

Laughter and Weeping

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[0 : 00] Let's turn now together to Genesis chapter 21. And looking at this section we read down to verse 21 where we find an account of Isaac's birth and then the account we have of Hagar and Ishmael having to leave Abram's home and make their way into the wilderness.

It's a fairly seamless translation if you like from the previous chapter where we saw Abram with Abimelech and how at the end of that chapter we notice the Lord blessing and hearing the prayer of Abram as he prayed and healed the women of Abimelech's household so that they were able to bear children having previously been barren or given to barrenness because of what had happened with regard to Sarah.

Of course we saw that that was Abram's fault that he was at fault in the matter but the chapter ended like that and that really flows very nicely in the way the writer has it here into this account you have of the birth of Isaac.

And there are two things about the birth or the following on the events of the birth that we find in this passage down to verse 21. First of all his birth itself he is of course the son of promise and that's really what comes across so very strongly in the chapter in the way that it progresses.

He is the son of promise the promise that God made to Abram that he would have a son by Sarah and the chapter really emphasizes that in different ways that this in fact is the son of promise this is God's way of working the promise that he gave to Abram that he would be the father of multitudes that he would actually have a line beginning with himself stretching down through the generations where God would bless and where God would be in covenant with them.

[2 : 05] So he is the son of promise born but then as he comes to being weaned and that would be around three years of age that would be the custom then you weaned a child when they were about three years old and at that time as a great feast was made to mark the occasion which again would be very common Ishmael the son that Abram had by Hagar who was by that stage a teenager he wasn't a small child he was being a teen something like 16 or 17 years old and at that occasion as we'll see Ishmael started mocking or came out in mocking of of the the other son Isaac and we'll see that that was actually a persecution it's the son of promise persecuted because that's what we learn from the New Testament and from Galatians chapter 4 let's leave that and come back to the first point the son of promise born now you notice how the chapter begins the Lord visited Sarah as he had said and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised and Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham it didn't just immediately say and Sarah conceived and bore a son the introduction is the Lord visited Sarah as he had said in other words the Lord is true to his promises whatever promise

God gives that is what he's going to be true to God is not going to renege on his promises and you see the way he says here the Lord visited Sarah it tells you that the way God keeps his promises is by taking action God doesn't just store his promises in his mind and then people wonder how are these promises going to be kept God actually does things that show his promises are true and that he abides by them he visited he actually took action in regard to the promise that he had given to Abraham and the action that he took was he visited Sarah he enabled Sarah to conceive a child even though she's in her 90s and that's what God actually does all the time when God keeps his promise he takes action in regard to some individual in regard to a people whatever it is you will always find God's promises acted out by him now that's through all the way through history and it will be through to the end of time the promise that Jesus left to his people is that he would come again and take them to be with himself how is he going to keep that promise he's going to come he's going to keep the promise by actually doing what he said by acting in the way that he promised he is going to come he is going to arrive he is going to visit as the word is here with Sarah the Lord visited Sarah and all the way through history you have these visits from the Lord when the Lord visits he doesn't just visit in the sense in which we visit you actually come to visit somebody you

stay there a little while or maybe a long time whatever it is but your visit is soon at an end the visits of God are purposeful they're full of fulfillment they're actually filled with the action that fulfills his promise and every time you see the word visit used of God that's what it's about it's not just a casual passing by it's not just dropping in for a word here and there it is a visitation it is an action filled with meaning and you can say that of your own life and when God comes into a person's life God visits you God comes to stay God takes action to actually carry out his promise regarding you that you that you would be your God and you notice also it says here that the Lord visited and Sarah bore Abraham a son at the time of which God had spoken to him God visits but he's never late nor is he early he doesn't actually have to gather up things so as to rush into what he has promised to do trying to make up time nor does he go past the point where he has to actually apologize for being late he doesn't miss appointments he doesn't actually in any way go out of the precise timing of his promise to be fulfilled at the time of which God had spoken to God had said to him at this time next year

Sarah will have a son that's the promise and as you look at things you can see the promise but with Abraham and Sarah the age thereat the promise doesn't look very promising it doesn't look very hopeful and yet this is God fulfilling the promise what he said he will do and he'll do it at exactly the time at which he says now that's important all the way through God's dealings with us and when you come to Galatians in chapter 4 which talks about the way in which Jesus the son of God came into the world what does it say it says when the fulfillment of the time was come God sent forth his son born of a woman made under the law at the very precise time in the history of the world you see however long the world will be in existence from the very first time that God created human beings from the moment of that creation right through to the very last seconds of the life on earth as we know it now but within that great span of time as we call it there is a precise point at which God acted in sending his son into the world not a moment early not a moment late absolutely precisely as he had planned it and that means that you can safely trust your life to him that you can give your life over by faith and in trust into the hands of the Lord and every single detail of your life will be precisely timed by him it is anyway but what you are doing in giving yourself to the Lord is giving yourself to that precision to that time devil is willingly giving yourself over to be ruled by that God who does things so precisely who fulfills his promise and fulfills them so minutely and in such a precise way and of course that means that as Abraham waited for the promise to be fulfilled as we have seen already it was a time of testing his faith in fact you can detect things virtually in all of these incidents recorded of Abraham where in some way or other his faith in God his faith in God's reliability his faith in God's promises is being tested nowhere more than in the chapter which follows where God said to him take now your son your only son

Isaac your son Isaac in whom your seed is called in whom your succeeding generations are all contained this Isaac now take him and sacrifice him to me everything that God requires of Abraham is a testing of his faith and that's the case with ourselves and the testing of our faith actually comes in the ordinary issues of life in our everyday lives here's Abraham's everyday life that's what we're looking at yes we're looking at his relationship with God we're looking at how he relates to the promises and to the commands of God we're looking at his response his reaction we're looking at his mistakes we're looking at everything that the Bible reveals about him in these chapters but it's all worked through in the daily life of this man it's worked out in his life in his household as a husband and as a father and as he will be a grandfather in all the issues that arise as he deals with his neighbours as he actually comes to make agreements with his neighbours as he finds tension between his household and his neighbour as he deals with the inhabitants of the land all the things of his ordinary everyday life are bound up in his relationship with God he has to work it out by faith he has to rely upon God he has to apply what he knows of God in his everyday life and that means as his life goes on day by day his faith is being tested he has to overcome things he has to surmount problems he has to actually face up to them and continue in allegiance to God in them that's everyday life that's the Christian's life that's where God actually says to us

[11 : 34] I have woven my relationship with you into the pattern of your everyday life that's where my relationship with you is worked out that's where it's tested that's where it's seen for what it is and it's part of the testing of faith that we have to wait upon God that we have to wait for his promise to be fulfilled that we have to continue trusting in him even when it seems things are not what they should be or what we would like them to be and you can contrast this really with the way that Abraham and I and Sarah actually rushed things or tried to rush things through in chapter 16 you remember there was where the birth of Ishmael arose from where Sarah instigated a means by

which because she was childless Abraham would have a child by Hagar perhaps this would be the heir for the household that was their own idea that was them taking things as it were as we saw then into their own hands trying to actually rush God into fulfilling his promises you can't do that it will always be a mistake and it will always show itself if we're not prepared to do it by God's timetable and try and do it by ourselves and by our own timetable then we'll get it wrong and there will be consequences wait for God look to God's word pattern your life by what he sets out not what we think is best accept the things that he has programmed not actually rely and go back to the way we would have done it there will be regrets there will be times of pain and of sorrow there will be things which we wouldn't have actually planned for ourselves that God has planned for us but remember it's his timetable it's his timing it's his wisdom everything in

Abraham's life is set out for him as a man of faith by the God in whom he believes and so it will be for you and for me as well and you see he names him Isaac when she bore him a son Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him and Sarah born to him Isaac and Isaac as we saw earlier in a previous study means laughter or he laughs we'll come to that in a minute because it's a point that's made here now that really shows us that Abraham is reacting in a way that's true to the command of God in other words you've got two things going together God is true to his promises and in response Abraham is true to his promise or to God's command as to what he will name his child that's how the two things go together God's commitment and reliability and God being true to his promise on our part we respond with that by being true to God by being true to what he requires on our part that's what you see in Abraham so God keeps his promises but secondly built into that in the son of promise born there is the joy of a believer

Abraham circumcised his son when he was eight days old Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born and Sarah said God has made laughter for me everyone who hears will laugh over me or laugh with me and she said who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children yet I have born him a son in his old age now there is a lot in the passage built around the word laughter which of course corresponds to the word Isaac and what Sarah is saying here that she has had laughter created for her now by God fulfilling his promises in other words when God fulfills his promises for his people built into that fulfillment is joy built into that is really a heart that knows this fulfillment of the promise in a way that rejoices Sarah you see he's been on a journey he's been on a journey of faith along with Abraham because when you go back to chapter 18 and you find God rebuking her there for the way that she laughed

Sarah denied that she had laughed when God revealed that she would have a child and verse 15 there says Sarah denied it saying I did not laugh or she was afraid he said no but you did laugh she had a laughter of skepticism or unbelief at least a laughter which really didn't take God's word at its full value there and then she looked at things outwardly she looked at things with her own reasoning and she had to move from that to accepting God's word which she did she learned that what God had said would indeed be fulfilled and now that she's come to see that fulfillment she laughs not now in the laughter of being reluctant to accept or reluctant to believe she laughs now with the laughter of joy with the laughter of rejoicing with the laughter that says God is so good because he has kept his promise and I have received the benefits of that therefore God has made laughter for me and that's why she says here who would have said to

Abraham that Sarah would nurse children and isn't that how we think ourselves when we come to know the joy of being a believer when we come to know the joy of being saved the joy of being founded Christ the joy of living in fellowship with him despite all the times that there are tears and sorrows and difficulties challenges in life yet we know that there are the times of great joy the times when your heart is really vibrant with joy when you see what it means to be in Christ and sometimes we look back over our life and we're like Sarah well who would have said who would have said a year ago who would have said ten years ago who would have said when I had this crisis in my life who would have said that it would work out just as well as it has but that's God and that's faith rejoicing in the way

[18 : 15] God turns things around and fulfills his promise and that belongs to all who trust in God that belongs to them as the joy of believing it's not something for a select few people it's not something for a spiritual elite group it's for every single person young or old whatever their circumstances in life whatever their status in life the joy of believing is yours when you believe and through your believing you see Sarah is saying here God has made laughter for me if you look very carefully at that what she's really saying is this is an act of creation this is something that only God

could achieve he has made this he has created this for me out of my barrenness he has created life in my old age he has given me a child who could have done it but

God and he has done it he has created this joy for me what is it that makes fulfillment in a human life I'm not saying that being a Christian is just a sense of satisfaction a sense of fulfillment but there is that element to it but where does it come from where is true and lasting joy made do we produce it ourselves is it the way we set about our life is it how we order things and put things together is it how we ourselves understand things is it how we ourselves arrange the various facets of our life so that they come together to enable us to rejoice where is true and lasting rejoicing from God creates it that's where it's God who actually creates it for us in his redemption in his work of salvation in Christ and working in our hearts it's the Holy Spirit who comes to plant Christ within us the joy of believing the joy that is known by those who are in union with Christ that's what she's saying God has made laughter for me God has created this joy for me and you can take that and you can take it into all your circumstances it isn't simply saying to us that God creates joy for his people he creates everything that they know that's meaningful and purposeful and beneficial and useful in their lives he turns situations around as only the creator can remember the psalmist in Psalm 30 weeping may last for a night but joy comes with the morning that's the psalmist really saying there's a time of weeping for me there's a time of sorrow a time of trial but I compare it he's saying to just a night that's followed by the morning and however long a night may seem at times literally it does seem long when you're in pain when you can't sleep when you have problems in your mind when the morning comes there is a sense of relief that at least the darkness is over and when you put that into a spiritual context what the psalmist is really saying to us is that I know the one who turns my darkness into light

I know that I have a faith in one who creates things as only he can so that even things that look very unproductive by his creative power they are turned into something new something refreshing something in which there is life the psalmist says the same in Psalm 84 those who are passing through the wilderness of Baca they make it a well the rain also comes to fill the pools in other words you have a context and we'll see that with Hagar in a minute context that seems very unlikely to be productive or to produce happiness or contentment or to have anything really meaningful in it and yet God turns it God brings out of it something that will be lasting and meaningful and beneficial and you know that many of you know that in your own lives were things that were dark and foreboding and filled with concern for you and yet God brought you through and he didn't just bring you through he brought you through in a way that instructed you in a way that showed you his creative power he turned things around so that you now know as Sarah saying that God has created joy for you rejoicing fulfillment contentment out of these things so the son of promise born let's look secondly at the son of promise persecuted because here's a different kind of laughter when Abraham made this great feast Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Ishmael whom she had borne to Abraham laughing so she said cast out this slave woman with her son for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac these last words are important that's why this drastic action had to be taken this was actually a threat to this new son to this heir that had been born to Sarah for Abraham Ishmael is in the way of persecuting him Ishmael is a threat to him Ishmael has still as you'd expect a place in Abraham's heart and Sarah knows that perhaps he still has a place too much in

[24 : 29] Abraham's heart even though now the son of promise has been born but it's when you go to Galatians and you read what Galatians says about this incident now this is not an easy passage in Galatians at least certain aspects of it in Galatians chapter 4 where Paul is dealing there with the difficulties of being tied to the law rather than to faith in Christ as the way of salvation so he says out here that Hagar compares to Sarah as the way of the law compared to the way of the gospel or the way of faith but it's what he says about Hagar for our purposes today that we're going to confine it to because what he says here is now what does this scripture say verse 28 now you brothers like Isaac are children of promise but just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the spirit so is it now but what does the scripture say cast out the slave woman and her son for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman now quite apart from the argument that

Paul is setting out there let's confine it to what he's saying about this incident it was in fact a persecution it was a despising on Ishmael's part of Isaac coming into the world as the child of promise it was in other words a despising a laughter against and a laughter at and a mocking of and

a persecution of God's work of God's promise fulfilled of what had happened in the birth of Isaac as the son that was promised to Sarah that's why this action was taken now we can't and we can't actually say that Sarah dealt perfectly with this situation this is a human situation and it's fairly clear that Sarah dealt very harshly with Hagar of course there would have been tension between them ever since the time that Hagar had born this son Ishmael way back 16-17 years ago remember then that

Sarah had dealt with her harshly and having come back into the family you can just imagine the tensions between the two women as the years went by and especially now coming to a height where Sarah actually at last has a child of her own and here is Hagar and her son in that situation it's understandable that things would come to the fore that had been brewing over these years and Sarah dealt with her very firmly very harshly she gave Abraham this instruction cast her out for she he shall not be an heir with my son with your son Isaac so that's what Abraham did and Abraham you kind of feel sorry for him and you feel sorry for for Hagar too because after all she didn't ask to be put in this situation she didn't ask to have a child by Abraham something forced upon her something in which she came to be involved in the plan between

Abraham and Sarah and yet this is what it led to and it just shows you that the tensions and the difficulties of human life and of human family life are still there even in a believing household even though God is dealing with them in his own remarkable way at grace so they came to be outcasts Abraham made provision for them and she departed and wandered into the wilderness of Beersheba and then you come to this amazing incident when the water and the skin was gone she put the child under one of the bushes she went down and sat opposite him a good way off about the distance of a bow shot for she said let me not look on the death of the child and she lifted up her voice and wept and the child was also weeping now we've said that you mustn't think of this as a five year old six year old child that she was able to carry they would have obviously been using one another for support as their strength was getting weaker as they were getting weaker the strength was ebbing out the water was gone it didn't look very hopeful for them so she pushed him under a bush to give him some shade and then she walked away a distance so she couldn't actually see his dying process that's what she expected and it's understandable a mother would do that and that's a picture for us of many today because the Bible is so relevant for us in these sort of incidents from which you can take instruction and teaching and application for many of our situations today that you find around us that you find in our society here's something that actually tells you that there are people who are marginalized there are people who have fallen on hard times there are such things as single mothers in our society mothers who have children to look after and yet are caught up in poverty maybe they've brought that on themselves maybe it's their own lack of organization maybe it's carelessness on their own part in getting pregnant in having children in not having husbands or partners to look after them or separating from them and caught up and very often in drug addiction and that sort of seamy side of human life but they're there they're there and they're in need and all people marginalized in our society whatever has brought that about they're there before us they're in a situation pictured here for us by

Hagar and her son Ishmael they're at the point of death their life's a mess they're in a situation that they can't create for themselves a way out of they need help and as the church as God's people we have to go to them we have to actually stop and take notice of them and realize that they are not people that we can simply put aside and say well that's somebody else's business it's the business of God's people of God's church and it's something we want to see more and more of now that this referendum is over now that it's at a conclusion now that the outcome is clear and indeed whichever way that referendum would have gone this is something that we were prepared and are saying to those who are in authority we want as a church to have our voice heard we want to contribute our share to Scottish society and part of that means that we have things that we know are beneficial in the gospel and in gospel ministry practically as well as spiritually that will help the marginalized please let us help please give us a place please allow us the kind of ministry that we know we can carry out and under God we'll see blessed because you see

[32 : 16] God is in the desert also and one of the great lessons from this is that God hears the cry of those who are in despair when they cry out because that's what you've got here verse 17 God heard the voice of the boy and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said fear not for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is lift him up hold him fast with your hand for I will make him into a great nation what a message for this poor woman in her situation in her predicament here is the angel of the Lord here is God himself actually saying to her I'm not just in

Abraham's household you know I'm actually here as well I'm seeing you I'm hearing you I'm hearing the cry of the boy now take him here she is having just expected a moment ago that her child her teenage boy was about to die having given up hope that their situation could be relieved and now here is

God saying to him hold him tightly because I have a purpose for him I have a future for him I'm going to make him also into a great nation and that's what you want to actually bring into people's lives through the gospel that's what the gospel contains for people it's a gospel for the hopeless it's a gospel that's designed to bring hope to the despairing it's a gospel that appeals to people not to give up on the things of life because if they actually turn to God they will find that God is as efficient in the desert as he is in the gatherings of his people in church lift him up I'm going to make him into a great nation and that means that we have to try and see the potential in people as far as possible that we also don't give up on people who have given up on themselves there are so many people and you'll find this through the work of organizations like Bethany for example who actually find that people have stunning gifts but they've fallen on hard times and these gifts have become obscured by either their poverty or their drug addiction or alcoholism or whatever but when they're rescued from that when they're given the facility to let the gifts they have flourish then it's seen you see that these people have so much to contribute to society when they're given the opportunity and here's God coming to tell us that's what we have in the gospel that's what we bring in the gospel to those who are caught out around us and it says there God was with the boy these are beautiful words aren't they who would expect looking at this situation that God was in it that God was bothered about it that God really would want to have anything to do with it and who would have said of Ishmael well he's he's Abraham's son but he's he's her son his son by a slave woman and he's not Isaac and he's not a son of promise therefore surely God is really featured in his life God was with the boy let these words soak into our minds God was with the boy God didn't abandon him God didn't give up on him whatever his future held what you read there is that God was with him and he grew up and for

Hagar herself there's also something very important verse 19 God opened her eyes God is not just the God who hears the cries of people in despair God's the God who opens eyes because he opened her eyes and she saw a well of water it wasn't just she opened her eyes and saw a well of water God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water the well wasn't created all of a sudden the well had always been there but when you're in misery and when circumstances like this overtake you they cloud your vision you don't see the obvious and especially they close your eyes to the reality of God very often don't think that poverty and despair automatically means people turn to God very often it means the opposite they turn against him they don't see him they don't see any point to him they don't see anything they're worth believing in until God opens their eyes that's what we bring again in the gospel when the gospel message comes clearly to people when we bring that message to them as we must because if they don't come to the gospel then we have to bring the gospel to them and when the gospel is blessed to them and when God shows them the reality of his salvation then when God opens eyes his eyes see what was there all along but what misery or unbelief or whatever it was that caused that they be blinded to it but now she sees this well and she goes to it fills up the water skin again and gives her son a drink that's important as well that's important also along with the fact that

God opened her eyes she got up and filled the skin with water she could have sat there and said well I'm not really interested I just want to be left alone I'm not prepared to just now get up and change my circumstances just leave me alone I'm going to die and that's all I want God opened her eyes and she went and filled the skin with water if we let resentment and jealousy and bitterness against God and others if we let these control our lives they're going to close our eyes to the things that really matter and are important there are some people and you know from meeting with them and speaking with them that they're just letting these things like jealousies and resentment and anger and bitterness they're just letting these things control their lives and what it does is just devour all the good things just like a cabbage I was looking at the other day that some the white butterfly had got to and the one that they had gotten to of course is now eaten up because the eggs turned into caterpillar and they started eating the leaves and when you actually look at that cabbage compared to the others all you've got left are really the hard stalky bits in the middle of the leaves everything else is eaten away and that is what resentment and bitterness and jealousy and all these horrible things that's what it will do to a person's life it'll eat away so that none of the sweet things

are left just the hard stalky bits of human life and God gives us the gospel so that we'll have sweetness restored so that we will have the best things from his hand so that he opens our eyes and shows us where the water is and so that he will therefore help us to get up go to the well fill our lives with his water and know the benefits of it and God of course understands maybe that's the greatest point of all he's just not only a God who hears the cry of the despairing and a God who opens eyes he's a God who understands why does he understand well because for one thing he knows what it's like to have a son who's an outcast isn't that what

[40 : 54] Jesus became didn't he put himself willingly in that position so that you and I would not be outcasts from God gracious God we pray that you would receive us again in our offering of praise that you would help us Lord to be the people that your word requires us to be that you yourself are looking for in our lives we ask that you bless your word to us today so that we will go onwards in your service and in seeking to make your name great hear us we pray for your glory's sake Amen God busted God stop God sometimes later maybe harvest then if you would Volkswagen to the if not trade done with those you you we