

“LAUGHTER IS BORN”

Genesis 18 / 21

Message for Peace Church

November 1, 2009

PURPOSE – To call people into the joy of new life in Christ.

MAIN IDEA – Through the announcing of the gospel in the fellowship of the church, God miraculously grants the blessing of new life in the Son to fulfill the calling of his people to bring blessing to the nations!

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to Genesis 18.

1. I am so excited to preach today's sermon!

In our series on Abraham, it's been a long time coming!

(i) We began the series NAMING the promise & destiny that came to Abram in his call from God:

I will bless you ... make your name great ... through you all nations will be blessed.

= BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

It is a promise & destiny given to everyone called of God, including Christians today = recipients & agents of God's blessing program for the world!

(ii) We have seen Abram living by faith in this destiny, going to battle / tithing interceding ... and also NOT living by faith in it – being deceptive in Egypt.

(iii) We have seen Abram WRESTLING with this destiny – and God assuring him of it by cutting a covenant ... which Abram, in turn, cuts into his own flesh – the mark of circumcision ... = a sign of belonging to God with a cut-open heart.

2. Most TELLING of all, we have observed Abraham WAITING upon the Lord for the birth of a SON.

- For how can he & his family bring God's blessing to the world unless he is granted new life?

He & his wife, Sarah, will die. He needs continuity, regeneration! He needs a son, as God Himself promised would come!

(i) SO DO YOU & I – if we are to receive & share the salvation-blessing of God.

Salvation is all wrapped up in the gift of NEW LIFE – the life of THE Son, Jesus Christ.

A. Eph. 1:3 states, *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”*

= heaven's blessings have come into this age in Christ Jesus

B. Col. 1:27 adds, *“God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is CHRIST IN YOU, the hope of glory!”*

= RE-generation in the Son!

3. So ... to FULFILL HIS DESTINY, Abraham is waiting on the Lord for that life, waiting, waiting ... while he & Sarah turn 70, 80, 90 years of age!

It's getting hard to hang on!

WILL THE PROMISE OF GOD BE FULFILLED?

Read Genesis 18:1-15 ... (turning a couple of pages) ... Genesis 21:1-7

4. This is the Word of the Lord ... thanks be to God ...

... because the SON HAS COME! = NEW LIFE!

- The promise fulfilled ... The destiny in tact!

= salvation for the world, salvation for me ... “Blessed to be a blessing!”

- Let's note WHERE new life is announced, HOW it comes, then WHAT it is!

II. WHERE NEW LIFE IS ANNOUNCED

NEW LIFE IS ANNOUNCED IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH!

1. That's what Abraham's HOSPITALITY is a picture of – the life & purpose of the Church!

God shows up UNAWARE to Abraham. He comes by in human form – a THEOPHANY (“God-appearance”), a foretaste of the Incarnation. He comes with 2 buddies!

Abraham notices the strangers ... then shows us the church in action!

(i) He lets these newcomers in the foyer know that they matter to him.

He doesn't just let them walk by. He greets them and begins a ministry to their needs. It's hot. Their feet are dusty. They need rest.

He too invites them to water & to be FED! What better way of letting someone know that they're important? He ministers BELONGING to them – that's what hospitality is!

A. Quickly, personally Abraham gets involved in preparing a meal for them: A little cottage cheese, tall glass of cool milk, some fresh hot bread – melted homemade butter, dish of Sarah's preserves, hot veal cutlets!

= He's puttin' it out there! He's generous. He's hospitable!

- This is CHURCH CULTURE!

2. I do hope you were a recipient of a couple of those 275 hand-made egg rolls that Pumavahn and her team made for us this past Wednesday.

- Not only were they delicious, but there was love, relationship, belonging in those egg-rolls!

- There's an invitation of belonging in every Wednesday night meal. That's why we set them forth – not just to feed your belly, but to cultivate belonging.

(i) THAT'S WHO THE CHURCH IS – because you matter to God, you matter to me.

- Here's a way to show it.

A. So come to those meals, engage with others - find out how they met their spouse, what courses they're taking, what's interesting about them.

And, like Abraham, invite others into the belonging of the church – especially strangers!

'PRACTICE HOSPITALITY' – the NT commands (Rom. 12:13)

Keep loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers – for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. – Heb. 13:2

(ii) Eugene Peterson states, “Hospitality is the modern day word for evangelism”.

I think what he means by that is that we live in a society so disconnected, so broken in relationships, so dizzied by information, so mobile ... in order to share good news, we must first let people - strangers especially - know that they matter to us through hospitality.

PEOPLE MUST BELONG BEFORE THEY BELIEVE! (2X)

- Our theology affirms this. It's part of the wisdom of baptizing covenant children. People must belong in order to then believe.

A. Hospitality is the modern day word for evangelism:

That's why our VISION is *“to be a place where everyone is INVITED TO BELONG at the family table”* ... in the fellowship hall, at our homes, here!

3. But that's not to say that the church exists solely for these horizontal relationships.

No! It's in that MILIEU of God's love that the INCREDIBLE GOOD NEWS of salvation is announced!

(i) Verse 9 – *Where is your wife, Sarah?* – the 3 strangers ask Abraham. “There in the tent”, he responds.

Then THE LORD said ... - this is the first time that God is recognized as being present in this fellowship - ... *I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have A SON!*

A. In the hospitality of the church, the gospel of ETERNAL LIFE IN THE SON is announced. It's proclaimed from the pulpit. It's taught in classes. It's shared in small groups.

In the hospitality of the church, people begin to recognize that God is actually present.

In that ministry of belonging, they hear God speak THEIR NAME – “Where’s Sarah ... Rachel, Judy ...?” ... “She’s to receive NEW LIFE – the life of the Son!”

THAT’S THE FULL PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH – hospitality & the proclamation of eternal life!

III. HOW NEW LIFE COMES

1. Standing near Abraham’s tent, Sarah hears that announcement of new life – and to her it’s LITERALLY INCREDIBLE.

It is UN-BELIEVABLE ... really.

She CHUCKLES to herself the laughter of skepticism: *“Yea ... right ... after I am worn out and my master / husband is old, I’ll have this pleasure of new life in me ... yea, right!?!”* = “Been through menopause decades ago”

She looks in the mirror at her white hair and wrinkled face. She feels the arthritis in her bones ... and LAUGHS CYNICALLY!

2. Maybe you can relate (not physically). The promise of the Son can seem too good to be true!

= A NEW HEART – a new Spirit - new thoughts / feelings / God-pleasing desires welling up from within.

= A NEW PURPOSE – living for God’s glory

= A NEW DESTINY – part of His blessing program to this cursed world

... and all of this ETERNAL LIFE

= a measure of heaven in me – life that will never end! ... YEA, RIGHT!?!

(i) Do you really believe that?

> “No way – life’s about getting through school – getting a job – maybe buy a house / have a family – get the kids through school – then hang around my grandkids. That’s what life’s about.”

A. GOD SAYS NO! Eternity has invaded.

Life is knowing His will through a new heart.

Life is BREATHING that will, seeking first His Kingdom – and all of those other things that you thought were life, He just throws those in the package – they’re not true life – TRUE LIFE IS THE ETERNAL SON IN YOU!

- Do you really believe that?

3. BY NATURE WE DON’T.

By nature we’re as SKEPTICAL as Sarah. The womb of our heart is as dead and closed as hers was at 90 years of age!

Ephesians 2 describes the natural heart toward God with these words: *As for you, you were DEAD in your transgressions & sins ...*

= DEAD means you’re indifferent, even hostile, toward the things of eternal life ... *but because of His great love for Sarah & Abraham, and us who have received new life, God, who is RICH in mercy made us ALIVE WITH CHRIST – even when we were dead in transgressions ... God raised us up with Christ.*

4. HOW DOES NEW LIFE COME? ... BY THE MIRACULOUS POWER OF GOD (for those keeping score on their outline)

- It’s the same miraculous power that raised Jesus Christ from the grave. He was dead; He was made alive.

Sarah’s womb was dead. My heart was dead – but RESURRECTION LIFE CAME! ... the life of the SON!

5. GOD HEARD SARAH LAUGH ... Even when it's just to ourselves, God knows our thoughts! Maybe you think this Jesus-stuff really is just a joke. Deep-down you're not taking it seriously.

When God confronts Sarah about her skeptical laughter, she lies. She says, "*I didn't laugh.*" – as if God can't hear her thoughts. DON'T DO THAT!

(i) For God says to her & Abraham: IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR THE LORD?

That's one of the meanings of Jesus' resurrection – to publicly, historically proclaim that nothing is too hard for God to do for you – nothing:

- Not dead bodies, dead hearts, dead wombs

"God does His best work in the graveyards", someone once said.

That's why we Christians don't participate in the death & ghoul of Halloween.

Our God is a God of LIFE!

HE BRINGS NEW LIFE TO THE DEAD BY HIS MIRACLE-WORKING POWER.

NOTHING is too hard for the Lord!

IV. WHAT NEW LIFE IS

Chapter 21 tells us WHAT THAT NEW LIFE IS.

IT IS THE LIFE OF THE SON. IT IS LAUGHTER.

It is Isaac. It is "Christ in us, the Hope of Glory!"

1. This past week I visited Ed Gibson in the hospital. We got talking about today's message and I told him it was about the "Birth of the Promised Son."

He said, "Now, Pastor, aren't you getting' ahead of yourself? ... It's not Christmas yet!"

Yea – but this is a great word to preach at any time.

(i) HE'S RIGHT! – Sarah is Mary is the Christian – God's promised miraculous new life comes personally!

= It's salvation / His blessing to bless others / eternal life!

= It's the life of Christ ... "the anointed one" = Holy Spirit life in us now ...

which we will one day see face-to-face.

2. Abraham and Sarah name this life, ISAAC ... meaning laughter.

That's the name God told them to give the Son.

It's His joke with them. Their laughter of skepticism turns into the laughter of joy!

(i) ISAAC (LAUGHTER) IS A FITTING NAME TO DESCRIBE THE LIFE OF JESUS IN US – because Jesus restores joyful laughter into our relationship with God.

A. This is what the Reformation was all about:

= CHRIST ALONE as the basis of my life with God. Not my merits, not my penance, not my indulgences ... CHRIST ALONE / GRACE ALONE.

- If we have to earn our relationship with God, laughter is summarily dismissed! It's work. It's business. It's my effort.

I.e. – Martin Luther was like that before he discovered grace in Jesus.

As a monk, he anguished before God - wrestling with the reality of guilt. He worked hard for God – but with no joy or peace.

Then he discovered Paul's teaching in the Book of Romans. *"There is therefore now NO CONDEMNATION for those who are in Christ Jesus – through faith"* (ch. 8:1) – and he discovered freedom & joy & laughter before God.

LAUGHTER IS BORN WHEN WE TRULY KNOW JESUS. When you read Luther's writings, mirth is often close to the surface!

(ii) I looked up some quotes this week on laughter. As I read them, I couldn't help but think of how TELLING they are of Jesus and life with God IN HIM.

- a. "What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul" – a Yiddish Proverb
 - That's Jesus – the cleansing one

- b. “Laughter is an instant vacation” – said Milton Berle
= Jesus frees us from having to work for my peace with God
- c. “A man isn’t poor if he can still laugh” (Jesus is true wealth)
- d. “Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face” – Victor Hugo
- e. “At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities” – Jean Houston
 - In Jesus, you are blessed to be a blessing – in a kaleidoscope of possibilities
- f. (And the one I put in your outline) – “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”
 - When you laugh together, you are spiritually connected
 - ISAAC is born - Jesus, the Son! He’s the shortest distance – the ONLY connection between God & man ... “the Way, the Truth, and the Life”

V. CONCLUSION

SO HOW DO WE RESPOND TO THIS WORD? SARAH HELPS US.

1. Verse 6 – She gives this testimony - In the new life of the Son, she says: *GOD HAS BROUGHT ME LAUGHTER!*

... and everyone who hears about this – with understanding of this life’s miraculous, gracious, eternal nature – everyone who hears about this WILL LAUGH WITH ME!

HO HO HO HOSANNA ...

2. Do you understand the gospel? Can you laugh with her? Will you laugh with her?

IS THAT LAUGHTER IN YOU? BETWEEN YOU & GOD?

= the laughter of the Son

(i) The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, could laugh with Sarah. In his commentary on this verse, he writes:

I would have all those that hear of my great deliverance from hell, and my most blessed visitation from on high, laugh for joy with me. I would surprise my family with abundant peace; I would delight my friends with my ever-increasing happiness; I would edify the Church with my grateful confessions; and even impress the world with my cheerfulness of my daily conversation ...

... Because the Lord Jesus is a deep sea of joy, my soul shall dive therein and shall be swallowed up in the delights of His society. Sarah looked on her Isaac, and laughed with excess of rapture, and all her friends laughed with her.

You, my soul, look on this Jesus, and bid heaven & earth unite in thy laughing joy UNSPEAKABLE.

3. What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought,
since Jesus came into my heart.

I have light for my soul for which long I have sought,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

... Floods of joy o'er my soul like the sea billows roll,
Since Jesus came into my heart!

CAN YOU LAUGH WITH SARAH?

WILL YOU LAUGH WITH SARAH?

Jesus – new life – is God's promise for you – that you might be blessed to be a blessing!

AMEN!