

Following the Biblical Stream:

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Part LXXXII

We talked last time about how much the union between Abraham and Sarah was special, not just in that Sarah was Abraham's wife, but in that she, as much as Abraham, was chosen for the task of building the chosen nation. She, as much as Abraham, had been given that blessing. We also talked about the contrast between Abraham's reaction of laughing in his heart when God told him again that Sarah would bear a child, and the fact Sarah laughs at this same fact at a later time. In talking about all this, and more, we made it to verse 20 of chapter 17 of the book of Genesis. Now this is where I usually say something like, "Now we're ready for verse 21." However, we really aren't quite yet. This is because there are still a couple issues in the verses we covered last time that did not make it into our discussion, and we do not want to move on without covering them. The first one is in the verse where God reiterates Sarah would be the one who would bear Abraham the son of promise, and the other concerns facts God told Abraham about Ishmael.

In verse 19, God tells Abraham what to name the son he would have with Sarah, and that name was to be "Isaac!" Not only did we not talk about this specific fact, but we also did not talk about the meaning of this name, which is something we have done many times concerning others in this family. While it is true God had also given the name for the son Abraham had through Hagar, we should remember that this name was told to Hagar, and Ishmael's name was intended to let Hagar know God had heard her cry. Being a son of Abraham, Ishmael would not be without blessings of his own. Of course, we know God did not initially name Abraham and Sarah, but the fact they ended up with those specific names is due to the fact God changed their names. In our discussion of the meaning of what God changed them to, we talked about the contrast between Abraham being the father of many nations; but Sarah, while more than one nation would come from her son, was the princess of the chosen nation specifically. Thus, the meaning of Isaac's name is not just important to cover, but there's an interesting contrast to it and what God had named Hagar's son.

Because Isaac was to be that son of promise, it only stands to reason God would tell Abraham what the name would be for this son; and the meaning would go

right along with the reactions we talked about both Abraham and Sarah having to being told they could and would still have a son together. "Isaac" means something pretty simple, for it means "he laughs" or "will laugh." Some will boil it down as far as to say it simply means "laughter," but the root of this name would not imply a noun, but a verb. Not just laughter as a thing, but at the very least, the act of laughing. This is important because it really points to everything involved with Isaac being born! Due to the way this name shows up in Hebrew, along with the fact Hebrew is much more expressive than a modern language such as English, there can be some debate as to if the verb it really relates to is the one that expresses the idea of being the one who laughs, or the one being laughed at. This is why in English we say it means "he laughs," which would be reference to the one who is laughing, or "will laugh," which points more in the direction of being the one who gets laughed at.

It might seem like a very technical argument, and to scholars of ancient Hebrew it is! However, to a simple teacher of God's Word, you have to love the fact Isaac can point in both directions. Why? you may ask. Because laughter of all kinds for all reasons surrounded Isaac, but no matter in what form it comes, it all comes for the same basic reason! If you go back to just what we talked about last time in the contrast between Abraham and Sarah laughing at the thought they'd still have a son, there are those who see the humility part I pointed to as a non issue. They would do this with the insistence that Abraham laughed in total joy at the thought of having another son. For me, that's not how I see it; but at the same time, I do not see a total lack of this in his response. I believe Abraham was both apprehensive as well as joyful.

I stress the apprehension part due to human nature and the daunting thought it had to be to raise a son at the age they were. Abraham falls on his face and directly asks God if he, being 100 years old and Sarah being 90, could still hope to physically have a child? In this, I believe there can be no doubt Abraham is feeling a mixture of emotions that run from finding it hard to believe, all the way to what would they do if it were to happen. At the same time, Abraham was not stumbling at the promise of God, and he knew full well that what he and Sarah had done using Hagar had not worked out as they planned - to say the least. This is why I stress

Abraham's statement in these verses we are looking directly at about Ishmael are concerning Ishmael not being left out. If God was going to do what He was going to do through a son whom Sarah would give birth to, what was to happen to Ishmael. Remember, Hagar and Ishmael did not return to Egypt where Hagar was from, but Hagar was told by God to stay with Abraham. Abraham had a father's heart toward Ishmael and certainly did not want the consequences of the mistake he and Sarah were responsible for to fall upon Ishmael.

However, God was not going to leave Hagar's son out in the cold or at the mercy of the larger world just because he would not be a part of the chosen nation. The fact this was a concern for both Abraham and Hagar is why God named Ishmael "God hears." In any case, it is apparent Abraham is concerned about a great deal many things as he has this conversation with God. In that clear context it is hard to believe Abraham's laughter was just that of joy, but, again, I will not argue there had to be, at the very least, joy in the idea of having another son as well as the confirmation Abraham's life was to mean so much in God's work. To some this latter point would not be that big a deal, but to someone like Abraham, it no doubt was, and it brought him joy in spite of the astonishment!

In someways Abraham encompasses almost all the laughter Isaac's name was meant to denote, but there is more. When we look at Sarah's laughter at hearing the words that day as she stood inside the tent, we see greater evidence of an almost uncontrollable burst of human nature in finding it unfathomable it could happen at her age. (Gen. 18:9-15) She, knowing there were negative aspects to her laughing, is also overcome by the human nature, and she attempts to deny she had laughed. However, she is told God knew she had laughed; at the same time this laughter, no matter the reason for it at that moment, would be turned to laughter of joy when it came to pass, and that was important. The point is Sarah shows us the disbelief in us all, and I'm not talking about just those who would see it physically happen and be amazed it was possible. I'm talking about the fact there are those who look back on these very ancient words in the Bible and believe this is nothing but a story made up to make the forefathers of the Jews seem to be miraculous!

This brings us to even more aspects of laughter, and those are the ones with real negativity associated with them. We say Sarah's laughter comes with a negative aspect but really only in that it would be doubting God.

Outside that, her reaction is nothing but normal in the human mind; and while some might be offended when they tell someone something and get laughs for saying something so unbelievable, who of us would believe a ninety year old woman could have a child? Especially in a day where no "scientific" trickery could be at work. No, there is a laughter that is far more negative than that and in all aspects of it's meaning. Those who have been laughed at by others who just wish to make fun of them, no matter what the reason may be, know the pain and negativity of such laughter. Many a person's life has been shaped by negative laughter they suffered, some long term and others just at very specific times. The point is, laughter is not always a positive or semi-positive thing. There is a big difference between being the one who is laughed at and the one doing the laughing, but with God nothing in this life has to mean so much to us as individuals, for He will always have (to use an expression some might find a bit distasteful when talking about God but applicable for our conversation here) - the last laugh! (Rom. 12:19-21)

One great Biblical example is that of Samson, who made the mistake which allowed the Philistines to capture him. On what would be the last day of his life he was brought out and bound between two support pillars of the great hall where the Philistines were celebrating. They brought him out to that spot so they could laugh at him. They felt they had brought down Israel's greatest hero, and they laughed at the fact that for all he had done to defeat them in the past, they felt they were getting the last laugh. However, those who know the story know it was actually Samson who got the last laugh as he prayed to God and received the strength to destabilize the support columns of that great hall. This literally, brought the roof crashing down on the heads of the dignitaries and others celebrating that night, as well as killed many more who were celebrating on the roof of the structure. In that one night, Samson killed more Philistines than he had in the combined total of all the other encounters with them during his life! (Judg. 16:23-31)

This story actually shows us the exact kind of negative, as well as positive laughter we want to look at. As we have covered many times, Isaac was the son of promise, he would be the father of the chosen nation; specifically, he is a typology of The Messiah, which is God's ultimate salvation for all those who desire God's ways. All these things get laughed at in this world. The main reason Hagar and Ishmael were finally separated from Abraham's house was because Sarah witnessed

Ishmael mocking Isaac one day and demanded Isaac not have to grow up alongside Ishmael (Gen. 21:9-11) Lord willing, we will cover this more when we get to those verses, but whether this was Ishmael just doing what kids so often do, or him specifically wishing to down Isaac because Ishmael was in truth the oldest son of Abraham, doesn't really matter. There have been, and will be those who do not believe the miracle of Isaac's birth nor the will of God that Isaac be the heir of Abraham's house. There were those who laughed at Isaac for believing his life would really mean something in the work of God here on this earth, as no doubt there were those who laughed at Abraham for believing it, and certainly those who laughed at Jacob for the same.

There have been and will continue to be those who laugh at the idea God set up a chosen nation, but no matter how hard they have tried to destroy it, the nation remains. There are those who laugh at the idea the Jews today are the true chosen nation, but as we see prophecy being fulfilled through them day by day, those who study God's Word know it's true no matter how hard others might find it to believe. Certainly there are those who laugh at Jesus. They laugh at the truth Jesus was born of a virgin, and there are polls that have been taken in recent times that say even many "Christian" ministers don't really believe it's true. It is even in the doctrine of certain organizations that while Joseph may have had nothing to do with it, Jesus was still formed using a piece of Mary's DNA and not of a pure newly created human form.

There were those in Jesus' life on this earth who laughed at Him showing Himself to be The Messiah. Jesus was killed for the fact He showed Himself to be, and there are those who still laugh today at people who believe Jesus was/is The Messiah. Unlike Samson, Jesus did not take others with Him in His death, but died as a criminal being mocked as not being the Son of God or even powerful enough to come down off that cross. (Matt. 27:35-44) There are those who laugh at the fact we believe Jesus, as the Bible tells us, even existed in history, much less that He rose from the dead and still lives today. They laugh at those of us who await His return and who believe if we do not live to see that return we will be collected to Him in much the same way as those who are alive and remain. (I Thes. 4:15-18)

All this is true, but with God it does not matter what those who do not believe think. This is why there is a simple fact that is pointed out in I Corinthians 1:25-29, "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and

the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence." This is what Isaac's name means!

If you do not believe in the things of God, even just in part, go ahead and laugh all you want to because it doesn't change the truth. The truth is in Paul's words I just quoted, which is that God has intentionally offered His plan the way He has so that in the eyes of the prideful it seems to be foolish. (Matt. 11:25) If you can't get over your own arrogance and believe God is able to provide salvation because of the ways He chose to physically reveal the plan, then you were never going to make it no matter how God had revealed it. God will not accept those who are only convinced because things are done according to their own selfish thoughts. Abel, Enoch, Noah, and many, many others lived before there was a chosen nation, the Law, the prophets, Jesus, the cross, and the promise of His return one day, and they staked their lives on the fact God has always offered, and been able to deliver in any way He chooses, a crown of life unto any individual who sincerely seeks after Him. Thus, if you have joy because Christ is your Redeemer, then be one who laughs no matter how much you may get laughed at, because in the end it will be God who has the last laugh!

With that, I'll turn our attention to the second point we did not cover last time which I wanted to get to in this segment, and that is what God tells Abraham about Ishmael in verse 20 of Genesis chapter 17. The first thing God tells Abraham is exactly what Ishmael's name means, and that is the fact God had heard Abraham. We have talked about this earlier and covered what this means in this conversation, in that God fully respects Abraham has a father's responsibility to Ishmael. God respects the family structure He established humans to live in, and it does not matter how much one might think the birth of a child is a "mistake" on their part, there's a new life birthed into this world at the moment of conception!

Some people like to say, "There is no such thing as a child who is a mistake!" I believe this, but not neces-

sarily in the way many people mean it. There are too many people running around, even claiming to be teachers of God's Word, who do not seem to grasp the fact man has a free will, but that does not mean everything we use it to do is correct. Human's make mistakes, and even if those mistakes produce one of the best things the world has ever witnessed; in many cases, it does not change the fact the choice one made in the beginning was a mistake. In spite of our weak language, we need to think on a high enough level to understand we can look at our mistakes as mistakes, but in the end result, learning from a mistake can mean a variety of things. I suppose to most people it makes no sense to call something a mistake if the end result taught us we actually made the right choice regardless of how long it took us to see it. However, this is one of those examples of when we need a more defining word to express the idea instead of having to constantly talk about how at first we thought it was a mistake but it turned out we were wrong about that.

That being said, maybe we should have another word for things that are no doubt mistakes, but only in the sense we made a wrong decision, there may even be very negative consequences to bear on the basis of that mistake, but what resulted was not a mistake. This is kind of what Paul is talking about in Romans 3:1-8 when he tells us if unrighteousness, or specifically a lie, ends up leading someone to the truth of God, we need to understand that does not corrupt in any way the person the lie assisted in seeking God. At the same time, it should go without saying that lying is wrong. The same thing applies to a pregnancy. The choices that led to the pregnancy can be wrong, but it's a downward thinking if we allow ourselves to pretend, ignore, or make excuses about the fact we make mistakes, even if we are doing it on the basis people can't be wise enough to know it should go without saying that no child is a mistake!

This goes hand in hand with the fact many people love to say, "Everything happens for a purpose," and that's wrong. The right way of thinking is, "There's a reason everything happens." Oftentimes the reason is that someone or multiple people have taken certain actions. Saying, everything happens for a purpose, is a bit like cursing, in that it implies God had it in His plan, and this could not be more wrong! Samson used the last super strength God granted him to weaken Israel's enemy in one action, more than he had in his entire lifetime prior to that; but Samson's mistake is what led

him to that place and time, not God's will or purpose that he be there to accomplish it, especially in that way!

What it does show us is that God can give us purpose no matter what kind of mess we've gotten ourselves into if we will turn to Him and allow Him to take control. Abraham taking Sarah's handmaid Hagar as a wife in order to produce the son they believed he needed was a mistake, but God had a purpose for Ishmael's life as He does for every human life that has ever been conceived in this universe. This is why the sixth commandment tells us murder is just not an option, and this is true even if we think it may in some way correct a mistake, much less when we choose it to avoid the consequences of our mistake(s)!

Now, I find the specific point we did not cover in our last segment a most intriguing fact, and that is the fact Ishmael would beget twelve princes. Not only does this emphasize how much Ishmael was not going to just end up being someone's slave, a beggar on the streets, or even just a man working his fingers to the bone in an attempt to survive this life, dying without being able to leave anything to his children and/or have no heir to leave anything to, Ishmael was going to be a great people of great numbers! In other words, there was no cause for concern on Abraham's part as to what would become of Ishmael. However, I think the more interesting part of this fact is that twelve is the exact same number of tribes Israel would end up with!

To be clear, this twelve number is not just metaphorical, because Genesis chapter 25 verses 12 through 16 gives us the names of Ishmael's twelve sons and repeats the fact they were princes of nations. Now, when you start talking about numbers there is always going to be people who get all mystical on you, but we should keep in mind how God works, and for that I'll repeat another point I often make. Prophecy is not so we can have a clear view of what is going to happen in the future. It is mostly about being able to see when God's hand is at work, both as and after events have taken place. Those who believed they had a clear view of what The Messiah was suppose to look and be like, missed Jesus entirely and/or refused to accept Him as The Messiah. However, the reason almost two thousand years later we can feel comfortable in the fact Jesus was The Messiah and The One we wait for again is that His life, words, and actions line up with what we were told about The Messiah. This is why true Christian understanding does not start by knowing the New Testament, it starts by knowing the Hebrew Bible!

In talking about the number twelve, understand that the fact there are numbers we can see over and over in the Bible is not some numerology thing. They often are there to show us God's hand is in something. The numbers three, seven, and twelve are good examples of numbers we see often in God's Word, but that does not mean we go out looking for and/or thinking everything that comes out as a three, seven, or twelve has something to do with God's plan. God taught us about Himself, and in turn ourselves, by showing us He consists of three parts, and we are made in His image so we are as well. Knowing God is Triune helps us look back and see the beauty in the representation of how the chosen nation sprang from a founding family story of three men: Abraham, his promised son, and the servant who would have been Abraham's most likely heir if Abraham had not had a son, and whom Abraham sends to get a bride for Isaac from Mesopotamia. (Gen. 24:1-9) We see the feasts God laid out in the Law for Israel to observe consisting of sevens in that there are seven feasts, they take place in the span of seven months, two of them span seven days. Inside this structure of the feasts is the fact three feasts take place in the first month and three of them take place in the seventh. Because the day of Passover directly joins to the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits is the same day as the second day of Unleavened Bread, these three cover an eight day span in the first month.

Some do not understand this, but the last feast, which is the Feast of Tabernacles, is specifically commanded to be a seven day feast. However, because this feast represents no ending but the idea the cycle now continues under the circumstances all seven feasts ultimately are to represent being accomplished, this feast, in the seventh month, also spans eight days. Seven is God's number of completion for this creation we live in. We see this right in the first words of Genesis. However, eight is a number of continuance, in that cycles continue as God set them up and for the purpose He completed them for. So why the number twelve? Well, just as eight crosses from one cycle into the next, six shows a cycle one segment short of completion.

It took God just six days to make everything He made for/in this universe, but He waited a seventh day to call creation complete. It was also a specification of God's design that He waited until the sixth day to make man. Six is man's number. God tells us in the fourth commandment man gets the first six days in the week to do his work, but the seventh belongs to God! (Ex. 20:8-11) The 666 everyone freaks out over is nothing

more than a representation of how man attempts to ignore God's day, and in doing so God Himself, thus repeating his life without God in a hopeless struggle of relying on only himself. (Rev. 13:18) This is what leads us to destruction. Twelve, on the other hand, is a simple doubling of man's number! Why is that important? Because to hopelessly cycle your life without God is a waste, but to allow God in your life brings increase! Most want this increase to be physical, but God brings blessings that are not really of this life. Those that are, are again, only confirmations He is at work both great and small.

What's important about six being doubled is that it represents molding or shaping, more specifically folding. If I fold a sheet of paper in half I can get two pieces of the same size. If I need to give an equal share to someone else I can. They in turn can do the same with their piece if they choose. One can note the pieces just keep getting smaller, which is true, but that's man's hopelessness, not God's ability. "For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase." I Corinthians 3:3-7 Both Ishmael and Isaac were clearly given God's blessing on what they would become. Whether they, and those who followed them, would choose to involve God or try to reject Him would determine not just the increase, but the value of the blessings God had granted them both!

Until next time, Shalom!

