

## Jesus in Genesis: The Birth of Isaac

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 18:10-15, 21:1-7

Years ago I read an article on a website called Mere Orthodoxy by a man named Michael Sacasas. In the article he talked about a disturbing phenomenon he'd noticed when he went to the movies. It was something he saw particularly when he went to movies that were earnest and sincere, movies that were trying to say something hopeful and uplifting, movies like *Saving Private Ryan*, or *The Fellowship of the Ring*, or *Les Miserables*. In their different ways, these are movies which try to say something good and hopeful about the world. They lift up virtues. *Saving Private Ryan* about sacrifice and patriotism, *The Fellowship of the Ring* about friendship and service, *Les Miserables* about grace and redemption. He would be watching these movies and when the movies came to a sincere part, an earnest part, some people in the theater would laugh. Not at a joke or a light moment in the movie, they would laugh at the part when someone on screen was saying or doing something hopeful, earnest and virtuous.

What would make someone laugh in a moment like that? Sacasas suggests that it's self-protective laughter. It's a laughter of a soul who's trying to protect himself from any emotion or idea or attachment that might require you to surrender yourself. It's a laughter that's meant to swat away any strong feeling or virtue that might give up your heart. It's a laugh that guards the heart from feeling and hope.

Sarah knew all about that kind of laughter. Sarah had been laughing this self-protective laugh for years. It didn't used to be that way. When she and Abram were married Sarah was full of hope and happiness. Hope that they'd settle down in Ur, near family. Hope that they would have a family of their own. Hope for a stable life in a community of friends. Hopes for play dates, picnics, and picket fences. Even after Abram came and told her about how God was calling him to something different, she still hoped. He'd come to her one night by the campfire. It was one of those clear desert nights when the sky was a dome of stars: "Sarah, Sarah, we must leave our home. God is calling me to something wonderful. He is going to show us a new land. We are going to be Father and Mother of a great nation. Our children will bless the world! He said our descendants will be like the stars in the sky!" She had believed him. She had seen the belief in his eyes and in the early days she shared his passion.

But that was more than 25 years ago. 25 years of wandering and disappointment. Early on in the journey she had been full of expectation. Every month she would be hyper-attentive to her body, trying to sense if she might be pregnant. But you can only do that for so many months. Now she didn't even pay attention. Every night at the dinner table, Abram prayed the same prayer he'd been praying for years: "Lord, thank you for your gifts to us. Please remember your great promises to us!" The words were well-practiced. Both of them would mumble 'amen' when the prayer was done, but honestly, at this point, neither of them expected anything to happen. What did Sarah expect? Mostly Sarah expected tomorrow would be more or less like today, only tomorrow she'd be one day older and a little more tired

Which is why she laughed back in chapter 18. You remember the story. Three strange visitors had come to Abraham and said, "By this time next year Sarah will have a son!" She overheard it and laughed. She Itzacked. She Isaaced. She snorted. She couldn't help herself; it was such a ridiculous idea. Her ninety-year-old body had trouble getting out of a chair; how was she supposed to carry and deliver a baby?!

I'm willing to bet the sound Sarah made when she laughed was the same sound that Michael Sacasas heard in the movie theater. It was the same self-protective laugh. It was the laugh of someone who not only didn't have hope, but someone who'd given up trying to hope. Those are two different things. Sarah had become cynical. A cynical person is someone who not only has no hope, it's also someone who's stopped trying to hope. A cynical person guards themselves against hope. It's a perilous spiritual condition, and it's the spiritual source of both Sarah's laughter and the kinds in the movie theater.

C.S. Lewis writes about this kind of laughter. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has a chapter where he talks about different kinds of laughter and different kinds of humor. Lewis is pro-laughter and pro-humor, but he does identify a kind of laughter that is counter to the Christian life, a kind of laughter that is corrosive to

faith. He calls it flippancy. What is flippancy? Lewis says flippancy is making a joke out of virtue, or talking as if virtue is funny. Flippancy, says Lewis, is a frame of mind where serious subjects are treated as if they are ridiculous. Flippancy, says Lewis, builds up strong “armor plating” against God and his grace. “It is a thousand miles away from joy...it creates no affection among those who practice it.”

I think it’s fair to say that we live in a flippant age, an age of flippancy. It’s not just Sarah and those kids in the movies theater laughing this cynical laugh; there’s a whole lot of people all around us who have not only lost their hope, but who’ve given up trying to hope. It’s reflected in the polls. Increasingly people are pessimistic about the future and we tend to hang that on politicians, but I think this is bigger than politics, this is deeper than politics; it reflects a culture full of people who’ve not only lost hope, but who are afraid to hope.

I think that when I was young and I heard that Genesis 18 story of Sarah laughing at the promise, I was taught to think badly of Sarah. ‘Sarah laughed at the promise She had no faith! Don’t do that children. Believe in the promise!’ And that’s right of course. We are called to be people of faith; we are called to hope. But the older I get the more sympathy I have for Sarah. When you have been disappointed so often as she had, hope becomes a burden. When you get your hopes up for a baby month after month, year after year, when you allow yourself to believe: ‘This is it! It’s going to happen!’ only to have that hope shattered, at some point you say to yourself, “I can’t take this anymore! This is too much!” And you stop trying to hope. Is it the right thing to do? No. Is it human and understandable? Yes.

I think that there are more people here this morning in Sarah’s frame of mind than we like to admit. I think there are lots of people here for whom years of steady disappointment, years of loss, years of pain, years of struggle have put you in a place where you’re not really expecting anything in this world to change. You’re expecting tomorrow to be like today, full of the same problems, only you’ll be one day older and a little more worn out. Even at Christmastime, surrounded by the singing and the festivities, you can smile and put on a good show, but your heart is pretty flat. You don’t have much hope and you’ve just about given up trying to hope.

The message of Genesis 21 and the message of Christmas is for you! In Genesis 21, Sarah laughs again, only it is a completely different kind of laughter. She holds her child in her arms and she laughs, but it’s not a scoffing sound; now it’s a laugh of pure joy. The laugh of joy is the opposite of the cynical laugh of cynicism. That’s what C.S. Lewis says in *The Screwtape Letters*. The opposite of flippancy is joy. Lewis calls joy the laughter of heaven. He calls it a meaningless acceleration in the rhythm of celestial experience. Lewis calls joy the serious business of heaven.

When Isaac is born, not only is Sarah’s laugh joyful, it’s a joy of a very specific kind. There’s a kind of joyful laugh of a person who’s finally seen the fulfillment of a thing they’ve been waiting for and working for their whole life. Maybe a football team has dreamed of winning the state championship. They work hard all summer in the weight room and they work hard all fall on the practice field and at their games, they pour themselves out and, lo and behold, their hope comes true! They win the state championship! Afterwards, in the locker room celebration, there’s hugs, and high-fives, and there’s lots of laughter. That laughter is joyful, but not joyful in the way that Sarah is joyful in this passage. That’s the joy of achievement.

Sarah didn’t achieve anything. She wasn’t working towards anything. Sarah had stopped hoping AND Sarah had stopped trying to hope. She wasn’t training for this or working for it, and yet she wakes up one morning to find new life kicking inside her. New life kicking down the walls of hopelessness and despair. And all at once her weeping is turned to dancing, her cynicism is turned into singing, and everlasting Joy has crowned her head. Sarah laughs, and she names her baby after her laughter, because now she knows that, whether she believes them or not, the promises of God are true and they are wonderful. It’s not the laughter of achievement; it’s the laughter of grace. It’s the least cynical sound you’ve ever heard.

That theme of God’s promises being true and unstoppable is so clearly the theme of this passage. Did you notice that the certainty of the promises of God are celebrated three times in the first two verses of the passage? “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.” Three times in two verses. The Holy Spirit really doesn’t want you to miss this. In those two verses, it’s like the Holy Spirit is leaning over and tapping us on our hard forehead, trying to get it through our thick skulls: “God keeps his promises, God will do what he said, God’s grace will not fail!” This story is all God and his grace. It’s not the faithfulness of the people, it’s not the moral excellence of the people, it’s all about God.

Abraham and Sarah do nothing and expect nothing; but God shows up anyway, and, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, he overflows in grace to these two tired people. All that's left for them to do is laugh. And maybe sing.

Is there anyone here who hasn't already made the connection with this story and the Christmas story? If so, let me do that for you. What God does here anticipates what happens at Bethlehem on that first Christmas morning. Was there laughter that day? It doesn't say so, but there was joy. Luke tells us that the Shepherds left the manger glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. I've got to believe that the glorifying and the praising included more than a little laughter, laughter of the same kind that Sarah laughed. Laughter because God had come to his people, God had come to save his people, and he'd shown himself to a bunch of schleppey shepherds who had long ago stopped hoping for anything more than their next meal and a warm place to sleep, but who instead find themselves talking to angels and meeting the savior of the world.

What God does in Genesis 21 is what he does again in Luke 2. It's also what he will do in Luke 24 when a group of women come to the tomb hoping for no more than a chance to embalm a dead body and instead find that Christ is risen. It's what he will do again at the end of time when the trumpet will sound and Christ will return and everything will be made new. We will see it and first we will cry and then we will laugh. We will laugh at our doubts, we will laugh at the goodness of it all, and the laughter will never end. This is all going to happen... just as he promised.

My last words are to everyone here whose hopes are flat and listless. I want to speak to you people here today who are not only low on hope, you're barely trying to hope anymore. I say to you: Fear not, for I bring to you glad tidings of great Joy. Jesus Christ is born. I say to you: the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. I say to you that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. I say that God will keep all his promises! Maybe all that good news just bounces off you. Maybe those gospel proclamations just sound like a bunch of clichés. I'm sorry if that's true. I wish for something better for you. I want hope and faith and joy for you. But in the end, your coldness and cynicism will not stop God from having his way with you and from fulfilling his purposes for you. If God could soften Sarah's cynical heart, he can change anyone, and if you belong to him, he will change you too. Because, it's God we're talking about here, and he will do what he has promised.

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