

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: It was Maundy Thursday, four days before Easter, four days before we celebrated the Resurrection, that Susan came into my office about 4 in the afternoon and said the doctor had called. I didn't remember we had anything going with a doctor. "What about?" I asked. "The test was positive," she said. "What test?" I said, anxiety rising within me. My memory is hazy at this point but I think she just stood and looked at me. "*What test??*" "The pregnancy test."

We were both 40 and *waaay* past thinking about pregnancy tests. We were thinking more along the lines of vacations. We'd always been content without children so this was a shock. It was weeks before we got the nerve to tell anyone and when we finally told our church we did it in a letter while we were far away in Colorado because, honestly, we weren't crazy about all the grins we'd have to face, all the people celebrating the answer to our prayers—which we'd never prayed. I signed the letter, "Abraham and Sarah." And I kid you not, for the next few months, every time anyone heard we were expecting *they laughed*.

- B. *Illus.*: Years ago we had a Quote-a-Day calendar. The quote one day was from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, "*Humor is the prelude to faith and Laughter is the beginning of prayer.*" Intriguing, right? But when I read that again this week I couldn't figure out what he meant so I looked it up. Niebuhr wrote that there was an intimate connection between humor and faith because "*both deal with the incongruities of our existence. Humor is concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones.*" ["Humour and Faith"] An immediate incongruity is something so out of place that we can't help laugh. Those two incongruities came together when Abraham was 99 years old and he found out that he and Sarah were about to have a baby. Turn to **Gen 17:1-3**... It starts without whiff of humor, maybe so we don't see the punch line coming.

I. **GOD ALMIGHTY ESTABLISHED A COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM THAT STILL WELCOMES US TO THE GOD-BLESSED LIFE (17:1-3)**

A. The lives of Abraham and Sarah were centered around God's covenant. It's been stated, restated, and filled in several times already by the time we come to this chapter. By way of reminder, **God's covenant is like a treaty on one hand and wedding vows on the other.** You just heard what Abraham agreed to in v.1 where the LORD said, "*I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless.*" Beginning with Adam and Eve after they were put out of the garden the human sense of direction has been to walk away from God. That's made clear in the early chapters of Genesis. **So Abraham represented a turning point.** He headed back toward God and now God says, "*Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.*"

V.3 tells us Abram's response: "*Abram fell facedown,*" a vivid non-verbal message of submission, humility and gratitude. Abram and God had pledged themselves to this covenant long ago and now Abram bowed to it again.

B. Abram meant his promise, of course, but he didn't keep it. You can read ahead for the details, but there's another "*She's my sister*" story coming where the pagans turn out to be more righteous than Abraham. So was this covenant canceled? Did God sing, "*Let's call the whole thing off*"?

C. Despite his inability to keep his promise, there is faith in Abram's response. Did you get that? Abram *wanted* to keep God's covenant, despite his sinful nature. That took faith. Abram believed that walking faithfully and blameless was good and right. That took faith. Abram believed God's promise to bless him. That took faith. *Illus.:* I've had people come to me troubled by their sin and fearful that they never became a Christian in the first place. "*You wouldn't even be here asking the question,*" I tell them, "*if you didn't believe the gospel. You're here because God in his love is drawing you back to him.*"

Remember the astonishing statement in **Gen 15:6**, “*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*” Do you understand that there is *nothing* about believing God that is the same as “*walking before him faithfully and being blameless*”? To believe God’s promises is good, to be sure, but it doesn’t make you moral. Yet God so treasures our trust in him and is so merciful and gracious that he will give us *credit* for being righteous when all we’ve actually done is believe his promises. And that incredible transaction is only possible because Jesus died for our sins so that we might receive his righteousness.

Listen to what God says to Abram as he bowed facedown: **vv.4-8**... That seems to be one message repeated in many wonderful ways: *a father of many nations ... very fruitful... kings will come from you.... between you and your descendant for the generations to come.... The whole land of Canaan... as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants.* But the very heart of all those wonderful interlaced promises is “*to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.... I will be their God.*”

II. GOD’S COVENANT GUARANTEES THAT COUNTLESS DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM WILL LIVE IN GOD’S PRESENCE (17:4-8)

- A. The Jews in the ages following naturally assumed that this promise referred to them, but they are only one nation. God’s covenant promises Abraham *many nations and kings*. Furthermore, the thing that set Abraham apart from all other people was that remarkable promise in **Gen 15:6**, “*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*” That made Abraham a different kind of human being—a man reckoned righteous by faith in God. Abraham started a new *line* of human beings, not by his DNA but by his trusting response to God’s promises and commands and by God’s blessing upon them. Eventually Abraham’s descendants would be “*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*”

- B. This is about us! We're among those nations promised to Abraham because our faith in the LORD is like Abraham's. The wonder of God's promise to Abraham was not just that he would have countless descendants **but that his countless descendants would live the God-blessed life forever.** They would have an everlasting homeland.
- C. Remember that center of God's promise to Abraham, "and I will be their God"? Here it is again at the end of the Bible in **Rev. 21:** *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Now a new aspect of God's covenant is introduced: **vv.9-14...** I think the principle here is this:

III. GOD REQUIRES US TO HAVE A PERMANENT REMINDER OF HIS COVENANT (17:9-14)

- A. Circumcision was a cut made on an Israelite man's organ of reproduction to remind him always that his offspring were to be part of God's covenant blessing. It is the connection to descendants that is emphasized. Circumcision was a sign that was pretty hard for a man or his wife to ignore and that was the point. *Don't forget God's promise to bless the children of this great covenant! Remember your birthright.*
- B. The sign might have been impossible to ignore but the promises proved quite easy to forget. Many of Abraham's blood relatives made no effort to "walk before God Almighty faithfully and be blameless." Thus, even if they believed in God, they were faithless. They didn't believe God's promise enough to even try to keep their end of the covenant. If you ignore righteous behavior as a way of life you will not trust God's mercy to forgive.
- C. Now, for believers in Jesus Christ, physical circumcision is no longer of any value. It is a common theme in the New

Testament because the great battle of the early church was whether Gentiles had to become Jews via circumcision before they could claim life through the Messiah Jesus. So listen to these verses. **Rom 2:29** says, “*A person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit...*” In **Gal 5:6** Paul wrote, “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*” Then he explains further in **Col 2:11**, “*In him (Jesus) you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ.*”

In other words, now when we put our faith in Christ our old sinful nature is cut from our hearts and discarded so that we might be new and free from that bondage to our old selves. We don't need a physical sign because we have circumcised hearts that tell us over and over that we belong to Christ and that the LORD is our God. Our *hearts* tell us of our birthright in Christ.

Now for a good laugh. A really, really *good* laugh. Vv.15-17... Up till this, God had never explicitly said that Sarah would be the mother of the promised son. That's probably why she'd come up with that plan to have Abram sleep with her slave, Hagar. But here it is a clear and astonishing promise. Here is the ludicrous incongruity of virile 100-year-old man and a fertile 90 year old woman having a son (would Social Security pay for that?); a son who at his bris was given the name Isaac, which means *he laughs*.

IV. COVENANT PEOPLE ARE WELCOME TO GOOD-GOD LAUGHS (17:15-17)

- A. Did you notice that first statement in v.15: “*Abraham fell facedown.*” Same as v. 3, when Abram's posture signaled his worshipful agreement to God's covenant. Now it is his worshipful gladness. There he is, a 100-year-old man, face down on the ground, with his shoulders shaking and laughs, belly laughs, muffled in the earth.

- B. He laughed at the **incongruity** of old people having a baby. It was almost like someone laughing at a pie in the face. Just crazy, silly surprised. He laughed at the incongruity of faith—believing the God for whom nothing is impossible. Wait till they hear the one about the virgin having a baby, and the baby is God! What till they hear the one about dead people born again! The whole universe will be in stitches!

Illus.: Most of us have had times when we experience some really amazing answer to prayer or hear someone else's, like the story of Kim's conversion which you'll hear shortly. We prayed for Kim for a long time, of course, and we believed that God was working but still, when it happened, we were amazed. "*We shouldn't be surprised,*" we told each other, "*it's what we prayed for,*" but of course we *were* surprised. Of course, we laughed. Part of our faith are those **good-God laughs**. We'll look at this idea more next week when we catch Sarah laughing behind the kitchen door.

- C. It is good to remember where we came from, to remember our forefathers—one whom God called the Father of Many Nations and his son named He Laughs. That is our heritage, that's our family, that's our future, thanks to the joyful grace of God!

Illus.: **Stan Telchin**, a successful Jewish businessman, felt betrayed when his 21-year-old daughter, Judy, called home from college to say, "I believe Jesus is the Messiah."

Judy's conversion threw the Telchin family into philosophical chaos. Stan, in an effort to prove his daughter wrong, began an energetic quest for truth. The search for answers spread to Stan's wife, Ethel, and to their other daughter, Ann, who were both angered, perplexed, then curious, about Judy's radically transformed behavior. When the search created friction between Stan and Ethel, they agreed to pursue their studies independently.

Months later, Stan accepted an invitation to attend a National Convocation of Messianic Jews. He planned to "work the convention" just like he was used to doing with his business. He said, "I intended to

meet with anyone who I thought could help me, always probing for more information."

After a series of meetings, Stan lay awake in his dorm room, thinking about his journey. He had arrived at a point of crisis. If the Bible was true—and he had concluded it was—then he really did believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He also admitted to himself that he believed in the Bible as God's inspired Word. But he couldn't quite say the words to himself, "Jesus is the Messiah."

He asked his roommate, Art, to pray for him. Art obliged, praying simply, "God give Stan your peace, and resolve his inner conflict."

The next morning at breakfast one of the men at Stan's table asked him to pray before the meal. Startled by the request, Stan bowed his head and said: "Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe. I thank You for the fellowship and the friendship at this table. I thank you for what we have learned at this meeting. I ask You now to bless this food, and I do so...in the name of Jesus, the Messiah."

For a moment, he sat there, amazed at what he had just prayed. It had not been planned. The others at the table didn't miss it. Their faces were suddenly jubilant. "Stan," said one of them, "You're a believer!" And one by one, they each got up from their seats and hugged Stan. Several cried with joy.

Stan began to weep as well. He wasn't sure how his wife would take the news, but he just had to call her. Instead of his carefully crafted speech, he found himself blurting out, "Ethel, honey, it's me. It's over. I've made my decision. Jesus is the Messiah!"

There was a pause on the other line as Stan held his breath. Then his wife's voice came back softly, "Thank God! That makes it unanimous. We've all been waiting for you."

PreachingToday.com; Stan Telchin, Betrayed (Chosen Books, 1981), p.95-100.

And that's how a whole family of Jews become true descendants of the Father of Many Nations and his son named He Laughs.