

JOY IN THE LIFE OF FAITH
GENESIS 17:15-17; 18:9-15; 21:1-8

You may have read in the press something about the “laughing revival” which began in Toronto, Canada. In one of the Vineyard congregations in that city, a movement broke out a few years ago that has caught the attention of the religious world. In these gatherings in that congregation people break out in uncontrollable laughter. The laughter may go on for hours. It has been so unusual that it has become a thing of interest to God’s people all over the world. It is probably a commentary on our day that laughter would attract so much attention. Could this be because faith has not been associated with great joy in our day? G. K.

Chesterton overheard someone criticizing the public zeal of a Salvation Army lady. They thought it was irreverent to stand on a street corner, shaking a tambourine and singing gospel tunes. This well-known Catholic theologian said, “There is nothing wrong with it. It is fine. If one believes they must dance and fight, he must dance or sheer joy and he must fight because he has found the path to sure triumph.” Chesterton rightly understood that faith does bring an expressible joy to life. It brought joy into the life of Abraham. We have before us three separate references to laughter in the life of Abraham and his wife Sarah. From these three references we can gain some important insight into the place that joy will have in

the life of faith. We need to consider this because it seems rather obvious that joy is missing from the life of many of us.

How long has it been since your faith put a smile on your face, a laugh in your mouth, and a song in your heart? How long has it been since your faith made your feet want to leap for joy? If it has been too long, learn from the experience of Abraham. It is faith that will bring you to joy again.

I. THE JOY OF ANTICIPATION.

On the occasion that God changed Abraham and Sarah's name, and gave the word about the Covenant with circumcision as its outward sign, God took Abraham a little deeper in the understanding of His will. It was on that day that God said to him, "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 though so she will be the mother of many nations; kings of people who come from her." When Abram received this word from the Lord, his response was one of worship and faith. "Abraham fell face down; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man 100 years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90?'" Some have mistakenly understood Abraham's laugh to be one of unbelief. They have placed too much emphasis upon the questions that he raised on that occasion. However, to truly understand the questions that he raised, you will have to hear the

tone that was in his voice. I think the tone that was in his voice was one of amazement and wonderment. His heart was overflowing with such joy that all he could do was laugh before the Lord and in wonder exclaim, “Can it be that Sarah and I are indeed to be parents at this age in our lives?”

Here we see joy – the joy of anticipation. Abraham is anticipating what God is going to do and just the anticipation fills his heart with unspeakable joy.

1. The anticipation is based on a word from God.

Actually Abraham did not have anything after his conversation with God that he had not had before. Before this specific conversation with God, he had a promise from God. After this conversation with God, he had a little deeper understanding of that promise from God. He now had the divine assurance through His Word that Sarah would indeed be the mother of the seed that God had promised. When God gave this word, by faith Abraham embraced the word. He received the word into the depth of his heart. He began in that moment to anticipate the fulfillment of that word. That anticipation of the fulfillment of that word that God had given, filled his heart with joy and his mouth with laughter.

You and I have the same reason for joy that Abraham had. We have a word from God. In fact, we have many words from God that are found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Just the anticipation of the fulfillment of those words that God has spoken

to us in Christ should fill our hearts with joy. When we begin to truly believe the promises and anticipate their fulfillment by faith, we will begin to experience the joy.

2. The anticipation focuses on Christ.

We probably need to go a little deeper in this text. While it is true that Abraham saw a son as the immediate fulfillment of the promise that God had given, we should understand that he was looking beyond Isaac to a greater Son that would come. In fact, the Lord Jesus announced during his earthly ministry that Abraham was able by faith to see his day, that is the day of Jesus the Christ, and because he was able to see it he “rejoiced.” He reminded his critics of this in the gospel of John, “My father, Abraham, rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day, he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

The primary anticipation that we ought to have should focus upon the Lord Jesus. Let me just isolate one promise that He has given that if we will anticipate its fulfillment it will bring joy into our life. I refer to the promise of His second coming. You will remember what Jesus said in the familiar passage in the Gospel of John, John 14:1-3 (NKJV)

¹“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. ²In My Father’s house are many mansions; if *it were* not *so*, I would have told you. I go to

prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also."

This is a glorious promise to the children to God. Just the anticipation of the coming of the Lord should fill the heart of the believer with joy and his mouth with laughter. In fact the Apostle Paul calls this promised coming the "blessed hope."

The word blessed has in it the idea of joy and happiness. It is indeed the happy hope of the people of God. It is the happy hope because it fills the heart with joy.

Could it be that our lack of joy is caused by our focusing upon our problems rather than focusing upon the divine promises? When we focus upon the divine promises in faith, the mouth will be full of laughter and the heart full of joy.

What about the promise the Lord gave for those who are growing old? Isaiah 46:3-4 (NKJV)

³"Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, And all the remnant of the house of Israel, Who have been upheld *by Me* from birth, Who have been carried from the womb: ⁴ Even to *your* old age, I *am* He, And *even* to gray hairs I will carry *you!* I have made, and I will bear; Even I will carry, and will deliver *you*".

II. THE JOY OF CONFIRMATION.

Abraham was not the only one to laugh. Laughter had a prominent place in the life of his dear wife, Sarah. The first recorded incident of laughter on her part was not the laughter of faith. Rather it was the laughter of unbelief and cynicism.

1. The laughter of unbelief may precede the laughter of confirmation.

In the historical record of the life of Abraham and Sarah, God often came to visit this couple. One of His most important visits preceded the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. On that occasion Abraham entertained three visitors and one of them was the Lord. During that time of entertaining these heavenly beings they asked Abraham, “Where is your wife Sarah?”

Abraham told them that Sarah was in the tent. Then the Lord said to Abraham, “I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.” This was the first time that God ever gave any reference to time with reference to the promise of a son. Here He indicates that the son would be born within the next 12 months.

Like any good, faithful wife, Sarah was in the tent eavesdropping on the conversation between Abraham and the visitors. She may have had the same problem that many wives have, the problem of getting her husband to tell them everything that the Lord had said. Just to make sure she understood everything that transpired between Abraham and the Lord, she listened in on the conversation.

When she heard this promise that she would be a mother within the next 12 months, her first response was to laugh. “So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” The Lord heard this laughter of unbelief on the part of Sarah. He asked, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’” Then in order to build faith in the heart of Abraham and Sarah the Lord asked another question? “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

We should gather some encouragement from Sarah’s experience. This experience of laughing in unbelief did not mean that she would never laugh in faith. God was able to move her and Abraham beyond this shaky moment in their faith to a day of fullness of joy when the promise of God was at last confirmed. You may be going through one of those shaky periods in your own walk with God in which you are wondering if God will ever keep His promise. You may be bordering on cynicism. Let me encourage you! There can be the laughter of joy after the laughter of doubt and fear.

2. The confirmation of the faithfulness of God.

The next chapter in the walk of Abraham and Sarah with reference to joy comes later. It came in God’s good time. Just as the Lord had promised He gave to Sarah

and Abraham a son. “Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.”

When the son was finally born to Sarah and Abraham they named him Isaac. Isaac means laughter. On that occasion Sarah declared, “God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” On this occasion Sarah’s laughter of doubt and fear had become the laughter of confirmation. She now knew that God is indeed faithful to His promise. He does not lie to His people or deceive them. What He says He does. It was this reality that filled the heart of Sarah with such joy that it overflowed to the whole family of Abraham.

Have you ever had such a confirmation of the faithfulness of God in your life? Has God ever come through in such a way that your heart was just filled with joy that it could hardly express? It is the kind of experience that will linger in the heart for years to come. It was appropriate that they named the boy Isaac or laughter because every time they saw this boy they doubtlessly broke out into the laughter of joy. God is faithful!

3. The confirmation of the provision of God.

They learned more about God in this experience than they had ever known before. They not only learned his faithfulness to His promise, they also learned the graciousness of His provision. God had promised a son and God gave a son. God had promised a seed to Abraham and now he has a seed. Anticipation has now become reality.

When you get serious about walking by faith you will begin to experience this laughter of confirmation. God will confirm himself and keep His promises again and again and again. The Psalmist, David, must have experienced some of this because in a familiar Psalm he put it into unforgettable language. When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, “We were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy.” Hasn’t the Lord indeed been faithful to His people? The Psalmist was focusing upon the way God had confirmed His word to the exiles in bringing them back from their years of captivity. That same God is still keeping covenant with His people, with us His people! And as we come to know this experientially we will increasingly know the joy of the Lord.

We should be knowing either the joy of confirmation or the joy of anticipation at every point in our walk of faith. If there is faith in us, real faith and reliance upon the promises of God, we will either be rejoicing over what we know God is going to do or we will be rejoicing over what the Lord has done. In either case, the walk of faith will always be one of joy, the kind of joy that must express itself in laughter before the Lord. If we were to begin genuinely walking by faith, who knows, a laughing revival might break out in our hearts. We should not be surprised if someone breaks out in uncontrollable laughter if they are indeed walking by faith.