

Established
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Genesis 17 & 18

Laughter isn't always a reaction to being amused. What are some other reasons people sometimes laugh? [Illustration: My boss who always laughed at bad news.]

Sometimes we shake our heads and laugh because something seems too good to be true and we doubt it CAN be true. Why is doubting a natural human tendency? How is our tendency to doubt actually for our protection in a scary world?

Last week in Genesis 15 and 16, Paul Hahn did a great job of teaching us about the danger of trying to "help" God with our own short-cuts instead of waiting on His timing. He also taught us about how God ceremoniously affirmed his covenant with Abram with cut up animals and a smoking, floating pot of fire. Paul also emphasized how Abram and Sarai had to have the faith to wait a quarter of a century before God delivered on giving them a biological son of promise, Isaac, in their old age.

Now in Genesis 17 and 18 the waiting was almost over, and God came to Abram to confirm the long-awaited heir would be born as the beginning of the nation of Israel. Though Abram and Sarai had demonstrated faith in God's promise, there was still a feeling of awe and a little doubt that this could really be happening to them in their nineties. It was almost laughable!

In this text we're going to see several interesting things:

- God declared Who He is by a new name. It's a name we need to understand.
- God also changed Abram and Sarai's names signaling a new chapter for them.
- God affirmed that He keeps His promises even if they seem to be impossible.
- Even people of faith like Abram and Sarai could also be people with doubts.

The point: Do you ever struggle to believe that God's promises in scripture can be true in your life? Do you read them and think, "*Lord, I know you promised this, but I just don't see it happening for me.*" Do you really embrace that nothing is too hard for God? Are you "standing on the promises" or laughing in the shadows doubting that His promises apply to you?

Genesis 17:1–10 (ESV) — **1** When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, **2** that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."

- For the first time in scripture God declared Himself as El Shaddai - "God Almighty."ⁱ
- Why was that name change significant for Abram? Why is it significant for us?

- God's covenant with Abram was unilateral; God would fulfill the promises and all Abram had to do was "Serve [God] faithfully and live a blameless life."ⁱⁱ
- No one is sinless, but we can be blameless thanks to God's Holy Spirit Who lives in the hearts of those who have trusted Christ.
- Abram was ninety-nine years old which makes these next verses incredible.

3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, **4** "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. **5** No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. **6** I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. **7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. **8** And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." **9** And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. **10** This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

15 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. **16** I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

- Verse three: How is Abram's reaction to God's presence a lesson for us?
- **Psalms 33:8 (ESV)** — **8** Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
- **Psalms 145:5 (ESV)** — **5** On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.
- Jesus is a personal Savior so we can have a tendency to lose our awe of Him.
- One reason to regularly read the Psalms is to refresh our "awe" of God Almighty.
- God changed Abram and Sarai's names. Some scholars say it was simply a change in dialect as they moved from Ur to Canaan. Others say it was a signal of a new chapter as God began to fulfill His covenant.
- *"God changed Abram's name, meaning "high father," to "Abraham," meaning "father of a multitude." At the same time, God changed Abraham's wife's name from "Sarai," meaning "my princess," to "Sarah," meaning "mother of nations."ⁱⁱⁱ*
- God changed Jacob's name to Israel, Simon's to Peter and Saul's to Paul. Each new name meant a new chapter. When we trust Christ as Savior and Lord, He changes our identity from enemy of God to friend and beloved child. (Rom.5:10)
- You know those "Hi, My Name Is..." stickers? Maybe when we look into the mirror of our hearts, we need to see one that reads, "...beloved child of the King."
- Abraham fell on his face in awe; but he also fell down laughing:

17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

- It feels like Abraham’s laughter was a mixture of joy and disbelief.
- Faith and doubt are not mutually exclusive.
- I read a quote this week, *“Doubt is natural, but faith is supernatural.”*

18 And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” **19** God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

- Verse 20 tells us God WOULD bless Ishmael but not as the child of promise.
- The child of promise would come biologically from Sarah in her old age.
- God chose the name Isaac for the baby. More on that in a minute.
- In chapter 18 God showed up again in the form of three men. In the Old Testament when God showed up as a person, a burning bush, a pillar of fire, etc. we call it a “theophany.” In the New Testament God came Himself as a baby.

Genesis 18:10–15 (ESV) — **10** The Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. **11** Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. **12** So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” **13** The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ **14** Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” **15** But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

- When Abraham laughed it was joy mixed with doubt. Sarah’s laugh was the chuckle of *“You’ve got to be kidding me! I’m way past the hot flashes and next year I’m having a baby at age 90? Give me a break!”*
- Sarah wasn’t “standing on the promises;” she was laughing in the shadows with doubt that God’s promises applied to her post-menopausal self!
- Sarah not only forgot that God can DO anything, she also forgot that He HEARS everything. *“Why did Sarah laugh?” “I didn’t laugh!” “Yes, you did!”*
- In verse 14 of chapter 18 God gave Sarah and Abraham the splash of cold water we all need from time to time: *“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”*
- We should put that on sticky notes everywhere we look.
- “God, I know you promised in your word, but...”
- “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”
- “This seems impossible.” “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”
- So, how did things turn out for Abraham and Sarah?

- **Genesis 21:1–2 (NLT)** — **1** The Lord kept his word and did for Sarah exactly what he had promised. **2** She became pregnant, and she gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age. This happened at just the time God had said it would.
- They named the boy Isaac as God had commanded.
- Do you know what that name means in Hebrew? It means, “he laughs.”^{iv}
- You know the old saying: “One day we’ll look back on this and laugh?”
- Whenever they called the boy’s name they were reminded, “*We laughed at God’s promise, but God got the last laugh, He did exactly what He said He would do.*”
- Sarah saw the positive side of Isaac’s name: **6** And Sarah declared, “God has brought me laughter. All who hear about this will laugh with me. **7** Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse a baby? Yet I have given Abraham a son in his old age!”
- In **Job 8:21** we read one of the few positive things Job’s friends said to him: “*He will once again fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy.*”
- If we will trust God’s promises in scripture and believe nothing is too hard for Him, he will turn our chuckles of doubt into the laughter of joy and gratitude.

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- How does this apply to you and me? If we’ve trusted Christ, God has given us tremendous promises in scripture. Do you ever struggle to believe those promises can be true for you? Promises like:
 - God’s promise to never leave you or forsake you (Heb. 13:5)
 - God’s promise of His Spirit to guide and comfort you (John 14:16)
 - God’s promise to you of His strength (Is. 41:10)
 - God’s promise to supply your needs (Matt. 6:31-32)
 - God’s promise to answer your prayers (1 John 5:14-15)
 - God’s promise to give you wisdom (James 1:5), help in trouble (Psalm 46:13), His peace (Phil. 4:6-7)
 - God’s promise that I don’t have to be a slave to sin, and He will forgive all my sins (Romans 6:1-7; 1 John 1:9)
 - God’s promise that all things will work for my good (Romans 8:28)
 - And the most important promise of all: Eternal life with Him if we will place our faith and trust in His Son Jesus (John 3:16)

[Here’s a link to a great list of many of God’s promises to followers of Christ:
<https://www.intouch.org/watch/sermons/gods-precious-promises>]

- This text has taught us that even God’s most faithful saints can have doubts.
- It’s a natural tendency to ask God, “*How, when, and will You really do it for me?*”
- God gives promises but not blueprints. We want to know how and when. All we need to know is WHO: El Shaddai – God Almighty. Nothing is too hard for Him.
- “*Doubt is natural, but faith is supernatural.*”
- How can we overcome our doubts? Jesus taught us that in Mark chapter 9 when a desperate dad had a demon-possessed son: Jesus said... “*All things are possible for one who believes.*” The dad said, “*I believe; help my unbelief!*”^v

- When we read a promise in scripture and begin to doubt it could be true for us, we need to cry out to God like that Father: *“I believe; help my unbelief!”*
- If we will ask Him to strengthen our faith and if we will embrace the fact that nothing is too hard for El Shaddai -- “God Almighty, we will be “standing on the promises” and not laughing in the shadows doubting His promises apply to us.

ⁱ [El Shaddai](#). (2016). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

ⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [Holy Bible: New Living Translation](#) (Ge 17:1). Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/name-change.html>

^{iv} Thomas, R. L. (1998). In [New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition](#). Foundation Publications, Inc. **3327**. יִצְחָק **Yitschaq** (850c); from 6711;

^v [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Mk 9:23–24). (2016). Crossway Bibles.