

The Boy Named Laughter

Genesis 18: 9-15, 21: 1-7

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It's such a lovely detail in the story: Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Have you ever listened for news outside a door? Especially when you hear your name spoken, you just want to know what they're saying.

The LORD I Am had appeared to Abraham through the arrival of three angelic men. Through one of these men, the LORD himself spoke, "I'll be back this time next year." That sounded intriguing. Sarah pressed her ear closer to the tent fabric. "And your wife Sarah shall have a son." If she'd had coffee in her mouth, she would have spewed it. What?! Laughter escaped her lips. For a long time she had not really expected the promise to be fulfilled. "After I am worn out, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"

Well, the LORD clearly has mother's ears, because in spite of her efforts to be quiet, he heard Sarah laugh. The conversation with Abraham was interrupted. I imagine they pulled her out from behind the tent door to appear before them. "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the LORD?" And then he repeated the promise, "At the appointed time I will return to you next year, and you will have a son." He meant it. And Sarah was afraid she had offended. "I did not laugh," she said. The LORD wasn't letting her get away with it, "No, but you did laugh."

Of course she laughed. Can you blame her? A child at ninety? With a husband who's almost a hundred? I'm sure that after the angelic visitors left, Abraham and Sarah laughed some more. Laughter became a theme among them during the next year, a catch phrase for the wonder of the promise finally coming true. So when the baby was born, Abraham named him "Isaac," which means "He laughs." Sarah agreed, "God has made laughter for me." No more doubting laughter, just the hearty belly laugh of joy fulfilled. Once others might have snickered at the old couple clinging to the promise. Now they would laugh with Sarah at such blessing. Out of barrenness, Laughter was born. Out of what seemed empty promised, the LORD brought fulfillment. After years of waiting, they brought forth the blessing.

Real laughter is involuntary. We laugh with delight. We have a new puppy at our house. He's all legs and wagging tail. The other night he just decided to take

off running around the family room. Behind the couch and out, under the chair and out, never stopping, moving like a blur in the straightaways. Again and again, round and round. His joy was infectious. I haven't laughed like that in ages. We laugh at the incongruities of daily life. Jerry Seinfeld made a career of simply noting what's funny every day. Long before his television show, he could break up an audience just talking about how socks get lost in the dryer. Do they plan it? Maybe they press themselves up against the dryer drum whispering, "Don't let the hand get you!" We laugh with relief when the doctor says, "We got it all. We checked all the nodes and there's no sign of that cancer anywhere." We laugh when something seems too good to be true. "Look at you! You drove five hundred miles to surprise me at my birthday party? I can't even believe it, but here you are!" Sarah's laughter was composed of all those feelings.

Is anything too hard for the LORD? Out of barrenness, God brought forth new life. He still does it. Ashley Gordon has been reflecting for years on the theme of barrenness and life. She's a great writer, so I'd like to read some of her words she gave to me this week:

After many years of struggling with the inability to conceive, I also struggled because I miscarried many times after finally getting pregnant. So I gave up -- just like Sarah. My dear friend had a dream that I would give birth to a little girl. Then my father had a dream that I would give birth to a little girl, and I would name her *Sarah*. I didn't believe either of them. Frankly, I was so busy with my three precious children I had at home (thanks to adoption) that I didn't pay much attention to their dreams or my former desires.

When I found out I was actually pregnant -- instead of being jubilant, I was in denial. "Great. Now I get to have a sixth miscarriage," I thought. Cynical, but true. I was a hormonal mess. Then, after a rough few months where the pregnancy was touch-and-go, I went to my ultrasound at 16 weeks and saw that the baby was growing well and everything looked great. FOR THE FIRST TIME during this whole process, I believed God was going to give me this baby. My attitude changed. My faith was strengthened.

God blessed our family in spite of my disbelief. I had believed so strongly before, so many times, and I had been disappointed so many times. What good is faith? I thought. Why believe in something that is not going to happen? I had hardened up. I had braced for pain. Then I was blessed beyond measure when *Sarah Caroline Gordon* joined our family on March 12, 2008. It was a reminder that God had a plan that I would not have chosen and could

not anticipate. But it was the best plan for my entire family. It wasn't the easy road -- not by any means -- but it was God's path. There was no denying it.

The pain of barrenness, the blessing of adoption. The heartbreak of miscarriage and the fulfillment of carrying a child to term. Is anything too hard for the LORD? His ways are mysterious. His ways are often hard. His ways are wondrous. And he is still at work in this world.

In Romans 4, Paul reflects on the faith of Abraham during his years of waiting for the promised son to be born. Abraham, Paul says, is the father of us all. He believed in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that are not. In hope, he believed against hope...” That is, with all expectation and evidence to the contrary, Abraham trusted that “God was able to do what he had promised.” Paul even seems to have a bit of fun in this description, noting that Abraham had to consider his own body “which was as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old.” Abraham believed that he would become the father of many nations, as he had been told, even when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.

Abraham put his faith in the promise of the God who can do the seemingly impossible. He put his faith not in how things were in the moment, but in the power of God. This is the God who gives life to the dead. This is the Creator who calls into existence the things that are not. For God still acts in the world. He still keeps his promises. He still creates and he still redeems.

So at this moment in the message, we are at the crossroads. Shall we go down the prosperity gospel road? Shall I say that since God gave Sarah a child at ninety, you can expect God to give you the miracle you pray for? Shall I promise you that where you lack funds, God will provide? Shall I say that where there is illness God will give healing? Shall I say that where there is a broken marriage, God will mend it? Shall I say that God will give you the job of your dreams?

In the last week, I have actually heard credible, true accounts of all these fulfillments. I heard of a man whose wife prayed for \$10,000 to care for a dire family situation. Within a day her husband found 100 \$100 bills in an envelope on his desk. I heard a man testify to the miracle of the joy in a marriage once nearly scuttled by adultery. I heard of an all clear cancer scan. I heard a young man discover the relief of finding a real job in his field. Every single one of these people gives credit to the God who calls into existence the things that are not. And

well we should. Thanks be to God for his unseen but sure Hand that still moves in our lives.

But you and I know it doesn't always work that way. You don't get your best life now just because you think positive thoughts. You don't realize your dream just because you claim it in faith. Not every barren womb is opened. Not every illness is healed: sooner or later we all die. Not every broken relationship gets fixed. Not every poor person becomes rich when they open themselves to the expanding territory of God's provision. No, the road of life winds uphill. The path of Christ's people frequently, even normally, means bearing down a suffering road. Peter writes to us, "If when you do good and suffer for it, you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called. Because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you might follow in his steps." Following in the way of Jesus means enduring the suffering that comes from trying to stand in a fallen world. It means being worn out with the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. It means the friction burns of resistance from the world that rejects the love of God. That's the way of it.

As long as we live in this sinful flesh, as long as we make our way in a broken, fallen world, we will get battle fatigue. We will take shots and get wounded. We will lose many skirmishes. The miracles of God's action that we see make us laugh because *precisely they are unexpected*. They go against what is usual and customary. They point us beyond these moments in this world to the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. They encourage us that the new heavens and the new earth will be the place where there is no more suffering and no more dying and no more leave-taking and no more heart-breaking. Justice, bounty, righteousness and harmony will prevail.

These days, in this world, from time to time we get a win. A barren woman conceives. A terminally ill person recovers. A depression lifts. An estrangement becomes a reconciliation. God still brings life to what is dead. He still goes into being what does not exist. If you look for it, you will see that God has indeed intervened in the life of every one of his children. The boy named Laughter comes into our lives in many forms. He has acted in your life miraculously. With provision or healing or protection or renewal. It's just that we don't each get every single miracle every single time. We do get opportunities to rejoice for others even when we still have needs. We get signs that let us know God is there. We get foretastes that keep our hope of what is to come alive.

These signs point us to our deepest identity. We have not been put here simply to have our best life for our personal fulfillment right now. We have been placed into Christ. We have been relocated out of self and into Jesus. He is our life. And he claims us. He calls us. For a purpose greater than ourselves. A purpose that includes joy. And suffering. And the two do not cancel each other out. In fact they quite often go hand in hand. Joy in the suffering. Suffering in the midst of joy.

Let's go back to Peter who said, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God's own possession." God has laid his hand on you and acted in your life. He has claimed you and named you as his own. For a reason. Peter goes on to tell us why we have been identified as a chosen race, a royal priesthood and a people of God's possession: *that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* God stretched forth his hand into your life for a reason: that you might bear witness. That you might give testimony. That you might speak personally and passionately about the God who got you out of the dark and into his light.

I love this verse, especially because it became so precious to a young woman who went through a deep and frightening depression. For long months the weight of darkness shrouded her lovely face. The fear that she would stay lost haunted her deep eyes. Many worried. Many prayed. When she came out of it, when the weight lifted, when the fear ended, she said God led her to this verse. I proclaim the excellencies of the one who called me out of darkness and into his marvelous light. I laughed with delight to hear the music returned to her voice.

He still does it. He still calls into being things that do not exist. He creates faith in our hard hearts. He creates new life in our dead spirits. He raises us from spiritual barrenness into a vibrant, warm relationship with himself. He calls us into a love that keeps us through all the ups and downs of the roads we must travel.

Sometimes, I can feel where these roads are leading. Sometimes, I can see what I believe God is up to. I see arthritic people dancing. I see the bed ridden doing cart wheels. I see people of all the past generations rushing to meet one another. I see people who have hurt me coming up and extending hands. I see the enemies who inflicted pain on people I love coming to be forgiven. And then, these people that once disgusted me, are dancing with the ones they hurt, twirling, sugar pushing, smiling. And it is not feigned. The reconciliation is real. I see myself back flipping at the great glorious wonder of it all. And I look up and see the Lord of this dance, standing with arms outstretched, nail prints still in his radiant hands. He gazes upon the world he has healed, the enemies he has forgiven, the people he

has redeemed. And he laughs. The child of promise is Isaac. *He laughs*. The child of Promise that Isaac foreshadowed is Jesus. Whose name means *the LORD saves*. And of his mirth, there is no end.