

# Encouraged by His Faithfulness

Gn 21:1-7 (text); Rm 4:16-21

11 April 2021, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

## Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Human beings in general often get disillusioned with the idea that there's a caring & faithful God watching over us.

Even *Christians* often doubt God's faithfulness to His promises made to them – promises like, "Those whom the Father has given Me, I will never let go out of My hand, but raise them up in the Last Day!"<sup>1</sup>

Yes, even believers can have their faith shaken!

And this doubting in God happens especially when there are trials or tension in people's lives – trials caused by negative things happening *to* them or *around* them; things like:

- Personal setbacks of various kinds or...
- Accidents
- A rise in the popularity of other religions
- A rise in secularism
- Or fighting and war...

Yes, my brother & sister, at times you & I have our faith in God challenged.

But look, our Bible passages of this afternoon have one overriding goal, i.e., to be an encourager; yes, to assure you & me – actually, **to make us laugh with joy at God's absolute faithfulness to His promises made to His loved-ones!**

Well, come marvel with me at/in God's faithfulness to the promises He made to Abraham & Sarah and us, despite some great tensions & setbacks in their & our lives...

Our sermon has three points:

- God's Faithfulness to the Promises He Made with Abraham & Sarah
- God's Faithfulness to the Promises He Made about Christ
- God's Faithfulness to the Promises He Has Made to You & Me

## God's Faithfulness to the Promises He Made with Abraham & Sarah

Gauging by Gen 12, Abraham was 75 years old when God first promised him an offspring.<sup>2</sup>

Well, this announcement was certainly a challenge to Abraham & his wife Sarah's faith, for, already at that stage, Sarah was 65 and thus beyond childbearing age. In fact, Sarah had been barren all along, and never had any children.

Well, as the years went by, this promise of God caused a greater and greater faith-struggle in Abraham & Sarah!

Yes, by the time 11 years had passed since God first made the promise, we clearly see the evidence of this inner-struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. e.g. Jn 6:39 & 40

<sup>2</sup> In Gn 12, just after God had come to Abram (in Haran) and had promised to him that he would have a great offspring, we read in v.4 ***So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.***

You see, Abraham was now 86:

- God's promise had not yet come true!
- And Sarah started doubting!
- She doubts God's faithfulness to His promise.
- Next, typical of all human beings (when we are tired of waiting on the Lord), Sarah schemed her own plans... as if to help God...

Sarah's thoughts must have gone something like this:

- How long will my husband still be able to father a child? I mean, he's now 86!!
- I am already long beyond child-bearing age... In fact, I have always been barren. Thus, I have anyway never been able to have children.
- Besides, up until now, God has not made this promise with *me*! Yes, He did not say that *I* will be the one who would give a son to Abraham.
- Perhaps, when God told my *husband* that he would father a son, God meant that my husband would have a son with *another woman*.
- Well, seeing that it's the custom in our culture to give your slave-woman to your husband when you can't give him any children,<sup>3</sup> let me do this – let me give Hagar, our slave-woman, to Abraham.
- After all, God has been waiting very long to fulfil His promise. I mean, it's already been 11 years!
- Anyway, who knows, perhaps this is after all what God wanted – a son for my husband, *by another woman*...

Well, that's what the couple then did!

And, considering Abraham's age, one could say it was "just in the nick of time"<sup>4</sup> that Abraham & Sarah resorted to this plan!

Phew!

My brother & sister, is that not what we so often do – pray to God, but not being prepared to wait for Him?

That's what Abraham & Sarah did!

The result? Hagar bore Abraham a son – Ishmael!

So, in Abraham & Sarah's mind, there's peace!

In their mind, God has fulfilled His promise!

So, there's "peace!"

Well, for *another 13 years* this "peace" lasted well!

By this time, Ishmael is now 13!

And Abraham?

He's now 99 – and nearly 100 (just like Prince Philip, Queen Elizabeth's husband who died two days ago). So, according to Rm 4:19, Abraham was *not capable anymore of fathering a child!*<sup>5</sup>

But God comes again! (Gn 17:1-21 and 18:1-15)

And can you believe what's happening here!? It's now *24 years* after God first made the promise!

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the ancient Nuzi Tablets mention this custom. See also Von Rad (apud Greidanus, Sidney. 2007. Preaching Christ from Genesis: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : W.B. Eerdmans. p.188) for a quote from the Nuzi Tablets.

<sup>4</sup> Well-put by Greidanus (ibid:188)

<sup>5</sup> Rm 4:19 ***Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb*** (NASB; emphasis mine).

God appears to Abraham who, for 13 years had peace in his mind that *Ishmael* (the quick-fix child) was that promised child!

And, as God appears, Abraham's stress rises again...

This is how he answers God, "***O that Ishmael might live before You!***"<sup>6</sup> In other words, "God, please don't kill Ishmael, the one born by me & Sarah's plan!" "O God, let Ishmael be the son You promised us!"

No, says God! Not Ishmael!

You will have another son who will be born next year!

What!?

Abraham broke out laughing in disbelief!

My brother & sister, then, at this stage God says something He had not said before: "***No but Sarah, your wife, will bear you a son!***"<sup>7</sup>

What?

Sarah, who is way beyond childbearing age!!

Sarah, who has always been barren – incapable of conceiving?

Sarah, whose womb is dead!? (Rm 4:19)

Sarah overheard God's words to Abraham.

And, knowing the full picture from a human point of view, she laughed to herself<sup>8</sup> – laughing in disbelief!

But God heard her secret laughs. He asks Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh...?"

Sarah in deceit (so typical of also you & me when caught) says, "I did not...!"

Says God, "Oh yes, you did laugh!" (NRSV)<sup>9</sup>

This laughing of disbelief – our text emphasises it over & over again. In just three verses in Genesis 18 (vv.13-15), the word "laugh" is repeated four times!!

Well, because of these laughs of disbelief (and knowing what would happen in future),<sup>10</sup>

God commands Abraham to, when this son is born, call him Isaac – in Hebrew "*Yitshaq*"<sup>11</sup> which means, "he laughs!!" (cf. Gn 17:19).<sup>12</sup>

Now, seeing Abraham & Sarah's disbelief, here is God's mind-bending answer... "***Is anything too wonderful for the LORD*** – (yes, for the Covenant LORD)?" (Gn 18:14a)<sup>13</sup> – something which you & I will do well to remember in our trials!<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Gn 17:8

<sup>7</sup> cf. Gn 17:19b וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶבְרָהָם שְׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ יִלְדָת לְךָ בֵּן

<sup>8</sup> The NIV, ESV, NRSV, and NASB all say "Sarah laughed to herself..." A literal translation from the Hebrew would be, "Sarah laughed *inside* herself" < וַתִּצְחַק שְׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ

<sup>9</sup> That's the every-day English rendering given by the NRSV. However, literally Gn 18:15 says, "No, but you did laugh!" < לֹא כִי צִחַקְתָּ

<sup>10</sup> i.e. that once the baby is born, Abraham & Sarah will laugh again – this time for joy!!

<sup>11</sup> יִצְחָק

<sup>12</sup> I agree with Greidanus (ibid:189-190) that it must be because of this disbelieving laughing by husband & wife that God told them to call the child who would be born "He Laughs" i.e. Isaac! However, Gn 17:19 only says, "***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"***" (ESV).

<sup>13</sup> הַיְפֹלָא מִיְהוָה דְּבַר

<sup>14</sup> Here's a part which, for time's sake, I have taken out of the sermon: My brother & sister, as if all the cynical laughs and actions of disbelief over the previous 24 years were not already sinful enough, look what the couple does next...

***“Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?”***

Well, a year later, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 (in other words, 25 years after the LORD first made His promise to His loved ones), what do we read...?

Gen 21:1-3

***The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.<sup>2</sup> And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.<sup>3</sup> Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.*<sup>15</sup>**

Wow! See God’s faithfulness to His promises?

And, seeing this beautiful child of the promise, and hearing his name again – Isaac = i.e. “He Laughs,” what did Sarah do...?

She laughs!

She laughs & laughs!

And this is what she says, ***“God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me”*** (ESV).<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Sarah laughs!

But this time, she laughs *not in disbelief!*

No, this time, she laughs in joy and wonder & awe of what the LORD has done!

In particular, she laughs in *amazement at the LORD’s faithfulness to the promise* He has made to His loved ones!!

My brother & sister, from that moment onwards, imagine what would happen every time Sarah calls little Isaac to come do his chores, or to come in for his dinner?!!

I’ll tell you!

Every time Sarah shouted, “Isaac!” “Isaac!” this name brought *meaning* to her ears, mind & heart!

Yes, every time she shouted in Hebrew, “Yitshaq!” “Yitshaq!”<sup>17</sup> she, who knew the Hebrew language very well, would be reminded of this name’s meaning: “Yitshaq! = He Laughs!” “Yitshaq! = He Laughs!”

And what connection would her mind then make?

That her and her husband’s laughter – first out of *disbelief*, but then out of *joy* – is a laughter *because of the mind-bending faithfulness of their God*; His ever-prevailing faithfulness to the promises He has made to His loved-ones!

God’s faithfulness! What encouragement in times of stress, hardship, and tension!!

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Yes, the arrival of their God-promised son is now only one year away, yet look what they do....!

They were travelling in the southern parts of the holy land, when, in an act of cowardice they went – can you believe it – so far as to risk the mother of the promised child in the harem of Abimelech, king of Gerar!! (Gn 20:1-2).

As one commentator says: The promise of God gets “put in jeopardy, traded away for personal safety!”<sup>14</sup>

Yet, the LORD, in grace, and faithful to His promises, prevents Abimelech to have & hold this mother of God’s promised child!

<sup>15</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ge 21:1–3). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>16</sup> In Hebrew: יִצְחָק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כְּלִי-שִׂמְעָה יִצְחָק-לִי:

<sup>17</sup> יִצְחָק יִצְחָק

And indeed, just imagine what an encourager this whole account of God's faithfulness was for all of Ancient Israel, when in their many years of hardship, trials & tensions, they heard (& reflect on) it over-and-over again-and-again!<sup>18</sup>

### **God's Faithfulness to the Promises He Made about Christ**

My brother & sister,

God's faithfulness to His promises is not just seen in Sarah's conceiving of Isaac.

No, may I remind you of God's faithfulness over thousands of years – and despite wars & exiles; yes, His faithfulness to His promises made to *all His loved-ones* – His faithfulness in working the miracle pregnancy of Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And if you thought Isaac's conception was a God-worked miracle – and it was – then Jesus' conception was an even greater God-worked miracle!

You see, although Mary was not beyond child-bearing age, neither barren, she had *never belonged to any man*, i.e., at the time she conceived baby Jesus, she was a virgin.

So, again, exactly as with Sarah's pregnancy: despite the disbelief, impatience, schemes and sinful actions of human beings; yes, this time...

- despite a 400-yr period in which God's people heard nothing from God – and this while they were sorely oppressed by Greeks & Romans;
- despite the human efforts of the Jewish Maccabees and Zealots to work the coming of a Messiah of their own liking;
- Yes, despite man's efforts in seeking a Messiah on their own terms and for their own selfish benefits...

the Sovereign God worked the birth of Jesus Christ, His Son – yes, He worked His Son's birth, ministry and saving love deeds on His own terms and for His glory!

What's more...

You think that only Sarah, of old, laughed for joy when she experienced God's faithfulness to His promise to Abraham & her?

Look! Mary, too, burst out in joyous laughter (in Lk 1:46)...

***“My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all***

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#### <sup>18</sup> **His Promise-Fulfilling Faithfulness to Ancient Israel**

- Just imagine Israel during their 40-years' wandering in the harsh desert...
  - God had made His promise to them: they would enter the Promised Land
  - But they're waiting: thirsty, dusty, hungry, embattled with/by enemy tribes
  - Moses & Aaron read out to them the story of God's promise-fulfilling faithfulness to Abraham & Sarah, and... their faith is strengthened!!
- Or...
- Just imagine the remnant of God's people sitting in Babylon...
  - God had made His promise to them: on the throne of David, his offspring would forever sit on his throne...
  - Yes, Messiah, would come...
  - But, tension...
  - How?
  - Imagine: Ezra or Nehemiah reads out to them the story of God's promise-fulfilling faithfulness to Abraham & Sarah, and... their faith is strengthened!!
  - Then, their laughter... (Ps 126)

*generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.* <sup>19</sup>

Mary laughed for joy, because God had totally surprised her with His faithfulness to the greatest promise ever – the birth of Christ!

Mary laughed for joy!

And several others, too, laughed for joy at God's faithfulness!<sup>20</sup>

- Zechariah, father of John the Baptist (Lk 1:67-80)!
- The shepherds outside Bethlehem!<sup>21</sup>
- The wise men!
- Simeon & Anna rejoiced! (Lk 2:21-38)

Well, Christ Himself remembered Abraham & Sarah's joy as they realised that God's promises were not going to stop with Isaac.

You see, it was when they looked at their son Isaac that they were able to even envisage in the far distance – however vaguely it might have been – Messiah!

Look, is that not why Christ once told the Jews, *Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*<sup>22</sup>

My brother & sister, there was widespread joy at God's faithful sending of Jesus Christ.

And look, is it not so that, at every miracle which Christ performed, God's people laughed for joy in God's faithfulness to His promises – the Messianic promises!<sup>23</sup>

But do you know what about God's sending of Messiah brought the greatest surprise and joy?

His resurrection!!!

Remember the joy in Mary Magdalene, the Emmaus Travellers, and the disciples when they saw their resurrected Lord!

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My brother & sister, I want to recap point 2:

After all the tensions in their life and the long wait, *Abraham & Sarah* rejoiced in God's faithfulness to His promises made to them...

The same with *Ancient Israel* – after all the tensions in their lives and the long wait, they rejoiced in God's faithfulness to His promises re Messiah

You & I?

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<sup>19</sup> Lk 1:46-49 continuing with vv.50-55, "*And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; <sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.*"

<sup>20</sup> cf. Lk 1:67-79

<sup>21</sup> cf. their obedient reaction to the angel's instructions, and also: cf. the angel's words to them in Lk 2:10 *And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Jn 8:56). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>23</sup> cf. e.g. Lk 7:16 *Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!"*

## God's Faithfulness to the Promises He Has Made to You & Me

I mean, we too, have tensions, hardships, setbacks, sorrows, and scares!

Also to *us* did God make promises!

You say, "What promises?"

Well, Christ's return!!!

And Christ's promise to each of His loved-ones that He will lose none of all that the Father has given Him, but raise them up at the last day (Jn6:39).

And the promise that *all things work for the good of those who love Him – all who have been called according to His purpose* (Rm 8:28).

He made promises to us!

You say, "But, pastor, it's been so long now!"

"Look at my trials!"

"Look at my hardship!"

"Look at the fear in my heart for disasters & wars which could come before Christ returns!"

"Look at the wars in the world!!"

"Look at the popularity of secularism in New Zealand!"

"Is God still remembering His promises of Christ's return?"

My brother & sister, you know what I hear in such questions?

I hear Abraham & Sarah's doubts in God's faithfulness!

Yet, through our Bible passages, this afternoon, the Holy Spirit encourages you & me to look at what God did on His terms & for His glory – through Abraham & Sarah, and through Mary & Joseph!

Look at God's faithfulness in those events, then look at the tensions in your life!

Then ask yourself, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord!?"

Is anything too wonderful for the One who has, time & time again, brought life out of death – especially when He resurrected His Son from the grave?!

Are your personal trials – your frail health, your sorrows too wonderful for the Lord to make sure you stay in His hand?

Are the wars & rumours of wars; the disasters of this world, and secularism – are these things too wonderful for the Lord to uphold His promises regarding Christ's return?

No!

God is faithful to the promises made to His loved-ones!

As with Abraham & Sarah – as with Joseph & Mary – God will be faithful!

He sees & knows you & me!

And joyful laughter is guaranteed!

Remember! Christ once said, "***Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh!***" (Lk 6:21)

On which grounds does Christ say this?

On the grounds that, based on His resurrection-power, nothing – but nothing (!!) – is too wonderful for the Creator, Sustainer & Saviour of the Universe!

**AMEN** (2457 words excluding footnotes)