



“CHILDREN OF GOD . . . BORN OF GOD”

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 17:15-27

Tenth Message

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The mere thought of children fills most people with deep emotions. In some families, children form the emotional center of their parents' well being. The inability to bear children causes intense pain for those who are barren or unmarried. Parents think about their children constantly, even after they leave home. We radiate in the blessing of their smallest achievements. We invest so much in our offspring that we are anguished if they take just one step off the track.

I want to address two questions from our text today. First: What is it about children that makes us invest our dreams in them? And second: Is having children a legitimate dream?

Last week we heard God make a number of mind-boggling promises to Abraham. In a scene that resembled a wedding ceremony, God expanded and reiterated his promises that the patriarch would become the father of a multitude of nations, and changed his name from Abram to Abraham (*“father of the multitudes”*). God then asked Abraham to reciprocate and ratify the covenant by undergoing circumcision as the sign of his fidelity. This ineradicable mark would reflect the eternal nature of this covenant.

Before Abraham can respond to God's demand, however, God speaks again. To Abraham's surprise, he tells him about his wife, Sarai.

I. God's Word Regarding Sarai (Genesis 17:15-18)

A. God's Promises to Sarah (17:15-16)

Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” (Gen 17:15-16, NASB)

For the first time Sarai is explicitly mentioned as the channel for the blessing of Abraham's son. God calls her *“Sarai, your wife.”* Everything he has granted to Abraham he now grants to her, making her an equal heir to the covenant. This is very important to note, since in two earlier tests her role as *“wife”* was placed in severe jeopardy (12:10-20; 16:1-16) due to Abraham's lack of faith. But God does not establish his covenant by compromising marriage. He elevates Sarai with *“honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life”* (1 Pet 3:7). God is eager that both husband and wife arrive at the same place in their faith before fully enjoying his promises. Therefore, just as Abraham received a new name, so will his wife: *“Sarai”* becomes *“Sarah.”*

The etymology of Sarai is uncertain, but it seems probable that both terms have the same meaning (*“princess”*),

with *“Sarah”* being the newer rendering of the more ancient spelling. The significance of the new name is that God is emphasizing that a new thing is happening, something as magnificent as a *“new creation,”* and it is to be remembered even in the most casual utterance of Sarah's name. She shall be called *“Princess”* (every Jewish girl's dream) since she will be the mother of kings, nations and peoples. *“Significantly, Sara is the only woman in the Bible to have her name changed by God.”*¹

So the kingdom will not advance until Abraham realizes that his wife is an equal heir to these promises. Sarah is not just a biological channel for his blessing, she is to fully share in the blessing as her husband's spiritual equal. Peter uses the same reasoning to remind husbands to give their wives this honor as equals, lest their prayers be hindered (1 Pet 3:7).

The narrator records Abraham's surprising response.

B. Abraham's Response: Laughter (17:17-18)

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” (17:17-18)

Earlier, when God told Abraham about what he would do for him (17:3), Abraham fell down on his face in speechless, reverential awe. But now when he hears God's promise concerning his wife, he falls to the ground laughing. He is incredulous. His is the laughter of unbelief, a response that conveys the outer limits of his faith. He has faith to believe that God can give him a son, but when he learns *how* God will do it, his faith falters. Now, face down before God, he expresses his incredulity. He is probably thinking, *“It's one thing for God to give life to a man my age, but to a woman, my wife, who is decades past menopause? That's impossible! Is this a cruel joke?”*

Once Abraham has vented within the rhymes of his own heart what he really thinks about the promise, he recovers his sensibilities and politely attempts to steer God on a more reasonable path. How beautifully human he is! He is growing in faith, yet he has real doubts. He yearns for the unseen world, but he also prays for what he can see and has come to love. For thirteen years he has been a responsible, loving father with deep affections. Now, unable *“to see”* beyond the horizon into the *“ways”* of God, he is content to ask God to bless what he can see. He has such freedom with God that he boldly places his dream for this son before him. We can hear his deep sighs in every word, *“Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”*

All of us have dreams. Sometimes we are able to give birth to them and they take root within our affections. After years of nurture and care, it is only natural that they

bore deep into our hearts. The problem is, as good as these things are, God has more for us. Much more than we ever dreamed lies just beyond the horizon. The things that we have created in our own strength are not the real dream. They are but a shadow that can blind us to what God has for us. The real gifts of God come by life out of death. They are pure gift, and God won't allow us to settle for less. The text probes us with the question, Have we allowed ourselves to become content with our Ishmaels?

So what does God do with these affections of ours?

II. God's Reaffirmation of Sarah (Gen 17:19-27)

A. God's Confirmation of the Promise (17:19-22)

But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year." And when He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. (17:19-22)

We can hear the irrevocable nature of God's choice in the dual repetition of the promise. Isaac frames the speech, and Ishmael, who lies at the center of Abraham's affections, is also at the center of the text. God is very sensitive to Abraham's affections. He doesn't write them off as having no value. Rather, he wants to create new affections within him that will expand the horizons of his world and place him right at the center of God's eternal kingdom. Wenham portrays the chiasmic outline as follows:

A Sarah will bear a son...Isaac (19a)

B I shall confirm my covenant with him (19b)

X Ishmael (20)

B' I shall confirm my covenant with Isaac (21a)

A' Sarah will bear next year (21b)²

God begins with a very strong and firm, "No," or literally, "On the contrary." Then he reiterates his intention to give Abraham a son through Sarah, his wife, whom God will name Isaac ("Yitzak"), meaning, "he laughed," or "may he laugh." Henceforth every mention of the name Isaac would be a powerful reminder of Abraham's initial unbelief at God's wondrous promise of a son through Sarah. And at the same time, how God interposes his smile over human unbelief to bring unimaginable blessing! God's smile will swallow our doubts.

This verb "yitzak" becomes the theme word in the chapters that follow. Through its different nuances are revealed the inner heart's response to faith. It is used of Sarah's laughter of unbelief (18:12); of Lot's sons-in-law who think Lot is but "joking" when he proclaims the coming judgment of Sodom (19:14); of the joyous laughter of all who rejoice with Sarah in the birth of her son (21:9); of Ishmael's mocking laugh towards his brother (21:9); and finally, of Isaac, whose tickling hands cause Rebecca "to laugh" (26:8). The repeated use of "yitzak" throughout the story draws a smile from everyone. "Thus, for the author, both the power of God and the limitations of human faith are

embodied in the most ambiguous of human acts, laughter."³

Thus Abraham must learn that God's choice is irrevocable. God will not be derailed by human affections. Isaac is the one with whom he will establish his covenant forever and ever. There will be no negotiating. But God does not dismiss Abraham's affections as illegitimate. He is delighted to honor the patriarch's request. He plays on the meaning of the name: "As for Ishmael ("*God hears*"), I have heard you." How gracious is our God! He wants to be generous to all. He cares deeply about the things we care about, so he guarantees Ishmael the blessing of fertility. Through him God will create a great nation. In fact, on the surface the nation will bear quite a resemblance to his brother, Israel. Israel's twelve tribes will find a mirror of themselves in the Arabian desert, where twelve princes will live in their shadow.

So God will care for this boy and his descendants. But, make no mistake about it, Ishmael will not be the line through which the world finds salvation. That will come through Isaac, whose birth will become the paradigm for how God imparts spiritual life to the human soul. If Ishmael had been the promised seed, our theology would have been: "*God helps those who help themselves.*" But through Isaac our theology becomes: "*God helps those in whom there is no hope, and who have long since given up hope. Life comes to them. It is pure gift, and rings out with inexpressible laughter and joy.*" When was the last time you were, in the words of C. S. Lewis, *surprised by joy*, and you collapsed in holy laughter? As children of Abraham, laughter is our legacy.

God concludes the conversation with a word that Abraham has been waiting twenty-five years to hear. It is a word that we don't hear very often: *When* will all this come to pass? God explains that Sarah "will bear to you at this season next year," finally putting an end to the endless waiting. At last there is a date that Abraham can mark on his calendar. The day is coming when laughter will be born and joy will replace sorrow. Never forget that waiting intensifies our capacity for joy, just as sorrow deepens it.

Then the narrator says, in the most dramatic way, "He finished speaking with him, and God went up from Abraham." We have just witnessed the end of something very large, the climax to a chapter in Abraham's journey, and so God exits stage left. The moment is recorded with precision to seal the event in a solemn silence.

These mind-numbing promises demand a response. What will Abraham say? The negotiations are over. Everything in his heart has been placed on the table. It has been weighed, honored, answered, and now redirected into something much larger than he had ever dreamed. Nothing more needs to be said. What follows now is Abraham's obedience. He is finally able to let go of his dreams and receive God's dreams in God's way. Remember that if God says no to your dreams, it is only because your dreams are not big enough.

B. Abraham's Response: Obedience (17:23-27)

Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of

their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. And all the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. (17:23-27)

When God finishes speaking, Abraham circumcises his household. Notice the sense of urgency in his obedience. He does not delay or procrastinate. Taking no time to sleep on it, Abraham is ready to seal his vows that very day. And notice how thorough and complete his obedience is. Not only is he circumcised, he also has his thirteen-year-old son Ishmael circumcised. Though Ishmael and his descendants would not become the line of promise, they could still have the blessings of the promise if they were willing to recognize and submit to that line. Election is not designed to limit salvation but to make it universally available. As Jesus said, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him" (John 3:17).

Following the circumcision of Ishmael, every single male in Abraham's household, whether born within or acquired without, is circumcised. No one is exempt. There are no loose ends to Abraham's obedience. He is not only urgent, he is exact and thorough. He exemplifies what God asked of him at the beginning of the chapter, to "*walk before Me and be blameless*" (17:1). With these actions Abraham ratifies God's holy covenant and brings an entire household into "a bond with God and each other, whose implications must now be grasped and lived out."⁴ It is a very holy day, one to be marked in the annals of time. Wenham comments: "By repeating the phrase 'that very day,' the narrator stresses that the day Abraham circumcised his family was one of the turning points in world history, comparable to Noah's entry into the ark or the exodus from Egypt (cf. 7:13; Exod 12:17, 41, 51)."⁵ This is the day that the people of Israel were conceived, a people who were born "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:13).

III. What Are Your Dreams?

Many of us begin life dreaming. Our desires run deep; our longings well up within us. We want to give birth to things that will thrive and last. If we dare touch our deepest desires, we will discover that their origins spring from Eden, and were strategically placed in our hearts by God. Our longings therefore are legitimate. But sadly, life kills the dream for many and we quit dreaming. The words of Fantine, from *Les Misérables*, express our heartache:

*I dreamed a dream in days gone by
when hope was high and life worth living.
I dreamed that love would never die.
I dreamed that God would be forgiving.*

*Then I was young and unafraid
and dreams were made and used and wasted.
There was no ransom to be paid,
no song unsung no wine untasted.
But the tigers come at night*

*with their voices soft as thunder.
As they tear your hope apart,
as they turn your dream to shame.*

Fantine's story is all too common. She speaks for many women who were loved by a man, then used, forgotten, and abandoned with a child born out of wedlock. She longs for the carefree, innocent love she once had, but deep down she knows that her man will never return. In her gaping wounds of resignation she cries out,

*I had a dream my life would be
So different from this hell I'm living.
So different now from what it seemed.
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.*

Life kills our dream and we are tempted to quit dreaming because the pain hurts too much. Have you quit dreaming? Have you lost all hope? If you have, the good news for you is that God has set a date on his calendar when you will laugh in a raucous laugh that will shake the heavens and echo through eternity. And that laughter will come right out of the center of your pain.

Then there are those who appear to be successful at achieving their dreams. They seem to be able to give birth to whatever their hearts desire, and their affections take root in all they have helped God produce. They land the job; we can't even land the interview. They get married; we remain single. They are blessed with children; we struggle to become pregnant. Their children seem to have no trouble being accepted into the right schools and getting the grades; ours struggle to even enter the race. Their lives are the epitome of health; we labor under dark depression. Our dreams die, their dreams thrive.

But the text reminds us that though these are good gifts, they still aren't the real dreams. If we invest all our affection in them, they can actually blind us to the real dream. We are tempted not to stop dreaming, but to sell God short of the real dream. Have you done that? Are you content with what you can see? If you are, there is more good news: whether life has killed your dreams, as it did Sarah's, or granted you an Ishmael, as it did Abraham, God will not allow you to sell out short of your full inheritance. He is generous. He is eager to bless the things we care about, but he will not allow us to remain content until we grasp the grand dimensions of his kingdom.

Think of the apostle Paul in this regard. After he became a Christian, he dreamt of the conversion of his people Israel. Such was God's dream as well, but Paul had no idea *how* it would come about. Being keenly aware of his natural abilities and background, however, he threw himself headlong into the task with the missionary zeal of a Jew for Jesus. The initial result was an absolute disaster. Despite his genius for linking Hebrew texts with the life of Jesus, and his formidable powers of persuasion (Acts 9:22), he provoked more trouble than good, and birthed no converts. The early disciples had to get him out of town on the first available flight (Acts 9:25). Paul's initial attempt at his dream ended in dismal failure.

Then, in the training ground of the desert, God taught Paul that the *way* he would convert Israel was by sending him to the Gentiles, of all people. What kind of plan was that? (Rom 11:13-14). What credentials did he have to speak to Gentiles? What did this intellectual Jew have in common with the Rambos of Rome? But he went in obedi-

ence, applying the same strategy in every city. As a visiting rabbi he would be invited to speak in the synagogues, and in those Jewish centers of worship he would take the prophetic texts of the daily readings and skillfully apply them to Jesus. His preaching provoked interest and controversy, which at times escalated to persecution, with the result that a new group of converts was born in every city, leaving Isaacs laughing on every street corner. Paul's horizons expanded beyond the narrow confines of Jerusalem to the Greek world of Antioch, Philippi, Corinth and Ephesus.

Paul's dream for his people still lodged deep within his soul, however. When famine struck in Jerusalem, he took up a collection from all these new found Gentile churches as a gift for their poorer Jewish brothers. I wonder if Paul was driven by the larger dream. Did he think that with the presentation of this love offering, carried by Gentile representatives from every church, Israel would finally see what Isaiah envisioned so long ago — Gentiles from every nation coming to Jerusalem as a grain offering to God? (Isa 66:19-20). Could this be the hinge of history, when all Israel might turn back to her God, inaugurating the New Heavens and New Earth?

Sadly, the dream ended in failure once more. Instead of receiving a reception like Isaiah's Messianic banquet (Is 25:6ff), Paul's entrance into the temple with these Gentiles provoked a riot. The only letter of appreciation he received was an invitation to jail. For the most part he spent his retirement years in prison, while every church that he had planted struggled to survive. Some were filled with immorality, some were rife with false teachers, while others that remained true in doctrine lost their fervent hearts. Did life kill Paul's dream?

Like a grieving father, in his pain the apostle wrote letters to his children. He could do no more. Confined to his cell, he could not visit them. But God did not allow the dream to die. Those letters, born out his grief, would one day shape countless sons of Abraham, as infinite as the horizon itself.

Friends, don't let life kill your dream. We were made to have children, far more than we could ever dream of, whose every birth will bring indescribable laughter.

*"Shout for joy, O barren one,
You who have borne no child;
Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud,
You who have not travailed;
For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous
Than the sons of the married woman,'
says the LORD." (Isa 54:1)*

1. Everett Fox, *The Schocken Bible: Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses* (New York; Schocken, 1995), 73.
2. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), 26.
3. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1992), 159.
4. Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago, Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 131.
5. Wenham, 27.

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