

Genesis 17:15-21 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." <sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" <sup>19</sup> God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. <sup>20</sup> As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

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## Announcements:

1. Members Meeting Today: 11-12 right after the service.
2. Good Friday Service: 6pm Friday
3. Easter Services: Sunday, 9:30 or 11am. Easter egg hunt 10:30am

## Genesis 17:1-14 | Sarah promised Isaac

So there is this great scene in the movie The Prestige, a story about two rival magicians. And one of the magicians thinks he has gotten his hand upon the diary of the other. And he is reading it alone thinking that he has acquired the secrets of his rival, but then as he is reading it, the words of the journal begin to speak directly to him by name. Just in the reading of it, as it directly addresses him and his life, his entire understanding about the reality he is operating within changes. He encounters a deeper, in this case, a more sinister truth.

John Calvin uses this analogy for our reading of scripture, that it is like putting on eyeglasses which allow us to see reality as it truly is. This might sound hyperbolic, but scripture plumbs the depths of reality deeper than the split atom, and the heights of reality beyond the cosmic background radiation.

And behind it all is the revelation of a God who is absolute in his power and perfections, and personal. This means that as we discover the foundations of reality in God we ought to expect to be surprised by his intimacy, and pushed to wonder at his transcendence.

This is the turn in our reading of the scriptures. When we think we are reading one thing, perhaps the wisdom of humanity filtered through time reflecting our superstitions, fears, and whatever else manifests itself from our evolutionary past. But then, in a moment of reading we find ourselves addressed by name, and discover that we are encountering the one who made it all. Today, expect to be surprised, maybe even driven to laughter at God's designs. We'll see the kindness of God, the surprise of God, and the mystery of God.

# 1. The Kindness of God

Genesis 17:15 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.<sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

For the past couple of weeks we've been in the first half of Genesis 17 and we've seen the sign of the promise, circumcision, given to Abraham. Today we see that God extends his promise to Abraham's wife by name.

One of the twists of this story of God promising Abraham a son has been the ways that Abraham and Sarah sought to make it happen on their own, even going around the boundary of their own marriage to make it happen. God had promised the offspring to Abraham, and implicit in this is an understanding that this would be through his wife, not by means of adultery. But as time wore on, and the likelihood of conception grew smaller and smaller for Abraham and Sarah, they decided to take on other means.

Sarai hatched a plan to give Abram her servant Hagar. Abram would conceive with Hagar and Sarai would take the child to be her own. This plan worked resulting in the birth of Ishmael, but it bred contempt within the household, as they acted outside of faith in God's promise to provide.

But here, even after this event, God's promise to Sarai has not been removed. Instead he comes to reiterate his promise to Abraham as also being a promise to her. In the same pattern of blessing Abraham he blesses Sarai. God changes her name, from Sarai to Sarah, it is actually the removal of a letter that changes her name from one more restricted to one more expansive. She moves from "their" princess, or "my" princess to merely princess. In bearing the promised son she will be the source of kings and nations and peoples. Abraham and Sarai on the heels of their rebellion in the previous chapter, are only drawn further in to God's grace. John Calvin says this;

"Their united fault did not prevent God from making it known to them that he was about to give them that seed, from the expectation of which, they had, in a manner, cut themselves off. Whence the gratuitous kindness of God shines the more clearly, because, although men impede the course of it by obstacles of their own, it nevertheless comes to them."

Gratuitous kindness. What is God like? Gratuitous kindness.

## 2. The Surprise of God

Genesis 17:17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Abraham at hearing this promise once again extended to him and his wife, falls upon his face before the Lord, demonstrating his honoring of God. And face down before the Lord he bursts into laughter. It is an eruption of joy and astonishment. We hear it as he talks to himself saying, me at 100, Sarah at 90? How can this be? It is wonderful and amazing and strange.

Our God is surprising. Part of understanding the surprising nature of God is understanding that he is both personal and absolute. There is no other faith which brings these things together, because no other faith has at its center this glorious doctrine of the trinity. God is in three persons; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and therefore exists as a relationship within himself. But God is also absolute, unchanging.

When we are learning about God, we can tend to consider him as akin to a law of nature. Something fixed and unchanging that can be operated like a machine, put in your obedience, get out your blessing. But this is to only see God as absolute, only grasping his oneness and simplicity. But Our God is a personal absolute, he is three as well as one, and in his personal nature, we are constantly surprised.

A surprising goodness. A thrill of hope. This is our God.

Genesis 17:18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!"

Abraham sees this goodness and like many of us, he pivots towards something more reasonable, his son who is already born! How often have you thought the perfect plan for your life was laid out, only for it to be totally turned upside down? God couldn't you have just moved through the obvious path. But you're not dealing with a merely absolute God, your dealing with a personal absolute. Expect to be surprised.

Abraham pivots towards reason, but this is also a father advocating for his son before the Lord. It is a prayer for Ishmael. But God captures this moment to introduce the name of Abraham's future son of promise.

Genesis 17:19 God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

The name Isaac means son of laughter. It is like the name Ishmael in that it acts as a prayer. Ishmael means the Lord hears, Isaac is a call to the Lord to smile upon them. The name son of laughter, shows to those on the outside that God has smiled upon this family, but to those on the inside they hear the reference. His birth was surrounded by the laughter before God of wonder, and the laughter at God of cynicism. But through all of that God still smiles upon his people. God now returns to Abraham's request regarding Ishmael and here we are shown the deep mystery of God.

### 3. The Mystery of God

Genesis 17:20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.

Once again God plays on the name, and responds to Abraham's prayer for Ishmael. Ishmael means God hears, and God says, "as for Ishmael I hear you." And God assures Abraham that his other son will likewise be blessed in prestige and heirs. But in the very language that God uses we are brought into the mysterious reality of his transcendence. Look at the tenses.

"I have heard you" This is God referring to Abraham's prayer that he just prayed for Ishmael. God assures him that he has heard his very prayer.

God in response to hearing Abraham states, "I have blessed him." And we have seen before in Genesis 16 this blessing that Abraham offered to Ishmael, in fact it was pronounced 13 years ago to Hagar the slave while Ishmael was only a child in her womb. Before Ishmael was even born.

So here is the order, Ishmael is blessed, Abraham prays for Ishmael, God responds to Abraham showing that his prayer is fulfilled. Don't you see the mystery of transcendence that we are being drawn into.

Of course God is surprising to us. He is gratuitous in his kindness, and transcendent in his being. When we pray we are tapping into the story he has built into reality, far beyond anything we could imagine. Look at his incomprehensibility paired with his intimate closeness. His hearing our prayers as he has already answered them. But he does not shift from his steadfast intentions.

Genesis 17:21 But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

God makes no mistake. He will bless Ishmael in a particular way, but the covenant comes through the promise, the covenant is too Isaac. This is the promise in which Abraham and Sarah are to place their faith. This is the promise that flows up through history, towards the offspring of Isaac, Christ.

