

Introduction

An interesting theme you can find in the pages of Scripture is that God often challenges the expectations of His people.

One example is the story of Joseph. God gives Joseph visions about his future glory. But then Joseph is sold into slavery. Next, God raises Joseph up in Potiphar's house, only to be brought down into prison before he is ultimately raised up again. Joseph had certain expectations, only for God to challenge them.

Samuel was a great prophet. God told Samuel to anoint Saul king over Israel, only for Saul to fall and God to point Samuel in a new direction with David.

The Apostle Paul had his expectations challenged on many occasions during his missionary journeys. He was rejected, beaten, stoned, and left for dead; not to mention shipwrecked, abandoned, and even betrayed by others who bore the name of Christ.

Throughout the Bible and throughout our own lives, we develop expectations about how God is going to work in our lives. And it isn't as though these expectations are unfounded. They often come thoughtfully, prayerfully, and from receiving counsel from godly parents and pastors. And yet, God still challenges our expectations in ways that force us to live in faith and to remember that He is in control and that He loves us.

This is especially true of Abraham. In [Genesis 16](#) Abraham finally had a son, Ishmael. God had promised him a son and for 13 years Abraham believed that Ishmael was the promised son. The one through whom God's covenant blessings to Abraham would be fulfilled.

But at 99 years of age, God comes to Abraham and turns these expectations upside down. Ishmael will not be the promised child, but Sarai, Abraham's 90 year old wife will bear him the promised son.

Abraham struggled with what God was doing in his life. And this should serve as an encouragement to us because he struggled in faith and ultimately obeyed in faith. And we are called to struggle with God in faith, especially a faith that leads toward obedience to God.

And that is how our passage breaks down this morning:

1. In verses 15-21 we see "Faith in Dialogue"
2. In verses 22-27 we see "Faith in Action"

Faith in Dialogue (vv. 15-21)

In verse 15 God tells Abraham that his wife Sarai will also be called by a new name. **“You shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.”**

The name change is similar to that of Abraham’s. Sarai means something like “my princess” and Sarah could simply be translated as “princess”. This change is more definitive. She is not simply Abraham’s princess, but she is the princess, the one who will bear the promised child.

And that is what verse 16 reveals. God tells Abraham that He **“will bless Sarah, and moreover, He will give Abraham a son by Sarah.”** He says, **“I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”**

The blessings that God has promised Abraham are now explicitly extended to Sarah and it is at this point that God challenges Abraham’s expectations and we see Abraham in dialogue with God as he grapples with what God has revealed to him.

In verses 17-18 Abraham responds to God by falling on his face and laughing. And Abraham says 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?”** Then Abraham says to God, **“Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”**

There are a few things to point out here as we consider how Abraham responds to God. Abraham’s expectation was that God would fulfill His promises through Ishmael. By asking that Ishmael might live before God Abraham harkens back to what God said to Abraham in [Gen 17:1-2](#). There God tells Abraham to walk before Him and be blameless that he might make His covenant with Abraham.

As we will see, the chief concern here is not whether God cares for Ishmael or not, but whether Ishmael is the one God is going to work His covenant through. Abraham wants God to carry out His covenant through Ishmael.

- › This presents a point of application. How do you best respond to God when the circumstances of your life do not meet your expectations? As a finite creature, you can read God’s word, seek godly council, and order your life wisely. But this can never guarantee that things will work out according to your expectations.

As a man of faith, Abraham shows that it is appropriate to lay one’s heart out before God. As a child of God, you have full access to the throne of grace.

Consider these encouragements from Scripture to go before God with your concerns and cares: [1 Peter 5:6-7](#) states, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares

for you.” [Psalm 55:22](#) says, “*Cast your burden on the Lord*, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”

God knows your frame, He remembers that you are dust, and he cares for you. [Psalm 103:13](#) states, “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.”

- › Take your cares before God. He will listen. Even if He plans for your life to move in a different direction than you expected, He is “Ishmael” which means, “God hears.”

Abraham desired Ishmael to be the child of promise, but this was not God’s plan.

In verse 19 God says to Abraham, “**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.**”

God tells Abraham that His plans are beyond Abraham’s expectations. The promised child will come from Sarah herself and the child’s name shall be “Isaac”. “Isaac” means laughter and his life is marked by episodes of Laughter.

But God makes it clear to Abraham that he has not forgotten his firstborn son, Ishmael. Ishmael means “God hears” and God tells Abraham that “He hears him” and that he has “**blessed Ishmael and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.**” Moreover, God tells Abraham that twelve princes will come from Ishmael to make a great nation. But none the less, the covenant will be established with Isaac.

Christian, received this encouragement when God challenges your expectations. He still hears you and you can enter into dialogue with God.

Faith in Action (vv. 22-27)

But we don’t simply see Abraham’s faith in dialogue with God in this passage. Abraham’s faith acts on what God says.

In verses 22-27 Abraham circumcises “**Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old.**”

Abraham is told that the covenant will not go through Ishmael and the sign of God’s covenant is circumcision. Abraham obeys God, despite the hard words that he has received.

In verse 27 we are told, “**All the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.**”

A question may arise at this point. All the men in the household are to be circumcised, but how do women relate to the covenant. One of the glories of the New Covenant is that the signs of the covenant, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are granted to all. But in many ways, neither was circumcised.

Even though only men were circumcised, it is very clear that women were included in the covenant even though they did not received the sign of the covenant. Women who were in the household of a circumcised man were apart of the covenant of circumcision.

This speaks to a foundational aspect of human reality that modern people often miss. As one scholar puts it, people are “implicated in each other.” You were not born into the world as a siloed off individual. Parents, children, siblings, and citizens are all implicated in one another. It’s been said before, “You were a ‘you’ before you were an ‘I!’”

My daughter Abigail doesn’t understand herself as an “individual” as I do. In many ways, her existence is so intimately tied to her mother that she cannot conceive of herself without her connection to her mother. But over time, as we continue to name her, “Abigail” she will begin to learn who she is. And in that process she will learn how she is already in relationship with others: parents, siblings, other South Carolinians and Americans, and yes, to her brothers and sisters in the household of faith.

It is because we think individually about “covenantal signs” that we often misunderstand them. Alastair Roberts puts it well when he says that circumcision is a sign that *this people* has a destiny. Circumcision is not about the person circumcised but about the circumcised people. The circumcised person participates in the people of promise and so they begin to understand themselves in light of the people they are apart of.

This is partly why the New Testament draws a clear connection between circumcision and baptism. Paul tells the Corinthians that there is one baptism. And this baptism is about the peoplehood and destiny of all the *baptized*. Baptism is a new birth into a new family. You were born into a family that you did not chose. Moreover, the name your parents give you, the family customs, and the family culture all shape who you become. The same is true in the church. Baptism bring you into a new family, this family has unique customs and a unique culture that will shape you and your identity. What’s more, in baptism you are called by a new name: “Christian”.

God gave Abraham a sign of His covenant that was for all the people. Even if women did not receive the sign personally, it was for them. We too are given a sign, baptism. And what this sign points to is the reality of God’s promise to save His people, to bring us safely through the

seas and floods of judgement. It is a promise from God that He has cut away all that would stand between us and His grace and presence.

You are people of the promise because you are Jesus' people and He is the promised one. It is because of His appearing, in the fullness of time, that we have received the Holy Spirit that is the guarantee of our salvation. By faith you have full access to the Father in heaven. And at the last, when Jesus returns, you will be raised to life everlasting. You will be welcomed to the marriage supper of the lamb even as you are invited to the table this day.

Let's us give thanks to our God of the covenant. He was faithful to Abraham, He continues to be faithful to us. Place all of your hope in what the signs point to, Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! AMEN!