



LESSONS IN LAUGHTER

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Catalog No. 1414

Genesis 21:1-21

14th Message

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May 7th, 2001

In Genesis 21 we come to a climactic moment in the life of Abraham. The entire drama has been moving toward this moment, the birth of Isaac, the event for which Abraham and Sarah have been waiting for twenty-five years. There is no greater joy in life than giving birth. If you don't believe this, just ask any mother. This text is a cameo of the joy that God desires to bring each one of us when he suddenly breaks into our lives and touches our barrenness.

Sadly, however, it is a joy that is short-lived for this family. Sarah's ecstatic laughter is drowned out by the mocking laughter of Ishmael, and a subsequent divorce. The story is very true to life. It makes us want to ask the question, Is lasting joy merely an elusive dream, or is joy our real destiny? The answer from the text may surprise us, as the narrator documents lessons in life's laughter.

The text opens with the long awaited birth of Isaac.

I. The Birth of Isaac: Unadulterated Joy (Genesis 21:1-7)

Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. (Gen 21:1-2, NASB)

The opening scene resonates with the pure, unadulterated joy that is ours when God breaks into our lives and fulfills his promises. Given the ages of Abraham and Sarah, and their twenty-five years of waiting, their joy must have been indescribable. But for the narrator, it is Sarah's exultation that is predominant. Nothing compares to the joy of a barren woman who bears a child at last. Thus the narrator frames the scene with God's intervention for Sarah and her consequent joy. Between the echoes of Sarah's delight we read of the obedient actions of Abraham.

The narrator begins by saying that "the LORD took note (*paqad*) of Sarah." This is the first time this term is used in the Bible. It describes a superior who gives careful attention to a person's situation, and then, at the right moment, steps in to intervene for them, dramatically altering their circumstances. The God who is the subject of the verb is constantly watching over his people. Out of his deep concern he intervenes from heaven to aid his distressed people and judge their oppressors (Gen 50:24; Exod 3:16; 4:31; 13:19; Ruth 1:6; 1 Sam 2:21).¹

The time for waiting is over at last. God intervenes on Sarah's behalf and radically alters her world. He proves absolutely faithful to Sarah to do exactly as he had promised. The fulfillment is recorded twice, to correspond to the double promise which he first gave to Abraham and then to Sarah (17:16-21; 18:10-15). The greatness of the miracle is further heightened by its fulfillment. It comes in

Abraham's old age, exactly at the appointed time it was promised. The matter could not be stated more emphatically. We can count on God's word, even for the impossible. We can stake our lives on God's promise, even when the waiting seems interminable. The word of God will drive history even when there is no hope in sight.

And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (21:3-5)

Following the statement of God's faithfulness to fulfill his promise, the narrator goes on to describe Abraham's faithful obedience. He names the boy Isaac ("*he laughs*") in obedience to what God had said, and immediately circumcises him, just as God had commanded. Abraham does not delay or debate when it comes to obedience. Seized in awe of God's faithfulness, his obedience probably seemed slight and easy. May it be so for us! This is why it is so important to experience the grace of God before we can adequately do what he requires of us. In Scripture, God's grace always precedes and drives obedience. At times like this, appreciation all but gives us wings and makes us fly.

And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (21:6-7)

Sarah is enraptured by delight. While Abraham is busy at work, she is making melodious music and poetic praise. Abraham names the son "*laughter*," but Sarah sings it. Her first refrain praises God, who transformed her laughter of unbelief into the laughter of joy indescribable. This new creation will gather a resounding chorus that will laugh alongside her at every mention of the boy's name. This is a timeless roar of infinite proportions. Sarah is the forerunner of Hannah, whose praise bursts into the narrative of Samuel, driving the theological guideposts all the way to Messiah (1 Sam 2:1-10). Sarah's second refrain celebrates the fact that no one but God would have made such a seemingly absurd promise: "Who would have said that Sarah would nurse sons?" The absurdity of God's promise heightens her praise, making it historic.

In a mere seven verses (the symbolic number of perfection), the narrator allows us to plumb the depths of a human heart overwhelmed by the faithfulness of God. The text evokes joy's deepest depths, with five echoes of *laughter*, and celebrates that rare ecstasy in life when sorrow and sighing flee away. C. S. Lewis termed this the "*inconsolable stab of joy*," a time when we are torn from the shadows and seem to float weightless to another time and

place. Though it is a rare occurrence in these stories, it is still a dense reality to be corporately celebrated with our deliberate obedience and delightful praise. At times like this we all should become poets.

*The fields, the floods, the heavens, with one consent
Did seem to laugh on me, and favor mine intent.
(Edmund Spenser, 1552-1599)*

But the narrator doesn't linger here. He quickly transports us into the near future, where old animosities and family tensions reemerge.

II. Ishmael Driven Out: Unspeakable Sorrow (Genesis 21:8-13)

A. Sarah's Demand (21:8-10)

And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." (21:8-10)

The idyllic joy that springs from Isaac's birth continues unabated for three years (the age when children were weaned, 2 Macc 7:27). Abraham prepares a huge feast, anticipating a full day of uninterrupted happiness. Wenham explains: "In a society where infant mortality was high, to reach the age of two or three would be regarded as a significant achievement, so this in part explains the magnitude of the celebrations. From now on Isaac looks relatively certain to be Abraham's heir."² But the joy of the household is short-lived as *laughter* is turned into *mocking* (the same root as *laughter*), by Isaac's half-brother, Ishmael.

One glance from a mother's eyes and Sarah interprets Hagar's childish play to be a threat to her son as Abraham's future heir. Filled with jealous rage, Sarah distances herself by refusing to even pronounce the boy's name, demoting him from the status of son to slave, and his mother, from wife to maid. Charged with the emotion of a mother bear being robbed of her cubs, she demands that her husband intervene to solve the situation. Her harsh disdain is clear as she orders Abraham to act with brute force: "Drive out *this* maid and her son!" The verb *garash* ("drive out") carries with it the idea of force (cf. Ex 6:1). Ruthless motherhood goes to work in defense of her boy.

B. Abraham "listens" to Sarah (21:11-13)

And the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant." (21:11-13)

Receiving the full force of Sarah's emotions, Abraham explodes with anger. According to the text, he is "greatly distressed." Wenham captures the severity of his displeasure: "Elsewhere in the Bible men explode in anger when they are merely 'displeased' (Num 11:10; 1 Sam 18:8). When God is 'displeased' with someone, death often follows (Gen 38:10; 2 Sam 11:7). Only here is anyone said to be 'very displeased.'"³ The reason is as clear as day. This son, whom

Sarah calls "the son of *this* maid," is Abraham's own flesh and blood, whom he loves. What began as a festive holiday ends with Abraham caught in the middle of warring relationships between two women and two sons.

It is only by the grace of God that we are able to maneuver through such pain. Fortunately, God intervenes to guide Abraham through this sea of emotion. God has the same affections as Abraham for the boy and his mother, and thus we might expect him to side with Abraham's anger, but he does not. He identifies with Abraham's affections, but gives him rather surprising counsel: "*Listen to the voice of your wife.*" This is the height of irony, since Abraham got into this predicament in the first place because he "*listened to the voice of his wife*" (16:2). On that occasion her motives were pure; she wanted to fulfill the promise of a son for her husband. But despite her good motives, her plan did not serve God's purposes. In this instance, however, rage and disdain taint her motives, and yet God tells Abraham, "Whatever Sarah says, obey (lit. "*hear*") her voice." The ways of God are beyond comprehension. The reason for God's directive is that, despite Sarah's ungodly anger, his larger purpose will be served by the separation of these two boys. Abraham need not fear for the boy's future. God will care for him and bless him. Thus it is time for Abraham to let go of what he had produced in his own strength. Ishmael must be sent off into the desert.

This may suggest that there are times when we can no longer cultivate the gifts of God simultaneously with our earthly affections. A time will come when God says we must let go. Though these things (or people) may be good in and of themselves, God says he will take care of them outside of our care. Continuing to cultivate affections in both worlds can damage our marriage and our home and prevent us from making God's kingdom on earth the central thing in our lives. Despite what the world tells us, we cannot have it all. We cannot enjoy the kingdom of God without paying a severe price. So for Abraham, the undiluted joy of the birth of the son of promise gives way to the unspeakable sorrow of losing a son after his own flesh. We are left with the terrible tension of what will happen to the boy and his mother.

Surprisingly, scene three is the longest and most detailed of the three. It focuses not on the celebration of Isaac ("*laughter*"), but on the salvation of Ishmael ("*God hears*"). What follows is one of the most touching scenes in the Bible.

III. Angelic Deliverance of Ishmael (Genesis 21:14-21)

A. Tender Departure (21:14a,b)

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. (21:14a,b)

Once God has spoken, Abraham does not delay. He rises first thing in the morning and prepares for the painful departure. The tender scene is laced with sorrow, as Abraham carries out Sarah's wishes but removes all her vindictive poison. He treats the lad and his mother with the utmost respect. He personally sees them off and prepares their provisions. How his heart ached as he gently draped the tiny backpack over her shoulder. Then, in silent grief,

he hands off his boy with that look of love that only a father can express. Off they go, not “driven out,” but merely “sent out,” in a divorce that Abraham never wanted but was forced to concede by God and his own wife.

B. Last Rites in the Desert (21:14c-16)

And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. And the water in the skin was used up, and she left the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, “Do not let me see the boy die.” And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept. (21:14c-16)

No sooner have they left than this little expedition of two find themselves wandering in the desert. Their life support is quickly used up; they are out of water. The narrator’s graphic description, “the water of the skin was used up,” helps us picture the little lad whose life was almost used up. Ishmael is in dire need of a miracle like the one performed for Sarah, whose body was used up. But Hagar does not have the faith to pray for such a miracle. She asks only that the boy die at a sufficient distance from her gaze. Thus she places him a bowshot length away so that she will not have to endure what every mother dreads, her child’s agonized cries. Her only prayer to God is that she not see her boy die. Then she cries as only a mother knows how to cry. Her tears are the only water left in the desert.

But there was more than one person crying that day.

C. God Hears: “Ishmael” (21:17-21)

And God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand; for I will make a great nation of him.” (21:17,18)

God answers Hagar, but, ironically, he responds not to her cries but to the cries of her son. The fact that this is mentioned twice may indicate that this son who earlier had mocked his brother is now crying tears of repentance. So swiftly does God act that his angel has no time to pack and descend to earth; he has to call out to Hagar from heaven. He gives the maid and the boy the dignity and affection that Sarah had robbed them of by telling her that “God heard the voice of the lad.” In that act of God’s hearing we hear the name “Ishmael” (repeated for emphasis). The name that Sarah refused to speak is now on the very lips of God. With fond affection he restores the identity of the one who was despoiled of it. Then God directs Hagar to tenderly take the boy’s hand and lift him up, and by faith walk with God into his future.

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. (21:19)

At this point, God opens Hagar’s eyes to see what she could not see before, a well of water. It is hard to tell if this was an actual well or a heavenly well of living water. Regardless of the source, it was a living reality. Hagar fills the skin with water and gives the lad a drink, and they both survive.

The story is bound together with a wonderful play on three Hebrew words. In Hebrew, the word “water” is *may-*

im; “to hear” is *shema*; and “heaven” is *shemayim*. The lost mother and son are at the edge of death because they have no *mayim*. But God hears (*shema*) the voice of the lad from heaven (*shemayim*), and gives the gift of *mayim* to save the life of the boy. God’s attentive hearing brings heaven to earth for the salvation of a cast-out woman and her son. And his care is divorced from all jealousy of rival family members. His love is pure and unadulterated, a care Abraham could no longer give within the context of his home. Rejection and isolation bring a strange sweetness to a soul that finds God in a wilderness.

And God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (21:20-21)

To show that the boy did far more than survive, the narrator casts us forward into his distant future. God will continue to be faithful to what he had promised. He was with the boy, and as a result, the lad grew (as did Isaac, vs. 8). This experience of being saved in the wilderness would shape his destiny. He would become an archer. Just as God had saved him when he was a bowshot away from his mother in the wilderness, so he became a skilled bowman in that harsh place of the wilderness. Ishmael didn’t just survive the desert, he conquered it.

The narrator concludes with the mention of Hagar as a single mother taking responsibility to provide a wife for her son. This was a parent’s final obligation toward a child. So Hagar returned to her original home to acquire a wife for Ishmael (as Abraham would later do for Isaac). Now that the boy is mature and married, we sense that the concerns Abraham had for Ishmael have been completely met in the provision of a gracious God — and to a much greater degree than if had Ishmael remained at home under Abraham’s roof.

IV. Lessons In Life’s Laughter

Our text is made up of three very different scenes, with vastly different moods. They cover the whole range of emotions: from the joy of birth to the lacerating sorrow of separation and divorce; from the agony at the prospect of a premature death to the awe of deliverance. Does this resemble the disparate events in your life? What are the spiritual lessons that lie underneath this sea of emotional swings? Where can we find a framework to make sense of it all? Fortunately, the narrator does this for us. In the midst of the wide range of experiences there is the repeated word “*hear*,” found in each of the scenes, that provides a unifying framework for the text. In the first scene it is spoken by Sarah, in the second by God, and the third by the angel. Through this repetition we learn what expectations we can have on this road of life, and whether joy is an illusive dream or our ultimate destiny.

A. Unexpected Eternal Joy – “Laughter”

In the first scene, Sarah sings, in response to the birth of Isaac, “*All who hear will laugh!*” The birth of Isaac after so many years of waiting brings her unadulterated joy. It is a joy that resounds not just with Sarah but with everyone who enters into the story. At times God breaks into our lives and touches the place of our barrenness. Then, like Sarah, we laugh uncontrollably. When God acts that way, no sorrow accompanies his actions; it is nothing but pure

joy. Isaiah predicts that after the coming and death of Messiah, this same Sarah-like joy will be given with every spiritual birth, for each one will be as miraculous as the birth of Isaac.

*“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)*

Sadly, this joy seems short-lived. It is stamped out by oppressive sorrow, as the second scene depicts.

B. The Pain of Letting Go – Mocking Laughter

In the second scene, the joyous laughter of Isaac’s birth is turned into mocking laughter. Sarah angrily confronts Abraham, demanding that he drive out Hagar and her son. Abraham is caught between two women, two sons, and his own affections. To our surprise, God says, *“All she says to you hear (obey).”* So Abraham must learn the painful lesson that if he is to continue to cultivate the true joy of the LORD, then he will have to let go of the object of his earthly affections. There is very little joy in letting go of children we love, or any precious things we may have created in our own strength. But to have the kingdom at the center of our lives, we have to let go. The letting go process increases our capacity for the things that God is going to do. So God asks Abraham, *“All she says to you, obey.”*

At this point there is no dialogue in the text. Abraham’s grief catches him by the throat, and he cannot speak. But he refuses to withhold affection. Though he cannot speak, his deeds convey a supreme tenderness in those final moments before the departure of a son and woman he had grown to love. We are left to fill in the tears. Letting go is painful. God grants us the dignity of our silent grief, knowing how difficult it is to die to our dreams. But if we are to have true joy, letting go is mandatory.

C. The Joy of Trust: God Hears — “Ishmael”

Once Abraham lets go, his worst fears are realized. His former wife and son quickly get lost and run out of water. In letting go, the favored son Ishmael experiences separation, loneliness and despair for the first time in his life. The lad who laughed a mocking laugh is now weeping tears of repentance out in that hostile place called the wilderness. Yet, *“God heard the voice of the lad...God heard.”* The boy prayed, heaven came down to earth, and Hagar was touched by an angel. Her eyes were opened, a well of living water appeared, and their lives were delivered. In that act, Ishmael learned something for himself that he had never learned in his own home: he learned the joy of trust.

Thus we see that in the process of letting go, God will give far more care than ourselves to the things that concern us. Notice that God gave the boy much more than water. He remained with him to equip him for a far bigger destiny than he would have had, had he remained at home. So in letting go, not only are we able to cultivate a deeper joy in the LORD, those we care for become much more than we could have imagined. We would never program a near-death experience for our son or daughter, but that is what this boy needed. And in the gift of despair, his mocking laugh was transformed into tears. Nothing brings more joy to a parent than tears of repentance on a child’s cheeks. So don’t be disillusioned if that first “inconsolable stab of joy” seems short-lived. Our present grief is making our future joy surer.

I want to close with George MacDonald’s words, which speak of his hope for future joy, written after he had lost a son in infancy:

*Twilight of the transfiguration-joy
Gleam-faced, pure-eyed, strong willed, high hearted boy!
Hardly thy life clear forth of heaven was sent,
Ere it broke out into a smile, and went.
So swiftly thy growth, so true thy goalward bent,
Thou, child and saint inextricably blent,
Will one day teach thy father in some heavenly tent.⁴*

1. The Greek version of the Old Testament (LXX) translates the term with the verb *episkopeo* which the New Testament writers later use to describe one of the main functions of elders who are to give “oversight” (1 Pet 5:2) in the church.

2. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), 81.

3. Wenham, 83.

4. George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), 131.