

# GENESIS

## RockPointe Church Small Groups

Patriarchs of Scripture • Sarah • Genesis 17:15-19 • Fall 2018

### Main Point

Today we will learn about two kinds of laughter—one of disbelief and one of amazement at what God has done.

### Background

Video: <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/VideoElement/182904>

Note: Requires Access to Right Now Media; if you have issues with accessing the link, copy and paste directly in your browser

### Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

**When you find yourself in an uncomfortable or awkward situation, how are you most likely to respond? Do you try to flee? Do you clam up or shut down? Do you laugh?**

**Why do you think laughter is such a common response to awkward situations?**

**Have you ever been disappointed in God because the circumstances you faced were not what you expected? What did you think about Him during that time? How did it affect your faith in Him?**

The story of Abraham in Genesis gives us one of the best pictures of what faith in God looks like through the ups and downs of life. One of the reasons Abraham's example is so important for us to learn from is because he wasn't perfect. God promised to do amazing things in Abraham's life, but choosing to trust those promises was a struggle for Abraham. Through his story, we see that God makes promises to His children, and we can trust those promises, no matter how laughably impossible they seem. True faithfulness, birthed in us by the Holy Spirit, is perseverance with God through all seasons of life.

### Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Have a volunteer read Genesis 17:3-6 and 17:15-19.

The events of Genesis 17 pick up 13 years after the birth of Ishmael, the son Abram bore to his servant Hagar when he doubted God's power to give his wife, Sarah, a son to be his heir. Thirteen years after Ishmael's birth, God again appeared to Abram when he was 99 years old (17:1). It was during this encounter that God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sari's name to Sarah.

**What was Abraham's initial response to God's plan?**

**What did God accomplish by waiting so long to complete His plan? What did He reveal about Himself?**

Abraham and Sarah were 99 and 89, respectively, when God told them they would have a son. They weren't exactly of childbearing or child-rearing age, a reality which Abraham found laughable (v. 17). But through Sarah's conception, God demonstrated His power over nature, and through her womb came a brand new nation, God's chosen people. God fulfilled His covenant promise in such a way that only He would receive the glory for it. There would be no question that God was behind the miracle of Isaac's birth.

**Now read Genesis 17:23-27. Although Abraham initially laughed at God in disbelief, how did he ultimately respond? What does this reveal about his faith?**

God alone was the engineer of Abraham and Sarah's destiny, and their attempts to go it alone paled in comparison to the grandeur of God's plan. God would be the one to bless them. God would be the one to give them the promised son, Isaac, and make their descendants as numerous as the stars. And God would be the one to receive every last bit of the glory. God's faithfulness and ability to do what He says overcomes all of our flaws and uncertainties.

| have a volunteer read Genesis 18:9-15.

Some time later, the Lord again visited Abraham, and He gave Abraham a timeframe for the birth of his long-awaited son. While God was talking to Abraham, verse 10 tells us that Sarah was listening from outside the tent.

**How did Sarah's reaction to God's news compare to Abraham's reaction in 17:17?**

**Both Sarah and Abraham laughed at God's news of a son, but how they acted next is notably different. Read Genesis 17:23-27 again, and then read 18:13-15. How do Abraham's and Sarah's responses to God differ following their laughter?**

**What is the takeaway for us from Abraham's response? What about from Sarah's?**

Laughter revealed the disbelief in both Abraham's and Sarah's hearts. Neither could imagine how they would have a son at their old age, something for which both of them had longed for decades. But when we compare the two individuals—Abraham's obedience and Sarah's lie—we are reminded of the importance of trusting the promises of God, no matter how impossible they might seem.

**Read Genesis 18:14 again. In what area of your life do you need to believe that nothing is too hard for God? What keeps you from believing this?**

| Have a volunteer read Genesis 21:1-7.

**In Genesis 21, we read that finally Sarah became pregnant and eventually gave birth to the son for whom they had waited. What does this reveal about God?**

**Verses 6-7 point out that Sarah again laughed at what God had done in her life. How was her laughter different this time?**

**What do you learn from Sarah's laughter in this scene?**

Truly, nothing is too hard for God. Genesis 21 reveals that God was faithful to keep His promise to this couple, and one year later they had a son, Isaac, despite their old age. When Sarah laughed at God's promise, she revealed her doubt in His power and her lack of faith in Him. But now that God had made good on His promise, Sarah's laughter revealed her awe and amazement at what He accomplished through her. Finally she arrived at a place of trust and gratitude.

## Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**What are you trusting God with today? Are you anxiously or patiently waiting for God to fulfill His promises?**

**How is Jesus a reminder to us of God's faithfulness?**

**How can you show God you trust Him, even when His promises seem unbelievable? How can we encourage each other in this effort?**

## Pray

Pray for a better understanding of God's faithfulness. Thank God for the ultimate fulfillment of His promises—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Also pray that the Holy Spirit will help you learn to trust God's promises and stand in amazement at what He does.

## Commentary

| Genesis 17

17:9-14. God now placed one final covenant-related demand on Abraham and his offspring: circumcision. This surrender of the first portion of the bodily instrument used to fulfill God's first command to humanity ("Be fruitful and multiply," Gen 1:28) symbolized the individual's willingness to submit all of himself to God and to all of His covenant commands. The fact that every male among them was to be circumcised had a leveling effect within the Israelite community; whether wealthy or poor, master or slave, all shared a common experience and a common mark. All were equal before God. So vital was the acceptance of the sign on the body that anyone who lacked it was to be cut off from his people because he had broken the covenant.

17:15-16. The Lord decreed that Abraham's wife Sarahi was now to receive the name Sarah ("Princess," which is an alternate form of Sarahi). This "princess" would be given the privilege of producing nations; kings of peoples would come from her. During the Old Testament period at least four nations came from Sarah's womb: Israel, Judah, Edom, and the Amalekites. Over Israel and Judah collectively a total of 41 kings reigned. Sarah is the only woman in the Old Testament whom the Lord specifically indicated He would bless.

17:19-22. Undaunted by Abraham's well-intended suggestion regarding Ishmael, God reaffirmed that Sarah would bear him a son who, appropriately, would be named Isaac—"He Laughs." With Isaac God would confirm an everlasting covenant—the Abrahamic covenant—that would continue with future offspring. Lesser promises were made for Ishmael. Though no covenant would be established with him, God would bless Ishmael, enabling him to fulfill humanity's basic command to be fruitful and multiply... greatly (1:28; 9:1,7). No kings were promised in Ishmael's lineage, but from him would come 12 tribal leaders (25:13-16), and his offspring would become a great nation.

The Lord's amazing final statement named the child not yet conceived, confirmed a binding relationship between God and that son, and then set a date when the boy would be born to 90-year-old Sarah. Dramatically, God then "ascended above" Abraham.

17:23-27. Promptly after the Lord ascended, Abraham circumcised himself and all the males in his household. With the sign of the covenant now on his body, Abraham was qualified to father the covenant child.

## | Genesis 18

18:9-10a. Collectively, the trio ("they," pl.) asked Abraham of Sarah's whereabouts (v. 9). His response is terse in the Hebrew, "behold, in the tent," including perhaps a gesture toward it. The spokesman is the Lord, if v. 13 is our guide, who dialogues with Abraham and Sarah in vv. 10-15. The certainty of the promise is further enhanced by a specific timetable, "this time next year" and by the statement of a son.

18:10b-15. The miraculous nature of the announcement is underscored by the Lord's amazing discernment of Sarah's private thoughts (vv. 12-15). Sarah's position in the tent, "behind him" (v. 10b), and her internal monologue, "to herself" (v. 12a), indicate that by unusual means the visitor knew her heart, not having seen a facial expression or heard a chuckle. Such exceptional perception gave credibility to the visitor's unlikely prediction of a child. The domestic intrigue of Abraham's household involving rival siblings is intimated in Sarah's actions in this passage by the hints "listening" and "laughed," wordplays on Ishmael's name (16:11) and on Isaac's (21:6). Sarah will later defend her son by urging Ishmael's expulsion, at which time the Lord directs Abraham, "Listen to your wife" (21:12; cp. 3:17). Isaac's wife Rebekah, after "listening" (27:5), takes action to ensure that Jacob receives the firstborn rights in her household.

A normal biological conception was humanly ruled out due to Sarah's post-menopausal age. The passage captures the impossibility of her pregnancy by three successive descriptions: the couple is "old"; "advanced in years"; and she is "past the age of childbearing." "Old" and "advanced in years" later describe the aged patriarch in his last days (24:1; also, Joshua, 13:1; 23:1-2) and David (1 Kings 1:1; so Jesse, 1 Sam. 7:12). Sarah's bitter amusement over the announcement (v. 12; cf. 17:17) reflects from her viewpoint the audacity of the man's claims; her inner thoughts poignantly confirmed that the couple had not engaged in sexual relations for years. "Pleasure" is used here for sexual delight and elsewhere of luxuries, delicacies.

Undeterred by Sarah's secret doubts, the divine spokesman continues his speech with Abraham, reiterating the promise (vv. 13-14). His two questions of Abraham are rhetorical, requiring no response from the patriarch. Since the Lord can accomplish such a feat, Sarah's skepticism is unfounded. The Hebrew for "hard" or "difficult" means "wonderful" in the sense of extraordinary (e.g., Jer. 32:17, 27). The works of the Lord are exceptional by human standards, evoking amazement by his people (e.g., Ps. 118:2-3). God's knowledge of future events as well as the human heart was "too wonderful" to comprehend (Ps. 139:6).

Sarah's interjection, "I did not laugh" (v. 15), shows that she, not Abraham, was the intended recipient of the man's statement. His unusual knowledge startled her, and she was "afraid" of the man's response (v. 15). The divine rejoinder is emphatic: "Oh, yes you did laugh"; the definitive tone of his answer ended the matter.

## | Genesis 21

21:1-2. The setting is Abraham's household where the early days of Isaac's birth and circumcision are recalled. Verses 1-7 consist of a birth narrative (vv. 1-4) and the exultation of Sarah at the birth of her child in Abraham's old age (vv. 5-7). Verses 1-2 describe the visitation of the Lord, resulting in the miraculous pregnancy of Sarah who bears a son "to Abraham in his old age" (vv. 2, 7). Verse 1 possesses parallel half-lines, emphasizing the faithfulness of the divine word revealed to Abraham and Sarah (17:16, 19; 18:10, 14). Not only was Sarah's pregnancy impossible by human resources alone, but the birth was at the "very time" promised.

21:3-4 Verses 3-4 describe Abraham's obedient response at Isaac's birth: he names (17:16) and circumcises the child on the eighth day (17:10, 12, 19) precisely as the Lord had directed.

21:5-7 This paragraph ties together the explanation of Isaac's name and the elderly age of the parents. Dual references to the age of Abraham form the boundaries of the passage (vv. 5a, 7b). Abraham, the narration clarifies, is a century of years (v. 5), and Sarah radiates with happiness at the thought she bears Isaac to her husband "in his old age" (v. 7b).

Sandwiched between the chronological notices is the explanation for the name Isaac (vv. 6-7a). Usually the person who names the child also provides the explanation, whether mother or father (4:24; 5:29). In this case the father announced the name (v. 3), and the mother supplied its significance. Moreover, customarily if an

explanation occurs, it immediately follows the giving of the name, but here the narrative describing the circumcision of the boy (v. 4) and the age of the patriarch (v. 5) intervene. These modifications are made to point out the importance of each parent in the work of grace. Abraham's doubting laughter is transformed into obedient faith by his naming the child Isaac as the Lord has said (17:17, 19). Verses 4-5 continue the narrative's attention to the father's obedience. Sarah's doubting laughter is transformed into a joyous faith (18:12-13). This privilege of declaration in vv. 6-7 is appropriately Sarah's, for she after all was the butt of the joke as the barren wife (16:4). The language of the birth report in vv. 3 and 5 are a literary reflex of the parallel episode of Ishmael's birth and naming (16:15-16). By the similarity in language, the passage points up the remarkable nature of the child's birth to parents in their elderly state. Sarah's exuberance rightly attributes the child to God, who grants her "laughter"; here she makes her point by a play, substituting "laughter" for the name "Isaac," v. 6a.