

## A question for Abraham

# Why did Sarah laugh?

### Genesis 18v13

Some things are almost impossible to put into words. For instance, how do you explain what “laughter” is to a little green man from Mars? One definition goes like this: *“laughter is an abrupt, strong, expiration followed by a series of expiratory inspiratory micro-cycles, super-imposed upon the longer expiratory movements.”* I can’t imagine that helping much.

This is another occasion where the Thesaurus beats the dictionary: I looked up the Concise Oxford Thesaurus and it *made me* laugh: *“chuckle, chortle, guffaw, giggle, titter, snigger, roar, hoot, ha-ha, tee-hee!”* These words conjured up an image, for me, of Ken Dodd and a tickling stick.

Believe it or not, the next question in our series on ‘Answering God’s Questions’ is about laughter. **“Why did Sarah laugh?”** Let’s look at the text.

In Genesis 17v1-8 God makes a promise to Abram about being the father of many nations and changes his name to “Abraham” - *“father of many”*. But Abraham is 99 years old and his only child is Ishmael, born to his maid Hagar. Meanwhile his wife Sarai is barren and has passed the age for childbearing. Unexpectedly, God then says that the Promise will not be fulfilled through Ishmael but through a son Sarai will bear Abraham. **17v15,16: God also said to Abraham, “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 so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”** At ninety God changes Sarai’s name calling her, “Sarah”, which means “Princess”.

## 1. Abraham’s laughter

**v17:Abraham fell face down; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”** Falling face down is an attitude of worship, but Abraham also sees the funny side of God’s Promise and he has a good laugh. Abraham is “rolling in the aisle”. John Wesley thought *“It was a laughter of delight not of distrust.”* (1) God loves to see us laughing like this in His presence.

Essentially, Abraham was laughing at himself! In Romans 4v18,19 we read, *in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead - since he was about a hundred years old - and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.”* Paul sees faith behind the laughter, but he also imagines Abraham looking at his own wizened body! *“His body was as good as dead”*. Hey, this will take a miracle – to bring new life out of this decrepit frame, with my 90 year old “Princess”!

It's good to be able to laugh at yourself. Don't take yourself too seriously! Over the years Adrian Plass has been an expert at helping Christians laugh at themselves. Ishmael is another; David Pawson described him as "*one of God's court jesters*". One of my most hilarious evenings was a meal Liz and I shared with Ishmael and his wife Irene; they lived near us in Littlehampton.

When I was 18, and a new Christian, I was one of a group of friends who went into Newcastle on Saturday evenings to zealously hand out tracts and share the gospel. My first venture into a city centre pub ended in disaster. I walked up to a group of guys sitting with their pint glasses. Unfortunately I bumped their table and spilled the beer into one man's lap. I quickly stuffed my tracts in my pocket and offered to pay for another pint. Not my greatest moment!

Fanatics rarely have a sense of humour; nor do they have the ability to laugh at themselves. I suspect God enjoys helping us laugh at ourselves. It is a great antidote to pride and super-spirituality. One of my favourite stories was told by Murray Watts of the Riding Lights Theatre Company who said that he and his colleague Paul Burbridge were at a bus stop but no bus had come. They were getting desperate so they sat down on the kerb, closed their eyes and prayed. "*As our eyes were shut, the bus went past*".

Are you able to laugh at yourself, or are you touchy and super-sensitive? Have you any stories about yourself which don't make you look too clever or successful? As he laughed at himself Abraham was also laughing at God's "topsy-turvy" ways. "*Fancy God choosing me, and waiting until now, when I'm an old wreck of 99 years and my "Princess" is 90!*" In the same way, as a church, we laugh with God for giving us a vision for multiple church planting in Northumberland, "*a ludicrously big vision with a ludicrously small number!*"

## 2. Sarah's laughter.

In Genesis 18v1-15 we read of three visitors who arrive at Abraham's tent at Mamre and are given lavish Eastern hospitality. It soon becomes apparent that these are no ordinary visitors. They reiterate the Promise about a son being born to Sarah. She is standing nearby and overhears this. 18v12: "**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 Message reads: **Sarah laughed within herself, "An old woman like me? Get pregnant? With this old man of a husband?"**

It is at this point that we read: "*Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?"*" God's question suggests that Sarah's laughter was different from Abraham's. By now Abraham must have talked to her about the Promise. His laughter had been spontaneous hilarity but, here, Sarah's laughter is different. It is furtive laughter. She doesn't want God to hear it. Godly laughter is laughter we can share with God - laughter He can laugh along with.

Before we ask what was so wrong with Sarah's laughter, here are three other examples of laughter you won't find God laughing along with.

- Scornful laughter:

This is laughing with the intention of hurting, or belittling someone. Jesus faced this kind of laughter at the home of Jairus when the weeping of the crowd of mourners turned to laughter when He suggested the little girl was not dead but “sleeping”. (Matthew 9v24) Theirs was derisive laughter. The AV translates this *“they laughed him to scorn.”* Similarly, Jesus’ Passion was punctuated by mocking laughter. The palace guards mocked with a blindfold, slaps and jibes; Herod mocked with taunts about a miracle: *“Prove to be that you’re no fool; walk across my swimming pool!”* (2) The Roman soldiers mocked by dressing Jesus as a pretend king and the Jewish leaders with their taunts at the cross; *“Come on down!”*

- Unclean laughter:

i.e. dirty jokes and innuendo. Ephesians 5v3,4: *“among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity... because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”* William Sangster was a fine evangelical Methodist. On one occasion a well known comedian was telling vulgar stories on the platform of Westminster Central Hall. Sangster interrupted him, told a string of his own jokes and then said *“You see? You can be funny and clean!”* (3) At our home Alpha on Thursday we had a hilarious time around the meal table with jokes flying left, right and centre – all of them clean! What do you watch on TV? There are some comedies that do you a power of good, and others that are so filthy they leave you feeling dirty. What kind of jokes do you laugh at or tell? Christians don’t tend to tell “blue” jokes, but watch out you don’t tell “turquoise” ones.

- Flippant laughter:

Some people put up their defences or avoid difficult questions or give the impression that they don’t care, by a flippant remark. Men are great experts at this. They can make a joke out of anything just to sidestep an issue; and of course it makes us feel clever too. Is that you? Do you use humour as a defence mechanism? Of course, some people are flippant about the very thought of God. Perhaps it is this kind of laughter Jesus’ is talking about in Luke 6v25: *“Woe to you who laugh now, for you will weep and mourn.”*

But what about Sarah’s laughter? It wasn’t especially scornful, unclean or flippant. God’s next question is the clue, in v14: **“Is anything too hard for the LORD?”** Sarah’s was the laughter of unbelief and doubt.

- Cynical laughter

She was laughing at the very idea that God could do such a miracle. There was a streak of cynicism in it. That’s why she **laughed to herself**. Sarah’s response contrasts with the Virgin Mary’s in the New Testament at the

Annunciation. Mary may have been bewildered and astonished, but she said *"May it be to me as you have said."* (Luke 1v38)

When you hear of God doing miracles, is your first response one of faith or cynicism? This is a very topical question. Something is going on right now in Lakeland, Florida, especially with miracles of healing being reported. People are travelling out there from around the world as they did to Toronto and Pensacola in the nineties. I was given a video of one of Todd Bentley's meetings in a baseball stadium, and it was a strange mixture of the bizarre and the breathtaking. I have listened to people I respect who have been out there. One pastor said his first reaction was *"This is Revival sponsored by GOD TV!"* It brought out his black British humour. But then suddenly he was aware of God's presence! He is now convinced that God is at work. God chooses some unusual people and vehicles as channels of His grace.

**18v13-15: The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."** Yet even if Sarah's is the laughter of unbelief, God is not hard on her. She has taken some hard knocks, some of them Abraham's fault –even ending up for a time in the harem of Pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12v10-20) and later seeing her husband have a child by her maid. Perhaps her life had contained so much longing for a child that she was scared to believe any more – she would be just setting herself up for further disappointment. Sarah's laughter would not stop God showing grace to her.

### 3. God's laughter

God has the last laugh! In Genesis 21v1-7 we read of how Sarah gets pregnant and bears a son whom God has said should be called "Isaac" which means *"he laughs"*. Now she gets the joke! **21v6,7: 'Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."** 'The Message' paraphrases these last words: **Whoever would have suggested to Abraham that Sarah would one day nurse a baby! Yet here I am! I've given the old man a son!** She is now laughing along with God. The name "Isaac" is like a joke Abraham and Sarah will always share with God. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner comments: *"to those who were in on the secret it spoke of the laugh, the promise, the miracle that made his birth unique and the covenant predestined beyond all doubt."* (4)

God is full of joy and He has a sense of humour. We see that here, but we see it vividly illustrated in creation as well. He has made some very strange looking creatures. There is laughter in heaven and laughter in the Scriptures – even if it does have a foreign accent. And because God enjoys laughter, men and women filled with God's Spirit often can't help but laugh. I love Psalm 126: *"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.*" (v1-3) In the early 1990's I believe laughter was one of the genuine characteristics of God refreshing us by the Spirit. God loves to use laughter.

- God uses laughter to penetrate our defences:

Laughter can cut through pomposity, hypocrisy and stubbornness. In Sarah's case God had a joke up his sleeve not judgment, for her unbelief. Laughter packs a punch. Preachers like C.J. Mahaney and J. John use it like this. Cartoons also use humour in this way – using exaggeration and caricature. We see Jesus' cartoon like humour in Matthew 7v3-5 about the log and the speck and in Matthew 23v24: *"you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel"* - a huge, hairy camel with humps, knobby knees and padded feet!

- God prescribes laughter like medicine:

It is therapeutic. Sarah had spent many bitter years lamenting her barrenness. But, *"there is a time to weep and a time to laugh"* (Ecclesiastes 3v4) Here laughter was a gift from God to heal her. Proverbs 17v22 says *"a cheerful heart is good medicine", but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*" When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was incarcerated in Nazi Germany he wrote this to his parents thanking them for their letters. *"It is as though the prison gates were opened for a moment, and I could share a little of your life outside. Joy is a thing that we want very badly in this solemn building, where one never hears a laugh.."* (5)

We need more laughter, not less. Christian leaders need a sense of humour (sometimes, if only to keep their sanity). When Paul says deacons must be serious he doesn't mean they should never smile. He means they should *"know when to be serious"* (1 Timothy 3v8) That great preacher Charles Spurgeon was once chided for using too much humour. He replied: *"If only you knew how much I hold back, you would commend me."* In training young preachers he said: *"it is less crime to cause a momentary laughter than a half-hour of profound slumber."* (6)

Is there healthy laughter in your home, your friendship circle, your office? Is there enough laughter in this church, our youth group, your cell group? (Our nativity event over the past two years has had plenty of laughter and that is so good.) We need more laughter. Laughter God can laugh along with.

**John Wilthew. June 2008.**

1. John Wesley. 'Explanatory Notes.' Sword of the Word (e Sword).
2. Tim Rice & Andrew Lloyd Webber. 'Jesus Christ Superstar'. ('King Herod's Song' copyright Norrie Paramour Music Ltd. 1970.
3. Paul Sangster. 'Doctor Sangster.' Epworth. 1962.
4. Derek Kidner. 'Genesis'. Tyndale Press. 1967
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 'Letters and Papers from Prison'. SCM. 1953
6. C.H. Spurgeon. 'Lectures to my Students'. Marshall, Morgan & Scott.

