Lesson Five

**Sarah: Laughing At God's Promise**

*Focal Text*


*Background*


*Main Idea*

Life calls us to choose between laughing at God’s promise and trusting in it so that we may laugh with joy.

*Question to Explore*

“Is anything too hard for the LORD?”1

*Quick Read*

When we bring our doubts and struggles to God, we find in his word and Spirit our help and hope.

*Commentary*

Did you hear about the man who called customer support to complain that his computer would not fax anything? He was holding a piece of paper in front of the monitor and hitting the “send” key. Another confused caller reported that his computer could not “find” the printer, even though he turned the monitor to face it. A third person called technical support for help with fixing his computer’s “cup holder.” He put a coffee cup on the CD-ROM drive drawer and broke it off.
I seldom field technical questions, but theological questions are basic to my work. Among the most common questions I have been asked in thirty-four years of preaching and teaching is this: What do I do with my doubts?

We all face times when we struggle to follow God’s will and trust God’s promises. Is God asking you to step beyond sight into faith this week? Is God calling you to a commitment that challenges the depth of your trust in him? How will you help those in your class follow God with sacrificial courage?

Laughing at the promise of God (18:1-15)

Abraham is the only person in Scripture whom God called “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8; see 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23). What qualifies us to be the “friend” of God? Jesus tells us:

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you (John 15:14-15).

Abraham believed the promise of God from the first time we met him (Gen. 12:1-3), following God’s call with consistent obedience. Now we watch him serve God directly, fulfilling the later biblical mandate: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23). His personal service, however, did not insulate him from the doubts and faith struggles that are common to fallen people in our fallen world.

Serving God

Our text begins: “The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day” (Genesis 18:1). This location twenty miles south of Jerusalem had been Abraham’s home since moving to the region: “Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord” (Gen. 13:18; see 14:13). “The entrance to his tent” is literally, in the opening of his tent, indicating that the fabric that served as the entrance to the tent had been folded back and tied to a post so the daytime breeze could cool the dwelling.

“The heat of the day” was around noon. This was the time of the mid-day meal, usually the largest of the day:

- “When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, ‘Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare dinner; they are to eat with me at noon’” (Gen. 43:16).
“The steward took the men into Joseph’s house, gave them water to wash their feet and provided fodder for their donkeys. They prepared their gifts for Joseph’s arrival at noon, because they had heard that they were to eat there” (Gen. 43:24-25).

Abraham and his family and servants must have finished their meal by this time, since preparations for feeding the guests had to begin afresh upon their arrival. This time of day was not typical for travel, and so Abraham must have been surprised when he “looked up and saw three men standing nearby” (18:2a). “Looked up” translates Hebrew that indicates that the men were walking down toward Abraham’s tent from a higher elevation.

Something about these visitors impressed this man of God immediately: “When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground” (18:2b). This was a typical Oriental act of submission before one’s superior, as when “Mephibosheth bowed down” before David (2 Samuel 9:8).

Who were these “three men”? Let’s gather together what the text tells us. The preface to our story states that “the LORD appeared to Abraham” (Gen. 18:1). However, the three visitors who manifested his appearance accepted Abraham’s offer of a meal, an action more typical of humans than of God and angels. Verse 8 adds that “they ate” what he provided for them.

But the first time one of the three spoke individually, we read that “the LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son’” (18:10). This individual is called “the LORD” through the rest of the Genesis 18 narrative.

By contrast, the other two visitors are still called “men”: “The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD” (18:22). But the next episode reveals their true identity: “The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city” (19:1). Subsequent events demonstrate their divine power to strike sinners with blindness (19:11), spare a city from destruction (19:21-22), and destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (19:13, 23-25).

Clearly the other two visitors were angels who appeared in human form to Abraham and then to Sodom and Gomorrah. But who was the individual identified as one of “three men” (Gen. 18:2) but subsequently as “the LORD”?

While the Genesis 18 text does not call him the angel of the Lord, it is easy to see why many commentators make this connection. the angel of the Lord is a fascinating figure who appears often in the Old Testament. This angel kept Abraham from sacrificing Isaac at Mount Moriah, and promised that God would bless him and his descendants (Gen. 22).
He rescued Hagar in the desert (Gen. 16) and spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-2). Wherever he appeared he was worshiped and feared as God.

However, “the angel of the LORD” was distinct from God the Father. In fact, in the Book of Zechariah (chapters 1 and 3) he prayed to God (Zechariah 1:11) and stood separate from him (Zech. 3:6). So we know that this “angel” is divine, part of the Trinity, but not the Father. And he cannot be the Spirit, for the Spirit is always invisible and unseen (see John 3:8; 14:17). Add the fact that this “angel of the LORD” never appears after Jesus came at Christmas, and it was clear to many early scholars that this “angel” was Jesus himself. This was the position of a number of ancient church leaders, including Irenaeus, Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theophilus of Antioch, and Cyprian.

Whatever this figure’s specific identity, Abraham knew instinctively to serve him and his companions: “He said, ‘If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant’” (Gen. 18:3-5a).

Note that Abraham’s response as translated by the NIV (“my lord”) would recognize these visitors as important dignitaries. The translator’s note, “O Lord,” indicates that the Hebrew can be read to indicate that Abraham saw his visitors not just as significant but as divine.

Hospitality was a sacred responsibility in the biblical era:

- “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).
- “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13).
- “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:9).
- A leader “must be hospitable” (Titus 1:8; see 1 Timothy 3:2).
- “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth” (3 John 5-8).

In this case, Abraham invited the three to “wash your feet,” an act of kindness by which sandal-clad dust-caked feet were washed before the person entered the tent. They could then “rest” (Gen. 18:4; the Hebrew means literally to recline upon the arm, an eating position) under his tree. He wanted them to be “refreshed” (18:5)—literally to strengthen the heart before leaving.
Their response indicates the grace with which our holy God receives the service of his imperfect people: “‘Very well,’ they answered, ‘do as you say’” (Gen. 18:5b). Abraham responded quickly: “So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. ‘Quick,’ he said, ‘get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread’” (18:6).

A “seah” contained 384 cubic inches of flour (about 5 quarts); “fine flour” indicates the excellent quality of the baking material she was to use. Abraham wanted Sarah to “bake some bread,” round unleavened cakes that were baked on hot stones. The flour was mixed with water, made into dough, and rolled out into cakes. These were placed on and beneath stones taken from the fire, which quickly baked the dough into bread.

Note the change in her name from “Sarai” (my princess) to “Sarah” (princess of many): “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her” (Gen. 17:15-16).

After setting his wife to work to begin preparing the meal, Abraham gave his best as well: “Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it” (18:7). Animal meat was seldom offered to guests; a “calf” was the best meat of their culture (something like filet mignon today). “A choice, tender calf” indicates a calf specially reserved for such an occasion and fed in a way that would make its meat especially delicious.

The meal prepared, “He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree” (18:8). The calf’s meat would have been roasted whole or cut into smaller pieces that were broiled on skewers over the fire. The meat was wrapped in the bread, which was dipped into the “curds and milk” and eaten. This was a feast of the highest luxury.

As is customary in the Middle East, the guests “ate” what was set before them. Despite their divine/angelic status, they entered fully into the physical dimension in which they manifested themselves. The risen Christ did the same with his disciples: “And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence” (Luke 24:41-43).

Note that Abraham set the meal before his guests personally, although he had more than 300 servants at his disposal (Gen. 14:14). He did not share their meal but “stood near them under a tree” in a servant’s position, waiting for another opportunity to provide further for their needs.
The verbs that describe Abraham’s activity indicate the urgency and passion with which he served his guests: he “hurried” to them (18:2), then “hurried” to the tent” (18:6) and “ran” to the herd (18:7); he “bowed low to the ground” before them (18:2) but “stood” while they were eating (18:8). It was his consistent desire to serve these “men” and the God they represented.

Questioning God
The positive, faithful nature of his response to their visit soon changed, however. Earlier, Abraham had laughed at God’s promise of a son:

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” (Gen. 17:15-17).

Now his wife would express similar disbelief in the promise of the Lord. “Where is your wife Sarah?” the men asked Abraham (18:9a). “There, in the tent,” he replied (18:9b). They were conversing beneath the “great trees of Mamre” (18:1) in front of his tent, while Sarah remained inside the tent out of deference to the male visitors. The woman’s apartment in the tent was in the back, separated from the front sections by a thin veil. From this position, she could hear all that the men said outside.

Now the identity of the visitors becomes clear: “Then the LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son’” (18:10a). As he spoke these incredible words, “Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him” (18:10b).

Such a promise astounded her, as it would any of us: “Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” (18:11-12).

God knows our every thought and feeling: “Then the LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son’” (18:13-14). Gabriel would offer a similar assurance to another mother-to-be: “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

When she recognized the divine omniscience of her visitors, Sarah’s laughter quickly turned to awe and fear: “Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh’” (Gen. 18:15a). Whenever people in Scripture encounter the holiness of God they are similarly awed:
Isaiah’s response to the heavenly glory of God: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’” (Isaiah 6:5).

Jeremiah’s response to God’s call on his life: “‘Ah, Sovereign LORD,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child’” (Jeremiah 1:6).

Peter’s response to a display of Jesus’ divine power: “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’” (Luke 5:8).

Peter, James and John’s response to the Father’s declaration of his transfigured Son’s divinity: “When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified” (Matthew 17:6).

John’s response to seeing the revelation of the risen Christ: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17).

In Sarah’s case, however, her fear of God led her to deception rather than submission: “she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh’” (Gen. 18:15a). Her response to divine omniscience was ironic, of course—if God knew her and her unborn child, he certainly knew of her hidden laughter and unbelief.

While God exposed her deception, he continued his gracious plan to use her in bringing Isaac into the world: “But he said, ‘Yes, you did laugh’” (Gen. 18:15b). We cannot deceive the Lord. For example, Jesus knew the true living situation of the woman he had apparently just met at Jacob’s well:

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true” (John 4:16-18).

He knows your mind and heart at this very moment, and loves you anyway. Where do you need such forgiving grace today?

Any of us can “laugh” at the promises of God when they exceed our understanding. I have known men and women who could not believe that God could forgive their past sins, believing them to be too heinous for such mercy. Believers sometimes distrust God’s call to service, despite the promise that his will is “good, pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2). We can be timid when sharing our faith, even though our Lord promises that his Spirit’s power will enable all we do as his witnesses (Acts 1:8).

We sometimes question God’s timing in answering our prayers, although he has promised to meet all our “needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). We often worry and fret, although he promises a peace “which transcends all understanding” to all who trust their cares to him (Phil. 4:6-7).

Is there an unclaimed promise in your life and service today?
Trusting the promise of God (21:1-7)

While they struggled to understand God’s promise, Abraham and Sarah nonetheless chose to believe his word:

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore (Hebrews 11:11-12).

Now the fulfillment of the divine promise made a quarter-century earlier begins: “Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised” (Gen. 21:1; see 12:4). Note that she and Abraham did nothing to earn such favor. Their son was a gift of God’s grace; their faith simply positioned them to receive what he intended to give to and through them.

Their miracle finally came: “Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him” (21:2). The Hebrew syntax requires that therefore or a similar word begin this verse, connecting this event with the promise and action of God. “The very time God had promised him” refers to the earlier prediction made to them both, “I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son” (Gen. 18:14).

For so many years Abraham’s name, father of a multitude, had been a misnomer. But now God did just what he said he would:

- “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you” (Gen. 12:2).
- “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted” (Gen. 13:16).
- “A son coming from your own body will be your heir” (Gen. 15:4).
- “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you” (Gen. 17:5-6).

In response, “Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him” (21:3). “Isaac” means he laughs. This decision fulfilled God’s prediction, “your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac” (Gen. 17:19).

Abraham then demonstrated his continued obedience to God’s word and will: “When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him” (21:4). God’s edict had been clear:
Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Gen. 17:9-14).

To remind us once more of the remarkable nature of Isaac’s birth, the writer states that “Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him” (21:5). It was standard in Genesis to report the age of the father at the time when the son was born.

Sarah’s response: “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (21:6). Abraham’s earlier laughter (17:17) had been a response of incredulity, as had hers (18:12-15). By contrast, Sarah’s “laughter” was now an expression of great joy, a celebration in which all who heard would join. In this way God would be glorified before all who knew of this remarkable, gracious event.

Their miracle was indeed marvelous: “And she added, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?’” (21:7a). The Hebrew should be rendered, No one would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children, would they? Despite all expectations, she added, “Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” (21:7b). “Yet” translates a Hebrew word that expresses surprise or something unexpected: amazingly catches the sense.

Such faith is commended by Scripture as God’s example for us:

The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he
did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Romans 4:16-25).

This was the first of at least eleven births in the Bible in which God personally intervened. He was also involved directly in the births of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:21), Reuben (Gen. 29:31), Issachar (Gen. 30:17-18), Joseph (Gen. 30:22-24), Samson (Judges 13:2-5), Obed (Ruth 4:13), Samuel (1 Samuel 1:19-20), the son of the woman from Shunem (2 Kings 4:14-17), John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-13, 57), and of course, the Lord Jesus (Luke 1:26-38; 2:7).

Over and over, God’s word proves the statement of Jesus: “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Paul testified, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13). So can we.

**Conclusion**

Are you struggling this week to trust and claim a promise of God? to follow God’s will into uncharted waters, to serve him beyond your understanding or believe more than you can see? Know that God delights to turn doubts into faith.

Consider C. S. Lewis, the brilliant atheistic literature professor who became the most important popular Christian writer of the twentieth century; Sir William M. Ramsey, the brilliant archaeologist, converted by examining the historical truth of Scripture; and Josh McDowell, an intellectual skeptic who was changed by the truth of Jesus and now convinces crowds around the world. Our Father’s invitation to “reason together” (Isaiah 1:18) still stands.

How will you encourage your class to trust God’s gracious promises for their lives? How will your example demonstrate the truth of your teaching?

I studied and taught philosophy of religion at Southwestern Seminary and in other schools because I believe we need to love God with our minds. We need to ask our questions with honesty, and find the wisdom that Scripture and Christ give us. When we bring our doubts and questions to our Father, we find in his word and Spirit our help and hope.

I closed every course I taught with a prayer I invite you to share with me this week:
From cowardice, which shrinks from new truth,
From laziness, that is content with half truth,
From arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
O God of Truth, deliver.

Amen.

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1 Genesis 18:14.