

THE LAUGHTER LESSON

By Steve Zeisler

How often we underestimate what God can do in our lives! I have a friend in his forties who seemed to have everything going against him. His family has for many years denigrated him as a person. He has always been single and has lived alone much of his life. Having only received a high school education, he has never had a high-prestige occupation. And he has fought valiantly against a very difficult pattern of temptation all of his life. As a result of all these things, this brother who loves the Lord and his Word has always assumed he could not be used as a Bible teacher. Recently, he shared with me how he is thrilled to the point of trembling to find now in his mid-forties the Lord is opening up an opportunity for him to be a teacher and counselor. Many who have advanced degrees and high stations in life have begun to realize that this man has something to offer as a teacher of the Word of God. My friend's experience reminds me of Zechariah and Elizabeth who, though barren to an advanced age, realized to their utter surprise that God was giving them a child. Their story, too, is one of unexpected joy.

In the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, we will come to a sentence I want you to consider as the theme for this message. It is the question asked of Sarah when she laughed at God's promise that she would give birth to a child: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" The Lord was asking, "Have you let yourself believe about you and your circumstances that they contain something too difficult for the Lord to handle."

This is where we will arrive after we have surveyed some history and the statements of God in chapters 17 and 18 of Genesis. But I want to ask you now: Do you believe there is something too difficult for God to do in your life? Have you set aside some issue because you have seen it as impossible, and have you quit hoping? I think we will be ministered to by this question and its obvious answer as we begin by looking at chapter 17:1-14:

"Now 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. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly.' And Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, 'As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.'

"God said further to Abraham, 'Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.'"

God began this instruction to Abram with a mighty word of self--disclosure:

"I am El Shaddai." This is a mysterious Hebrew term which stresses the power of God and is usually translated, 'God Almighty.' We are presented here with a new emphasis on God's self--disclosure that had not been seen before. The promise given Abraham concerning his seed and the land he would possess remained essentially the same. But there was a new fullness to this presentation--more information, more clarity. Abraham was told that he should walk blamelessly before God. The logical implication of the appearance of El Shaddai and of the covenant between them was that Abraham's life should change. Anyone who knows God as this man did should walk blamelessly before him, considering his way and seeking righteous behavior without compromise. Abraham fell on his face at the appearance of God. Hearing the voice declaring the nature of God moved Abraham to prostrate worship before him.

Then we are told of a name change. The word Abram means "Exalted Father." The word Abraham means "Father of a Multitude." There is no critical, essential difference between these two names. The important point of the name change, I believe, is that the sovereignty of God was upheld. It is always the master, the greater figure, who has the authority to name those inferior to him. In the garden of Eden, Adam was told to name the animals. Since he was to have dominion over the earth, he was the proper one to give names to all the animals. Jesus, you will remember, changed Simon's name to Peter. He knew this man, his future and his heart and had an authority supreme enough to change his name. Parents give names to their children because they have authority over them. Since God had authority over Abraham, his friend, he gave him his new name.

Furthermore, he instructed Abraham to begin the rite of circumcision. In the law, when a Hebrew slave voluntarily chose a lifetime of servitude to a family because of their good treatment, a mark was made on him to indicate that choice. We see the same process today in Africa where elders will scar children with appropriate marks indicating the allegiance they have to a particular tribe. The Lord God said to Abraham, "A mark will be made on you that will be the announcement in every generation of your commitment to serve me and of my ownership." Ray Stedman has written:

"What a strange thing this is--the removal of the foreskin of the male procreative organ--literally carving in the flesh the sign of God's lordship.! This is the great sign of Jewry, intended by God to be the mark of his possession, that they were God's instrument to use for blessing among the nations. It was placed upon this particular part of the body to indicate that they were to be physically separate from the other nations. The very organ by which that separation could be violated bore upon it the mark of God's ownership."

Abraham, his descendants and all who knew God through him were to carry the physical mark that announced they were slaves of the Lord, owned by the Lord in a unique and significant way.

While in high school, I played football. This was in the sixties when long hair was fashionable, But our coach insisted that everyone on his team shave their heads at the beginning of every season. Naturally, the yearbook pictures were taken in the Fall, so you could always spot these odd-looking males with skinheads among the pictures of others with long hair. This was the coach's way of saying, "You are my slaves. You will do what I say. You are to be different, marked to live with the implications of my discipline. Standards are expected of you." His placing a mark on us announced his ownership, at least during football season. Similarly, God called for a mark on Abraham, on the most physically and psychologically sensitive part of his body, as a mark of ownership.

Further, we are told in verse 6 that El Shaddai was to be God to Abraham and his descendants. In verse 8 God repeated this promise, "I will be their God." Probably the fullest statement of all the promises is found in this significant little phrase. God was saying, "Not only will I do what I have promised to do, but I will be in person the living and personal God for you and for your descendants--a God who can be known, trusted, worshipped and followed throughout life. I will be your God."

Abraham first encountered God in broad activity. He was called to move his family great distances to a place he did not know. He fought battles God gave him to fight. He worshipped on mountain tops, and he declared his faith before kings. Although he was a man of activity in his encounters with God at the beginning, here we see increasingly a mature relationship that requires no great activity.

In 1 John 2:12-14, the apostle John talks about the stages of growth in the Christian life. He taught that the babe of faith knows that he now has a relationship with the father and that his sins are forgiven. The young man of faith is primarily engaged in battle, trusting God and his Word and defeating the evil one. But the mature in faith know a God who is from everlasting and who is unchanged from the beginning. What characterizes maturity in the Christian faith is a deep, personal, intimate knowledge of God that can exist when motionless and apart from the support of other people or energy expended. There have been some tremendous books written in recent years about knowing God--the ability to understand him and his heart, to reflect his purposes, and to appreciate his being. I believe Abraham was at this stage in his life. God said, "I will be your God. I will be their God." A greater knowledge of the names and nature of God was revealed in this beautiful spiritual interchange taking place in Abraham's maturity.

Abraham was to be blameless in his daily walk, He received his identity from God who had the sovereignty and authority to change his name. He was to act to bear the mark of God's ownership in his life. All of these things speak of intimacy with and knowledge of God that characterizes the mature man or woman of faith.

Now look at verses 15 through 27:

"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.' 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 Thee!' 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. 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 house-hold, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him."

We are told expressly in the book of Romans that in this period of his life Abraham believed God. You will remember that thirteen years previously he had taken over God's place and had rebelled at the slowness of God in keeping his promises. At that time, he had taken a second wife thinking, "Maybe this is how we can bring about the promise of descendants. " When he took Hagar as his wife and had Ishmael, he plainly saw the tragedy of his choice. For thirteen years after that, he refused to act apart from God. He refused to take the fleshly choice in place of the godly choice and refused to disbelieve the promises of God.

However, I think we see Abraham's humanity here; not a lack of faith but a lack of expectancy. Although he would not do anything contrary to the promises of God, he had stopped expecting anything to happen. He had stopped hoping in this painful area of his life--this longing for a son by his wife Sarah whom he had loved for decades.

He knew God would do something, and he refused to take any steps to act in God's stead. But hope and expectancy were drained from him to the extent that when God said Sarah would have a son, his incredulity dropped him to the ground in laughter. Shortly before he had fallen on his face in worship because God Almighty had spoken to him. This time he fell because he was laughing so hard.

Verse 12 of chapter 18 reveals: "Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord also being old?' " When Sarah heard the promise of God, her reaction was interesting. Her question suggests that the two had even given up physical intimacy on a regular basis.

Abraham had lived with the burden of not having a son so long that he could not imagine how it would happen. In fact, he had stopped expecting it to happen. I think he had imagined God would somehow reconstitute Ishmael in some miraculous way so that he could in fact be the son of Abraham and Sarah through whom the promises would be given ("Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee!"). Abraham expected God to do a miracle, but he thought he would somehow grant life through Ishmael. Clearly, he refused to disbelieve. Disbelief would issue in either despair or fleshly self-effort. Abraham refused both of these. But I also think he had stopped living with any expectancy of Sarah being able to bear his son.

Thus, he fell down in laughter and God ministered to him. There was no rebuke of Abraham. In fact, God answered his prayer, "Yes, indeed, Ishmael will live before me. Ishmael in his own right will be a great man, but this time next year Sarah will have a son." It was a beautiful, loving irony that his son would be named Isaac, 'Laughter.' Both father and mother laughed incredulously at the announcement of his coming.

The very same day that Abraham received this message--not a week later, not at a more convenient moment--he circumcised himself, his son, and all of those in his household. He obeyed with alacrity. He was a believing man at a mature stage of his walk with God in whom God had found an area of hopelessness--a lack of expectancy, a door that had been shut. And God ministered to him and returned his delight, not the laughter of the incredulous but the laughter of the joyful.

Let me ask you if you are in the same place as Abraham: You love the Lord, you follow his commandments, and you are convinced of his sovereignty. He is El Shaddai, the Almighty God of the universe. You are willing to do whatever he says and delight in the things he does, yet deep down you do not expect God to deal with the area of your life that has caused pain, struggle and uncertainty for years.

I have a friend who just married for the first time at the age of 50. A beautiful Christian woman, she had wanted to marry since her childhood. Years went by and other people married, but the occasion never came to her until at 50 she fell in love with a widower, a godly Christian man whose sensitivity and love for the Lord are magnificent. God gave them to each other at the stage of her life when she had stopped expecting she would ever marry.

Doug Goins and Ed Woodhall are leaving soon for Columbia as part of a ministry that never ceases to amaze me--a ministry of lay people in this church to prisoners in Columbia. Ed grew up in a Christian home and works on cars for a living. I have never talked to him about his vision of missionaries as a youth, but I know other people who from their youth wanted to serve the Lord overseas but became caught in the ordinary working of life and family and stopped hoping that the Lord would ever use them. To me, these men going to Columbia, having a tremendous missionary presence in a country of desperate need, says something about what is and what is not too difficult for the Lord. Can he give valuable ministry to ordinary people, perhaps even to those who have given up hope that he might? Yes!

Do you remember Tevye, the milkman in Fiddler on the Roof, singing, "If I were a rich man, I would study the Scriptures for hours every day and have a seat by the eastern wall"? I had the delight a few years ago of attending the graduation service of my father-in-law who received a masters degree in Christian Studies at 65 years of age. He had been a businessman all his life, had listened to the teaching of others, and like Tevye, never imagined that he could be a Christian scholar himself. Is anything too difficult for the Lord--things you wished could be true, things other people seem to be allowed but you have missed, doors you shut a long time ago, prayers you stopped making? Some have given up the hope that marriage can be delightful and joy-filled. Yet there are couples in this congregation who had dry and distant marriages and bear testimony that life can spring up in them after years of struggle. Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

Abraham was not rebelling against God. He was a man who loved God at this stage of his life. He was a man who denounced fleshly alternatives and would not resort to them. He was in the maturity of his faith, yet when

God said, "I will do this thing," he realized perhaps to his own surprise how little he expected. I think it is worth asking if there are things in our hearts that we have stopped believing God could do. Perhaps, we no longer expect miracles. Anything that is predictable, that the ordinary course of events might bring about, we will gladly give God credit for and expect to happen, but not the miraculous. A woman past menopause, a couple that has been infertile for decades--these people do not have children. Without realizing it, we may have told ourselves that there is something too difficult for the Lord.

Look at the next appearance of God to minister to Sarah and Abraham. It is interesting in 18:1 that God did not say to Sarah, "I am El Shaddai." He came to her home as a visitor, to the arena in which she was most comfortable. Verses 1-15:

"Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. And when he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, 'My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.' And they said, 'So do, as you have said.' So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make bread cakes.' Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf, and gave it to the servant; and he hurried to prepare it. And he took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate."

"Then they said to him. 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'Behold, in the tent.' And he said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.' Sarah denied it however, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. And He said, 'No, but you did laugh.'"

The story ends abruptly here. We have to wait a year before this long--building crescendo, the promise of a son, is finally accomplished. But there are some interesting notes in this part of the story.

It is hard to know when Abraham figured out that these visitors were not ordinary visitors, that they were in fact the Lord in human guise and two angels, as the rest of the story makes plain. He would certainly have offered hospitality to ordinary strangers in much the same way. But in the heat of the day and at ninety-nine years of age, Abraham ran everywhere! He ran to the tent. He ran to the herd. He ran to the servant. Something about the bearing and presence of these visitors suggested to him that a dramatic event was taking place. Abraham knew enough about God to know that it was very possible that he was involved in the coming of these strangers. Certainly by the time the stranger spoke Sarah's new name, Abraham must have wondered how he could have known these things if he were not God or a representative of God.

Sarah was given an opportunity to serve, and she willingly served these strangers. She was put in a place where she could hear the conversation, yet not be directly and completely embarrassed in her difficulty to believe.⁸ I think we can see the love of God not only in his naming the baby Isaac but also in his speaking to Sarah on her familiar turf and rebuking her in a way that frightened her yet did not destroy her. And it is Sarah who would later say, "Everyone can laugh with me." The laughter of unbelief became the laughter of delight at having a child.

Again, we come to the words of Genesis 18:14: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" This was the critical question hanging over the affairs of these two. In their incredulity, they had stopped expecting to have a child, and with good reason. But the appearance of God's speaking made the point plain, "There is nothing too

difficult for the Lord."

I think we all need to ask ourselves some important questions about whether we believe God or not. Everything we want in life is not promised us. God knows better than we what is best for us. He certainly knows the timing better than we do. Just because we have a desire or a longing does not mean we are certain to have it met. But it is also true that God performs miracles and that being able to predict something is not the only basis on which we can expect God to act. He will do the unpredictable.

Are there elements in our lives on which we have finally shut the door, stopped praying, and stopped expecting? Are there areas we assume are too difficult for the Lord? We need to lay these before him, being willing to face them and to refuse to be incredulous. We need to say, and betray by the way we live, that we do not believe there is anything too difficult for the Lord. He is a life-giver. He can resurrect life from the grave. We must not be ultimately skeptical but ultimately hopeful.

Abraham fell on his face twice. He fell on his face the first time when the Lord God Almighty spoke to him and commanded a blameless walk of him. And Abraham realized the only appropriate response was prostrate worship. He fell on his face the second time because he was laughing so hard. I think we ought to learn a lesson from this. The first act of worship should have informed the second and should have dealt with Abraham's lack of expectation that God would allow Sarah to bear a child.

I would like to close with something John White said concerning faith in a God for whom nothing is too difficult:

"I am talking about what appears to observers as a smiling insanity, yet what is in fact a glorious gamble with a clear-eyed perception both of what the odds appear to be on the surface and of what they really are. I am talking of Paul singing with Silas in jail at midnight or wind-whipped on the deck of a storm-battered ship calming the panicky crew with an assurance that all would be well. These exemplify an irrevocable commitment, not to quit obeying whatever may seem to go wrong; this is strong faith. To grow in your capacity to persist like this is to increase your faith. To put it another way, great faith is responding to God when it is hardest to do so, either when the thing he demands of you hurts or else seems to be totally impractical."

Is anything too difficult for the Lord? The answer is resoundingly, "No!" The God we serve both loves us and is absolutely capable to doing what is best for us.

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