

Laughing with Sarah

Genesis 21:1-8

Halifax: 28 April 2002

Introduction:

This is the day we have set for the baptism of two precious covenant children that God has brought into our church family:

- 1) Leah Katharine Hubbert, who was born to Norm and Kristine Hubbert on April 8;
- 2) Isaac Cecil Kubik, who was born to Andy and Danielle Kubik on April 14.

By baptism, God marks out His covenant people from all others.

- He says, “These are My people and I am their God.”

And although it may sound strange at first,

- I want to show you today that the baptism of these children is something to laugh about!
- In fact, Baptism is always something to laugh about because it is so absurdly wonderful that God Almighty should take sinners like us to be His very own people!

If you understand baptism, it will make you laugh in the same way that Sarah laughed when Isaac was born.

- Hear, now, what is recorded for us in Genesis 21:1-8 about Sarah’s laughter.
 - This is the Holy Word of God:
 - READ> Gen. 21:1-8

I. Sarah’s laughter was a “who would have said” kind of laughter!

- In verse 7, she says,
 - “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age.”

A. This is the kind of laughter you have when something absurdly wonderful happens!

1. It is:

- The laughter of a man who learns that a cure has been found for a disease he has suffered with for twenty years...
- The laughter of a wife who found out that her husband missed his flight on September 11—the same flight that crashed into the Pentagon.
- The laughter of a mother whose child is pulled out of a twisted car unharmed when it looked like all hope was gone.

TRANS> But these illustrations are just that—illustrations.

- They fall short because although they speak of God’s mercies, they do not speak of actual miracles—situations in which God acts above ordinary means.
- But these illustrations speak of laughter that is similar to Sarah’s because it is the laughter of amazed gladness.

2. Sarah laughed because God had done something impossible for her!

- a. How absurdly wonderful that she, a ninety-year-old woman who had been barren all her life, should now be nursing a child that she herself had delivered!
- b. Most of you know what young mothers are like when they have their first baby—
 - They look at their husbands and they say, “It’s so hard to believe that this is really *our* baby.”
 - They know something of the amazement and wonderment that Sarah had...
- c. But can you imagine what it would be like to have your first baby at ninety—
 - Even after you had been barren all your life—
 - Even after you had been menopausal for years.
 - that you should be nursing your baby!
- d. Can you see how this would make everyone laugh?
 - What would some of you think if your grandmother’s ninety-year-old sister, who had been barren all her life, called you next week to tell you she was expecting a baby?
 - It would make you laugh—you would say, “How can this be?”

B. Abraham had already laughed—fallen on his face and laughed—when God told him that his wife Sarah would bring forth a son at ninety.

1. READ> Gen. 17:15-19

- a. Abraham laughs because it is so amazing to think about Sarah conceiving now—after all these years!
 - He and Sarah had long since given up on her having a baby herself, and had attempted to use Sarah’s maid as a surrogate mother in order to have a child.
 - While this sinful method did produce a son, named Ishmael,
 - it was not the son that God had promised that would have God for his god and through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.

- b. So now Abraham laughs in wonderment when God renews to him the promise that he had thought would have to be worked out through Ishmael—and before Ishmael had come, through his chief servant.
 - God had his reasons for waiting till Sarah was past the age of childbearing.
 - He did it this way because He wanted to demonstrate to Abraham and everyone else that salvation is His work and His work alone.

TRANS> I'll have more to say about that in a moment, but first see that....

- 2. God told Abraham that the name of his son was to be Isaac.
 - a. In Gen. 21, we see that Abraham obeys God and gives his son this name.
 - The name Isaac means “he laughs.”
 - When God gives anyone a name, the meaning of the name is always very significant:
 - He gave Abraham the name Abraham which means “father of a multitude” because He had promised Abraham that nations would come from him.
 - He gave Jesus the name Jesus which means “Jehovah saves” because He came to save His people from their sins.
 - b. But why did God give Isaac the name “laughter”?
 - Because in this way, God was showing everyone that His gracious saving work is so remarkable and marvellous that it makes His people laugh.
- 3. Sarah had laughed before Isaac was born as well as after, only her earlier laughter had been the wrong kind of laughter—
 - a. She had laughed in unbelief and was corrected for her folly.
 - READ> Genesis 18:9-15
 - b. As Pastor Barnes showed us when he was here on April 7, God had worked in Sarah so that she was able to believe God’s promise...
 - And now in Gen. 21 we see that God has changed her unbelieving laughter into believing laughter...
 - the laughter of wonderment at the incredible thing God had done for her!
 - That is the kind of laughter that God gives to His people.

II. But there is a whole lot more going on here than a ninety-year-old woman having a son...

- A. God has not recorded this simply to encourage barren women that He is able to make them fruitful...
- Certainly, God is able to do whatever He wants...
 - But if that is all you see in this passage about laughter, you are missing the point.
1. God has recorded this account about Isaac—about laughter—because He wants us to understand that His kingdom is not established by human work, but by His own divine work.
 - a. God arranged all the circumstances of Isaac’s birth in such a way that it would be conspicuous that this work was not a work that Abraham and Sarah could have pulled off.
 - He wanted to give a testimony to the human race in all future generations that salvation was HIS work alone.
 - That as ruined sinners, it is impossible for any human being to save himself.
 - b. That salvation is not our work but God’s is emphasised over and over in the New Testament.
 - As He states it for us in Titus 2:5, it is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy that He saved us.”
 - And as He puts it in Ephesians 2, “By grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, lest anyone should boast...”
 - And Galatians 3:26 reminds you believers that “you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ.”

TRANS> But just what is faith?

- c. Faith is relying on the work God has done to save you rather than relying on the work you do.
 - Sarah and Abraham were not able to bring forth the child of salvation by their own power, but only by looking to God to accomplish the promise for them.
2. Sarah and Abraham knew that there was more to Isaac than simply a promise to a barren woman that she would have a child!
 - a. God had told Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through the son that would be born to him.
 - When God promised that, He wasn’t just talking about the everyday blessings of this world!
 - He meant blessed in the fullest sense that...
 - “God would be their God and they would be His people.”

- Through Christ, God would bring His people into His favour and He would see to it that they were blessed forever.

TRANS> This was the promise...

- b. But when Sarah was barren, it seemed that there would be no salvation and therefore no laughter that accompanies salvation.
 - It was impossible for her to bring forth a Saviour or even a child that would belong to God's kingdom...
 - All they could do is look to God was look to God in faith.

3. Faith, then, is when you trust in the work that God has done or has promised to do instead of what you do.
 - And the result of faith is laughter—
 - The kind of laughter Sarah had when she said: “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?”
 - It is a “How can this be” kind of laughter that came when she saw the amazing thing that God had done that she could not do.
 - Because she had faith, she knew that God had done it.

B. Do you see how faith is emphasised in Gen. 21...

1. First, see how it speaks of *God's* work (the work we are to rely on)
 - a. Gen. 21:1 says that God *visited* Sarah.
 - The word *visit* is used in the Bible to refer to God's coming to act in people's lives, either in salvation or in judgement.
 - It is used of His coming to rescue His people from bondage in Egypt:
 - Exodus 4:31: “So the people believed when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction...”
 - It is used of His sending Jesus to redeem His people in Luke 1:68:
 - “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has *visited* and redeemed His people.”
 - Salvation is God's work—
 - He visits us in Jesus Christ who came to save His people from their sins.
 - If He had not visited, no one could be saved.

- b. Gen. 21:1 goes on to speak of God’s work when it says that He not only *visited* Sarah, but also *did* for Sarah.
 - It is not what we do for God that makes us fruitful for Him...
 - It is what He does for us.
 - Sarah would never have conceived or borne Isaac if God had not visited and done for her
- c. And it is in the wake of God’s *visiting* and *doing for* Sarah that she laughs!
 - After His visit, she who was barren is made fruitful.
 - And so it is for all of God’s people!
 - We have no salvation until God gives it through Christ...
 - And then we look and laugh because we who were hopelessly barren are alive and bearing fruit!

TRANS> So you see that the first way faith is emphasised here is by emphasising the work what God does to make His otherwise barren bride fruitful...

- Biblical faith is faith that relies on God’s work.
2. But biblical faith does not look to God to work in whatever way we may want Him to work... it looks to Him to work according to His promise.
- a. The sick person who says, “I have faith that I will get better...” is not expressing the kind of faith that is based on God’s word.
 - The “I have faith that I will get better” kind of faith may give you some comfort, but it is not certain—
 - It would be better to say, if the Lord wills, I will get better.
 - I don’t mean to say that saving faith does not expect God to work—it does—but the difference is that it looks to Him to work in accordance with His promises.
 - It is not a fill in the blank kind of faith—“I have faith that God will...” and then you fill in the blank.
 - Saving faith is always faith in what God has promised in His Word.
 - b. This aspect of faith is emphasised in Gen. 21.
 - Notice in verse 1:
 - “And the LORD visited Sarah **as He had said**, and the LORD did for Sarah **as He had spoken.**”
 - Likewise, verse 2 states: “For Sarah conceived and bore a son in his old age, at the set time **of which God had spoken.**”

- Three times you are told that God acted according to what He had previously promised.
 - This shows us that God’s word is utterly dependable.
 - God always keeps His promises!
 - If He says something, it will be done—even if it seems impossible to us—
 - If He says that Sarah will have a son, it makes no difference if she is ninety years old and past the age of childbearing—she will have a son.
 - If He says that He will save all those who look to Jesus Christ, He will save them—it makes no difference what you may have done in the past—He will do what He has spoken.
 - Saving faith looks to God’s work to accomplish what He has promised in His Word.

TRANS> Sarah and Abraham had this kind of faith—

- And because they had true saving faith, they also had laughter.
- Because they believed what God had promised, they knew that God was going to bring the Saviour through Isaac, and through that Saviour that He was going to call all the nations of the earth to salvation!
- They laughed because they were so amazed at what God had done and at what He had promised to do.
 - They relied on His work and they relied on His promise.
 - It was truly something to laugh about!

III. So I want to ask each of you who hear my voice today,

- **Do you have this laughter?**
- **Are you laughing with Sarah?**

A. There may some here today who can’t laugh with Sarah because you are too busy trying to do the work of salvation yourself...

- You are trying to prove that you are not barren.
 1. You say to God and to the world,
 - “Look at me, I am not barren, I have fruit in my life!”
 - a. “I say my prayers, I go to church, I read the Bible...”

- b. Or you say: “I am kind to my neighbour, I give to the poor, I am compassionate.”
 - c. Or maybe you look at what you don’t do: “I don’t steal, I don’t lie, I try to be a good person.”
2. Now if this is the way you think, you can’t laugh with Sarah.
- a. Sarah laughed because she had a baby when she knew herself to be desperately barren.
 - She knew herself to be powerless to produce any fruit for God.
 - She could not bring forth the child of salvation any more than she could raise herself from the dead or make her blood flow in reverse.
 - If she had thought that it was something she could do on her own, she would have had nothing to laugh at.
 - b. The laughter comes when you realise that God has done (or is going to do) something that would have been utterly impossible for you to do!
 - As long as you think you can do it, you have no reason to laugh—only to keep working in futility.
 - That was the way Sarah and Abraham were at first—they were trying to bring forth the seed that God had promised.
 - They were so desperate that they even came up with the idea of using Sarah’s maid as a surrogate mother.
 - And God did not stop them!
 - He let them go through all their own efforts until they finally realised that they just could not produce a child a promise, a child for God’s kingdom.
 - Once they were absolutely convinced of that, God gave them the child and they laughed...
 - Because what had been impossible for them, God had done.

TRANS> If you still think you can save yourself...

- 3. You need to hear what God says:
 - a. He says that all your righteousness are as filthy rags.
 - He says that it is *not by works of righteousness that we have done*, but by His mercy that He saves us.
 - He says that by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.
 - All the law can do for a sinner is expose his failure.

- He says that *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God* and so we need to look to God's work rather than our own work to save us.
- b. But of course, the hardest thing of all to do is to admit that you are barren when you have been giving yourself to proving that you are not!
- Human beings have always been reluctant to admit their barrenness!
- 1) It was this very reluctance that hindered the Jews from receiving Christ as Saviour when He came into the world.
- They were so busy trying to save themselves by works that they were offended that the Son of God should come to save them from their sins.
 - It would have been fine if He had come to save them from the oppression of the Romans or to free them from death—
 - they could admit that they needed that kind of salvation...
 - But they could not admit that they needed to be saved from sin, and that this was something that only God could do for them.
 - Consequently, they could not laugh about the salvation Jesus came to bring, all they could do was call for His crucifixion.
- 2) The same problem occurred in the history of the church as well.
- Over time, more and more people began to trust in their own works to save them—things like going to church, saying prayers, purchasing indulgences, receiving the sacraments, and such.
 - The problem had become very widespread by the 12th century, but God began to raise up preachers to show the people the folly of trusting in their own work rather than God's work for salvation.
 - By the 14th and 15th century, many had learned to laugh again because they had come to understand that salvation is of the Lord.
 - However, by the 19th century, many of the churches that these men founded had begun to think that they could establish the kingdom of God themselves.
 - They thought they could do it by loving others, and they began to define love in their own way.
 - Although they talked about Jesus a lot, they did not really trust in the work that He had done for our salvation—
 - They only looked at Him as a good example to be imitated.
 - They couldn't laugh anymore about the marvellous salvation that He had accomplished.

4. So how is it with you today?

- Are you able to laugh because of what Jesus has done?
 - Or are you angered even at the suggestion that all your own works are useless?
- Well I want to urge you that you need to be honest.
 - Look inside your heart at the bitterness, at the covetousness, at the half-hearted devotion you have toward God.
 - Look at the lies that are in your heart as you try to pretend that your case is not that bad, that you are not really barren...
- Do you not realise that you must answer to God and that He is not deceived?
 - Do you not realise that a full view of Him would make you tremble as Moses did when the law was thundered forth from Mount Sinai?
 - Stop playing games—you are barren, all your works are as filthy rags.
- You cannot save yourself, why do you think Jesus had to die?
 - Come to Him and you can start laughing with Sarah.
 - He is the One who makes the barren woman fruitful.

TRANS> But I would guess that there may be some here who are more honest about things... who recognise that there is no way you can pass muster with God...

B. But you are among those who can't laugh with Sarah because you have completely given up when it comes to bearing fruit for God...

- You know that you are a sinner and you are trying not to worry about it.
1. You have resorted to a counterfeit laughter to cope.
- a. Solomon called this the laughter of fools:
 - Ecclesiastes 7:5-6: "*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise Than for a man to hear the song of fools. For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, So is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity.*"
 - b. This verse shows that the song of fools is something to drown out the rebuke of the wise.
 - Rather than facing his barrenness, the fool tries to drown out his conscience with a million diversions.
 - One fool is consumed with career advancement...
 - He laughs with each step he climbs on the ladder to success.

- Another fool tries to fill himself with food and drink so that he might forget his God and his conscience...
 - He becomes enslaved to his lusts, be it wine, women or entertainment.
 - All he wants is to turn up the noise so he won't have to face God's music.
- c. But notice that Solomon says that "the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot"—
 - In other words, the noise of the fool's laughter is only temporary.
 - He has to keep going back to get another fix because as soon as the laughter stops, he has to face his barrenness before God again.
 - His is only a temporary solution—
 - Thorns make a lot of noise, but they don't produce much heat because the fire goes out too quickly.
 - So it is with the heat of lust—it is highly deceptive—
 - The heat is very strong and the laughter is very loud, but it never lasts.
 - And this is especially true when you consider the day of judgement.
 - Jesus said that people will be looking for a place to hide in that day, but there will be no bottle to turn to, no pornography to gaze at, no career to get lost in, no new purchase to make...
 - There will be nothing but God's penetrating gaze and your own barren soul.
 - All the laughter will have ceased.
- 2. But I want to tell you the good news...
 - a. You don't have to resort to the laughter of fools!
 - You do not need to despair of God's salvation—
 - Of course you can't save yourself! God knows that, and He has declared that about everyone.
 - But He sent His Son to save us.
 - Jesus did not die for the righteous, but for sinners!
 - He went to the cross so that we could be forgiven.
 - b. Do you know who it was that flocked to Jesus when He was here?
 - It was not the self-righteous religious people that came to Him...

- It was the people who had given up on even trying to be righteous—
 - It was the prostitutes and the crooked tax collectors that welcomed Jesus.
 - They were not like the self-righteous Jewish leaders who refused to admit that they were undone...
 - They had admitted that long ago and were just trying to forget about it.
- But when the gospel of Jesus broke through all the noise of their party and they realised that the whole reason He came was to save desperate sinners who could not save themselves...
 - They came to Him and they started laughing!
 - They started laughing because Jesus had come to save them!
 - They realised that it was not what they had done, but what He had done that saves, so they came to Him and they started loving Him and they started following Him and they started giving their lives to Him.
 - They started living transformed lives by His grace and power.
 - The barren were bearing fruit—and they were laughing with an authentic laughter that would never stop.
 - They joined Sarah and all those who had come to understand that salvation is of the Lord.

TRANS> So what about you?

- Are you laughing with Sarah?
- Are you laughing with the barren bride of Christ who is now made fruitful and alive?

C. If you are laughing with Sarah, I want to encourage you to laugh even more!

1. I want to encourage you to laugh when you think about how desperate your condition was and how radically God turned it around!
 - Eph. 2:1 “And you He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins!”
 - You were so barren that this verse says you were dead in your sins.
 - You were like a wilderness with no fruit.
2. Laugh when you consider how helpless you were and how futile your attempts to save yourself or to avoid God were.
 - Romans 5:6-11: “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

- The more you realise how helpless you were, the greater your laughter will be now that you have been rescued.
3. Laugh when you consider how great your danger was—
 - When you realise that before Christ saved you, you were headed for a crisis eternity in the Lake of Fire—
 - The worse the danger, the greater the laughter now that you are rescued!
 4. Say with Sarah: “God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.”
 - Who would have thought that I should be saved?
 - Who would have thought that I should be forgiven?
 - Who would have thought that I should bear fruit for God?
 - Who would have thought that I should be given eternal life?
 - Who would have thought that I should be given children who will inherit God’s kingdom?

Conclusion:

And that brings us back to the occasion of our laughter today!

- You are all barren—every one of you...
- Not one of you could produce a child to inherit God’s kingdom...
 - You can’t even save yourself!
- But you can laugh because God has commanded His people who trust in Him for salvation to give their children the covenant sign...
 - For Abraham it was the bloody of sign of circumcision which showed how we are so polluted in ourselves that even the very fountain of reproduction must be cut off and cast away.
 - Circumcision was symbolic of the cutting away of sin so that sinners could be accepted.
 - In it, the worshipper confessed that he needed to be cleansed, cut off, to live before God.
 - But now circumcision is no longer commanded—
 - It is no longer done because Jesus Christ has fulfilled circumcision by being cut off for us when He was cursed for us on the cross, died and was buried.
- And so, now that Jesus has come, God commands that we baptise rather than circumcise...

- In baptism, we confess that we are unclean and need to be washed,
- And we confess that Jesus Christ was cut off for us so that we do not have to be cut off—that the washing symbolised in baptism comes by trusting in His work.
 - He is the one who makes us clean in God’s sight because we could not do it ourselves.
- And parents, that is why we baptise our children—
 - We confess that they are helpless sinners too who can’t save themselves.
 - We confess that we are looking to Jesus to save them through His work.
 - We promise that we will always point our children to this cleansing in Jesus so that they will always be able to laugh with us...
- What hope there is in Jesus for your children!
 - Do not lead them to trust in their own work to save them, for that is futile and they will never laugh!
 - And do not hide from them the work that Jesus has done to save them, for that will lead them to despair and to drown their sorrow in the laughter of fools.
 - But teach them look to Jesus...
 - Then they can laugh with Sarah and with all of us who are laughing with her...
 - Here the words of Isaiah:
 - “Sing, O barren, You who have not borne!
Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you who have not laboured with child!
For more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married woman says the LORD.”