

What makes you laugh? Have you ever laughed so hard you nearly fell on your face? Abraham did. A sense of humor is good, you know. The Bible says, *“A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance...”* To laugh is wonderful. To laugh at ourselves is a miracle from God. There are so many sad things in the world around us, but we need to lighten up and see the humor in things. We also need to help others to do the same. Scripture tells us there is *“a time to weep and a time to laugh.”* That we can’t deny. We need to be there for each other in good times and hard times. But laughter is a gift from God.

This past week I was reading one of Fredrick Buechner’s books entitled, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, and one of the passages that he addresses in the book is today’s Genesis story.

“Quantitatively speaking, you don’t find all that much laughter in the Bible,” he says, “but qualitatively, there’s nothing quite like it to be found anywhere else. There are a couple of chapters in the book of Genesis that positively shake with it.”

“Sarah was never going to see ninety again, and Abraham had already hit one hundred, and when the angel told them that the stork was on its way at last, they almost collapsed. Abraham laughed “till he fell on his face,” and Sarah stood cackling behind the tent door so the angel wouldn’t think that she was being rude as the tears streamed down her cheeks. When the baby finally came, they even called him Laughter—which is what Isaac means in Hebrew—because obviously no other name would do.”

He concludes, “Sarah and her husband had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they’d better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they’d ever had hadn’t been half wild enough.”

Looking at this story from another point of view we could say that the laughter of Abraham and Sarah was the laughter of disbelief. They laughed at the ridiculous absurdity of God’s promise ever coming true. Consider what was, or maybe still is, your wildest dream? Is it one that is still very personal to you and over the years you have rarely shared it because people might laugh?

In Genesis 17:16-17 God says to Abraham, *“I will bless [Sarah] and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’”*

Genesis 18:11-12 says, *“Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?’”*

When her son is finally born Sarah says, *“God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me”* (Genesis 21:6).

There’s also a time NOT to laugh. When might that be? When God says that anything is possible with him and we refuse to believe it. God loves us and wants what’s best for us but we need faith and we need to believe him when he makes a promise to us. We need to believe, even though the situation we may be in seems hopeless. Let’s find the humor in things and enjoy this great life that God has graciously bestowed on us, but never laugh at God’s promises.

In the last chapter the LORD promised Abraham what humans even today would consider impossible. Sarah was going to be a mother of a son named Isaac in twelve months. As we just heard, Abraham laughed at the idea, but the LORD told him it would be so. To remind Abraham that he laughed, the LORD said the boy's name would be Isaac, which in Hebrew means "laughter." The LORD changed the name of Abram to "Abraham" to reflect that he would be the father of many nations of people. He also named Sarai "Sarah" which means princess. So in chapter 17 the LORD himself appears to Abraham by a new name—God Almighty (El-Shaddai) and gives new names to Abram and Sarai to reflect the new reality, as well as to give a name for the son of Sarah and Abraham. These names reflect a new reality in their lives.

The LORD also made a second covenant with Abraham of circumcision which was to be done to every male as a sign of the covenant. The rest of the chapter talks about the covenant marked by circumcision. But nowhere does Abraham break the good news to Sarah about being a mother. That situation is about to be remedied.

Chapter 18 begins with another appearance of the LORD to Abraham while he was sitting in a tent, the reminder that he was a wandering nomad in a land that his descendants would eventually call their own and build houses. It says he was startled by the appearance of three men. It says that he rose and bowed before them. This could be taken as a form of hospitality which was and is the expectation in the Middle East. Abraham's actions were similar to the saying "My house is your house." But when the appearance of the three men is linked to an appearance of the LORD, more is suggested. These weren't mere men. Whether Abraham knew this and bowed before the chief of them is debated, but Moses wants us to know from the start that it was the angel of the LORD and two other angels. Many see the chief angel as an Old Testament appearance of Christ. Many of the church fathers held to this view. Some even held to the idea that the three men were Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Abraham made haste to greet and show hospitality to the guests. The New Testament warns us to show hospitality to strangers because some have entertained angels unawares. This scene may hint that Abraham did just that, not knowing at first who they were. Abraham insisted that these three men get out of the heat, drink some water, and that he would go and get them food. The Middle East can get unbearably hot at midday which could be life-threatening. If they would rest and refresh themselves, they could go on their way when it was a little cooler.

Sarah was ordered to quickly prepare three loaves of bread for the guests and his servants were ordered to prepare the fatted calf reserved for the appearance of a special dignitary. He had it brought to the three men who were under the shade of a tree for them to eat, which they did. The LORD knew that Sarah was listening and was perfectly aware of her own situation. She was an old woman, far beyond menopause. Her reaction was almost identical to the reaction of Abraham to the announcement. She laughed within herself and thought how impossible the situation. Abraham was too old to father a child and Sarah far too old to conceive one.

The LORD asked Abraham, "*Why did Sarah laugh?*" He again said that this thing would happen the next spring. Sarah denied laughing, but the LORD who knows the heart of all people told her differently. Both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the news that they would be parents of a child. The gentle rebuke of Sarah by the LORD was directed at Abraham as well. The LORD said to them: "*Yes, you did laugh.*"

I just mentioned Hebrews 13:2 about showing hospitality to strangers because that stranger might turn out to be an angel, or even the LORD. In the time the letter to the Hebrews was written, many Christians had

been evicted from their homes and had their names removed from the roll of citizens of the cities and towns they lived in. Anyone who received these people in their houses ran the risk of having the same thing happen if they were caught showing hospitality to them. These pilgrims and wanderers who no longer had any earthly city to belong to had to wander in the wilderness. Christians were to receive these refugees as if they were the Lord Jesus.

When this kind of hospitality is shown, it is never to offer the very least help. Instead, our hospitality is to be the most generous. When Abraham killed the fatted calf for the celebration, we are reminded of the reception the father gave for his unworthy prodigal son. This dirty broken young man was greeted by a father who ran to him and hugged his dirty ragged body in public. This would be considered a most shameful act on the part of the father. But he ran to show hospitality just like Abraham ran to show hospitality. The killing of the calf was like inviting the Emperor to dinner. You may remember Jesus says in Luke's gospel, every time a sinner is received, a great banquet is thrown. There is more joy in Heaven over one repentant sinner.

We now know that the ultimate fulfillment of the LORD's promise to Abraham and Sarah was not in Isaac but one of Isaac's distant descendants, Jesus of Nazareth. He would come to Jerusalem in the spring of the year and offer his own life for the life of the world. As his children, let us follow him in offering true hospitality and words of hope to a dying world.

*"Is there anything too hard for the Lord?"* the Lord asks Abraham in verse 14. When ninety-year-old Sarah heard she was to be a mother for the first time, she laughed in humor or in disbelief, or maybe both. But to God it was no laughing matter. Her laughter expressed her doubt. Today people laugh at the idea that God can make a saint out of a sinner, or God can transform a drug addict to a responsible citizen. Some doubt that faith in God can save a broken marriage. Ponder any great impossibility and then know that God is much greater than that.

An article from *Psychology Today* says that, "Intuitively we know that [laughter](#) is one of the best tools we have for dealing with [stress](#), and science backs that up. In fact, research into laughter goes even further, revealing that it's like a potent drug with the contagious power of a virus that conveys a slew of benefits for the mind and body."

Whether we laugh because something is funny or because we can see the impossibility of something that is promised, laughter is good for all of us. Abraham and Sarah were reminded of that every time they spoke their son's name, Yitschak—"he laughs." Amen.