

**When God Almighty Makes You Laugh ~ Genesis 17:1 - 18:15 ~ WRBC**  
**Nov. 1, 2009**

**Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we worship you together. As we see Abraham in this passage, bowing his face to the ground in the dirt as you revealed yourself to Him, so to, we bow ourselves low, our hearts, our wills, our minds, we present them to you in faith and submission as you reveal yourself to us afresh Lord through this, your Holy Word.

As we read in your word that Paul, while guided by your Spirit, wrote of Abraham as a supreme example of one who lived by faith, and was justified before you by faith, we are encouraged to look closely at this man and His life. And as we read the author of Hebrews commend Abraham to us in that great Hall of Faith, as one who pleased you because he lived by faith, we are urged by you to see who you are, through this man's life. We come to this familiar account again looking to hear fresh words from you that strengthen our walk with you by showing us who you are. Would you do that Lord? For the glory of your Son and our Saviour we pray, Amen.

**Introduction**

Where is God in the gap? This passage begins by showing us that Abram has been living in the gap between receiving the initial promise of God, and receiving a sign, any sign, of that promise being fulfilled, and this gap, it appears, has been a pretty quiet one.

You'll remember that Abram was 75 when God, out of the blue, calls him and tells him to leave his home country and his family of origin and go to the land God would show him (joke about being used of God). So he sets off for Canaan with his nephew lot, and there God appears to him a second time and says to him, "To your offspring I will give you this land."

Famine, goes down to Egypt . . . He travels back to Canaan and builds an altar there to the Lord and calls on the name of the Lord.

Soon trouble develops between Abram's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen, they are expanding and there is not enough grass for everyone to munch on, so Abram gives Lot the choice and he chooses Sodom. So Abram stayed in the land of Canaan. There **the Lord said to Abram after Lot left, Look north, south, east and west.** I will give it to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, go walk the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. So he and Sarai go throughout the land, checking out the sights, that's where we will put the pool, and there will put the three car garage . . . and he moves his tents by the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

Lot gets into trouble, Abram goes and rescues him, and then this mysterious man, a priest of God Most High, Melchizedek, just comes out of nowhere and pronounces a blessing upon Abram, and Abram gave him a tenth of all the spoil recovered through his rescue of Lot.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. So far Abram has been told that he will become a great nation, but he hasn't had any children up to this point. So it seems that everything is going to end up going to a servant in his household. God tells him, No, a son coming from your own body will be your heir. He is told to look at the stars and is told, So shall your offspring be. Abram believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. And God makes a covenant with Abram, promising him the land of Canaan for his descendants.

Then things get interesting. Now the story appears to turn into an episode of Days of our Lives gone bad. Sarai approaches Abram and says, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." And Abram agrees. Now thus far we have seen Abram listening to God, and now we see him listening to his wife. Now many a husband don't see much of a difference between the two when it comes to deciding how things will go, and some would call them wise, but, nonetheless. I think Doug was right last week to point out that it seems that parallels are being drawn here between what is happening here and what happened in the garden of Eden, especially given all that follows. It gets ugly.

Hagar indeed conceives, and when she does she gets hostile towards Sarai. Sarai starts mistreating her after running it by Abram, and out pregnant Hagar goes into the desert. But there the Lord reveals Himself powerfully to Hagar through the angel of the Lord. The angel tells her to go back to Sarai and submit to her, that *HER* descendents would be too numerous to count, and that her son, Ishmael, would be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him, and that he would live in hostility against his brothers. Hagar had a powerful experience of God in her most broken moment. Her son's name is to be Ishmael, meaning God hears. And the well where she was met by Him was named, Well of the Living One Who Sees Me. Then Ishmael was born, and we the author makes a point of telling us that Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born. And then our chapter begins with, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old . . ."

This is important. God first appears to Abram when he is 75. Then all these incredible events happen over the next 11 years until he is 86 when Ishmael is born. Look at all that happened in that 11 years . . . this is like Abram is having powerful encounters with God, rededicating his life every year at summer camp. And then 13 years of . . . ? We are not told.

We know that he has been shown powerfully that God would give him the land and give him a myriad of descendants and that all people's would be blessed through him. We know that he knows that all this would come from a son coming from his own loins. We know he is watching Ishmael grow up from birth to age thirteen.

We can wonder what Abram would have thought as he saw Ishmael run around the camp. "Is he the one? Well the last time God appeared was to Hagar, and He emphasize that she would have a great number of descendents rather than connecting her to the promise He made to me. Making what appears to be a separate promise to her. And God tells her that Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man who will oppose and be opposed by everyone. This doesn't seem in accord with the promise He gave to me. And everything was so ugly about that whole scene, that is until God appeared to straighten my mess out. This does not seem like the fulfillment of the blessing." And then thirteen years of . . . silence, it seems.

Where is God in the gap between promise and fulfillment? Abram is living there when we find him. And we often live there too. Really the whole of the Christian life is a bit like that. God has revealed Himself to us in Christ, we have believed in Him as He has done that, He has given us His Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until our redemption, which has already begun and is complete in once sense, but is awaiting fulfillment in another. Now we see Him as through a glass darkly, then we will see Him face to face, we are told. And we long for the completion of this salvation that has been won, but is awaiting its consummation. We live in the gap between receiving the promise, and receiving its complete fulfillment.

And on a more subjective level, in the Christian life we can experience times of great power with the Lord, where He reveals Himself quite strongly and palpably. Or He gives us a strong sense of a calling He wants us to fulfill, or the type of person we are supposed to be, or whether or not we are to be married, or whatever. And then sometimes there are seasons of, well, waiting. And being faithful. Doing what He last told us to do.

It is very easy to see Abraham as an example of faith when he gets this amazing revelation of God and packs up his family and heads off to a new land. Or when God shows him that land he will receive and he builds an altar and calls on the name of the Lord. Surely there, it is easy to see Abraham as an example of what it means to live by faith. These great events seem quite in accord with how we envision the life of faith to be. These 11 years of Abram's life where we are told that God appeared to him, if we include this last time he appeared to Hagar, no less than five times and then we read in addition of how God afflicted Pharaoh, enabled Abram to route his enemies and blessed him through Melchizedek.

It may not be so easy to see these 13 years of what appears to be waiting as apart of the life of faith. And this is a theme that will be developed later in Genesis, in the life of Joseph in particular, but we see it here too. Seeing this strengthens our faith. Maybe you are here today and you feel like this season of your walk with the Lord has been marked by uncertainty about His will, waiting for His direction, false starts here and there. One where it feels like your wheels are spinning and the things you believe God has called you seem frustrated or stalled. In these times it is tempting

to let your faith ware down, or lose its zeal. Its tempting to begin wondering if God has forgotten you. Well, as we are about to see, God's plan for Abram was not stalled at all, not in the least. And it is not stalled for you, not in the least.

It turns out we are asking the wrong question. It turns out that instead of asking "Where is God?" We need to be asking, "Who is God?" God breaks the silence with an answer to that question:

Ge 17:1 **When Abram was ninety-nine years old,<sup>a</sup> the LORD appeared to him<sup>b</sup> and said, "I am God **Almighty**<sup>1</sup>;<sup>c</sup> walk before me and be blameless."<sup>d</sup>**

Ge 17:2 **I will confirm my covenant between me and you<sup>e</sup> and will greatly increase your numbers."<sup>f</sup>**

Ge 17:3 **Abram fell facedown,<sup>g</sup>**

**God doesn't answer where He was. He reveals who He is, and Abram falls face down.** The question we need answered for us we walk the walk of faith in the gap is not, "Where is God?" He is with us. But rather, "Who is God?"

This is why the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I am God Almighty." Or, I am El-Shaddai. There is some debate as to actually what God means in revealing Himself as El-Shaddai. This is the first place He calls Himself this and this name will appear a number of times throughout the rest of the Old Testament. But this, being the first time it is used, and that within a full account, is likely the fullest passage to help us understand its meaning. El is one of the words used to designate a god. Early Jewish sources understood Shaddai as developing from a connection between two words: Sh – Which/ And Day – Sufficient. The God who is Sufficient or Able. **The translation Almighty is a good one.** And wherever it is used we see that it carries this meaning of God having the power to give life, to bless, to deal with unrighteousness, and most often, to keep His covenant Word. **God Almighty is perfectly able to keep His promises because He has no limitation caused by want of sufficiency. What God desires to do, He can do. And because He is faithful as well as Almighty, what He promises to do He will do.**

It has become frustrating to me lately how often my word can extend my ability. Putting Judah to bed . . . the whole routine . . . I love it, but it is tiring . . . get him all covered up and all of a sudden the little turkey will ask for a glass of water or

go to the toilet again or something . . . another lap . . . in those moments of domestic desperation I might say something like . . . “Go to sleep now and in the morning we will play trains.” Ok, Daddy. And his head hits the pillow.

What seems like just a few short hours later he will wake at the regular time, I will wake up to the sound of his door opening and he will come in. Wanna Play Trains. My words from the night before seem to have much less power to get me out of bed then they did to put him into bed. But I do want to keep my word so we will go into the other room, turn on the fire, grab a blanket and a pillow off the couch, lay down by the fire, cover myself up, get the tracks relatively out, assemble a few. And a few winks later and whatever happened, it was not playing trains.

Now of course, many times I am able to connect with him. But you see the point, often my resources are not sufficient to guarantee my word. We know what that feels like. We know what it feels like to have people let their word fall to the ground when there word concerned much more important things than playing trains. God knows that experience. But we’ve also known the sting of letting others down.

**God has *never* known that experience.** When we experience the gap, between receiving His promise and seeing it completely fulfilled, we need to see clearly that God is El-Shaddai. He is perfectly sufficient to do what He has promised. He is God Almighty. **What God desires to do, He can do.** And here we see that what He desires to do is enter into an everlasting covenant with Abram and his descendents, to be their God. **The point is that What God Almighty promises to do, He will do.** When I make a promise, it can end up on the floor barely conscious by the fire. When He makes a promise, it changes the world. It alters history every single time. Not one of His words falls to the ground.

**That the God of the Gap Is God Almighty, who will do what He has promised to do, has three implications for our lives as we come to a close this morning.**

### **Number One: Give Yourself Completely to God in Trust and Obedience**

When God reveals Himself to Abram as El-Shaddai, and confirms that He is making a covenant with him, He says, “Walk before me and be blameless.” This may

be a sign that Abram's faith had waned under the wear of living in the gap. No, the Lord says. I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless. This is another way of saying trust me, and because you trust me, obey me.

And in this vein, God commanded Abraham that he and all the males in his household be circumcised. Circumcision was a common cultural practice at the time. But God adopts it and commands it as a sign to literally mark the whole community of Abraham's descendents as belonging to God through the covenant.

But is important to recognize that Abraham was credited as righteous because of His faith, back in Genesis 15, *before he was circumcised*. Circumcision as, it turns out, was meant to be a physical expression of a consecration of the heart of God's people to Him.

**Dt 10:14** **To the LORD your God belong the heavens,** <sup>g h i</sup> **even the highest heavens,** <sup>j k</sup> **the earth and everything in it.** <sup>1 15</sup> **Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved** <sup>m</sup> **them, and he chose you,** <sup>n</sup> **their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today.** <sup>o 16</sup> **Circumcise** <sup>p</sup> **your hearts,** <sup>q</sup> **therefore, and do not be stiff-necked** <sup>r</sup> **any longer.** <sup>17</sup> **For the LORD your God is God of gods** <sup>s</sup> **and Lord of lords,** <sup>t</sup> **the great God, mighty and awesome,**

God's promise to Abraham is ultimately fulfilled through Jesus Christ. He is a literal descendent of Abraham through whom all peoples are blessed. **But not only is Christ God's fulfillment of the covenant to Abraham. Christ is also Abraham's fulfillment of the covenant to God, and our fulfillment of it as well, if we trust in Him.** He was physically circumcised at the temple on the eighth day as the law prescribed. But more importantly by His life and death and resurrection He secured the forgiveness of all who trust in Him, and opened the way for us to receive the Spirit of God so that our hearts are born again through faith. And now our hearts can be circumcised to God.

**Gal 5:6** **For in Christ Jesus** <sup>i</sup> **neither** **circumcision** **nor uncircumcision has any value.** <sup>j</sup> **The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.** <sup>k</sup>

God wants your heart this morning. He wants your faith in Him to be strengthened  
**Ro 4:18** **Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations,** <sup>z</sup> **just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."** <sup>4 a</sup>

Ro 4:19 **Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead<sup>b</sup>—since he was about a hundred years old<sup>c</sup>—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.<sup>d</sup> Ro 4:20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened<sup>e</sup> in his faith and gave glory to God,<sup>f</sup> Ro 4:21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.<sup>g</sup>**

Are you fully persuaded that God will do as He promised? That He has forgiven all your sin? That He is giving you eternal life? That He will come again and redeem all of creation? That He really is Lord? That He is turning for good your every circumstance?

Maybe I am speaking to someone today who is holding on to a certain painful issue in their lives, that they are fearful to trust the Lord with. God is asking you to give it to Him.

## **Number Two: Prepare to Have Your Plans, Indeed Your Very Identity, Changed**

This is both gives us a challenge, and it gives us hope. It challenges us because it means that we need to hold our plans with open hand. That God would give a child to Abraham through Sarah was astonishing. It was amazing. But this had a back side for Abraham. He still had in mind his initial plan for helping God out with His promise: “Oh that Ishmael might live before you! God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.” This was not Abraham’s plan. But it was God’s. And Abraham trusted God. Ishmael would not be the one through whom the covenant would be established. But the amazing thing is, is that God blesses Ishmael anyway. God redeemed Abraham’s and Sarah’s brash action and used Ishmael to create another nation that could be attributed to Abraham. And we can take heart that God redeems even our missteps, and wastes not one of our years.

In Abraham’s time, names were very important. They often gave central meaning to one’s identity and hinted at a person’s destiny. So when God changes Abram’s name, which means “exalted father,” to Abraham, which means, “father of many nations.” God alters the course of his life. And when God changes Sarai’s name from Sarai to Sarah, he is making it clear to her that she is indeed going to have a child from whom kings will come (both names mean “princess”). When we are

walking with God Almighty, we need to take hope that we can change. Our futures are not simply the inalterable outcome of our past and present circumstance. We are called to view our future not primarily from the perspective of our past, and our limitations, but rather from the perspective of God and His sufficiency.

### **Number Three: Don't Box God Almighty In. Instead, Be Prepared to Laugh.**

It has been said that one way to make God laugh is to tell Him our plans. And this is true. But maybe even a better way to make God laugh would be to tell Him what He cannot do. The one thing He cannot do is go against His own character. And we will see Abraham plead with God on the basis of God's character in the next chapter. But outside of this, let's be open to the fact that God does the impossible.

Abraham is already convinced that Sarah will bear a child, but it appears that Sarah, not so much. So God appears through these mysterious three visitors. And God says to Abraham in Sarah's hearing, "I will surely return to you about this time next year,<sup>r</sup> and Sarah your wife will have a son."<sup>s</sup> <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed<sup>v</sup> to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master<sup>4w</sup> is old, will I now have this pleasure?" <sup>Ge 18:13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'<sup>x</sup> <sup>14</sup> **Is anything too hard for the LORD?**<sup>y</sup> I will return to you at the appointed time next year<sup>z</sup> and Sarah will have a son."<sup>a</sup> First Sarah laughs in unbelief. Then she is caught in it and realizes that God is serious. But then she laughs again with joy, later in the book, when Isaac is born.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? For God Almighty? Sometimes His doing of the impossible is changing our hearts so that we can follow Him amidst incredibly difficult circumstance, rather than doing what to us would be a more obvious miracle. The life of Joni Erickson Tada is a shining example of this.

The significance of Isaac's name is that God is able to do what is laughable to us at first, and turn that laughter of unbelief into laughter of joy and hope and celebration.

## **Benediction**

Heb 11:11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren<sup>v</sup>—was enabled to become a father<sup>w</sup> because he<sup>1</sup> considered him faithful<sup>x</sup> who had made the promise. <sup>12</sup> And so from this one man, and he as good as dead,<sup>y</sup> came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.<sup>z</sup>