

“They Called Him Laughter”
Genesis 21:1-21
September 25th, 2016

Proverbs 17:22a reads, “A joyful heart (laughter) is good medicine...” As a physician of the soul, I heartily agree!

A man opened a new business and his best friend sent him a floral arrangement to congratulate him. The friend dropped in the business a couple days later to visit his buddy and was disappointed to see that the flowers had a sign that read, “Rest in Peace.”

He called the florist to inform him of the error. The florist said, “It could be worse. Somewhere at the city cemetery there’s a floral arrangement that reads, ‘Congratulations on your new location.’”

In her poem *Solitude*, Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote, “Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone.” Let’s focus some more on the first part of that quote – laughing!

Reaching the end of a job interview, the Human Resources (HR) Director asked a young Engineer fresh out of engineering school, "And what starting salary were you looking for?"

The budding Engineer said, "\$125,000 a year, depending on the benefits package."

The HR Director said, "Well, what would you say to a package of 5 weeks’ vacation, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental coverage, company matching retirement fund to 50% of salary, and a company car leased every 2 years - say, a red Corvette?"

The Engineer sat up straight and said, "Wow! Are you kidding?"

The HR Director replied, "Yes...but you started it."

Laughter is low calorie, caffeine free, no salt, no preservatives or additives, 100% natural, and one size fits all. Laughter is truly God’s gift. Laughter is contagious. Once it starts, little can be done to stop it. Laughter never felt bad, it never committed a crime or started a war, and it never broke a relationship. Laughter is shared by the giver and the receiver. Laughter costs nothing, and its nontaxable!

Laughter is also a trendsetter. If we found ways to laugh first thing in the morning, it may, in fact, set the trend for the rest of the day. One of the most constructive uses of laughter is when we laugh at ourselves, we leave little room for others to laugh at us!

Looking back over the last several chapters of Genesis, we’ve covered some heavy ground. We’ve learned of wars between kings (**Genesis 14**), the kidnapping of Lot (**Genesis 14**), sexual immorality with Abraham and Hagar (**Genesis 16**); violence and sexual perversion in Sodom and Gomorrah (**Genesis 18 & 19**), a righteous man (Lot) involved in incest with his daughters (**Genesis 19**), and, then, godly Abraham falling prey yet again to a besetting sin (**Genesis 20**). We’ve gone through dark times, often discouraging and always disappointing. *But*...with Genesis 21, especially the first 8 verses, we finally have reason to rejoice, to be happy, and to *laugh*!

God's promise to Abraham, long before, had come to fruition as we open Genesis 21. God told Abraham he'd be the father of many nations, and now the promised heir had arrived!

Genesis 21:1-21:

"And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. ²For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. ³And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. ⁴Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, *and* all who hear will laugh with me." ⁷She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne *him* a son in his old age."

⁸So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

⁹And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing.

¹⁰Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *namely* with Isaac." ¹¹And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son.

¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. ¹³Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he *is* your seed."

¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting *it* on her shoulder, he gave *it* and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba. ¹⁵And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down across from *him* at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite *him*, and lifted her voice and wept.

¹⁷And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he *is*. ¹⁸Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

¹⁹Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. ²⁰So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. ²¹He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt."

We can see two primary sections, as we have here two half-brothers and both would be great.

MP 1 – The Arrival of Isaac (verses 1-8);

MP 2 – The Departure of Ishmael (verses 9-21)

Some of you will know the name Michael Card, a member of the PCA, and a Christian singer, songwriter and Bible teacher. (His song *El Shaddai* is # 42 in the *Trinity Hymnal*).

The title of today's message I've taken from his song about the text before us today, "They Called Him Laughter."

<p>"A barren land and a barren wife Made Abraham laugh at his wandering life. A cruel joke it seemed then to call him the father of nations. A heavenly prank, a celestial joke; Cause grey hair and babies leave no room for hope, But hoping is something this hopeless old man learned to do.</p>
--

A cry in the darkness and laughter at night;
An elderly couple sat holding him tight.
An improbable infant, a punchline, a promise come true.
They laughed til they wept then laughed at their tears.
This miracle baby they've wanted for years
Would make a Messiah who'd give us impossible joy.

They called him laughter
For he came after
The father had made an impossible promise come true.
The birth of a baby to a hopeless old lady,
So they called him laughter
Cause no other name would do.”

Genesis 21:1-8 are the culmination of a lengthy wait from the time of God’s initial promise to Abram in Ur back in **Genesis 12:1-3**. Collectively, these verses show us **the Arrival of Isaac**.

One of the first things we note in the opening two verses of today’s text is the use of three phrases that show the **reliability** of God’s Word:

- * Verse 1 – “And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said...”
- * Verse 1 – “and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken.”
- * Verse 2 – “For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.”

Often in the Bible, we see God make a promise, and it always happens. You’ve heard me say it many times – “God says what He means, and He means what He says!” In the case of Abraham and Sarah, they had to wait 25 years for the fulfillment of God’s promise of an heir.

If you were alive then, do you remember what you were doing 25 years ago? Late September 1991? Those were pre-Molly days for the Dietmeier’s – Zach was closing in on his 3rd birthday – We were then stationed at McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, where I was teaching at the Military Airlift Command’s Non-commissioned Officer Academy. It seems like so very long ago!

Twenty-five years passed between issuing the promise and the fulfillment of it in order to remove any human possibility that Abraham and Sarah had something to do with their baby’s conception and birth. A 100-year old man and a 90-year old woman are not able to procreate. But, God is able to do what is humanly impossible. And He did!

Has God made a promise to you? If He has, you may be sure that He will keep it. You may waver, but He will not waver. You may disbelieve; He remains faithful. The day will come when you will laugh with joy at the fulfillment of His promise to you!

We also note in this first point, Abraham’s obedience to God:

- * Abraham named his son Isaac – just as God commanded him to in **Genesis 17:19**. “Isaac” means “laughter.” And, we see lots of laughter in these verses in Genesis. Abraham and

Sarah's laughter is indicative of the great joy they had in their little baby, and the God Who promised to bring them their son.

I'm so grateful for passages such as these. I love to laugh, and I am glad laughter is so important to God. For sure, fellow Christian, we have much reason to rejoice and to laugh – because God saved us from the punishment due our sins in putting them on His eternal Son (Jesus). In turn, He gave us Jesus' righteousness that we may boldly and confidently stand before the throne of judgment at the last day. Oh, how that should bring us the laughter of the Redeemed ones!

A young couple invited their pastor for Sunday dinner. While the couple were in the kitchen preparing the meal, the pastor and the couple's young son visited in the dining room. The pastor asked the son what they were having for the meal.

"Goat," the little boy replied. "*Goat?*" repeated the pastor. "*Are you sure?*"

"Yep," said the youngster. "I heard Dad say to Mom, 'Might as well have that old goat for dinner today as any other day.'"

* Abraham's obedience was also seen in having Isaac circumcised on the 8th day, again, according to God's Word as we see in **Genesis 17:12**. In Old Testament times, all God-fearing males to include their infant male sons, received circumcision as the sign of God's promise to be their God, and them His people. (In the New Testament, the covenant sign is baptism, and it is placed on all believing females, as well as their infant daughters, and not only their sons).

Our obedience to God is a tell-tale mark of our belonging to Jesus. Jesus teaches in **John 14:15** – "If you love me, keep My commandments." Then, in the Apostle John's first letter, we read, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." (**I John 5:3**) We can point to our obedience to God's Word as assurance of our salvation. Conversely, the one who transgresses God's Word, doesn't take ownership of their sin, nor grieves over it, and fails to humbly seek forgiveness and reconciliation bears the mark of the worldly. I urge you to be found among the first group spoken here, and not the latter.

The first 8 verses deal primarily with the **arrival of Isaac**; the final 13 verses show the impact of Isaac's arrival on his half-brother, Ishmael (though, curiously, that name isn't specifically mentioned here). We first met Ishmael back in **Genesis 16:15** when he was born to Hagar, sired by Abraham. At the birth of Ishmael, Abraham was 86 years old (**Genesis 16:16**).

So, 14 years pass until the time of Isaac's birth. Even more time passes, maybe 2 or 3 years, (Ishmael would have been 16 or 17 years of age) and we fast forward to the time when Isaac is weaned from his mother, Sarah, as we learn from verse 8. To mark the occasion, Abraham holds a celebratory dinner. Verse 9 gives us a peak into Ishmael's reaction to the attention Isaac is receiving. "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing."

The word for "scoffing" can mean "joking" (**Genesis 19:14**) or to "mock" (**Genesis 34:14, 17**). Ishmael's laughing at the toddler Isaac, then, seems to have been a sarcastic laughter, laden with mockery and ridicule.

That didn't escape Sarah's notice, and she went to her husband and said, "Cast out this bondswoman (Hagar) and her son (Ishmael); for the son of this bondswoman shall not be heir with my son, *namely* with Isaac." (Verse 10) *Can you sense Abraham's dilemma? Can you feel his pain?* Both boys are his sons and Abraham had been raising Ishmael for 16 or 17 years. Now that we have Isaac, Sarah wants to be rid of Ishmael.

Yet, in verses 12 and 13, we see God directing Abraham to do as Sarah requests. After all, Isaac is in the line of the Seed of the woman described by God to the serpent and Eve after the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 3:15**). God assures Abraham that both of his sons will be fathers of great nations.

Yet, notably, where God will make Ishmael into a great nation, He doesn't covenant with Ishmael as He has with Abraham and Isaac.

Then, we have this sad scene in verses 14-16 picturing Abraham preparing his first son and his mother to leave their clan. Water and provisions are prepared, and Hagar and Ishmael leave to wander in the wilderness of Beersheba. "The physical environment of the Beersheba region is very harsh. It is part of a zone in Palestine that only receives 6 to 12 inches of rain per year. The area contains low vegetation forms such as low brush and dwarf bushes. From a natural standpoint Hagar and Ishmael find themselves in a hopeless condition and position." (Currid, 377)

When the water is used up, Hagar despairs in tears, she leaves Ishmael to die in the shade of a small shrub, and she moves away, not far, but far enough that she doesn't have to watch him die.

What a pitiful scene! What a desperate situation! Yet, God in His mercy and grace comes to Hagar as an angel and commands her to take Ishmael by the hand, and God would raise him up to be a great nation. She does that, then immediately sees a pool of water she hadn't previously seen, and is revived by God's presence.

The passage closes with the end in view – Hagar and Ishmael lived in the wilderness, he became an archer, and she secured a wife for him from her people, the Egyptians.

This passage shows us two half-brothers representing two kinds of people. Which are you – *are you a child of promise, like Isaac? Or, are you a child of the wilderness, like Ishmael?* The only way to be part of the former camp is to believe in and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

A lady was busy at home when she heard a knock at the door. Upon opening the door, she was greeted by a 5-year old girl and a 4-year old boy, siblings whom she knew lived in the neighborhood.

The little girl explained that she and "her husband" were coming to visit. The lady played along with their little game and invited them in. She took them to the sofa just like they were grownup and asked them if they would like some cookies and lemonade. They said they would.

After they finished the lemonade, the lady asked the kids if they wanted more.

The little girl responded, "No, thank you, we really must be leaving now. My husband has just wet his pants!"