

Genesis 17:15-18:15

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[0 : 00] Thank you. Well, do turn back with me to Genesis chapter 17. And as you're turning there, I'd like to talk to you a little bit about laughter. We need to think about laughter to understand this passage. Laughter is fundamental to human conversation. It's fundamental to our communication. It's a gut reaction, isn't it? Laughter is a gut reaction to what someone said or done. Sometimes if we're bad at laughing at our own jokes, it's a reaction to what we're about to say.

Or perhaps to the situation we find ourselves in. It's a gut reaction and we often can't control it. It's such an intuitive part of us that often laughter, well, we do. We learn laughter before we learn to talk, don't we? Parents look forward to the first time their baby giggles. Finally, not just crying, but giggles, a happy sound.

And generally, we do associate laughter with happiness, don't we? There are giggles. There are belly laughs. There's that kind of laughter that erupts from one person and ripples around the room so that everyone has a kind of warm, fuzzy sense of positivity and well-being.

We do normally associate laughter with happy moments, but there are other types of laughter too, aren't there? And we've all heard them. There's snide laughter and there's cynical laughter. There's mean laughter when someone laughs at the fault of another or their pain.

There's cynical laughter and bitter laughter. See, in a conversation, laughter plays the kind of role for our conversation that music plays in the background of a film.

[1 : 37] It's like the backing soundtrack that helps us to understand the emotional context of what's being said. Laughter gives a flavor to the words that are being said.

It's why so often we get misunderstandings when we try to communicate to people just in email, isn't it? You can't hear the tone of their voice. You can't hear the laughter. Is that a mean laugh or a happy laugh?

Laughter is fundamental to our communication. It's also fundamental to the section of Genesis that we're looking at. Actually, from about Genesis 17 to 21 and probably a little bit further on as well. It's a theme that keeps on recurring. People keep on laughing. It's such an important theme that, as we're going to see tonight, one of the key characters ends up being called, he laughs.

And in our passage today, we read that both Abraham and Sarah laugh. When I come back in a few weeks' time, we're going to look at some other people who laugh too, I hope. We read that both Abraham and Sarah laugh in response to the same promise.

[2 : 37] But reading it cold, 4,000 years down the line, without a tape recording of exactly what that sounds like, we have to do some digging, some detective work to understand the tone of their laughter.

Is this happy laughter? Is this bitter laughter? So that's what we're going to do. We're going to do some detective work this evening. The plan's quite simple. We'll look at the context of this passage. Then we're going to look at Abraham and Sarah's laughter in turn. And then hopefully, looking at the two in comparison, we'll be able to draw some conclusions and application to ourselves. So firstly, just some background to where we've got to in Abraham's life.

When we get to this passage in Genesis chapter 17, God has now promised three times to Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. He'll be the father of a great nation which is going to be a blessing to the whole earth.

At Genesis 20, sorry, Genesis 12, you remember, thinking back when Abraham was 75. I always imagine him as a young man, but he was 75 at that point.

[3 : 40] God first called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans with the promise, I will make of you a great nation. Then in Genesis 15, God takes Abraham out to look at the starry sky, doesn't he?

He says, count the stars. Count the stars. So shall your offspring be. As many stars as you can see, so shall your offspring be. At the beginning of chapter 18, Abraham's now 99.

Sarah's about 89. A quarter of a century has passed since Abraham's first calling. A quarter of a century has passed and God reiterates the promises. Just looking back to verse 4.

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abraham, but your name shall be Abraham. For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

God confirms his covenant. He reiterates the promise, and he confirms it by changing Abraham's name, doesn't it? He goes from Abraham, exalted father, to Abraham.

[4 : 47] Probably haven't got the emphasis right there, but to father of a multitude. From exalted father to father of a multitude. He emphasizes the promise there. And if we were to carry on reading, we'll see that he not only changes his name, he gives him a sign, the sign of circumcision.

As a seal of this covenant, this promise that he's given him. So we know by this point, when we get to our passage, that Abraham will be the father of a great multitude.

But there's a big unanswered question so far. Abraham's going to be the father, but who's going to be the mother? Actually, we've never had a mention of that yet.

God hasn't told Abraham yet for sure who the mother will be. When they originally left on their pilgrimage, Sarah was childless at 65. Humanly speaking, it looks unlikely she's going to fall pregnant, doesn't it?

But perhaps they left Ur of the Chaldeans expecting a miracle. 25 years on that, miracle hasn't happened. And if we'd read the previous chapters, we'd see that actually Abraham and Sarah have started to take things in their own hands.

[5 : 53] They're not expecting that miracle in the same way anymore. At chapter 15, Abraham tries adoption. What about Eleazar of Damascus, he says, a man of my household?

He could be my heir, I suppose. We're not really going to have a child now. God says, no. It will be your own son that is the fulfillment of this promise. But he doesn't name the mother.

Then chapter 16, well, Abraham and Sarah try what we might generously call surrogacy, don't they? Abraham has a son, Ishmael, by Sarah's servant, Hagar.

Perhaps then, illegitimate Ishmael will be the beginning of this great nation. In our passage today, God finally puts this matter to rest.

For the first time, he addresses the issue directly, decisively. Probably tells Abraham what he should have known all along. Verse 15, and God said to Abraham, as for Sarah, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah shall be her name.

[6 : 58] I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. God's promises to Abraham are also promises to Sarah.

The change in her name doesn't have quite the same significance of meaning, but it does have the significance that God is indicating, just as I have made these promises yours, I've made them Sarah's too.

And he confirms, doesn't he, who the mother will be. I will give you a son by her, by Sarah. How does Abraham respond?

Well, verse 17. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed. Abraham fell on his face and laughed.

Well, let's look and try and understand what this laughter means.

With modern ears, and honestly, the way I'd always heard this myself, this sounds incredibly like Abraham responding to a direct revelation from the covenant God with mocking laughing.

[8 : 00] He just rolls about laughing. Is that what it says? Shall a child be born to a man who's 100 years old? Give me a break. Shall Sarah, who's 90 years old, bear a child?

You're pulling my leg. Abraham falls on his face and laughs at the promise of God. It sounds like scoffing, like mocking, but there are four clues in the text which help clear this up, that help us to hear the real tone of his laughter.

Actually, we're going to see it's not mocking at all. Quite the opposite, and it doesn't indicate doubt. Firstly, we need to see that Abraham's laughter here is in the context of worship.

Abraham's laughter is in the context of worship. When it says in verse 17 that Abraham fell on his face and laughed, we're not being told that he laughed so hard he fell over.

We're not being told that, even though that's how I intuitively hear it. We've seen Abraham fall on his face before. We went back to the beginning of this chapter. When Abraham was 99 years old,

the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, I am God Almighty.

[9 : 05] Walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly. Then Abraham fell on his face. In verses 1 to 3, Abraham falling on his face is the proper, humble, worshipful response to encountering God Almighty, isn't it?

And that's what we're being told when he falls on his face again in verse 17. He's not falling over because he's forced by the extremity of his laughter.

He's falling on his face from a humble impulse to worship the God Almighty who's given this promise. So it's important to note, before Abraham laughs, he falls on his face before the God of the covenant in worship.

Secondly, we need to notice that God doesn't rebuke Abraham for his laughter. He doesn't rebuke Abraham for his laughter. In fact, he celebrates it. Now, you would expect, wouldn't you, if Abraham had laughed in the face of God's promises, had mocked God to his face when he gave him a promise, that God would rebuke him.

We'll see later that is what happens to Sarah. But that's not what happens here. God doesn't rebuke Abraham at all. Verse 19, rather than rebuke Abraham, he reiterates his promise.

[10 : 26] 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. God confirms it to him.

And do you notice the little footnote on the name there, Isaac? In my Bible, at least, I have a footnote that says Isaac means he laughs. He laughs.

See, what God does here is he commemorates God's laugh, sorry, Abraham's laughter in the name of Isaac. He commemorates and celebrates the fact that Abraham laughed.

It's as if Abraham's laughter now is a foretaste of the laughter that he's going to enjoy when Isaac's born. You're laughing now. Just wait till you see what I've got to give you.

God doesn't rebuke Abraham for his laughter. He memorializes it in the name of the promised child. Thirdly, Abraham doesn't doubt God's promise.

[11 : 30] We might read it as seeing that he doubts God's promise, but actually he's asking for more. Once he's got over the initial shock of this revelation from God, the surprise confirmation that Sarah will indeed be the mother, we read in verse 18, he cries out, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you.

Now, if we're still hearing Abraham as a doubter, we might think he's giving God the easy out here. He's giving God the easy out. Look, that's beyond you, God.

Just settle for something easier. We've got Ishmael already. Here he is. I've been bringing him up to be the lad you need. Just let Ishmael walk before you. But that's not actually what Abraham's doing here.

He's not doubting God's promise. Quite the opposite. He's realized the implications of this promise for his family life. He's realized that if there's going to be another child, Ishmael could be left behind. We know this from the way God responds to Abraham's prayer. Verse 20. As for Ishmael, I've heard you. I've heard what you're saying to me in verse 18.

[12 : 37] I've heard you, and behold, I have blessed him, and I will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father 12 princes, and I will make him a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

See, Abraham's prayer was that his son Ishmael wouldn't be forgotten. He doesn't actually doubt the promise. He's concerned about its implications, and he prays that God might extend the blessing even further.

And God clearly approves of Abraham's attitude here, his prayerful attitude, and answers him with that blessing. Though he confirms that it will be Isaac, not Ishmael. See, Abraham doesn't doubt God, but he prays for blessings consistent with his faith in God's promise.

Fourthly, and finally, just to prove this point out, Abraham's next action is obedience. Verse 23.

Then Abraham took Ishmael, his son, and all those born in his house, or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him.

Abraham doesn't behave here like a man with any uncertainty, does he? He doesn't behave like a man who doubts. Humanly speaking, he's got every reason to be squeamish about the command of God.

[14:03] I don't think it would be an easy task, telling every man in the household that it's circumcision day, that very day. It's not an easy thing to do to himself or to the others, but he doesn't dally full and complete immediate compliance with God's word that very day.

It's not the action of a man who doubts or scoffs at the word of God, is it? No, it's a man who believes. So once we've properly studied this text, we can see that Abraham's laughter can't be mocking God's promise.

It's in the context of worship. It's memorialized by God. It doesn't doubt the promise. And it's followed by immediate obedience. If you're still uncertain about the exegesis here, the Apostle Paul tells us with authority that this is the case.

Abraham didn't doubt God. We'll mock his promises here. Turn with me quickly to Romans 4.

Romans 4, verse 18. I believe this is a passage Paul preached on a couple of weeks back.

Romans 4, verse 18. In hope he believed against hope. In hope Abraham believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations as he had been told. So shall your offspring be.

[15:18] He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old. That's the time we're looking at, isn't it? Or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God. But he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. In childbearing terms, Paul says, looking at the facts of the situation they were in.

In childbearing terms, Abraham and Sarah were dead. As good as dead. Verse 19. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as death.

Or when he considered the barrenness, literally deadness, of Sarah's womb. In childbearing terms, Abraham and Sarah were as good as dead, the apostle Paul tells us.

But the God who gives life to the dead. That's how Paul describes him earlier in this passage. The God who gives life to the dead promised them a son. Abraham knew the biological facts, didn't he?

[16:23] He knew the biological facts. But he didn't weaken in his faith. No unbelief made him waver. He grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.

Fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. Do you see how the apostle Paul sheds light on this passage? Abraham was dead and God had offered him life.

And his laughter here is the laughter of a man who thought he was dead. But has been given life.

His gut response of the promise of God is to fall on his face in worship.

And to laugh in joy as he wonders at the kindness of the God who could make this happen. At the greatness of that God. It's not mockery, is it?

It's wholly appropriate. It's wholly appropriate. Shall a child be born to a man who's 100 years old?

You can hear it in his voice now, can't you? Shall Sarah, who's 90 years old, bear a child?

[17:26] It isn't scoffing or doubt we hear in his voice when we look properly. It's marvel and delight that bubbles over into laughter. I'm not going to try and argue that Abraham was a Presbyterian.

Probably was, but I'm not going to try and argue the point. But he was definitely someone who believed Westminster Shorter Catechism, question one, wasn't he? Or at least someone who lived it out.

Here he is, glorifying God and enjoying him. The chief end of man, to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Well, here he is. He falls on the floor to glorify God.

And he laughs as he enjoys his promises. Just as we were made to. Just as we were made to. See, Abraham's laughter is not a picture of skepticism.

It's a picture of Christian joy. And Christian joy isn't some kind of vague meditative calm, as some would have it. Nor is it some contentless catatonic state that a drug user might get.

[18:32] We're not replacing drugs with the Holy Spirit and getting to joy. It isn't also a stoic reserve to grin and bear it. To smile, even though life's rubbish.

And it's definitely not a painted on smile that we wear to church, even though we're feeling rotten on the inside. Christian joy, like Abraham's joy, is a gut reaction to the promises of God.

It's a gut reaction to the promises of God who gives life to the dead. We were dead and we've been promised life. Peter tells us in 1 Peter, though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Contemplating God's promises, believing on them should trigger in us and in our hearts an inexpressible joy. You see, Abraham's laughter was a foretaste of the joy he would have at the birth of his son Isaac, wasn't it?

He laughs now in anticipation of meeting the little boy who's going to be called laughter. He laughs now in anticipation of that moment. And our joy, like Abraham's, is a foretaste.

[19 : 45] A foretaste of the eternal life that we're promised. It's a foretaste now through faith of the enjoyment we will have when Christ returns.

But it is a foretaste only, isn't it? It's a foretaste. It's not the full thing. It's a foretaste in the context of pain and frustration and the mess of uncertainty and just uncertainty of our lives.

We may laugh with Abraham, but we may laugh at times through tears, mightn't we? Because it's only a foretaste. At other times we might find it impossible to laugh at all. Our joy this side of eternity is a foretaste of what we'll enjoy.

But it'll only be completed when Jesus returns. Just as Abraham's laughter is only completed when Isaac is born. But when we consider God's promises to us as people who were dead but have been promised life, when we really think about them, the right and proper response is an inexpressible deep joy that, even though we're British, might bubble up in a smile or tears or even, as in Abraham's case, laughter.

We're not used to that in our worship services, but that is what we might expect. But that isn't always our experience, is it? Frankly, let's be honest, for most of us, it isn't often our experience.

[21 : 14] We can quite easily read the words of the Creed, for example, unthinkingly, without even cracking a smile. We read it in monotone, don't we?

I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. And my ability to say those words without feeling, without feeling anything, reflects poorly.

It reflects poorly, perhaps, on my understanding of the greatness of those promises. And it reflects poorly on my certainty in those promises. Perhaps it reflects poorly on how much I need those promises.

And perhaps it just reflects that I'm distracted on Sunday mornings. And I want to be more joyful. I want to be more joyful. I don't want to be a monotone man.

But the answer isn't just to try and be happy. I don't know if you've ever tried to do that, just try and be happy. It doesn't work. We can't just supercharge our behavior with extravagant displays of happiness.

[22 : 16] That would just be faking it, wouldn't it? False laughter's awful, isn't it? You know when your friend isn't really laughing at your joke, but is just pretending. I don't always, because I know my jokes are brilliant, so I expect that to.

False laughter is terrible. It doesn't really fool anyone. It doesn't even fool us. When we put on a false laugh, it doesn't make us feel joyful, does it? It just makes us feel hollowed out.

And it's the same with false joy. We can't just drum up joy by putting on an inane smile, despite whatever we're actually feeling. That won't do anything. It'll just irritate us and everyone else around us.

We can't drum up joy. Joy like Abraham's joy, Christian joy, is a gut response to the promises of God. Christian's joy, like Abraham's, is rooted in an appreciation of and a trust in God's promises. If we want to be joyful, then we need to fix our heart on those promises and on the God who made them. I want to be more joyful.

[23 : 21] Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Abraham laughs with joy. Let's turn to the second episode and look at Sarah's contrasting laugh.

Sometime later, soon after these events, the Lord appears to Abraham again by the oaks of Mamre. This time, he appears in the form of three men. And there's quite a lot of interesting discussion about the exact identity of these men.

But for our purposes, what we need to know is that they speak with the voice of the Lord. They speak with the voice of the Lord. And Abraham welcomes these strangers as they arrive. He welcomes them as honored guests.

He rushes off, doesn't he? He rushes off to cook, to take a calf, tender and good, while Sarah needs fine flour to make cakes. They rustle up a feast together.

As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, doesn't he? Almost certainly thinking of this passage. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.

That's at least what Abraham's doing here.

[24 : 22] And as they sit down over this meal, over this feast, the men make sure that Sarah is within earshot. And they repeat the promise. Verse 9.

They said to him, where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, she's 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. You see, in chapter 17, the promise explicitly included Sarah for the first time, didn't it?

It's the first time the identity of the mother was put in writing, was said explicitly. In chapter 18, it's the first time that promise is made within Sarah's earshot, directly to her.

This is Sarah hearing the promise for the first time, and she laughs. Now, Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.

[25 : 23] So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I'm worn out, and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure? Sarah may not have had the benefit of modern medical science, but she knew enough, didn't she?

She knew enough to know that biology is against her. Ninety-year-old women don't conceive and have children. It's just not how things work. The way of women was no longer with her. She's well aware of the same facts that Abraham had, isn't she?

And she receives the same promise. And like Abraham, she laughs. But this time, her laughter has a very different tone. And it is that scoffing, cynical laugh.

We know that because, unlike with Abraham's laughter, God calls her out on it. Where Abraham's laughter is celebrated, Sarah's is challenged. Verse 13, the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh?

Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child now that I'm old? And when she's challenged, Sarah doesn't own that laughter. She doesn't say it was a laugh of joy.

[26 : 34] She doesn't, does she? She denies it. But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. He said, No, but you did laugh.

Sarah knows that her laughter was wrong. She knows that her laughter didn't have a tone that honored God. Her laughter was dismissive of this promise. Where Abraham heard the promise of God and laughed for joy, she hears it and laughs bitterly.

She can't square that promise with the world around her. And the Lord's rebuke here identifies the root cause, the root cause of this gut reaction that she has.

Verse 13, The Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child now that I'm old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? Or, as the footnote will make it, Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Sarah is so focused on her problem that she's not really focused on the person who's promising to solve it, is she? Whereas Abraham believed that God is fully able to do what he's promised, and so could marvel in the wonders that he can do.

[27 : 49] Sarah looks at her situation and says, It's too hard. No, I'm past it. I'm beyond help. It's too hard. You can't do this for me. And it causes her to laugh bitterly, with despair, with cynicism.

And it's important for us to note that this isn't the response here of an unbeliever. I think we tend to think of cynicism and scoffing as something wholly outside the church.

And it is something we hear from outside the church, isn't it? People who will laugh at us for believing the Bible. But here, this is the response of a Christian. Sarah is recorded in Hebrews 11 as one of the heroes of the faith, as an example for us.

And yet, when she looked at the circumstances around her, the reality of her situation, her gut reaction, was to dismiss God's promise with a laugh. You can't do that.

You can't do that for me. I'm beyond help. And that is perhaps sometimes how we feel, isn't it? We know we're dead. We know we were dead.

[28 : 53] And we've been promised life. But the reality of our experience, when we look at ourselves, when we look at the world outside us, perhaps make it just seem too hard. Can God really do that?

Is it too wonderful even for him? Maybe it's just me. Maybe it's just me. But I suspect for many of us, cynicism comes more naturally than joy. Perhaps that's how the world has programmed us, the world outside.

Cynicism comes more naturally to joy. And perhaps the promises of life seem far too remote to our physical experience. We've been promised a resurrection body and a life everlasting.

But our own physical aches and pains get in the way, don't they? Specific illnesses, disease, or just the general gradual aging.

Our personal griefs, perhaps. Or looking at the tragedies of the wider world, or of our friends and families. They can make that promise of a resurrection, of a new body and a new life, just seem too good to be true.

[29 : 57] I'm beyond help. It's too wonderful for God. Too hard. Set your eyes lower. Perhaps the promises of forgiveness and of eternal life with God also seem impossible in the face of our struggle with sin.

That returning anger. Another day of idleness when you're meant to do something good. The words that you always regret, that somehow you always say.

The TV show that you knew was unhelpful. You weren't going to watch it again. But it was on last night. The website you said you'd forget that you knew about. When we keep on doing those things that we know we shouldn't, the promises of forgiveness and of new life can just seem too far away, can't they?

Too remote. Impossible. I'm beyond help. A wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Sometimes we feel we're beyond help.

We're beyond help. It's too hard for God. The things he's promised are actually too wonderful. And we could be tempted to respond to the gospel with not Abraham's joyful laugh, but with Sarah's bitter cynicism.

[31 : 10] But is anything too hard for God? Sarah initially responded with cynicism, but in Hebrews 11, we're told that she ultimately believed the promises of God.

She may have struggled with the impossibility of the situation, but we're told that ultimately she considered him faithful who had promised. She considered him faithful who had promised.

There's kind of a neat symmetry here. Sarah, who highlights a problem for us, also with the testimony of Hebrews 11, finds the antidote for us to consider that the one who makes these promises, these promises that are actually too wonderful, is faithful.

He is faithful to them. He wouldn't promise them if he couldn't do them. We only have to read a couple of chapters on to see that the God who makes these promises to Abraham and Sarah, the God who made promises to us too, the God who brings life to the dead, is the God of the impossible.

Chapter 21, I'll read it briefly for you. Chapter 21, verses 1 to 6. The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.

[32 : 23] And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken, just as he'd said. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.

And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. He was dead in childbearing terms, but it happened.

And Sarah said, God has made laughter for me. Everyone who hears will laugh over me. Do you see, God does exactly what he says he'd do, that wonderful thing that was too wonderful even for him.

He does it, doesn't he? And Sarah laughs again, and this time she laughs with a different tone in her voice. She laughs with joy, and her joy is infectious. Everyone who hears will laugh over me. She can laugh now with joy. Notice two things quickly. Firstly, obviously, God was well able to do what he'd promised. He does not promise things that he cannot do.

[33 : 25] Even if they're biologically, scientifically impossible, if God has promised them, he can do them. He's faithful. Why would he promise something he can't do? Secondly, God's blessing was not contingent on Sarah's response.

Sarah's faith may have been weak when she first responded to God's promise. She heard that promise, and she laughed with cynicism, as we might be tempted to do sometimes, that God was still true to his word.

He didn't change his activity. Our God's patient with our unbelief. He's patient with our unbelief, and he blesses us in spite of it. To paraphrase a Puritan, I can't remember which, which is why I have to

paraphrase, our love for God is like the moon, isn't it? It changes every day. It has its waxings and its waning. Sometimes it's big, sometimes it's small. God's love is like the sun. It's the same every day. We may be faithless. We may be inconsistent, but God is faithful to his word. And that's the antidote to our skepticism. So we've seen Abraham's laughter.

[34 : 38] We've seen Sarah's laughter. Let's just briefly tie it together as we conclude. Abraham and Sarah receive the same promise, and they receive it in the same context. It is a promise of life to those who are dead, just like the promises we've received as believers.

And they both respond with laughter. Abraham's laughter is a laugh of joy, while Sarah's laughter is a laugh of cynicism. We've got cynical Sarah and awestruck Abe.

Both of these are responses, which we as believers have from time to time to the gospel. And the root of the difference appears to be their view of the God who makes the promises.

The view of the God who makes the promises. But at the end of the day, God's gracious to both.

Both Abraham and Sarah receive the promises of God. They receive that blessing of a son.

So why does it all matter? Why have you listened to me talk on? Why does it matter if we're cynical Sarahs rather than awestruck Abe's? You seem to get the same deal at the end of it.

[35 : 50] Well, it's true. Sarah's doubts didn't change God's plans, did they? They didn't change God's promises. They didn't change his character. And by his grace, we've seen God doesn't hold our faults against us.

He doesn't hold our doubts against us. Faith as small as a mustard seed is all that's needed.

Sarah's doubts didn't change God's plan. But they did stop her from worshipping, didn't they?

That laughter didn't affect her ability to take hold of the promise, but she didn't fall on her face with Abraham. She didn't glorify God. So that attitude stopped her from worshipping, but it also robbed her of her joy.

If only she'd believed that day by the oaks of Mamre when she heard through the tent. If only she'd believed then when the Lord made her promises. She could have tasted something of the joy then that she would have in a year's time when Isaac was born.

She could have had the joy of the birth of Isaac before he was even conceived. So we all have our doubts, don't we? And we always will. We're human. We're fragile.

[36 : 59] But what we should see is that doesn't change God. It doesn't change his promises. He always knew our fickle nature, didn't he? He knew it from the outset. But when we doubt God's ability to fulfill his promises, when we say, no, that's too big.

I'm beyond help. That's too wonderful for God. We dishonor him. And we rob ourselves of the joy we could have now. And those two things come hand in hand.

We fail to glorify God and we fail to enjoy him. There might be lots of reasons why you don't experience joy as you would like to now.

As we've mentioned before, the joy we have now is only a foretaste of what we have to come. It's not fully complete yet until Jesus returns. And we're experiencing this joy in the midst of a broken world, aren't we?

But check yourselves when you hear God's promises. The things he promises are wonderful. Do you know that? And do you know that he is the God who does wonderful things?

[37 : 58] The God who gives life to the dead. The right response to the promises of God. The God who gives life to the dead is to fall on our face with Abraham in worship and to laugh with joy.

That's not always where I am. Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Amen. Amen.