

Chapter 10: The Company of Abraham

Genesis 17:15–18:15

Of all the challenges to our faith, perhaps nothing is more difficult than to believe that our suffering fits into God's gracious purposes for our lives. When we cry out to the Lord in prayer during our suffering, we are lamenting the fact that this world is not as it should be. God originally created humankind to live with him in paradise, but because of the rebellion of Adam and Eve, we now live in a broken, fallen, sinful world. Our suffering is the fruit of the presence of sin and death in the world. Therefore, suffering is evil, and God promises that he will personally wipe away the tears of suffering from our eyes forever when he brings us into the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:4).

Even so, suffering does not run its course chaotically, unbridled, and out of control. If the Fall caused suffering to enter the world like a chaotic flood, God personally oversees and directs the channels, rivers, and streams where those floodwaters of suffering flow. He appoints boundaries to the chaos of suffering, declaring, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed!" (cf. Job 38:8–11). Though Satan himself rages against us, tossing the waves of suffering toward us, he cannot prevail; though he roars, suffering cannot pass over the boundaries God himself has appointed (cf. Jer. 5:22). God is holy and righteous, so that he is never the author or approver of sin—nor of suffering, which is the fruit of sin. Nevertheless, God is still sovereign over sin and suffering in the sense that he limits it, orders it, and redeems it for his holy purposes and for our good.¹

We might helpfully define suffering as the gap between promise and reality.² To the degree that things are not as they should be, then we are experiencing suffering. Therefore, as Abraham and Sarai (here renamed "Sarah"; Gen. 17:15) have awaited the promised offspring, their waiting has been suffering. We have seen them manage this suffering in different ways at different times: faithful obedience, cynical scheming, and lamenting prayer. By this point, both Abraham and Sarah are entirely beyond the age of child-bearing, humanly speaking. So, as God declares that he will *now* fulfill his promises, he stretches the faith of this couple beyond what they can think or imagine. This means more than that they find it difficult to get their minds around everything. Beyond that, their doubts represent a threat to the fulfillment of God's mission that he seeks to accomplish in and through them. Still, the surprising point of Genesis 17:15–18:15 isn't *that* Abraham and Sarah struggle to believe God's word. Rather, the surprising part of this narrative is *how* God leads them to believe: *God eats and drinks with us to overcome the limitations of our faith.*

Stretching Abraham's Faith (Gen. 17:15–27)

In the covenant God gives to Abraham, we observed that God first laid out his promises ("As for me..."; lit., "I"; Gen. 17:4–8), and then he specified circumcision as the aspect of the covenant that

Abraham must keep (“As for you...”; lit., “you”; Gen. 17:9–14). In Genesis 17:15, God adds a third section to specify the way in which Sarai will be blessed by the promises. This section begins with the similar “As for Sarai your wife...” (lit., “Sarai your wife”; Gen. 17:15) phrase that corresponds to the opening of the other two sections:

[15] And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. [16] I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” (Gen. 17:15–16)

Just as God identified himself by the new name “God Almighty” (*El Shadday*; Gen. 17:1) and gave Abram the new name “Abraham” (Gen. 17:5), so God also gives Sarai the new name “Sarah” (Gen. 17:15). As with Abraham’s name change, *Sarai* and *Sarah* both mean “princess,” so the significance of this name has more to do with her *being* renamed than with the new name itself: “the re-naming was a landmark and brought her specifically into the promise in her own right (verses 16, 19).” Here, God states twice that “I will bless her,” and he specifically promises that a son will come by Sarah. Furthermore, Sarah’s offspring (like Abraham’s) will become “nations,” and even “kings of peoples shall come from her” (Gen. 17:16; cf. Gen. 17:4–6).

Up to this point, God has never specifically named Sarah as a recipient of the promises along with Abraham.⁴ As we noted in our study of Genesis 16, this is a “good and necessary” inference⁵ that Abraham and Sarai should have drawn, because (1) Yahweh told Abraham that the promised offspring would be Abraham’s biological son (Gen. 15:4), and (2) Yahweh ordained marriage as the one-flesh covenantal union between one man and one woman for life (Gen. 2:24; cf. Gen. 12:18–19). Even so, God now makes explicit what he previously only implied. Abraham’s name change reflected a shift of emphasis away from the “Exalted Father” of Abram to emphasize the way that *Abraham* will become the “Exalted Father of a Multitude.” Sarah’s name change may point in a similar direction. So, if the name *Sarai* looked back to the woman’s royal lineage, *Sarah* seems to look forward to the woman’s royal offspring: “kings of peoples shall come from her” (Gen. 17:16).⁶

Abraham’s Laughter

Abraham’s reaction to this news is unexpected, although perhaps not surprising: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (Gen. 17:17) Earlier, Abraham “fell on his face” in worship when Yahweh appeared to him to give his covenant (Gen. 17:3). Certainly, by falling on his face again, Abraham must be expressing some level of reverence and faith at the promises that God has declared for Sarah.⁷ Still, Abraham not only falls on his face, but he also laughs and expresses astonishment about these promises. What does this tell us about the faith of Abraham?

It is unclear at this point how much Abraham believes or even comprehends about what God is promising about Sarah. In Hebrew, the word “and laughed” is spelled the same as the word “and Isaac.” The wordplay between “and laughed”/Isaac, then, is deeply ironic: “in laughing at God’s promise, Abraham unwittingly confirms it.”⁸ Furthermore, John Sailhamer makes an interesting observation about the use of *Abraham’s* name:

For the first time the name *Abraham*, rather than *Abram*, is used as the subject of a verb: “Abraham fell on his face and laughed” (v. 17; cf. v. 3: “Abram fell on his face”). The author’s irony is apparent in that Abraham was laughing at the very thing which his new name was intended to mark: “You will become a father of many nations” (v. 4).⁹

On the one hand, this verse about laughter demonstrates Abraham’s joyful astonishment over these promises. On the other hand, this verse also incorporates the new names of Abraham and Isaac to demonstrate the *truthfulness* of these promises. Later, when Sarah laughs after overhearing the same promise (Gen. 18:12), Yahweh rebukes Sarah for her unbelief (Gen. 18:13–15); however, God does not rebuke Abraham here for any unbelief.¹⁰ Most likely, the contrast between God’s stern response to Sarah and God’s gentle response to Abraham suggests that Sarah’s laughter arises from unbelief in a way that Abraham’s does not. That is, Abraham’s laughter does not reflect unbelief, but only a “limitation of his faith” that “must still be pushed beyond its present limits.”¹¹

We see this limitation of Abraham’s faith reflected in his words. After laughing, Abraham asks two questions “to himself” (lit., “in his heart”): “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gen. 17:18). The first question reflects Abraham’s state of shock and confusion at these promises, since he actually asks whether “a man” can be the one to *give* birth: “The way he frames his doubt, ‘Can a man...give birth?’ combines two different constructions for a double-barreled question....Probably the confused syntax reflects Abraham’s inward confusion. He is so overcome by the announcement that he changes the sentence structure in midstream.”¹² Abraham’s second question correctly reflects the process of human reproductive biology, but it expresses the same concerns. How can two elderly people possibly conceive and give birth to a child? Clearly, Abraham is perplexed by this announcement, and he is struggling to comprehend the promises.

Ishmael Before God

In his confusion, Abraham proposes an alternative plan for God to count Ishmael as the fulfillment of the promises:

[18] And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” [19] God said, “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. [20] As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. [21] But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.” (Gen. 17:18–21)

Abraham’s plea for God to allow Ishmael to “live” before him is one more facet of the limitations of Abraham’s faith. Just as Abraham went in to Hagar because Abraham and Sarah had lost confidence in God’s ability to keep his promise of providing them offspring (Gen. 16:4), so now Abraham is promoting Ishmael from some degree of a lack of confidence that any offspring will come from Sarah. Beyond the implausibility of Sarah’s conceiving, we should also recognize that Ishmael is now thirteen years old (Gen. 17:25), and Abraham has grown to love his son. Here, Abraham prays for

God's favor on the life of his son, including, if possible, that Ishmael would become the fulfillment of the promises.¹³

God firmly rejects this alternative proposal.¹⁴ Instead, God reaffirms that Abraham's wife Sarah will give birth to a son, and now God provides the name of the son: "and you shall call his name Isaac" (Gen. 17:19). Ishmael's name reminded Hagar (and Abraham and Sarah) that God heard Hagar's affliction (Gen. 16:11), meaning "God hears." Isaac's name will remind Abraham and Sarah of their laughter at the promises of God. Indeed, laughter will become the theme of Isaac's life:

Throughout the remainder of the narratives surrounding the birth of Isaac, a key word within each major section is *laughter*. Sarah laughed (18:12); Lot's sons-in-law laughed (19:14); all who heard of Sarah's birth to Isaac laughed (21:6); the son of Hagar laughed (21:9) at Isaac; finally, Isaac's own failure to trust in God (26:7) is uncovered when the Philistine king sees him "laughing" (26:8; NIV has "caressing") with Rebekah. Thus, for the author, both the power of God and the limitations of human faith are embodied in that most ambiguous of human acts, laughter.¹⁵

In other words, the name of this child will forever remind those who know him that Isaac's birth was a perplexing, astonishing miracle of God's power to accomplish the impossible.

The Offspring of Promise

Emphasizing the fact that Isaac will be the offspring of promise, God continues: "I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him" (Gen. 17:19). Here we see God's election at work, choosing Isaac over Ishmael as the recipient of his covenant, before Isaac is even born.¹⁶ In fact, God promises by this word to do something more than to treat Isaac simply as the inheritor of Abraham's covenant; rather, God graciously promises to put Isaac on equal covenantal footing with Abraham himself. John Sailhamer explains this well:

Thus Isaac was not to be one of the anonymous "seed" who was to receive the benefits of the covenant. He is here brought to the level of a participant in the original covenant: "I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (v. 19). Thus the identification of the covenant "seed" of Abraham is made more specific. The descendants of Abraham who are heirs of the covenant are those through Sarah, that is, the "seed" of Isaac. In this respect God's words to Abraham concerning Isaac in 17:19 already anticipate the reiteration of these words in the covenant with Isaac (26:3—"I will establish the oath which I swore to Abraham your father").¹⁷

Ishmael and Isaac are not interchangeable, since the promise offspring ("seed") does not relate generally to all the biological children of Abraham. Instead, God's promise to give Abraham offspring refers to the offspring who come *from Isaac*. Later, God will clarify this promise: "through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (Gen. 21:12). Again, note that God does not identify Isaac *as* the promised offspring. Instead, God says that Abraham's offspring will be named by those who come *through* Isaac.

This point is critical for understanding the wider biblical theology of God's covenant with his

people. Not all the biological descendants of Abraham belong to God's elect people, for God's covenant stretches beyond the scope of his election. The Apostle Paul writes this:

[6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [7] and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. (Rom. 9:6–8)

Paul articulates a stunning paradox: not all of the children of Abraham are actually the children of Abraham, for not all of Abraham's offspring are counted as Abraham's offspring. God's covenant works on two levels. On one level is the visible church, which includes all professing believers and their children.¹⁸ To be incorporated into the visible church is a great blessing, which brings marvelous benefits to all:

The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto him.¹⁹

At another level, however, the Scriptures differentiate between the visible church and the *invisible* church of those whom God chooses, calls, and counts as the *spiritual* offspring of Abraham. While every member of the visible church (elect and reprobate alike) receives the outward benefits that the visible church confers, only God's elect will enjoy "union and communion with [Christ] in grace and glory" forever.²⁰

We must uphold both sides of this robust, biblical doctrine of God's election. God does indeed set apart as holy those who live in the extended household of Abraham with a believer (1 Cor. 7:14), and God does insist that the children of believers have a rightful claim to the promises of his covenant (Acts 2:39), including the sign of those promises in baptism (Acts 2:38). These are magnificent benefits that God bestows upon his covenant people. Nevertheless, they are not enough on their own. In order for these benefits to confer eternal, spiritual blessings, we must lay hold by faith to the Person whom these benefits point us toward: the Lord Jesus Christ. God grants this faith in Christ as a gift to his elect (Rom. 8:29–30; Eph. 2:8–9), a group that includes some who were formerly far-off covenant strangers (Eph. 2:11–12) who have now been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13). God teaches the doctrines of the visible church and the invisible church through the entirety of the Bible. Therefore, we must not downplay the significance of either reality as we seek to make disciples by going into the world, baptizing, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded us to do (Matt. 28:18–20).

Promises for Ishmael

Accordingly, God does not incorporate Ishmael into fullness of his covenant as he does Isaac. Nevertheless, God insists that he will bless Ishmael in visible, temporal, worldly ways. Notice first

that God tells Abraham, “As for Ishmael,²¹ I have *heard* you.” This is a play on words in regard to Ishmael’s name, which means “God hears.”²² In Hebrew, this sounds like God is saying, “And for *God-hears*, I [God] have *heard* you.” Earlier, God *heard* Hagar (Gen. 16:11), but now God hears *Abraham* (Gen. 17:20). Later, God will hear *Ishmael* himself (Gen. 21:17).

Astonishingly, God promises that he has “blessed Ishmael,” and he will make Ishmael “fruitful” and “multiply him greatly [lit., “in great greatness”],” which are the same promises that God made to Abraham (Gen. 12:2; 17:2, 6).²³ Nevertheless, God draws a clear difference between the eternal, spiritual blessings for Abraham and the temporal, worldly blessings for Ishmael. Most prominently, God does not promise to “be God” to Ishmael in the way that he has promised to “be God” to Abraham and to Abraham’s offspring after him (Gen. 17:7–8). These are wonderful promises, yet they are restricted to “this earthly life” so that they do not “penetrate into the celestial kingdom of God, where a greater and higher blessing is laid up for us.”²⁴ Furthermore, God promises to make Abraham into “nations,” and he promises that “kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17:6). For Ishmael, God promises to make him into a single “great nation,” the father of “twelve princes” (Gen. 17:20). The nation of Israel will also have twelve “princes” (cf. Num. 7) as their tribal leaders, but the twelve tribes of Ishmael will constitute only one nation (Gen. 25:12–16), while Abraham will beget a multitude of nations.²⁵ Finally, God reasserts that he will establish his covenant with Isaac alone, “whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year” (Gen. 17:21).

Keeping the Covenant

With that, God departs from Abraham, and Abraham sets about keeping God’s covenant by circumcising himself and every member of his household. The text goes to great lengths to detail Abraham’s meticulous obedience:

[22] When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. [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. [24] Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. [25] And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. [26] That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. [27] And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. (Gen. 17:22–27)

The phrase “went up” describes the end of God’s *appearance* to Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:1): “What Abraham saw of God he now ceases to see.”²⁶ Nevertheless, Yahweh will appear to Abraham again soon (Gen. 18:1).

It is one thing for Abraham to circumcise himself after having seen such a glorious appearance of God; it is another thing for every male in Abraham’s household to submit to circumcision without having seen the appearance for themselves.²⁷ Nevertheless, we read that Abraham circumcises every single group whom God identified as the recipients of circumcision: Abraham himself (Gen. 17:24, 26), Ishmael his son (Gen. 17:22, 25, 26), and “all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner” (Gen. 17:27). In going to this great detail, Abraham

fulfills God's commandment to be "blameless" before him (Gen. 17:1).²⁸ Even though God explicitly excludes Ishmael from his covenant in favor of Isaac (Gen. 17:19, 21), God nevertheless extends the covenant sign of circumcision to Ishmael: "He too is to walk as one of Yahweh's children."²⁹ Ishmael is included in the visible church, so that he may be blessed along with the rest of Abraham's household by his connection with Abraham. Nevertheless, Ishmael does not possess the full breadth of promises that God extends to Abraham and to Isaac.

The phrase "that very day" (Gen. 17:26) marks out this event as "one of the turning points in world history, comparable to Noah's entry into the ark or the exodus from Egypt (cf. 7:13; Exod 12:17, 41, 51)."³⁰ On this day, God sealed a covenant-bond with his people by circumcision: "In the sense that Pentecost was the birthday of the church, this was the birthday of the church of the Old Testament."³¹ From this point forward, God bound himself not merely in a general sense to his promises, but in a specific sense to his particular people, who were marked with his sign of circumcision.

Seeking Abraham's Table Fellowship (Gen. 18:1–8)

Genesis 18:1 begins in the same way that Genesis 17:1 began: an appearance from Yahweh:

[1] 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. [2] He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth [3] and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. [4] Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, [5] while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." (Gen. 18:1–5)

We should recognize from the outset of our study of this passage that this narrative is directly contrasted with the encounter that Lot will have with the two angels in Sodom in Genesis 19. To start, we may recall that the last mention of Abraham's tent by "the oaks of Mamre" came in Gen. 13:18), right after Lot "moved his tent as far as Sodom" (Gen. 13:12), even though "the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD."³² Furthermore, Derek Kidner notes the difference in the time of day:

The noon encounter in this chapter and the night scene at Sodom in the next are in every sense a contrast of light and darkness. The former, quietly intimate and full of promise, is crowned by the intercession in which Abraham's faith and love show a new breadth of concern. The second scene is all confusion and ruin, moral and physical, ending in a loveless squalor which is even uglier than the great overthrow of the cities.³³

Indeed, Yahweh visits Abraham to bless him and his household, while Yahweh visits Sodom to destroy it.

On the surface, however, the encounters with Abraham and Lot look quite similar in the way

that both men extend hospitality to the visitors. Each man “bowed himself [with his face] to the earth” (Gen. 18:2; 19:1), an expression that could either describe a gesture of honor or of worship.³⁴ Abraham pleads with them not to pass him by, offering to bring water to wash their feet, to provide them rest under the tree, and to bring them a morsel of bread to refresh themselves before they move on (Gen. 18:3–5). Lot, similarly, asks them to turn aside into his house to spend the night and to wash their feet so that they can then rise up early the next morning and go on their way (Gen. 19:2). Although Lot does not verbally offer them a meal, he makes them a feast and bakes them unleavened bread (Gen. 19:3).

Nevertheless, while there are surface-level similarities, the hospitality of Abraham far exceeds that of Lot. After the men agree to Abraham’s hospitality, Abraham rushes into the tent to bark commands hurriedly at Sarah: “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes” (Gen. 18:6). Two seahs would be the equivalent of four gallons of flour for bread, which, along with an entire calf (Gen. 18:7–8), would make an extraordinary amount of food for only three visitors.³⁵ Even the detail about Abraham’s standing by while the three men eat (Gen. 18:8) reflects Abraham’s comprehensive hospitality toward these men.³⁶ We have no similar details about the hospitality of Lot for the feast that he served (Gen. 19:3).

The Appearance of Yahweh

Most significantly, however, are the titles by which each man addresses these visitors. When Abraham lifts up his eyes to see the three men “standing in front of him” (Gen. 18:2), he runs to meet them, bows low to the earth, and addresses him (singular) as “Lord” (Gen. 18:3). This word *’Adonāy* is a form of the general word for “Lord” that refers to God (cf. Gen. 15:2, 8; 18:27, 30, 31, 32; 20:4). Lot, on the other hand, uses a slightly different form of the word (*’Adonay*) that the ESV correctly translates as “my lords” (Gen. 19:2). This difference illustrates one of the most challenging aspects of the interpretation of this passage: what are we to make of these *three men* (two, in Lot’s case) who in some way represent the appearance of Yahweh (Gen. 18:1)?

Many Christians have drawn a straight line from the three men to the three Persons of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some suggest that Yahweh is *one* of the men, and that the other two are angels who depart, leaving Yahweh behind (cf. Gen. 18:22; 19:1).³⁷ John Sailhamer, however, makes a compelling case against both of these options, in my judgment. First, Sailhamer notes that, in all the similarities between the approaches of Abraham and Lot, the only *major* difference is in the way that each man addresses the visitors. Why does Abraham address the visitors as “Lord” (singular title for God) while Lot describes them as “my lords” (plural)?: “The most apparent explanation is that the author wants us to see that Abraham, who had just entered the covenant (chap. 17), recognized the Lord when he appeared to him, whereas Lot, who now lived in Sodom, did not recognize the Lord.”³⁸ Alternately, other commentators suggest that Abraham “only gradually discovers in the course of conversation” that he is speaking with Yahweh.³⁹ The text, however, tells us that Abraham addresses Yahweh as “Lord” from the start.

So, Sailhamer offers an explanation for this theophany that resists identifying any single one of these men (or the group of men as a whole) as the Lord:

That explanation seems to be that the three men, as such, are to be understood as the physical “appearance” of the Lord to Abraham. In other words, though God himself did not appear to

Abraham in physical form, the three men represent his presence. Similarly, the burning bush of Exodus 3:2–3 was a physical representation of God’s presence but was not actually the physical presence of God. In such a way the actual presence of God among his covenant people was assured without leaving the impression that God may have a physical form.⁴⁰

This explanation helps make sense of the shifts between singular and plural forms of words used throughout Genesis 18 and 19, since it differentiates between Yahweh himself and the *appearance* that Yahweh provides by sending the three men and then the two angels. Here, Yahweh appears, but not in such a way that Yahweh is personally seen in the fullness of his glory. Therefore, the presence of these three men is different altogether from the later appearance of Yahweh in the flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Even so, in the light of the revelation of the rest of the Bible, it would not be inappropriate to see some kind of foreshadowing of the doctrine of the Trinity in the appearance of Yahweh in a threefold form here, even if we do not go so far as to consider each man to *be* one of the Persons of the Trinity.

Abraham, though, recognizes something from the previous appearance of Yahweh (Gen. 17:1) to inform him that this is another appearance of the Lord (Gen. 18:3). Even the phrase “if I have found favor in your sight” echoes what the Scriptures recorded earlier about how *Noah* found favor (lit., “grace”) in the sight of Yahweh (Gen. 6:8).⁴¹ This also helps to explain why the narrative can suddenly shift from singular forms in Genesis 18:3 to plural forms in Genesis 18:4–9: Abraham recognizes this as an appearance from “the Lord” but he then interacts with the three men as the manifestation of that appearance.⁴² Even the food that Abraham serves reflects his knowledge that he is dealing with the Lord, since the word for “fine flour” is only used for “cereal offerings and for making the bread of the presence (Lev 24:5), and the regulations about the sacrifice constantly insist on the necessity of offering only top-quality animals (cf. Abraham’s ‘fine tender bull’).”⁴³

The Covenant Meal

On the whole, this text seems to reflect “a conscious attempt to stress at one and the same time the theological relevance of the promise of God’s presence along with his transcendent, sovereign power.”⁴⁴ Yahweh is glorious and transcendent, so that no one can see him and live (Ex. 33:20); however, Yahweh appears multiple times to Abraham as a sign of the intimate, covenant relationship that the two enjoy together. Seen in this light, this meal represents not just the next chapter of Abraham’s story, but a *covenant* meal that further ratifies God’s covenant with Abraham. Allen Ross writes this:

A good case can be made that the visitation to eat in Abraham’s tent was meant to convey intimate fellowship, and on the basis of such a close relationship, the Lord would guarantee the imminent birth of the child of promise. Covenants in the ancient world were often arranged with meals (see the treaty with Abimelech in 26:28–30). To eat together was important for peaceful agreements in covenants and treaties. And so, at the ratification of the covenant at Mount Sinai, the people of the covenant ate and drank in peace before the Lord (Exod. 24).⁴⁵

Indeed, God demonstrates his covenant intimacy with us by eating and drinking with us. God’s

people began in the garden of Eden, where they ate with God (Gen. 2:16) until they were expelled from the garden because of their disobedience. Jesus spent much of his ministry eating and drinking with people, and then, before his death, he ate with his disciples and established an ongoing covenant meal of bread and wine. If circumcision (under the old covenant) and baptism (under the new covenant) ingraft us into God’s covenant, ratifying our rightful claim to the promises, then table fellowship with God—especially during the Lord’s Supper—celebrates the peace that we have with God through the gospel. By these meals, we anticipate the eternal feast we will enjoy at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). There, we will behold God as we eat and drink with him forever (cf. Ex. 24:11).

Shepherding Sarah Toward Faithfulness (Gen. 18:9–15)

After finishing this meal of covenant fellowship, Abraham’s company ask him a question:

[9] They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” [10] 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. [11] Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.” (Gen. 18:9–11)

If Abraham has indeed recognized that these men represent an appearance of Yahweh in his midst, then their question must strike him as strange. Would Yahweh not know the location of Sarah? Furthermore, did they not overhear Abraham issuing his instructions to Sarah when he went into the tent (Gen. 18:6)? Instead, this question is yet one more of the “Where are you?” questions we have seen at so many key points in the Genesis narratives so far (Gen. 3:9; 4:9; 16:8): “it is not a real question, for the questioner knows the answer. In this case, it rather shows something about the questioner and indicates the real recipient of the message about to be given.”⁴⁶ Yahweh has already told Abraham of Sarah’s role in the promises (Gen. 17:15–21), and now Yahweh intends to inform Sarah as she listens to the conversation from inside the tent (Gen. 17:10).

Yahweh continues, largely repeating what he told Abraham in his previous appearance, but this time in the hearing of Sarah: “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son” (Gen. 17:10). At this moment, the narrator breaks in to give us background information: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” (Gen. 17:11). The narrator has reminded us repeatedly of the old, advanced age of Abraham and Sarah. The new information at this juncture comes in the information that Sarah has reached menopause.⁴⁷ From every human perspective, this promise will be impossible to fulfill.

Sarah’s Laughter

Sarah, then, laughs to herself and ridicules the promises:

[12] So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” [13] The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ [14] Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed

time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” [15] But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. He said, “No, but you did laugh.” (Gen. 18:12–15)

The similarity of Abraham’s and Sarah’s responses in laughter compels us to compare and contrast the two events. Where Abraham seemed to laugh with wonder as the promises stretched the limitations of his faith, Sarah’s laughter seems a bit more derisive and explicitly carnal as the matriarch makes a joke about sex. As added confirmation, Yahweh goes on to rebuke Sarah in a way that Yahweh did not do in response to Abraham’s laughter, as we will examine in a moment. In summary, Derek Kidner writes:

Her derision suggests that either Abraham had not yet told her of the promise (17:16, 19) or he had failed to convince her. God’s rebuke, where he had been gentle with Abraham (17:17, 19), rather points to the latter, i.e., that Sarah was persisting in unbelief, not merely reacting in astonishment. Her purely sensual comment (12b) adds to the impression that her interest in the covenant and promise was still shallow.

The next time Sarah laughs, her laughter will not be from skeptical doubt, but from overwhelming joy at the birth of Isaac: “And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me’” (Gen. 21:6).

The Rebuke of Yahweh

Even though Sarah is hidden away in the tent, laughing only silently “to herself” (lit., “in her inward parts”), Yahweh hears and responds. Once again, Yahweh asks a question about Sarah: “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” (Gen. 18:13). As with the last question, this is not actually a question, because Yahweh knows the answer, that Sarah does not believe that this promise is at all possible. Therefore, Yahweh asks another question, but this time one that is rhetorical: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14). In this question, Yahweh does not ask something that only *he* knows the answer to, but that everyone knows as well: there is *nothing* too hard for the LORD. Yahweh’s response cuts through Sarah’s actions and words to reveal her heart as well as his own gracious power.

Even so, the response of Yahweh also illustrates the profound obstacle to faith that these promises represent. It is not a small thing to bring forth a child from an elderly man and an elderly, menopausal woman, and Yahweh’s response highlights that difficulty to underscore the great power of the Lord. John Sailhamer puts it this way:

The key to the sense of this short passage lies in the Lord’s question to Abraham about Sarah’s laughter. The subtle changes in the wording of Sarah’s thoughts reveal that the Lord was not simply restating her thoughts but was interpreting them as well. In this way the writer is able to give the reader a deep insight into the meaning of the passage. First, the Lord restated Sarah’s somewhat ambiguous statement (“After I am worn out, will I now have pleasure?”) as simply, “Will I really have a child?” Then he took Sarah’s statement about her husband (“My husband is old,” 18:12) and reshaped it into a statement about herself (“I am old,” v. 13).

finally, he went beyond her actual words to the intent of those words: “Is anything impossible with the LORD?” (v. 14). By means of these questions to Abraham, the underlying issue in the narrative is put before the reader, that is, the physical impossibility of the fulfillment of the promise through Sarah.⁴⁸

From a human standpoint, Sarah’s reaction is perfectly understandable. For God, however, nothing is impossible. The point is not that we should dream the most outlandish things imaginable, and then urge others to believe those things by reminding them that God can do all things. Instead, the point is that we should believe everything that God declares *by his word*. On this point, John Calvin observes the following:

In short, he who does not expect more from God than he is able to comprehend in the scanty measure of his own reason, does him grievous wrong. Meanwhile, the word of the Lord ought to be inseparably joined with his power; for nothing is more preposterous, than to inquire what God can do, to the setting aside of his declared will.⁴⁹

Therefore, Yahweh reiterates his promise: “At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” (Gen. 18:14).

Realizing that she has been overheard, Sarah quickly tries to backtrack: “But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. He said, ‘No, but you did laugh’” (Gen. 18:15). By bringing Sarah’s laughter into the open, Yahweh preserves the fact that both Abraham and Sarah responded to God’s promise with laughter.⁵⁰ At one level, this highlighted the glory of God’s miracle. At another level, the laughter of Abraham and Sarah which will be captured in the name of their son, Isaac (“he laughs”), rebukes them for their the limitations and lack of faith in God’s promises. If the name *Ishmael* (“God hears”) stands as a rebuke for the prayerlessness of Abraham and Sarah, the name *Isaac* stands as a rebuke for their faithlessness. Even so, these names also function in such a way as to call Abraham and Sarah back to prayer and to faith in the areas where they stumbled.

Still, we should recognize the grace of God in his rebuke of Sarah. God does not disqualify or disown her; rather, he is shepherding Sarah out of her faithlessness and into faith. These doubts have remained hidden in her soul for a long time, even leading Sarah to give her Egyptian maidservant to Abraham as a wife (Gen. 16). But now, as Yahweh enters into table fellowship with Abraham and Sarah, he approaches them near enough to rebuke Sarah directly, even though she is hiding inside the door of the tent. Yahweh is not rubbing her nose in her sin, but exposing it so that he can heal her unbelief. All of this happens not from afar, but over the intimacy of a shared meal. Indeed, the Lord still accomplishes the same thing as he confronts our sin during the self-examination required as we approach his Table (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

A More Unbelievable Pregnancy

Finally, there may be a parallel between the different laughters of Abraham and Sarah and the different questions of Zechariah and Mary in the New Testament. The story of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth echoes the story of Abraham and Sarah: “And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly [cf. “walk before me and be blameless”; Gen. 17:1] in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were

advanced in years” (Luke 1:6–7). When the angel Gabriel informs Zechariah that his barren, elderly wife will bear a son, Zechariah responds with unbelief: “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (Luke 1:18). Zechariah expresses doubt and demands confirmation to help him “know” the truth of the promises. When Gabriel appears to Mary, however, to inform her that she will bear a son, Mary responds differently: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). Unlike Zechariah, Mary seems to believe the promises, and yet she expresses questions about *how* this will be, since she is a virgin. Gabriel rebukes Zechariah for his unbelief (Luke 1:19–20), but Gabriel honors Mary’s perplexed question with an answer (Luke 1:35). Then, Gabriel answers Yahweh’s rhetorical question from Genesis 18:14: “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). This parallel may indicate that Abraham’s laughter is like Mary’s question of belief, while Sarah’s laughter is like Gabriel’s question of unbelief.

Still, this parallel tells us even more. In the New Testament, the pregnancy of Zechariah and Elizabeth is contrasted against the pregnancy of Mary. It is a remarkable thing for barren, elderly Elizabeth to conceive. Indeed, this is the same kind of miracle as the extraordinary conception of Sarah at such an advanced age! Nevertheless, Gabriel tells us that it is Mary’s pregnancy that comes more closely to being classified as “impossible,” since Mary’s pregnancy will happen entirely by the power of God. The births of Isaac and John the Baptist are glorious; however, their glories pale compared to the glory of the birth of Jesus. Moreover, we should not miss that the miraculous pregnancies that so stretched the faith of Abraham, Sarah, Zechariah, and Elizabeth are outstripped not only by the birth of Jesus, but by the simple faith of Jesus’ mother, Mary: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Discussion Questions

1. What promises of God do you struggle to believe intellectually? What promises do you struggle to believe emotionally? How do you struggle with believing that God has chosen, called, and sent *you* to play a role in accomplishing his mission on earth? What lies does Satan try to persuade you about to distract you from God’s mission?
2. What benefits do every member of the visible church enjoy (cf. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #63)? Why are the outward ministries of preaching, prayer, singing, sacraments, and shepherding not enough to save us on their own? What must we do to be saved? If so, then why do we need the ministries of the visible church at all for our salvation?
3. How many examples can you identify from the Bible where God eats and drinks with his people? Why does God seek table fellowship with his people? What does table fellowship accomplish that God’s word, by itself, does not? If so, then why do we need God’s word at all? What is God seeking from you as you prepare to approach the Lord’s Table next?
4. Why might God choose to confront Sarah’s unbelief in the midst of table fellowship? Has God ever challenged your unbelief, hardness of heart, or sin as you received the Lord’s Supper? What does this tell us about the severity of Judas’s sin in betraying Jesus *after* Jesus fed him (John 13:26–27)? How then should we prepare for the Lord’s Supper?

Notes

1. “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.4)

2. This definition comes from the title of Iain M. Duguid’s book: *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).

3. Kidner, *Genesis*, 141.

4. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 25.

5. “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture....” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6)

6. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 25.

7. Calvin, *Genesis*, 459. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

8. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 26.

9. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 159.

10. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 477.

11. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 159.

12. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 26.

13. Calvin, *Genesis*, 460–61. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

14. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 26.

15. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 159.

16. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 479.

17. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 159–60.

18. “The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children.” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #62)

19. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #63.

20. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #65.

21. Grammatically, this phrase “As for Ishmael is different from God’s “As for me...” (Gen. 17:4), Abraham’s “As for you...” (Gen. 17:9), and Sarah’s “As for Sarai your wife...” (Gen. 17:15). All the other statements use only the name/pronoun (“I”/“you”/“Sarai your wife”), while this phrase actually includes the preposition “for”: “For Ishmael....” These are promises *for* Ishmael, but they are grammatically distinguished from the covenant promises between God and Abraham, along with his wife, Sarah.

22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 27.

23. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 159–60.

24. Calvin, *Genesis*, 462–63. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

25. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 27.

26. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 479.

27. Calvin, *Genesis*, 464–65. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiii.i.html>>

28. “Abraham’s final response shows that he obeyed the covenant as commanded in 17:9—he circumcised all male members of his household, ‘as God has spoken to him’ (v. 23). This final remark about Abraham’s

obedience carries the reader back to the beginning of the narrative where the injunction was given: ‘walk before me [הִתְהַלֵּךְ] and be blameless [תָּמִים, v. 1].’ This portrait of an obedience Abraham is reminiscent of the picture of Noah, who also “walked with God” (הִתְהַלֵּךְ) and was ‘blameless’ (6:9, תָּמִים). In the light of the sparsity of these terms in Genesis it seems likely that the author expects the reader to make an association between these two great men based on the close recurrence of both terms. ‘Blameless’ occurs in Genesis only in these two texts; ‘walk before God’ occurs more frequently, but in carefully chosen contexts (Enoch, 5:22, 24; Noah, 6:9, Abraham, 17:1; 24:40; 48:15 [with Isaac]). Thus Abraham and Noah are presented as examples of those who have lived in obedience to the covenant and are thus ‘blameless’ before God, because both obeyed God ‘as he commanded them’ (17:23; cf. 6:22; 7:5, 9, 16).” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 160. (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 160.)

29. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 480.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 27.

31. Kidner, *Genesis*, 141–42.

32. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 161.

33. Kidner, *Genesis*, 142.

34. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 45–46.

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 47.

36. Kidner, *Genesis*, 142.

37. “Christian commentators have been tempted to discern the three Persons of the Trinity here; but the passage differentiates clearly between the Lord and his two companions (see verse 22, and 19:1).” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 142.)

38. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 163.

39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 45.

40. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 164.

41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 46.

42. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 161.

43. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 47.

44. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 162.

45. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 342.

46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 47.

47. Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 12.

48. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 166.

49. Calvin, *Genesis*, 476. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>

50. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 345.