

*Lessons for Living from the Old Testament*

**“The Laughter of God”**

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

*“Sarah said, ‘Now God has brought laughter for me; and everyone who hears will laugh with me.’”* (Genesis 21:6)

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley  
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

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**Scripture introduction**

Today we begin a Fall Sermon Series on “Lessons for Living from the Old Testament.” We will be looking at the primary characters of Jesus’ ancestry, particularly at those faith shaping points in their lives, and see what we can learn for our own faith from their experience of God.

We start with Abraham and Sarah. They are called the father and mother of Faith, because they trusted God’s promise. Following that promise, they left the comforts of their homeland to seek the Promised Land. They trusted God in such a way, they left behind the life script they had planned for themselves, in order to seek what God had planned. And the Promise that was given was this: *“If you follow me, you will be blessed; your descendents will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and in fact, through you ALL THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED.”* (Genesis 12:1-3)

Of all the prophecies made in the Scriptures, this is the most easily provable. *“All the nations...”* Our being here today is a fulfillment of this prophecy that began with Abraham. Wherever you go on the face of the earth, you don’t have to look too far before you find a Christian Church. It may be in a grass hut, or a palatial home; it may be outdoors along a sea shore, or in one of the vaulting cathedrals of Europe. Quite a phenomenon. Historian Thomas Cahill came out with a best-seller some years ago: *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels.* It all started here, with Abraham and Sarah, leaving their home, seeking the Promise.

Abraham and Sarah are also the father and mother of our Faith because they show us that *believing* and *trusting in the Lord* is not always easy. The journey with God is not a smooth one. Having trusted God's promise, and left everything behind, they find themselves barren, without children, way after the time of child bearing.

Sarah gives up the Promise; well, at least she revises it. She gives her young Egyptian maid, Hagar, to Abraham, to be the birth mother. Ishmael is born. "No," said God; "that is not what I had in mind. Sarah will bear her own child." But that's crazy!, Abraham said; and he fell on his face and laughed out loud (Genesis 17:17). But this "crazy" God, won't give it up. "Watch me," God said. Not long after old Abraham's fits of laughter with God, the Lord reappears in the form of three men...and that is where we pick up the Salvation Story today. Let us listen for the Word of God: **Genesis 18:1-15 and 21:1-7.**

### **The Laughter of God**

The verse on which this entire story of Faith turns is the Lord's question to Abraham, "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" How Sarah and Abraham answered that question made all the difference; and it makes all the difference for us as well. How would you answer that question?

The difference our answer makes begins with something as simple and frequent as Prayer; and ends with something as wonderful and "impossible" as a Man rising from the dead. "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*"

There are many who answer Yes to that question. One has to respect them for their honesty. "Yes, there are some things too hard for God." The classic Deists would say, there are certain natural and scientific laws that God set up and will not violate. To have it any other way would make such an unpredictable universe, there would be no scientific progress possible, only superstition. If you jump out of a 15<sup>th</sup> story window, you will fall and you will die. No amount of praying will stop you.

There are many others, however, equally educated, who will not jump out of 15<sup>th</sup> story windows. But they will give an impassioned No! to that question, almost like a protest: No!, nothing is impossible for God. And it is the song of their lives. They would want to go on: this scientific, predictable universe we are grateful for; but it is not all of the story. They would say, "Certainly Faith goes beyond Reason; but Faith is not *unreasonable*." And this protest against the idea of a closed universe, that God does not penetrate with interventions beyond our understanding...well that protest has become the vision for their lives, something like a great Hope. It is certainly the Source of their strength. We may laugh along with our "closed universe" friends, but the tone of our laughter is different. It is more like Abraham and Sarah's laughter: "This is crazy; but it happens!"

*“Sarah said, ‘Now God has brought laughter for me;  
and everyone who hears will laugh with me!’” (Genesis 21:6)*

When our kids were young, we took a long road trip to New York City to show them the sites; then down the Jersey Shore on the way to Washington, D.C. Andy had grown up not far from the Jersey Shore, and wanted the kids to see the beach where they used to go, a sleepy little town called Ship’s Bottom. We got there about 5:30 in the afternoon; the beaches were empty, and the surf was up! I really wanted to show the kids how to body surf; well, the truth is *I* wanted to body surf and show off to the kids; they were way too young to try it. So as Andy shook her head and laughed at her husband who never grew up, the kids hooted and hollered, I ventured forth into the waves, like Neptune the great god of the deeps.

Of course, I immediately got hammered by the incoming surf. So much for Neptune. Not to be outdone, I dove under the waves, swam under water against the currents; and finally got out to the place where the waves just began to swell up and form. I got ahead of one just as it was breaking, and in I flew with the thrill of the surf pushing me into shore, my skinny body looking like a tooth pick in front of a tsunami. What a thrill! More thrilling, of course, were the hoots and hollers of my kids, and Andy really getting into it, like a cheerleader on shore. So, I got up and did it again, over and over, . . . until finally, Andy was looking at her watch, and I could tell it wasn’t fun any more. So out I came, while I could still be a hero. Andy reminded me that we had already paid for our hotel for the night in D.C. and it was past the 6:00 cancel time. So, with the kids hanging on to their amphibious hero, we walked back to the car. I reached into my bathing suit pocket for the keys. . . . Oops. It suddenly became clear that, somewhere out there with Neptune in the deeps, my keys were resting at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. “Uh, Andy, you have your keys, right?” Yea, she said; and she pointed into the car; sure enough, there was her purse, her key chain dangling out of the top, safely locked in the car. I wasn’t a hero any more.

Thus began what my adult children still refer to as “Dad’s streaking down Main Street at rush hour.” You all wait here, I said, as if still in command. I’m going to find a service station still open. (No Triple A, of course.) So with nothing on but my soaked bathing suit and my flip flops, I ran down Main Street of Ship’s Bottom hoping beyond hope I would find a service station still open. Amid the honks of cars, I caught sight of a service station across the street. It looked awfully dark. But I ran down the median strip trying to cross over, . . . just as a police car wheeled around the corner to see this bizarre spectacle of a nut in rush hour traffic. “Get into the car,” he said; “you’re going to get killed.” I explained what had happened; all the service stations were closed by that time. He looked totally disgusted, as I was dripping all over the seat of his car. I tried to ingratiate myself to him by explaining that I was just a Presbyterian minister on vacation with my family. He looked at me with complete disdain, “Yea, right buddy.” But he did believe me enough to pull around the corner to see if this mythical family would materialize.

To my great relief,..they were still there. So, more for their sake than for mine, I'm sure, he took out his slim jim, that looked like a long machete; and in 15 seconds the car door was opened...and off he went.

Now, in something as trivial as this, what was it that kept me going? Was it not some wild and crazy notion that, somehow, God would make a way. How much more, in the desperate times in our lives, when there is far more at stake, does this indomitable belief provide "*a refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble*"? (Psalm 46:1)

Yet, this indomitable believe is not an unwavering one. Like Sarah and Abraham, we doubt, we stress, we laugh. But we don't let those doubts paralyze us. And when we laugh, it is not the bitter laugh of the cynic, but the laugh of trust, that somehow, some way, God is still in charge. And the beautiful thing about how Sarah and Abraham show us Faith, is how gracious our God is with us when we doubt. God even sounds playful with Sarah, does He not? "*Why do you laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" "*Oh, but I did not laugh,*" Sarah said, *because she was afraid. And the Lord said, "Oh yes, you did too laugh!..but you are going to find out, in just one more year, that I am more wonder-ful than you ever imagined!"* (Genesis 18:14-15)

And so we continue to hope; and so we continue to pray. Sometimes we pray like the father in the Gospel story who pleaded with Jesus for his son's healing, "*Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief!*" (Mark 9:24) And despite our mustard-seed faith, God continues to work with us. And for our part, we continue to follow Jesus in giving over our lives to His work—to help the weak, feed the homeless, help the disabled, lift up the outcast and despised in our world. And at the end of our days, there is no "impossible promise" we want to believe more than Jesus' resurrection as the true sign that beyond this mortal life, there is truly something far more wonderful awaiting us. Yes, "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" Alleluia! Amen.