prepare us to go back in our series in Romans, where we'll pick up in chapter 4, which is about Abraham. And two, because it allows us to answer this question, what does it look like to follow God in faith?

[1 : 09] You remember last week, chapter 17, we asked the question, what does it mean to be in a relationship with God? How does it change us? And we found two answers, that it gives us a new identity, and it gives us new responsibilities.

Here in chapter 18, God is going to reiterate his promise specifically to Sarah. In the past, he's spoken only to Abraham. And here, she struggles to believe.

And so we ask this question, how does faith overcome bitterness and cynicism? How does faith face overcome bitterness and cynicism?

It's with that that I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 18. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. You can turn in your worship guide. No matter where you turn, remember that this is God's word.

Proverbs chapter 30, verse 5 tells us, every word of God proves true. He's a shield to those who take refuge in him. So that's why we read now chapter 18, starting at verse 1.

[2 : 44] Do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of 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 went quickly into the tent to Sarah, and said, Quick, three sillas of fine flour.

Knead it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them.

And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, Where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, She is in the tent. The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, shall have a son.

And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure.

[4 : 05] 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. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you for what you show us in Genesis, that

as your people fail again and again, you pursue them again and again, show them grace over and over.

We ask that you would remind us of that this morning, that you would open our eyes, you'd unstop our ears, you would clear our minds, you'd soften our hearts, that we would be able to see and hear and understand and believe everything that's written in your word.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Many years ago, over a decade ago, I spoke with a woman who desperately wanted to be married.

[5 : 29] And she told me that she had recently started praying about this. She'd recently started praying for a spouse. But only recently, because for a long time, she did not want to pray about it, which I thought was interesting.

So I said, why? Why did you not want to pray about it? She said, well, what if I prayed and I still didn't get married? It's bad enough not to have it.

It's even worse to pray and not have it. That would be an even greater disappointment. I tell you that because the point is this.

Hope is really vulnerable. It is incredibly vulnerable to hope. It's scary. And it's scary and vulnerable because it opens you up to disappointment.

And so I'm going to share a little life hack with you. If you want to never be disappointed, make sure you never hope for anything. It's easy.

[6 : 35] Don't desire anything. you can be safe. If you don't long for anything, your heart will never be broken. So it's a lot easier to make it through this life as a cynic.

That's where we're at in this story with Abraham and Sarah. They have been hoping for a long time. You may remember the opening of chapter 17. Last week, we're told that Abraham is now 99 years old, which means that it has been 24 years since God first appeared to him in Genesis chapter 12. It was in Genesis chapter 12 that God said to him, look, you are going to be the father of a nation. Later, he tells him not just a great nation, but many nations. Chapter 16, Abraham and Sarah try to speed things up.

This isn't happening fast enough. Maybe we can get Hagar to have the promised son for us. That's Sarah's idea. Chapter 17, remember, God comes to Abraham and says, I'm going to give you a son.

And Abraham says, yeah, but what about Ishmael? Isn't he good enough? Can't he be the solution to the problem? Proverbs chapter 13, verse 12, tells us, hope deferred makes the heart sick.

[7 : 54] Sarah's hope has been deferred and her heart is very sick. I'm jumping ahead of us, though. At the very beginning of this passage, verses 1 and 2, we have three unexpected visitors who show up to see Abraham.

Verses 3 through 5, he gives them this offer of hospitality. Verses 6 through 8, we have a frantic scene of preparation. And we know it's frantic because of the words that are used.

Verse 6, Abraham goes quickly and he says, quick. Verse 7, they ran. In the Hebrew, there's actually a verb or two that is dropped to show how fast Abraham is talking because he's trying to get it done as soon as possible.

Now, the point is this. Abraham is a great host. Abraham is a great host who is really good at hospitality. This plays a larger role in the narrative of Genesis because we're being set up for what's going to happen in the next chapter.

Remember, Abraham and Lot sort of serve as contrast to each other. Abraham often the positive example. Lot always the negative example. Abraham shows great hospitality so we can understand how bad Lot's hospitality is later on.

[9 : 09] Okay? That's for a future sermon, though. We still need to get down to business. And in fact, that's what they do. So they have this meal and then it is time for the four men, Abraham and the three visitors, to sit down and figure out what this is all about.

We don't have to wait long because they tell us the topic, verse 9. Where is Sarah, your wife? Now this is kind of a rhetorical question.

They're not actually wondering where Sarah is. This is a men's meeting for man talk. And so really what they're saying is, hey, the reason we're here is for Sarah.

We know she's behind the tent and we find out quickly these are not just random human visitors. No, something is going on. And we know something is going on for many reasons, one of which is they know Sarah's name.

And they don't just know Sarah's name, they know her new name. Right? Remember chapter 17, after most of her life being called Sarai, she is now, God's given her this new name of Sarah. [10:17] And so we are not dealing here with some average, regular travelers. No, and we find out quickly we are dealing with God himself. In fact, that's what we see in verse 10.

You may have noticed in verse 3, Abraham addresses him, O Lord. Lord there is lowercase, meaning he's just using the general term. And we find out verse 10, Lord uppercase, meaning God's personal name, Yahweh.

This is not just three random men. No, God himself has come to visit Abraham. That commentators point out that until Jesus' incarnation in the New Testament, this is the only and first time that God has a meal with a man.

So it's significant. It's a good thing that Sarah is listening in because they, in fact, do have a word for her. Verse 10, Sarah, your wife, shall have a son.

And what's Sarah's response? Does she say, wow, that's so exciting. I wonder how that's going to happen. Oh, the thing I've been longing for for so many years is finally coming to pass.

[11:37] No. Verse 12, Sarah laughed to herself. Her laugh here, it's not a joyful laugh. It's not a silly laugh.

It is a bitter laugh. It is a laugh filled with Sarah's shame. And we know that because of what we found out the verse before, verse 11.

Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. It's a bitter laugh of how.

How is this going to happen now that I'm weak? How is this going to happen now that I'm not enough? How is it going to happen now that my sex life is over?

We're not here to throw Sarah under the bus. In many ways, her response makes complete sense. From a human perspective, this is a joke.

[12:46] Verse 11 is telling us that for Sarah, menopause is finished. And whatever hope that she had of one day having a child is fully and finally gone.

Her options are set. Her greatest dream, the thing that would be most important to a woman in the ancient Near East has not happened and it will not happen.

And so it's safe and easy for her to laugh. In fact, cynicism makes complete sense in a world without God.

Cynicism makes complete sense in a world without God. A man named Cary Newhoff tells us that cynicism and hope are actually opposites. If you hope, you cannot be cynical.

And if you are cynical, you have given up on hope. Those things cannot travel on the same track. Hope tells us that the future and other people are innocent until proven guilty.

[14:00] Cynicism tells us that the future and other people are guilty until proven innocent. I'll say that again. Hope tells us that the future and other people are innocent until proven guilty.

Cynicism tells us the future and other people are guilty until proven innocent. Cynicism assumes the worst so that we never get disappointed.

Assumes the worst so we never have to hurt. Where do you laugh at God's promises?

Where are you tempted to let bitterness and unbelief set in?

Do you believe that the very best things are not in front of you, but are behind you? If you do, you don't believe God's promise in Psalm 23.

[15:11] That goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. Do you believe that God cannot use you anymore?

If you do, you've given up on God's promise in Ephesians 2. That you were created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand.

That we should walk in them. Christian, if you're still alive, God still has good works for you.

Are you convinced that you or other people cannot and will not change?

If you do, you've forgotten God's promise in Ephesians 3. That he is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or think.

[16:23] Remember, we're asking this question in Genesis. What does it look like to follow God in faith?

One of the answers, the answer of this passage is, following God in faith means believing that what is ahead is better than what is behind.

It's hard to be cynical if you believe that.

Charles Spurgeon was a Baptist pastor in London in the 19th century. It's well known that Spurgeon struggled with pretty severe depression throughout most of his adult life.

It was so bad at times that he wanted to die. Spurgeon spoke about this in multiple sermons. In fact, a man named Zach Eswine wrote a book about it called Spurgeon's Sorrows.

[17 : 32] And he tells us in one of Spurgeon's sermons that he points out that despair is arrogant. And he said, despair is arrogant because it is confident that it knows the future.

It's arrogant to believe that you know what's going to come next. And so Spurgeon goes on to say the Christian needs to hide themselves under this promise. And he quotes 1 Corinthians 2, verse 9. But as it is written, What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

Christian, you cannot imagine what God has prepared for you. Faith means believing that what is to come is better than what has passed.

Spurgeon preaches a sermon on the prophet Elijah, and he riffs off the Psalms and says this, Do you believe that God can and will still do great things for you?

[19 : 08] Do you believe that God can and will still do great things for you?

Or do you laugh with bitterness? Hope and cynicism cannot coexist.

Hope and despair never go together. Thankfully, God doesn't leave Sarah here.

He doesn't leave us there either. As we've been going through this story of Abraham, one of the major themes, maybe the major theme, is this, that God shows mercy and grace to his people despite their failure.

That God shows mercy and grace to his people through their failure. Genesis chapter 12, right after God's made this great promise to Abraham, what does he do?

[20 : 20] He goes and lies to Pharaoh and puts his wife in danger. What does God do? God delivers him. Genesis 14, Lot makes a foolish choice and ends up being the collateral damage in a big war between lots of kings.

What does God do with Lot's foolish choice? God shows grace to his people through his people. And Abraham shows up to rescue.

Genesis chapter 15, God makes a covenant and says, I'll pay the price if you break it. Genesis 16, Hagar is thrown out because of Abraham and Sarah's selfishness.

What does God do? He goes and finds Hagar in the desert and rescues her. Genesis chapter 18, God comes to a bitter and cynical old woman and shows her his grace.

God comes to someone who's very disappointed with how their story is ending and he calls her by name.

[21 : 48] She laughs. God doesn't punish her for that. No, he doubles down on his promise. He says it not once, but twice.

First time, verse 10, Sarah, your wife shall have a son. Verse 12, she laughs. So it's time to repeat the promise again. Verse 14, Is anything too hard for the Lord?

I will return to you about this time next year and Sarah will have a son. God is still going to use Sarah for his mission.

His grace is more powerful than her unbelief. Christian, as you falter and fail in following God, he is still going to use you in his mission.

He has still prepared works beforehand for you to do in Christ Jesus. His grace is greater greater than your unbelief.

[23 : 06] I'm going to fast forward a little bit and steal a little bit of thunder for chapter 21. Because in chapter 21, Isaac is born. You know what Isaac's name means?

Isaac is Hebrew for he laughs. God gets the last word. Genesis chapter 21, Sarah says, God has made laughter for me.

Everyone who hears will laugh over me. Her laugh of bitterness, her laugh of shame, God takes that.

He makes it into a laugh of joy. He does that for us as well. And so there's a foundational question that we must get straight as Christians, and it is this.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Is anything too hard for the Lord? The answer is no.

[24 : 23] And we know that even more than Sarah did. We know that more than Sarah did because we have seen more than Sarah saw.

What Sarah looked forward to, we look back on, which is Jesus' life and death and resurrection. If there was anything that would show that there was nothing too hard for God, it was not everything that God sent up to this point in Genesis.

No. It's God sending his son, his only son, to die for us. If Jesus has risen from the dead and he has, there is nothing too hard for the Lord.

That's what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15. He says, if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. In other words, if Jesus has not risen from the dead, you really need to be cynical.

You need to stop hoping. In fact, he goes on, verse 19, he says, if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

[25 : 45] If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, you should laugh at Christians more than you laugh at anyone else because we believe the future is better than the past even though it's not. The problem is this.

Jesus has risen from the dead. So we can trust him and follow him and believe him. He'll take our laughs of bitterness, our laughs of shame, he turns them to laughs of joy.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? No. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you that you meet us as we falter and fail, that our mistakes cannot stand in the way of your kingdom as it moves forward.

They don't block our relationship with you because we don't rise or fall on our behavior, but instead our hope is in Jesus Christ. We ask that you would remind us of that, you would drive it deeper and deeper into our hearts and we would believe it more and more that we would have great hope.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.