

Sarah Laughed

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- [0 : 00] Let us now turn to the book of Genesis, chapter 18, and to verse 12 as our text.
- And I'd like just to pick out two words in verse 12. Sarai laughed. Sarai laughed.
- You know, when you are reading the Bible, sometimes a word, sometimes a phrase, sometimes a sentence, sometimes several verses stick with you.
- And in my view, these words are worth reflecting on. Sarai laughed. I am sure that everyone would agree that laughter can be catching, infectious.
- Who has not been in a place where it would be inappropriate for you to laugh? But then something happens that triggers off laughter in your own life or in the life of someone else.
- [1 : 16] And before you know it, several others are also affected and go into fits of laughter. Or perhaps you've been in a group of people and someone tells something amusing, triggering laughter, and continuous laughter affects others in the group.
- So that you see people weeping tears of laughter. Now that may be because it is a release from nervous energy.
- It may be for other reasons. But it sometimes happens. And yet the strange thing is, although you may be affected by the tears of someone crying, it is seldom that you are moved to cry with a person.
- And I don't know what the explanation for this might be. But the old adage that states laugh and the world laughs with you, weep and you weep alone, seems to be an accurate description of much that happens in our lives.
- There are different kinds of laughter. If all laughter were relatively innocent and lighthearted, its contagious nature would be good.
- [2 : 45] But all laughter is not like that. Some laughter is scornful and derisory. At the cross, for example, we see the laughter of scorn and the laughter of derision as people mock the Lord Jesus on the cross.
- Some laughter speaks of an unhealthy arrogance in the lives of some. Other laughter can be the mark of unbelief.
- And in this part of Scripture where the Holy Spirit has deemed it important for us to know that Sarah laughed, it is evident from the context that this is an example of unbelieving laughter.
- The narrative in which these words are placed is in itself fascinating, not least because we are informed of God's appearing to Abraham at Mamre.
- The Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, we are told in the opening words of the chapter. We are told of the visitors who came to visit Abraham.
- [4 : 15] They arrived in the heat of the day. As Abraham sat at the door of his tent by the oaks of Mamre, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men.
- Three men were standing in front of him. There are three men. That in itself is intriguing.

So intriguing that some would suggest they represent the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I cannot accept that personally.

I think that can be immediately dismissed as Scripture does not support such a view. They are spoken of as angels.

But one of the three is not just any angel. He is the angel of the covenant. And when we speak of the angel of the covenant, we refer to the Lord Jesus Christ appearing in a pre-incarnate form.

[5 : 26] John Owen, the great Puritan, makes the observation, two are angels by nature and one by office only.

And I think that is a very perceptive comment. Two are angels by nature. In other words, they are created beings, but one by office only.

In other words, the angel of the covenant. Two of these angelic beings seem to have journeyed on to rescue Abraham's nephew Lot from the cities of the plain.

And it's interesting to note to the reaction of Abraham to these visitors. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

Now, it could be argued from the reaction and address of Abraham that he recognized the most important of the three.

[6 : 40] O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. In the original, in the Hebrew language, it is not the forum for Yahweh, that is, for Jehovah, but rather for Adonai that is used here.

But given the reluctance in the Old Testament to use the term Yahweh, it's a term that they were reluctant to take on their lips, then I am inclined to the view that there was recognition on the part of Abraham as to the identity of this third person.

The customary courtesies are provided. And I don't know, did you wonder, when we read these courtesies, how many housewives here would rush to prepare bread and to bake it to scones, as it would be in our day, or perhaps oat cakes or barley bread.

How quickly could you rustle up that if your husband came in and said, we've got visitors, you've got to make scones or barley bread, or that is the equivalent.

And then the calf that he had prepared, we wouldn't think of slaughtering an animal and eating it right away, would we? We would want it to hang for a while, for a certain length of time.

[8 : 23] Maybe that in such a hot climate, it was acceptable, but it's a different custom to what we are used to. We would wait some time before that would be done.

But it may be that the courtesies that are extended here, that they remind us of a New Testament incident that is related, where one particular host did not extend these common courtesies to his guest, a man by the name of Simon the leper.

and you remember how he was rebuked and how his behavior was contracted, contrasted, with the reaction and behavior of the woman who was a sinner and who had, for want of a better phrase, had gate-crashed the gathering.

and you remember how the Lord contrasted her behavior in anointing him with the behavior of Simon the leper.

Because, although Simon had invited Christ, his heart was not really in the invitation. He was merely curious to find out who this person was.

[9 : 49] But this woman who came in and anointed the Lord, she was one whose life had been radically altered by meeting the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the Lord reaffirms this in dismissing the woman. and you remember how he speaks of her as one who loved much.

Why did she love much? Because she had been forgiven much. And everybody who has been forgiven has received great forgiveness.

I'm not going to say that everybody's love who has received great forgiveness is at the same level. But they do love the source or the person through whom their forgiveness has been granted.

Well, Abraham sets about preparing the meal. And whilst these guests partook of the provisions, we are told they inquired about Sarah.

[11 : 07] where is Sarah, your wife? That would be a natural question. To which Abraham replied that she was in the tent. No, I don't think there was anything unusual in that.

In our tradition, we would expect the wife, your wife, to appear to greet the guests along with yourself, wouldn't you? You wouldn't expect your wife to be hiding somewhere in the kitchen and not to appear.

You would expect her to come and you would be introduced to the guests if she didn't know them. But in this tradition, it was clearly proper for her to remain within the confines of the tent, to be in the background and to remain unseen.

And so you have this word of promise spoken by the Lord. The Lord said, and notice it's the Lord who speaks, the Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, Sarah, your wife, shall have a son.

And Sarah, obviously her curiosity had been aroused by the visit of the guests. She was eavesdropping. Not sure that that is something to be praised.

[12 : 33] She was eavesdropping on the conversation. And she overheard what was said. And when she overheard what was said, Sarah was listening at the door behind him and Abraham and Sarah were old.

The writer tells us advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself saying, after I am worn out, and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure?

Sarah laughed. And you have to wonder why the Holy Spirit put these words down in the Bible.

Is there something strange about it? Is there something that ought to arouse our curiosity? In fact, in the previous chapter, we're told that Abraham laughed.

But his laughter is very different to that of Sarah's in this chapter. Abraham's laughter was that of joyful acceptance, or at least wonder mixed with growing belief.

[13 : 50] Sarah's laughter, I believe, was an expression of utter unbelief.

And I think that is proven by the response of the Lord. The Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh? And say, shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?

And the Lord goes on to say, is anything too hard for the Lord? Well, there are three things that I'd like to highlight first about this laughter in the life of Sarah.

I believe it is expressive of unbelief, and unbelief is sin. It's difficult to know how much Sarah understood about the identity of the visitors who came into their tent that day in the heat of the day.

The New Testament in the letter to the Hebrews states, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

[15 : 11] Just in passing. Do you think you've ever done that? It is possible that these words in the New Testament are a reference to this episode that is recorded for us in the book of Genesis.

So it is difficult to judge how much she understood with regard to the visitors, or whether she appreciated that one was the Lord himself in a pre-incarnate revelation.

If Sarah had realized this, then her unbelief is even more blamable. But even if she did not have that measure of insight, yet it was still inexcusable on her part for the simple reason that God had promised Abraham many times that he would have a son.

Recently, God had confirmed or reaffirmed this to Abraham. God said to Abraham, as for Sarah, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah shall be her name.

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.

[16 : 45] So the laughter of Sarah was not innocent. It was the laughter of unbelief. In effect, she was saying by her laughter that God was a liar and not to be trusted.

Remember what the apostle John has to say in his letter about unbelief? If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater.

For this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his son. Whoever believes in the son of God has the testimony in himself.

Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his son.

There is the danger that we treat the lack of faith lightly in the lives of our fellow men.

[18 : 00] faith in the life of anyone because unbelief is serious.

It is the vehicle that will carry us into a lost eternity if our unbelief is not removed. John Stott makes the comment that unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied.

It is a sin to be deplored. Unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied. It is a sin to be deplored.

Its sinfulness lies in the fact that it contradicts the word of the one true God and attributes falsehood to God and the Bible makes it abundantly clear that God cannot lie.

He is so unlike the creatures who inhabit the world. Men can lie and they can lie easily but God cannot lie.

[19 : 23] It is an impossibility and so to disbelieve what God has promised is in effect to say that God is setting forth falsehood or to quote a current phrase that God is promoting fake news.

falsehood there is nothing fake about what God has promised in this context. There is nothing fake about it at all.

So there is unbelief in the life of this woman. Unbelief is sin. And secondly like all sin unbelief leads to other sins.

that is the domino effect or the chain reaction. When the Lord challenged Sarah for her unbelief she may have made excuses saying that her laughter was an expression of joy in God's promise or that she was only laughing as Abraham had done earlier when God had made the same promise to him and we are told Abraham fell on his face and laughed.

Each of these excuses would of course have been untrue. But Sarah did something even worse. She lied outright. Sarah denied it saying I did not laugh.

[21 : 04] You see there was fear in her denial for she was afraid. That is why sin is so serious.

why we cannot willingly sin just a little bit. She was in denial and if we engage in denial we play the blame game.

Everyone else is at fault. And oh how early this behavior came into the life of man. Remember when Adam was challenged in the garden the woman whom you gave me.

In other words he was pointing a finger at God for the fact that he had contradicted and disobeyed the direct command of God.

Remember man's inhabiting of Eden was conditional on his obedience. And the moment that man disobeyed the command then he lost that privilege.

[22 : 16] And here is this woman. She was in denial. She is denying that she ever did this.

There's one member of our family. He's the youngest in the family. And he has issues that not everybody has because of his condition.

And if you challenge him on something, he will immediately tell you, I do nothing wrong. I do nothing wrong. takes him a long time to get to the fact that sometimes he does do something wrong.

But because of his condition, you have to make allowances, but then you have to point out to him where there is things are done wrong.

And that is something that is engaged in by countless individuals. it is practiced so often by nations giving rise to conflict, resulting in actions that cause the loss of life and demand suffering.

[23 : 36] And of course we see it in our troubled world. In Venezuela, we've seen the problems that are arising there. In the Yemen, tremendous loss of life.

the Middle East, a powder keg, waiting to explode because of the tensions that exist between the various groupings and nations there, between Palestinians and Israelis, not forgetting the pernicious aims of Iran to erase Israel.

But you see, looking at the world is all very well. we have to bring the spotlight closer to home and look at our own life.

Do we play the blame game? Are we blaming someone else for where we are this evening?

The only safe course is to repudiate sincerely and entirely and turn to the one who is faithful and just to provide both forgiveness and cleansing.

[24 : 55] So, unbelief is sin. Unbelief leads to other sins. Unbelief is offensive to God.

That's obvious from the nature of unbelief itself. For if unbelief is sin and it leads to other sins, unbelief is clearly an offense.

to God and must be dealt with firmly. And this principle is vividly illustrated for us in this episode.

Sarah, we are told, had laughed. And the Bible says she laughed to herself. In other words, it was silent laughter.

laughter. She laughed inwardly. So that even Abraham, her husband, was totally unaware of this laughter.

[25 : 56] He didn't hear it. Ah, but God did. God heard it. And here we have an example of the omniscience of God.

Remember in Psalm 139, the psalmist tells us of the omniscience of God, the knowledge that belongs to him, so that even before we speak, before we speak, he knows what we're going to say.

He knows what's in your mind. He knows what's in your heart. He has an intimate knowledge of all our thoughts. You wouldn't like all your thoughts to be known to your fellow man, would you?

Even the thoughts since you sat in this church building tonight. You wouldn't like all these thoughts just to be spewed out, pasted, around the gallery here, and everyone could read them and see them.

Ah, but you see, God knows them. There will be thoughts of which you'll be ashamed, thoughts that you wouldn't want anyone to know about, and yet God knows them, just as he saw this silent laughter in the life of this woman, as she eavesdropped on the conversation.

[27 : 27] Because every heart is open to the eye of God. All our desires are known. And God responds with a question designed to expose and correct the transgression in the life of this woman.

Why did Sarah laugh and say, shall I indeed bear a son now that I am old? And he goes on to say, is anything too hard for the Lord?

God. God. And remember, he contradicts her version. Yes, you did laugh.

You see, when we sin, we hope that God will ignore it. Or that God will not take notice. And you remember, that's what was true.

And you remember how the psalmist, how he summarizes this in one of the psalms that we sang together this evening in Psalm 94, where he speaks of that kind of philosophy.

[28 : 34] Yet say they, God it shall not see, nor God of Jacob know. And the psalmist says, ye brutish people understand. Fools, when wise will ye grow?

the Lord did plant the ear of man and here then shall not he only found the eye and then shall he not clearly see? So, that gives us an indication of how God monitors all of our lives in a minute way.

He doesn't ignore what we do. He doesn't wink at it. He doesn't overlook it. You know, sometimes like indulgent parents, we overlook sometimes what our families might do.

We know it's wrong, but we overlook it. That's not how God behaves, because his standards are so different to ours. His standards are in accord with his own nature, which is holy and perfect and righteous.

And his standards are just. And sometimes we wonder why our lives go badly, why we seem to be where we are.

[29 : 59] We are so slow to learn. And you see, God is reminding us of the intimacy of knowledge, knowledge, but he is also reminding us of this, of his power to deliver.

The Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear. And then he makes this very plain, but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

it's like a thick cloud layer of sin obscuring the face of God just as the cloud naturally obscures the light of the sun.

So the cloud layer of sin obscures the face of God. But you see, and this is where grace comes in, God does not deal with us according to our desert.

That's where grace comes in. He reveals his grace, and that is seen in the words with which he addresses Sarah. When Sarah laughed at God, he could have said, well, since you have not believed Sarah, the promise of a son will not come to pass.

[31 : 26] I will establish the Redeemer's line in some other way. God is slow to anger, God said, Sarah's unbelief did not deflect his announced purposes.

God had said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son. And he repeats the promise, at the appointed time, I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.

He had a special word for Sarah. Although he doesn't speak to her directly for most of the conversation, but after he contradicts her version and her denial of what she had done, yet we are told that in verse 14, Sarah, after I am warned of the Lord, my Lord is, in verse 14, is anything too hard for the Lord.

Now, these words, I believe, are spoken to encourage Sarah and to promote faith in her life. Sarah had been looking to her circumstances rather than to God.

She had been considering her age and the age of her husband. Remember, and even if she was alive today, an IVF program I don't think would be used for a woman of her age.

[33 : 03] She knew she was past the age of childbearing and that he was past the age of engendering children. But in this response, God directs her away from circumstances to himself.

And at the same time, he exposes the nature of her unbelief. He reminds her again that he is truly the sovereign God, the God of almighty power, for whom nothing is too hard.

Yet, how often we doubt and question the power of the almighty. If you look at examples in the Bible, God made water flow from a rock in the desert.

Yet, the people doubted that he could provide them with bread. bread. And although he rained manna from heaven, they questioned whether he could provide them with meat.

Even Moses counted the people and told God there was not enough animals in their flocks and herbs to feed them and asked sarcastically almost if all the fish of the sea could be secured for them.

[34 : 16] In Numbers chapter 11, the people among, says Moses, among who I am, number 600,000 on foot. And you have said I will give them meat that they may eat a whole month.

Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them and be enough for them? And God replied, Is the Lord hands hand shortened?

In other words, do I not have the power? Do you remember on another occasion where the words that are used here, is anything too hard for the Lord are used?

Do you remember when Jeremiah was in prison? And the Lord urged him to buy a field from a close relative?

And the field was under the control of the Chaldeans. And Jeremiah went and bought the field.

[35 : 26] You might have questioned whether Jeremiah had somehow lost his marbles buying a field that he couldn't use when he was in prison that was under the control of the invading army of Nebuchad Netzer.

And then Jeremiah himself began to wonder. And you remember the encouragement that the Lord gives him.

When he is beginning to question what he has really done, and the Lord says to him, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh.

Is anything too hard for me? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

It's one of the great rhetorical questions of the Bible. is there any problem in your life? Any difficulty that you face?

[36 : 34] Too hard for God? Can you imagine any circumstance or providence in your life that God cannot control?

Perhaps it's in the area of, your problem is in the area of salvation. You have heard the gospel, for a long time, for more years than you can remember.

You have even marveled how the examples of the great grace of God displayed in the lives of some. But you cannot believe that that can take place in your life.

You have seen how others can be saved. But it might be that you have vivid memories of sins committed in your own life. Sins that haunt you and you do not see how God can forgive anything that is so terrible and that seems to dog your footsteps as you go through life.

Whatever it might be, and it may be that you are of the view that these sins bar you from the society even of believers never mind the presence of Almighty God.

[38 : 02] Oh let me ask the question again is anything too hard for the Lord? Is there any one sin for which the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ God Son cannot atone?

Moses was a murderer but he was saved. David an adulterer and a murderer but he received grace. Peter denied the Lord but he was converted.

Paul was present when Stephen was killed and by association guilty. These and countless other sinners saved by the merits of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone.

Their salvation was not too hard for the Lord. Why should it be impossible in your life my friend? God says to you as he has said to many others.

Come now. Let us reason together says the Lord. Though your sins be like scarlet they shall be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson they shall become like wool.

[39 : 25] In other words though your sin be so deeply ingrained in your nature as the dyes of crimson and scarlet. Dyes that did not easily fade or wash out.

God says I can erase them and make you pure and white. Oh do you feel tonight that you might want to believe but then you are going to tell me faith is a gift and I don't possess it.

Yes there's no question about it faith is a gift but have you asked for it? Have you asked for the gift?

Do you remember in the New Testament where the Lord uses this argument of how fathers can give good gifts to their children?

And then he goes on to say ask seek and you shall find ask and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened unto you ah but have you sought has there been a reluctance on your part to seek?

[41 : 11] Have you been silent when it comes to asking? Have you been hesitant and knocking? Are you like Sarah gripped by unbelief in these situations?

Is that what is true? Is that why you have not sought? Well the Lord is saying and the word of God is saying that God can do these miracles.

is anything too hard for the Lord? Ask for it. Read the Bible.

That encourages you to ask. There was a man who belonged to the last congregation that I served in.

I never met him but I did meet his family. It was before my time. He was a shepherd in South America.

[42 : 32] He was living in a remote area for a period of his life. And every time he went to this remote area he took a supply of magazines and books.

But he ran out of magazines and books. And the supply wagon as it was then was not due for some weeks.

Do you know what he started doing? He began to read the Bible just like he would read a book. But he discovered that the Bible was not just any book but that it was the word of the living God.

And the more he read the Bible the more the word of God began to convict and do its work in his heart and in his life.

So for anyone here who has neglected to be reading the word of God, for anyone here who just opens the Bible on a Sabbath evening, puts it on the shelf and feel that you've done your duty for the week, you've set yourself up for the week, do you know what the dust on the Bible is adding to your guilt?

[44 : 09] And it's pointing an accusing finger at you and it's saying to you, you have not opened me today. You haven't listened to what I have to say to you today.

I'm not asking you to read rims of the Bible every day. Better to read a few verses and to sort of turn them over and mull over them in your mind and in your heart.

Because you see the Bible, the God who says is anything too hard for me, is the God who says whatever you ask in my name, this I will do.

Not the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. Oh, whatever it is, however personal to you it may be and appear to be an insurmountable barrier that you cannot overcome, is anything too hard for the Lord.

And you notice what God did. Even although these two were so old, God created life as it were out of death.

[45 : 44] Seemed impossible. Totally impossible. Humanly speaking, could never happen. God created life out of death.

That's what he does in the lives of men and women and boys and girls. He creates life where there is death. faith. And so this woman received faith.

She began in unbelief and she's brought to faith. So the New Testament tells us by faith, Sarah herself repowered to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

She received laughter. Not only did she have faith, but she had laughter. And you might be saying, laughter, I thought that was the problem. Yes, it was the problem in this chapter, because it was an indication of unbelief.

But this is not the only incident in the Bible where Sarah is reported as laughing. In Genesis 21, God has made laughter for me.

[46 : 53] Everyone who hears will laugh over with me. And she said, who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age.

Here is the laughter of unbridled joy and delirious wonder of God's goodness. And the actual name of Isaac means laughter or literally he laughs.

So you see, she is given faith and she has the joy that accompanies faith in her life. we sang about that joy in our opening psalm.

When science bondage God turned back as men that dreamed were then filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongues with melody.

Ah, my friend, do you know something of this uplifting joy of the Lord in your life? joy that shall never leave you.

[48 : 07] The laughter. People present Christians as gloomy and dull. That's always the way, particularly in this island for some reason.

That's the way they're presented. Nothing could be further from the truth. they're full of joy. The joy of the Lord has entered into their heart and into their lives.

And Sarah came to experience something of that. She came to experience praise in her life as one to whom the Lord reached out and reminded there is anything too hard for the Lord who creates life from death.

Oh, friend, maybe you have laughed many times, have laughed the laughter of unbelief, but my friend, would it not be better to weep the tears of repentance and to know the joy of the Lord in your life that you may enjoy in this world and in the world to come.

Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.