

Genesis 18 – Sarah’s Choice

I don't know about you, but I find Genesis pretty frustrating. Nothing is ever straightforward. For example, there's so much sin, so God sends a flood, but that actually doesn't fix anything. Jacob gets blessed as heir, but he has to run away from his brother, and then there's so much drama. Don't even get me started on Joseph!

Here in chapter 18, it's the same. Ever since chapter 12 of Genesis, there's been this question hanging over the whole narrative: who is going to be Abraham's heir. It doesn't seem like a big question to us, but the idea of the growth of the people of God into a nation is one of the main themes that Genesis is about. It goes all the way back to the very beginning, in chapter 1 of Genesis and verse 28: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'" We see it through the tables of nations, as generation upon generation emerge. It's clear that God just doesn't want a relationship of love and grace with just one individual person, he wants that relationship with a whole bunch of people: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, you and me. God has always been building a people for himself, a special group of his own who can enjoy all the amazing gifts that he wants to give us. God wants a relationship with heaps of people. God wants a relationship with you.

Perhaps we can forget about that. Ask yourself, "Why am I in church today?" Perhaps you've come to hang out with your friends. Perhaps you're here because your partner is here, and so you just tagged along. Perhaps you're just here because your kids are in the children's program, and you think it's important for them, but not so much for yourself. Where are you at? If you're at church for any of those reasons, you're probably thinking that whatever God has to say in his word, whatever I have to tell you that he's saying, is not for you. Perhaps it's good for your friends, or your partner, or your kid, but not you. Well, that's where you're wrong. You're so wrong! God wants a relationship with you. Now. Here.

A classic example of this is Sarah. Like I said, ever since chapter 12 this question of who Abraham's heir is going to be has hung over the narrative and over the family. It's a crisis point, because family and children, and the building of God's people have been such core themes. It's a crisis, and it's all her fault. Well, it's not really Sarah's fault. I mean, it's not like she purposely wasn't able to have children. But it's still down to her infertility that Abraham has no children. You can imagine what she would have been thinking when Abram told her about God's promise to him back in chapter 12. "Oh, wow, you'll be a great nation, will you? Your offspring will inherit all this land? Cool story, bro. Nothing to do with me." For her, Abraham's promise was just that: Abraham's promise. She was simply along for the ride.

But then we get to chapter 18, where we finally get to what's going on for Sarah. Abraham here does a very good job at playing host to these mysterious strangers, but he's only really serving as a contrast to what's going to happen next in the Sodom and Gomorrah episode. No spoilers. The focus here is on Sarah. "Where is Sarah, your wife?" ask the mysterious strangers. For whatever reason, she has stayed inside the tent while Abraham waits on his guests, but she's not that far away, curiously listening to the conversation going on outside. This mysterious guest for some reason already knows her name and already knows their offspring problems – hint, because he's God – and so he also knows that Sarah is listening. And that's great because God's message here is for her: Abraham's promise is

your promise. You will have a son. You will be a great nation. Your offspring will inherit this land. Your children will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Imagine that. All this time, after so many, many years of society telling you that you're an incomplete person without children, that you could never be a proper wife because you could never have children, that you could never be a real woman, now, finally, you have the chance to change all that. Finally you will have some sort of value. What an unbelievable promise!

Hahaha, yeah, no. You see, Sarah's not the kind of woman who's a dreamer with her head in the clouds. She's a practical woman, just like Abraham is a practical man, and both of them have done what they can to make God's promise to Abraham become a reality. Abraham passes her off as his sister in Egypt, which not only saved his life but with Sarah out of the way it could have also paved the way for Abraham to marry someone else and possibly have children. When that fails, Sarah suggests that Abraham should have a child with her servant, Hagar. That child wouldn't be a slave like his mother but would be a legitimate heir. He would, in legal terms at least, be the child of Abraham and Sarah, the married couple of the household.

Now, I could talk here about how dumb it is to try and make God's promises happen the way you want them to happen. Genesis makes it pretty clear that this is a stupid idea, because it shows all Abraham and Sarah's plans going terribly wrong. But what I want to draw your attention to is this: Sarah laughs.

This is an important point in the Abraham and Sarah story, not only because the verb "to laugh", *tsahaq*, forms the basis of the name of their son, Isaac, or *Yits'haq*. Sarah laughs, just like Abraham did back in chapter 17. They laugh because to them the idea of Sarah having a child actually sounds really stupid. It's illogical. On top of the fact she couldn't have children in the first place, now she's post-menopausal. Kids are just never going to happen. That's what Sarah talks about in verse 12: "I can't even think of getting lucky. I'm old, my husband is old. Maybe if you'd come to me 50 years earlier, I might have taken it seriously. But, yeah, not going to happen." If God's promises to her were irrelevant before, now they're just nonsense. So Sarah laughs.

But it's not like she was being unreasonable. Like I said, she's practical and logical. There is nothing in her life that would tell her that this could happen to her, so why should she believe it?

Does that sound familiar? I reckon we can all think at one time or another that God's promises are too unbelievable. Like when the guilt of our sins weigh down, and we fail in the same things every time, we think God couldn't possibly keep on forgiving us. Like when we struggle to pay all the bills and put food on the table, and wonder how at all the poor are supposed to be blessed. Like when we lose our job and can't find work, we struggle with sickness and stress, loved ones leave us or betray us or die, and we laugh at the suggestion that God works all things for the good of those who love him. We laugh, maybe bitterly, but we laugh. And we don't listen. This promise, we think, is not for us.

But there is something that is more unbelievable than a 90-year-old infertile woman becoming a mother for the first time. "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child now that I'm old?'" asks God. In the Hebrew it's more forceful: why on earth does

Sarah say “Will I ever really truly have a child?” Why on earth does she say that? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Is anything too hard for the Lord?

This verse is the key to the whole story of Abraham. God's promise of an heir has had to withstand Sarah's infertility, Lot's departure, Abraham's disputes with kings, the couple's own stupidity and lack of faith, but still it stands. Still God is faithful and still God will make his promises happen.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? This is the key to the whole story of Scripture. I would say that it's the key statement, but you'll notice that it's not a statement, it's a question, and that's important. The way it stands unresolved in Genesis 18 leaves the question of Abraham and Sarah's fate hanging in the balance, but it's also a question for the reader. See, a question demands an answer, and here Scripture is asking you to answer as well. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Think about it yourself, but think about it seriously, because this is a pure question of faith. Your answer to this question determines everything else.

Is anything too hard for God? Anything at all?

If the answer is yes, that you do think that something is too hard for God – if you think he can't do the impossible, if you think he can't change your world, if you think he couldn't possibly use you in his plans – then God is not confessed as God. You're not letting God be God, with all the freedom and power that that involves. Like Abraham and Sarah we are determined to live in a world that is static, stable, reliable – but utterly hopeless.

If the answer is no, that you don't think anything is too hard for God, then that faith in God should leave open to God the freedom to do anything. If you trust that God can do the impossible, change your world, or use you in his plans, then when he does those things you can't be surprised. More than that, you can't be resistant. You can't say, “No, God, I don't want to change, I don't want things to change,” because then our faith slips.

Look, I know that sometimes it is actually hard to trust God. If I ask myself that question, I say, “Yes, nothing is impossible for God...” but still there's that niggling little question mark somewhere, and I reckon that's because I can't see what's going on. It's not like there was some procedure that we underwent to take our sin out, and it's in a jar somewhere that we can point to, like, “Look, no more sin!” We can't see what God's plan for us is going to be. We don't have pics of heaven so we can say it happened. When we think about our own experiences, God's promises don't seem to fit. They're not like catching the train, or brushing your teeth, or something normal like that. They're out of our everyday experience, like they were for Abraham and Sarah.

And, really, if there's one thing we learn from the Bible it's that God doesn't do normal. God's promises don't fit neatly into the life we build for ourselves, they break it, and they transform it, and often not in a way that we might like. In fact, God uses the impossible and the unexpected to reconstruct our lives precisely to show us what he can do, and that it's him doing it. And you've got to be okay with that because he's God, not you.

It's like us going to Namibia. This isn't something I'd ever thought I'd do. I'd never done any mission subjects in Bible College or anything. But now here I am, ditching my whole life and my friends and everything comfortable, off to somewhere I've never been before to do

stuff I'd never thought I'd be able to do. And I am petrified, to tell you the truth. The closer we get to leaving, the more in the back of my head I'm thinking about all the things I'm going to miss, and all the difficulties we're going to have even just fitting in, and a large part of me thinks, "No, I don't want to! It's too hard! I'm going to be so uncomfortable on so many levels, it would be easier just to stay here."

But faith is difficult. Faith does make us uncomfortable, and God will call us into places that are not normal and not easy for us. But God is God. For one, he gets to tell you where to go. And if you're ever wondering, "I think God wants me to do this, but I'm not sure," give it a go, even if it is hard. Even if it blows up in your face, God will still stick with you and bless you through it, like he did for Abraham and Sarah.

But for two, even when stuff is difficult and uncomfortable, he's always got you. His promises always stand. He does save. He does bless. He does work all things for the good of those who love. And he's proven it to his people, to us, again and again and again. So when the guilt of our sins weigh down, when we struggle to pay all the bills and put food on the table, when we lose our job, or we struggle with sickness and stress, when we cry out in the mess of our lives, "But you promised!" God says, "Yes, I did promise." And you cling to that. Every day you cling to that because life will crowd out God's voice. Your thoughts will overwhelm you and everything may be a struggle, but you hold on to that. Because that is the truth that will set you free.

Our story from Genesis leaves us unresolved. Sarah tries to take back her laugh. She knows it wasn't right to laugh at a guest, or to laugh at God's promises, and in her panic she lies, "I didn't laugh." God calls her on it. He knows everything, and he knows that she's having massive trouble believing him. But faith is a journey, and he also knows the direction she's heading. But where is that? In the rest of chapter 18, we're suddenly discussing Sodom and Gomorrah, and we don't see the fallout of Sarah's meeting with God. At least, not yet. That question still hangs in the air: **is anything too hard for God?**