

**Genesis 17: 15- 22; “God’s Ways laughed at”, Sermon # 51
in the series - “Beginnings”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on
November 27th, 2005 in the Morning Worship.**

It will do us well to remember that these verses are set in the context of God’s giving Abraham the Covenant of Purpose that we have been talking about for the last several Sundays. The Covenant of Purpose is a Covenant made with Abram where God was saying to him that he must become obedient by faith to the purpose that God had, to make him fruitful in God’s way and not his own way. It came to him 13 years after the episode of Sarai’s giving Hagar to Abram for a wife so that they could fulfill the promise of God that Abram would have descendants. We have seen that this happened because of the sin of unbelief in Abram and Sarai. They did not believe that God was going to fulfill the promise to Abram through Sarai, who was barren and had been barren the whole time of their marriage. They were tired of waiting for God. They believed that since a child had not been conceived in Sarai’s womb after all these years, that there must be another way to see it happen. And what a terrible mistake it was in using their own fleshly reasoning in the matter of Hagar. Because even now, this same sin of doubt was at times, influencing their thinking. Abram is indeed willing to believe God, and to walk before Him and be blameless. He has not left off believing in the promise, but I would say that with he and Sarai that there had developed a certain skepticism about how God does things. I wonder if this is the case with you this morning? It is entirely possible for true Christians to fall into a skeptical mindset about the way that God does things. We do believe in Him, we do acknowledge his sovereign way of proceeding with us. But if we cannot comprehend His way of bringing things about for us, then sometimes we become skeptical that His way, the way of patient waiting, is right.

God’s ways seem funny to us. We see this here with Abraham. He has a new name, the Father of a multitude, but we find him laughing at God’s ways. He is not laughing with the irreverent laughter of the unbeliever. No, he is not wavering here in unbelief at the promise of God. He is going to be strengthened in his faith through this and he will give glory to God in this. But he is laughing because He knows that God has something more to show Him and teach Him about His ways. God has purposed to bless Abraham and Sarah with a son in fulfillment of His covenant promise to multiply them exceedingly, but Abraham laughs that it should happen to ones as old as they are. So too, you and I would rather see our own conception established, of how things should be given to us and worked out in our lives, because we cannot at first accept God’s way of doing things. And sometimes we laugh. And sometimes our reasons for laughing are right and sometimes they are not. We need to pray the words of Psalm 25: 4, 5- “Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; on You I wait all the day.”

So what I want to do this morning is to ask the question; “Why do God’s ways

seem so funny to Abraham and to us?” And I think that we can answer that question in this way. God’s ways seem funny to Abraham and to us for the following reasons:

1st- Because God does amaze and surprise us with His Sovereign power and ability.

(Verses 15-17)

We now find the veil being lifted from God’s sovereign purpose in this matter of Sarai having a child. God has kept Sarai barren all these years until this point, just to demonstrate that nothing will be impossible with Him. They had doubted before that the promise would be fulfilled in Sarai having the child of promise. Now Abraham finds that God does intend for her to have the child. God is going to bless her and take away her barrenness and “she will become a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her,” it says in verse 16. This is why Abraham “fell on his face and laughed.” Sarai, “his princess” or in the original, “his princesses”, the woman who was more to him than 10 wives, was about to become Sarah, “the princess who rules, the princess who triumphs,” for so her name means. God was going to make her a princess in the absolute sense. He is going to bless her, and she would become a mother of nations and kings of peoples would be from her. How utterly amazing! How seemingly impossible! Two people like them; 100 and 90 years of age going to have a baby! Abraham is not doubting God’s ability to perform such a thing. He is fully persuaded that God will do it. But what he is amazed about is that such a thing could be done in themselves who were so old and weak. It brought to his heart great joy and astonishment and delight that God would do such a thing. What a great surprise! This was what he had hoped for, for so long. And now it is going to happen!

Turn with me to Romans 4: 17 and we will see what was going on in Abraham’s heart. It says, “...It is written, ‘I have made you a father of many nations’, in the presence of Him who he believed- God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; (Abraham) who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of man nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith , giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.” Abraham had believed and it was accounted to him for righteousness. He was a justified man because he had believed years before when God had taken him outside and told him to count the stars. But it is the way that God brought this promise about that amazed and surprised and delighted Abraham. This is what our great God does. He almost always makes his people wait for the fulfillment of the things that they most strongly desire that are things which are for their spiritual blessing and for His glory. It is not as though He will not sustain them in their pilgrimage with many spiritual blessings. Most certainly He will. But their fruitfulness and their being

able to be useful to Him and to see the great desire of their hearts, the blessings of spiritual fruitfulness coming to pass in their lives; He will often defer this for a time so that we will understand the greatness of what He is doing, so that we are humbled by it, and so that we can really marvel and rejoice forevermore in it. This is what Abraham was experiencing that day. It seemed funny to him that it would be so. But He greatly rejoiced in it.

Now 2ndly- God's ways seem funny to Abraham and us because we cannot believe that God would not establish our own efforts and plans to further His purposes.

(Verses 18-20)

Immediately after Abraham asks the question in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old bear a child?", he bursts out with this prayer of exclamation, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" It is very obvious from this that Abraham had a great love for his son Ishmael. We will read of it again in Genesis 21: 11. But Ishmael is a type and picture of the results which come from our own human wisdom and our own fleshly efforts. He was no doubt a fine lad in many ways, but nevertheless would become a wild donkey of a man before God and man. Abraham would have him to be the one with whom the covenant would be established. He would have Ishmael to live before God and to have all the spiritual blessings of the Covenant that God was now making with him.

Now we cannot say for sure that Ishmael was not eventually brought into all the spiritual blessings of the Covenant by faith, but we do know that Abraham prayed that it would be so. This was the concern, evidently the great concern of his heart. And truly it ought to be the concern of every godly parent that their children be brought into covenant with God through the New Covenant made and established through Jesus Christ our Lord. This does not come about through the water baptism of our infants. They know nothing of their own sinfulness and they cannot exercise saving faith. But Ishmael was old enough to do so. And Abraham realized that it would take a work of grace in him to change this tendency within his son to be fiercely independent and opposed to others around him who might not be as strong and self sufficient as he was. We shall see this in chapter 21: 9. But Abraham longed that it would be so. And he was fervently beseeching God that it could be so. You and I ought to bring each one of our children before God with this kind of prayer. "Oh, that they might live before You!" Oh, that you might give them a new heart and take away the stony heart from them and do a work of regenerating grace that would save their soul. That should be the desire of every Christian parent's heart. And we must rest in His sovereign will and purpose for our children in praying all of our prayers. We do not know whether the Lord will save them and in what ways He may use them or bless them. But it ought not to stop us from praying fervently that God would have mercy upon them. The child of promise was to be Isaac and not Ishmael and yet in verse 20 we find God telling Abraham, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and

will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.” He would have great earthly and temporal blessings from God, and perhaps it is possible that he himself was converted in his later years.

But God would establish His Covenant with Isaac. He purposely further narrowed the Covenant of Purpose here to Isaac and not to Ishmael because Ishmael was the son of the bondwoman and not the son of the free woman as it says in Galatians 4: 23. It says, “he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise.” The term “according to the flesh” means according to our own efforts, works, and purposes in opposition to God’s purpose and in opposition to His Word and will. We would like those efforts and works to last and to merit favor with God but we put ourselves under the law and a curse when we attempt that way to get what we want. God’s ways seem funny to us at first. We have a hard time believing that it is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh profits nothing. (John 6: 63) And we do love those people in our families who are not listening to the Word of God or concerned with His purpose and promise. We do not want them to be left out! We would pray them in if we could. Only God can give us a favorable answer. It is His mercy that any of us are saved and brought into covenant with Him through faith in the promise of Christ. But all things are possible with God.

3. And Finally- God’s ways seem funny to Abraham and to us because we often do not see God’s greater purpose and His long term plan.
(Verse 21, 22)

I am referring to the words of verse 21, “But My covenant I will establish with Isaac.” What does this mean, the narrowing of the promise to this child Isaac? We need to understand that God in making this covenant with Abraham and establishing it through Isaac has in mind, in the long run; a very narrow and particular purpose to fulfill. It is that Isaac would be the first descendant in a long line of descendants which would culminate in the birth of the one of which Isaac is a type. I am referring to our Lord Jesus Christ. Sarai was barren and she would have that barrenness removed by God and have the child that she thought that she would never have, even Isaac. She was indeed a princess who triumphed. But when Jesus Christ was to be born, He would be born of another Hebrew princess, Mary, who would be a virgin who would conceive and bear a son. Isaac was the child of promise. Jesus is the actual descendant that was the fulfillment of all the promises made to the fathers. Listen to Galatians 3: 16. “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds’, as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” The Covenant of Purpose was with Abraham and the Hebrew people, the Jews. It was in force until Christ came who fulfilled all the promises in His perfect obedience to God’s law and in dying a sacrifice for the sins of every one of Abraham’s spiritual descendants, both Jew and Gentile. He would triumph over sin and death. When Abraham received the

news from God that he and Sarah were going to have a son, he fell on his face and laughed. I believe that he was in that laugh fulfilling the saying of Christ in John 8: 56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." He laughed for joy that it would be so through his own son Isaac. He did not know the long term purpose of God, how many generations of descendants would intervene before the Christ came, but he knew that He was coming and it could be his own Isaac. He knew that this child was indeed God's doing and it was marvelous in his eyes. He now knew the truth of Romans 9: 8, "Those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of the God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed." And he rested all of his faith upon that promise. God had said, "But My Covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year." How great was the blessing to Abraham's heart; his Sarah a triumphant princess.

Now in closing, will you not receive the truth of the text this day? Only God can save us from our sins through Jesus Christ who was the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. You must see that salvation is based upon a promise, and your living the Christian life and being fruitful in God's service is something that only He can bring about. But God has a way of bringing it about that will bring us great joy and rejoicing and even laughter. That is what Isaac's name means; laughter. And each of you can have this kind of joy, this holy laughter when you will trust and hold fast to the precious and magnificent promises of God which are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Your soul may feel as though it is in some sort of a captivity because things have not developed in your Christian life in a way that you think that you can at all be satisfied with your life. But remember these verses that we have studied today and have faith. And go and read Psalm 126. "When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad." You can apply this to yourself and to your own heart and mind if you are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. God's ways may seem funny at times, but He will bring you through all your trials and afflictions, safely to His heavenly kingdom, and even give you joy and rejoicing on the way by surprising you and astonishing you by the great things that He will do for the one trusting in His Son. I urge you to trust in Him, even if for the first time today. And if you have been a Christian for a long time waiting for the promises to be fulfilled in you, remember that the greatest gift of all is to have Christ and having Him you have everything that Abraham and Sarah longed for- salvation and fruitfulness.