

18<sup>th</sup> June 2023

**Genesis 18:1-15**

**Faith Full of Promises**

Have you ever heard a promise, or a prediction, which you couldn't help but laugh at, perhaps even embarrassingly out loud? You know, like in a movie or TV show where a character not known for their academic intelligence says, 'I'm going to university to become a nuclear scientist', and another character laughs loudly with a mouthful of drink? Even if it's not as loud or embarrassing as that, you probably have had times where someone has made a promise or prediction which has made you laugh, or cry. Politicians have a habit of doing this; one I remember is from the mid-1980s when our then Prime Minister Bob Hawke said, 'by the year 1990, no Australian child will be living in poverty'. At the beginning of a sporting season coaches or club leaders often make predictions about how well their team will do this year; promises which often come across to us as a desperate attempt to keep their jobs at least for the whole season. And in many ways, it's hard, isn't it? Sometimes even what we think are the most out-there promises are delivered on. We also don't want people to limit their goals of what they can achieve based on others think of them, or politicians just accepting the bad things happening in our country without believing they can change them, or leaders of sporting teams just accepting they will never achieve success. But, to us, sometimes those promises seem to be so unrealistic that we find it difficult to see how they can come about.

In this well-known story of God promising a son to the very old couple of Abraham and Sarah, we see how we, as people, can react to promises from God which seem unrealistic to us. I think this story is so loved because it is so human; it is easy to see ourselves in at least some parts of it. This is the third time God has come to Abraham and promised him that he will be the father of a great nation. Each time Abraham's response has been the same, 'But Lord, I am so old, and you haven't even given me one child!' After the first time, Abraham and Sarah decided God needed a bit of help, that the plan needed changing a bit, so Abraham had a son with Sarah's slave-girl, Hagar. Not surprisingly, that didn't turn out very well! It's not unusual for people to make their own interpretations of what God actually means; changing things around so they better suit what we think is what Adam and Eve did, and we still do it today (with similar less-than-desirable results as happened for Abraham and Sarah).

And now, God Himself comes to visit Abraham and Sarah (although they don't know it's Him), accompanied by two other visitors. Abraham and Sarah show their guests great hospitality, giving them the best of food and drink they can offer. And then, God for the third time makes His promise that; "I'll come back about this time next year, and when I do, Sarah will already have a son." (v. 10b) We are told that Sarah's reaction was to laugh, and very understandably to say to herself, "Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, will I really know such happiness?" (12b) To which, God's response was, "I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me. I'll come back next year at the time I promised, and Sarah will already have a son." (14)

When we look at this well-known story, we probably tend to concentrate a lot on Abraham as the main character and see Sarah as playing a supporting role. But a lot of what we like about this story, and a lot of what we learn about how we respond to God's promises, comes from Sarah. And that is without being critical of her or judging her, because her reaction of laughter and disbelief to God's totally unrealistic promise is so like how we react, even if we don't outright laugh at God. Like Sarah, we often limit God and what He can do to the level of our experience; to what we see as being practicable and reasonable. We put our human, earthly boundaries onto the One who Created the universe (yes, it sounds silly, but think how often you do it), so that we think; 'that relationship can't be repaired, I can't cope with what I am facing now, there can't be a good outcome from this situation, so there's no point in even bothering to pray about it or handing it over to God'. We may not laugh, like Sarah did, that a seemingly hopeless situation can be resolved, but we can very quickly 'write-off' any hope that God can help us out here.

We can expect God's promises to love us, to protect us, to always be looking after us and giving us what is best for us, will be fulfilled in the way we expect them to be. We might pray for a relationship to be healed and restored, but we pray that the other person would change, rather than seeing healing perhaps coming from changing ourselves, and asking God to help us see and do that. We might get frustrated because we have prayed for more money, or success, or freedom, because we know that when we can do what we want, when we want, how we want, we will be fulfilled, rather than asking God to help us change our attitude, our heart, so we see what we do have and the many blessings we have in our life already. We can pray for and expect healing for someone who is very ill, and feel frustrated and let down when this doesn't happen, rather than seeing God's miracle of faith and hope which enables someone to pass peacefully from this life knowing where they are going, and for their family finding comfort in that faith also.

Very often we downplay what God does, the miraculous promises He keeps. We call it a ‘coincidence’ when things work out well, or we say how ‘lucky’ we are to live in the country we do with the healthcare we have. Or we think about how smart and clever we are as people to have these healthcare advances, or the technology of today, but like those people way back with the Tower of Babel, we don’t see God’s gifts and His hands in making all these things possible. ‘Wow, how lucky am I that things just happened to turn out all perfectly for me! What a coincidence!’

And, too often, we overlook what God does. I feel like I should wear a T-shirt that says, ‘Quick to pray for God’s help, slow to see when it happens and thank Him!’ How many of you could wear that same shirt with me? How many times do we do that, pray things like: ‘God, help me to get through this.’ ‘Help that person get better.’ ‘Please guide me to make this situation work out ok.’ ‘Whatever happens here, give me the strength to accept it.’ And then, when it does all work maybe not in the way we had envisaged, but perhaps even better, how many times do we fail to even notice God at work there, both in and through us, and then to thank Him? I know sometimes I think back later and say, ‘Oh yeh, thanks God, you helped that work out really well’, but many other times, I even forget to do that. God is at work in our lives every day, so it is easy to take for granted and overlook what He does give us and do for us.

When Sarah laughed in disbelief at God’s promise of a child, God replied: ‘I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me.’ (14b) We learn from what God did in Sarah and Abraham’s life, what He did in the lives of many others in the Bible, including other incredible promises, and what we have already experienced in our lives, that God calls us to be open to how He keeps His promises to us and all His people. Sarah wasn’t the only woman in the Bible, young or old, who had a promised baby when it wasn’t expected. God chose people to be kings, and leaders, and disciples, who would not have been chosen our human standards. Whether it’s about ourselves, our family, our Church, our society, our world, ask God to give us the faith and the peace to hand our worries and concerns over to Him, and to be open to how He will respond to those things.

To follow straight on from that, God calls us to trust Him. It’s okay to have an idea for how we want things to play out, but we are called to trust God that He will deal with it in the way He knows is best. We see such a small part of the picture, God sees it all. In trusting God we are then open to see how He keeps His promises to us, rather than being caught up on our own expectations, and we are also open to being a part of what He does in whatever way He calls us to do so.

This is all about an attitude, a faith, in which we open ourselves up to God and what He does in our lives, and it finally leads us to see what God does, and to give thanks. How aware are we, each and every day, to seeing what God does in our lives, in us, through us? Do we see Him at work in both the little everyday things which ‘just happen’ anyway, like the sun coming up each morning, as well as the big and amazing things which blow us away, like the birth of a child? There are many promises of love, or care, of blessings, of hope, God fulfills for us each day. In being open to how He does this, and trusting Him, our attitude becomes one of seeing what He does for us and giving thanks to Him for that.

It’s great when you look at a story you know very well, so well you think you know everything about it, and then a new angle of it comes to you. In thinking about Sarah’s laugh this week, it struck me that she would have been laughing in a very different way, a happy and willing way, when God blessed her with a child one year after this. Imagine her joy, after waiting for so long, in watching her child grow and fulfill all the promises God had made to her and Abraham. The greatest promise God has made to us is the promise of forgiveness and new life which is ours through Jesus’ death and resurrection. God did that in a way we would not have planned, but through it He has given us a hope and a joy we can live out in our lives each day. May we also laugh at God, regularly; not in ridicule or disbelief, but in amazement and joy at how He continually keeps His promises to us, and the faith we have been given to see them. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Can you think of any promises you have heard people make which have seemed very unrealistic and unbelievable to you?
- Think about how you respond to God’s promises to you: do you sometimes limit them by your own expectations, expect Him to fulfill them your way, downplay what God does, overlook what God does?
- Take some time to think about or discuss how you react, and consider to how you can change this into a reaction which is open, trusting, and thankful for how God fulfills His promises to you.

Pray: thank God for keeping His promises to us in so many ways each day. Ask Him to help us to see this through our faith, so that we can always be open to Him.

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