

Laughing at God's Promises

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And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him...They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." 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. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." Genesis 18:1-2, 9-15

In the movie It Could Happen to You, Nicolas Cage plays a policeman who stops into a diner. He eats a meal and then discovers that he doesn't have enough money to give a tip to the waitress. So he makes an unbelievable promise. He tells her about a lottery ticket that he has, and he says if he wins, her tip will be half of whatever the prize amount is. The waitress laughs it off, and who could blame her, but to the amazement of everybody the policeman wins the lottery and fulfills his promise by giving her a two million dollar tip.

The producers of that film claimed it was based on a true story. I found that hard to believe, not just because it seemed to be an unlikely promise, but even more that a person making such a promise would keep it. The funny part of the movie is watching Cage go home and try to explain to his wife why he gave the waitress a two million dollar tip! It is an entertaining movie, and you can do what I did, go online and see what was true and what was made up. But know this: a policeman really did win the lottery and gave a waitress three million dollars. But there's more to the story.

As for us, I would say that most of us are probably skeptical of big promises. Some people make promises with good intentions but lack the resources to carry them out. Some people make them and forget about them. Some of them make them as means to an end, like a politician wanting to get elected. Some promises made are downright lies; the people know they are not true and are trying to manipulate us.

But we need to be careful not to put the promises of our God in that category. In his case, there is no question that he has the resources. Also, he has a proven record keeping his promises. That's why Luke 1:37 clearly says, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Remember this, too. We are children of a promise God made to Abraham thousands of years ago. We wouldn't be here today without that promise, so we of all people should take God's promises seriously.

Yet in our human weakness, sometimes we forget that or let doubt creep into our mind. At times we may find it difficult to believe what God has promised. We have an example of that in our account in Genesis today. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when God appeared to him and told him that his wife, renamed "Sarah", was going to have a son. Abraham and his wife were to be the Father and Mother of many nations. God told him that Sarah was going to have a son, and that they were to name him Isaac. God had established a covenant with Abraham and his descendants long before this, and God was going to carry out his plan of an everlasting covenant through Isaac.

Abraham was the first one who laughed at the news. He did the math, and Genesis 17 tells us he fell facedown and laughed! He said, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" Abraham not only believed in God, but he actually knew God, and yet he questioned whether God could bring this about in people their age.

Our reading from Genesis 18 this morning tell us that about a year later Abraham had three visitors as he sat at the door of his tent. Two of them were angels. But who was the third man? The only likely possibilities are that it was a special Angel of the Lord, or the Lord himself, possibly in the person of the pre-incarnate Christ. The evidence strongly supports that it was the Lord himself, for Abraham addressed him as "Lord", and he welcomed him with food and water, all the while deferring to him as to a superior person.

After dinner, the question was asked, "Where is Sarah your wife?" Abraham replied that his wife was in the tent, for they had eaten outside under a tree, Then the Lord said that he was going to return at about the same time in the next year, and that Sarah, well past the age of childbearing, was going to have a son!

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent. When she heard this, she laughed and made some comments to herself. The Lord noticed this and said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

Then Sarah made an even bigger mistake. She was afraid when the Lord referred to her laughing, and she lied and said that she had not laughed. But the Lord corrected her and said that she had.

Doubting what the Lord says is not a laughing matter. Granted, laughing at times can be a result of joy. The Cleveland Cavaliers both laughed and cried with joy when they won the world basketball championship. But laughing is often our reaction to not believing something. Abraham and Sarah both laughed at God's promise. God showed a great deal of patience in dealing with them, but laughing at what God says is something we don't want to do. When we are tempted to laugh at or disbelieve one of the Lord's promises, we would do well to remember his words: "Is anything too hard for the Lord." He is called "Almighty God" for a reason.

Have you ever been tempted to laugh at God? You better think hard before answering that question.

We laugh at God in a sense when the Holy Scriptures tells us we are saved by grace, saved by the undeserved mercy of God as shown through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins, and yet we think, "Yeah, right. There's got to be more than that." Then we trust in the things we do or our goodness in thinking we will go to heaven. What promise do we have here? Paul writes, "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that's not of yourselves: it is the gift of God..." (Ephesians 2:8)

We laugh at God in a sense when we read or hear that God will take care of us, that he even cares for the lilies of the field, and yet we continue to be worried about this and worried about that and live our lives filled with anxiety. Note the promises the Lord has for us here. He has promised "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) Verse 6 tells us that we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Even if someone takes out life, the same God who gave us life in the first place, promises to give us another and better life in the future.

Unbelief in what God has clearly told us in really a form of laughing at God. Unbelief may limit God in doing mighty works in our lives. I remember the account recorded about Jesus entering a particular town but doing very few miracles there because of so much unbelief. The letter of James reminds us of the importance of faith and the danger of doubting. He wrote, "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord..." (James 1:6-7a)

We understand that, like Abraham and Sarah, we may slip at times because of our flawed human nature. A man brought his afflicted son to Jesus and said, "if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." Jesus responded, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." The man cried out in reply, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Jesus in his love and mercy went ahead and healed the son. (Mark 9:25) May God in his love and mercy help us in any times of unbelief also. Amen.

