

People of Promise
Abraham and Sarah
609 words

A Laughable Promise

Abraham and Sarah:
When Laughter Turns to Joy

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-19

You could hardly have blamed them for laughing, Abraham and Sarah. What if someone you barely knew promised you something you had wanted for a long time, but which seemed preposterously out of reach? You'd probably laugh, too--the kind of laugh people have when they open the front door and see sweepstakes officials with TV cameras, flowers, and a check for ten million dollars. It's a combination laugh--cynicism (a defensive mechanism so you won't look like a fool for believing a practical joke in case it isn't true) and joy (the natural response to a dream fulfilled). In Abraham's and Sarah's case, it was some of both--cynicism that gave birth to joy.

Their road to joy took a discordant series of twists and turns. Thoroughly pagan in the beginning (remember: before Abraham became the father of the Jews, almost everyone was thoroughly pagan; cf. Gen. 14:18-20), Abraham and Sarah had been told by God they would one day be the progenitors of a great nation (12:2). It was obvious they would need to be parents, which they weren't. It was also obvious that this early, generalized promise from God weighed heavily on their minds. For instance, when visiting in Egypt on one occasion, Abraham lied to the Pharaoh about his relationship with Sarah so he could stay alive (12:11-13). "This new nation already has no members," he thought. "How will having no father help matters? I'll lie for the sake of the children."

Sarah was no stronger. A number of years had passed (16:3), and they still had no children (16:1). So she insisted that Abraham use her maid, Hagar, as a surrogate mother to begin the new nation: "We're not getting any younger, Abraham," she said. "A Plan-B nation is better than no nation at all." So Abraham acquiesced and Hagar bore a son who turned out not to be a blessing (Ishmael became the father of all the Arab nations, who have been in conflict with Jews ever since; cf. 16:12). So, Abraham and Sarah went 0-for-2 in their quest to see God's promise fulfilled. No wonder they were primed to laugh the next time God spoke to them.

Abraham and Sarah were 99 and 89 years old when God brought up the subject of children again (17:1, 17), and their ill-attempted son, Ishmael, was 13 (17:25). When God approached them the second time about having children, they both laughed out loud (17:17; 18:12-15). But this time, the promise was specific: Within a year, Sarah would bear a son (17:21; 18:10, 14). And, because nothing is too hard for the LORD (18:14), Sarah gave birth to a son just as God had promised. This son they named Isaac ("he

laughs”), as a memorial to how God turned defensive, cynical, disbelieving laughter into the unbridled, unashamed, baby-borne joy (21:3, 6-7). While Abraham had been a believer in God for more than a decade (15:6), he and Sarah learned through the birth of Isaac to believe God’s promises--even if it meant killing their very son of promise (Gen. 22; Hebrews 11:11-12; 17-19). And Isaac? The whole experience put the fear of God in him--literally (Gen. 31:42, 53).

If God’s promises to you (2 Pet. 1:4) seem (pardon the expression) laughable, think about Abraham and Sarah:

- Do you really think what God has promised is too hard for him to fulfill?
- Are you mistaking delayed-fulfillment for non-fulfillment?
- Do you think Abraham’s and Sarah’s eventual joy made them wish they hadn’t been so cynical?

It’s great to laugh when God speaks--as long as it is the laughter of faith that anticipates the joy of fulfillment.