

**Laughter Isn't always the best medicine**  
**Genesis 18:1-14**

You know, I've got to tell you: you guys are really great laughers. Have you ever heard that compliment before? Well, it's true. I learned very quickly that I have to be on my toes up here because laughing comes very easily for this group. A small goof-up with my words, a stumble on the steps, or even a light-hearted example in the sermon and suddenly the church sounds like a comedy club. See what I mean? It's a great thing.

Do you know why? Well, not only does it make you fun to be around, but there's something to it. Just a second ago, while you were laughing, your body was actually changing physiologically? Your blood vessels were expanding and allowing better circulation. Your heart rate increased. Your body produced chemicals called endorphins so that you felt relaxed. So you'd better believe it's a compliment to be called good laughers. It's one of the healthiest things you can do for your heart! That's probably why some doctors are now saying that laughter really is the best medicine.

Obviously I'm no doctor. But I always get a little skeptical when something is labeled as *the best*. Oh sure, I would certainly agree that laughter is *good* medicine. But I don't know about the word *best*... at least not in every situation. And I think we have a good test case in front of us this morning. God puts a situation in front of us in his Word where we can test if laughter is indeed the best medicine for the heart, or if there's something even better.

So you're the great laughers. What do you think? To me this seems like the perfect situation where laughter is the proper prescription. I mean, it even starts out like a cheesy joke: "So, this 99-year-old guy and this 90-year-old woman were going to have a baby..." That can't be serious, can it? It sounds funny, right? Well, that 90-year-old woman thought so, too. She was a real woman; and this was her real reaction: "**Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my [husband] is old, will I now have this pleasure?"**" Normally you would think that the laughter was good for an old woman's heart, right? Except for the fact that she was the only one laughing. And add to it that fact that it was the Lord who was saying this about her and her husband, and it's obvious that this was no joke. I've also got to believe that there was probably something better than laughter in this situation.

So let's take a closer look. We've already met the 90-year-old woman. Her name was Sarah. But do you know her 99-year-old husband? He's pretty famous in the Bible. His name was Abraham. And what is important to know about this couple is that they had a very special relationship with the Lord. It was a relationship where the Lord would appear to them periodically and promises them blessings. And Abraham and Sarah responded to the Lord's goodness, with faith-borne gratitude. And I suppose I could give a number of examples, but this is a great one here in Genesis 18.

Wouldn't you say this fits the pattern. Verse 1 says: "**The Lord appeared to Abraham.**" To be fair, it seems like this is information that Abraham didn't know right away. All he knew was that there were three men standing outside his tent. But I don't think that ignorance lasted long because it soon became obvious who at least one of these visitors was by the things he knew and the things he said. This was the Lord! And true to the pattern, once the Lord appeared Abraham and Sarah, they responded with faith-borne gratitude. Starting at verse 3 Abraham said, "**If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought... Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed.**"

I know that my insides always smile when I visit someone and they offer me something to drink. I smile even more when they offer me a cookie. It's wonderful to receive hospitality. But this is a little more than that isn't it? Listen to some of the things that went on:

- Four different times it says that Abraham either hurried or ran. I used to minister to a 99-year-old man regularly and nothing about his movements could have been described with those words. But Abraham ran for the Lord! It kind of makes me think... Do I always put that much ability and effort into responding to the Lord's goodness? Would *running* be a good description of your effort for the Lord?

- Sarah's job was to bake some bread. Abraham's job was to butcher a calf. And it said they *hurried* to do it *quick*. The quick setting on my bread maker takes over an hour! And that last time I butchered a deer it took me all day, and that wasn't even cooking any of it! But that was their attitude for the Lord - to get right at it. It makes me wonder... even though I may serve the Lord, is my attitude always so joyful and eager? Do you serve him for more than mere obligation?

- The food that is mentioned here is exquisite. It mentions a choice, tender calf, curds, milk, fresh bread. This wasn't whatever was in the fridge or cupboard. Besides the effort, this was a pretty pricey meal. Again, it makes me consider... Are my gifts to the Lord mere leftovers and disposables? Do you give to the point of sacrificing something valuable?

The difference between your and my sinfulness (and don't be fooled... that's exactly what half-hearted, zombie-like, cut-rate response to the Lord is...a condemning sin that is forever detestable to our holy God) and Abraham's service is in the relationship I

mentioned earlier. Remember, the Lord - the God of free and faithful love - appears. Then, and only then, comes the response of faith-borne gratitude. And by his grace that is what is also happening today. Like Abraham, maybe you were unaware of it, but the Lord is standing nearby right now. He is visiting you today as you hear the liturgy's proclamation that God made you alive in Christ even when you were dead in your sins. He is visiting as you sing the words of the first hymn telling of Christ's full obedience to God in your place. He is visiting as the Bread and Wine remind you of Christ's body and blood sacrificed to forgive every one of your sins.

The Lord is here today. Isn't that why we *ran* to church today to strengthen our friends and to be strengthened in the faith? Isn't that why we are *quick* to use our time and abilities to serve at home, at work, at school, and at church? Isn't that why we generously give our best gifts to carry on God's work in our congregation and community? That is our faith responding to the Lord's goodness with gratitude. It's no wonder why in Abraham's culture they had a different expression for what verse 5 reads as "refreshed." They said it as, "Sustain your heart." I have no doubt that like Abraham and Sarah's here in Genesis, your faith's service is much better medicine than laughter. In the sense of pleasing him, it sustains even the Lord's heart.

Wait a minute! Maybe I should cue up the laughter track again. Did you hear what I just said? On a day where we heard the story of Mary and Martha I'm saying that serving the Lord and fixing him a fancy meal is a pleasing thing to God. I know what you're thinking: Didn't Martha get in trouble for that? Good point! But before you start laughing at me, think a little more about the words you heard in the Gospel. Jesus didn't really get upset that Martha was preparing a meal. I believe he said, "You are worried and upset about many things." In other words she was so completely wrapped up in and distracted by serving that she totally missed out on the real business of the day... Jesus and what he had to say!

Now look again at Abraham and Sarah. That wasn't the case for them. Sure, they served like crazy. But then came the real business of the day. **"Where is your wife, Sarah?" "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. So Sarah laughed to herself. Then the LORD said, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."**

Give Sarah this much credit...when it came to what was the most important, at least she did what Mary did: she stopped serving and started listening to what the Lord had to say. Her problem, though, was in *how* she listened. Sarah listened to the Lord almost like a bird eating at the backyard feeder. From a distance she kept a skeptical eye on the guy talking as she pecked away at which morsels of words she wanted to digest in belief or leave behind as garbage. Unfortunately, as we mentioned earlier, her laughter proves that she got it mixed up.

But it's hard to get after Sarah. The Lord said something that was completely outside the realm, not only of common sense, but also of human biology! And he always says stuff like that, doesn't he? Everything out of nothing? God became human? Rose from the dead? New birth from water? Bread equals body? Always with us? All things for our good? Always hears? Under stressful circumstances... in the wrong mood... around a certain crowd... of our own opinions... how many times haven't we laughed to ourselves or right out loud? I really don't know what we find funny about the lake of burning sulfur where that kind of unbelief leads. It certainly can't be good medicine!

I will confess that when I was a kid, I wasn't always an angel in church. I can vividly remember one time in 7th grade when I was sitting in the pew laughing with my cousin. We laughed during the whole sermon. And all of a sudden I heard the pastor say loudly, "Amen." It was the end of the sermon. And I hadn't heard a thing. It really bothered me, so I talked about it with Pastor at Catechism class a couple of days later. And after he reminded me of how wrong that was he said something that has always stuck with me. "Your laughing didn't have anything to do with what God was promising on Sunday. He promised to forgive you. And no laughing can ever change that."

Sarah and Abraham were thankful for the truth of that statement. The Lord said, "Surely." And nothing would change that. His promise stood firm. They did have a son. And I believe that we are thankful for the truth of that statement, too. When the Lord promises, it always happens, despite how we may initially react. Let me say that again... it always happens. Is there anything that seems too hard for the Lord to overcome in your life... guilt you've been struggling with... sin that seems to have you trapped... something you've been praying for... pain that you're convinced is unbearable? Remember, the Lord says, "Surely." He speaks a promise for all of those situations in his Bible. It's not too hard for the Lord to overcome. And no, laughter, isn't going to change that. So if you want to do something good for your heart when you're worrying and upset about so many things, remember the real business of the day... take time to sustain your heart with the Lord's sure promises.

Everybody wants to get their blood flowing, their pulse up, and produce some relaxing endorphins. It's good for the heart. So, how about a good joke? Nah! I don't know any good ones anyway. Besides, between serving him and rejoicing in his promises, I believe the Lord has something better in mind for your heart. Sure, it may be good, but maybe laughter isn't always the best medicine after all! Amen