

Imperfect Faith: The Life of Abraham

Faith and Laughter

Scripture:

Read through Genesis 18:1-2, 9-15, 21:1-7 as a group.

Introduction:

Cynicism is en vogue today. In some ways, its become a hallmark of society. While questions and doubts and concerns ought to be encouraged, the cynical edge brings with it a negative and critical mistrust of institutions, traditions, systems, and even people. Cynicism is an attitude, a disposition of the heart and mind that colors and impacts our understanding of the world and events around us. In Genesis 18 we're witness to a fascinating encounter between Abraham and three visitors. At first their identity is unclear. But as the conversation unfolds, we quickly find out that one of the three men is the Lord himself, and the other two appear to be servants of the Lord, likely angels. They've come with special news for Abraham and Sarah: *their long awaited baby will soon arrive*. The decades long wait for a son and a family will soon be over. In Genesis 18:10 the Lord says, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."

Sarah, however, doesn't receive the news with immediate joy and gladness. As Ian Duguid writes, "*Such a specific date was also a test of faith. It is one thing to believe that at some time in the future God will give you a child. It is quite another to fix your hopes on a specific date and risk a cruel and bitter disappointment if the event does not come to pass. Perhaps that is why Sarah found it so hard to believe. She laughed to herself, not daring to hope that what was promised might be true.*"

Sarah is cynical. She's mistrusts God's promise of a son. After all, it's been nearly 25 years of waiting for the promise to be fulfilled. She's old. Abraham's old. And now, in their old age, God's going to give them a son? It's all too much for Sarah at the moment. But the story continues and God's word comes to pass. In Genesis 21, Abraham and Sarah give birth to Isaac, who's very name means *laughter*. And laugh Sarah did! But this time it wasn't with a cynical edge. This time Sarah laughed because of grace. Her heart leapt because God provided despite her doubt, suspicion, and lack of faith. God had done the impossible – He'd made good on his promise; He'd brought life from death. And Sarah's mistrust melted as she held her promised son. Laughter and joy replaced cynicism and doubt. Jesus, the promised Son, is the only thing that can ultimately re-program our cynicism and replace it with joy, trust, and gratitude. The path to transformation in your life may not be an easy one. You may have good reasons to mistrust God or other people. But the Lord is sympathetic to your pain and disappointment. He's not immune from it himself. So lean in to the promises of the gospel, not away, and see what the Lord might do in your life when you take that step of faith. Laughter and joy will be on their way to your heart!

Reflection: Take personal inventory of your life, heart, and spiritual journey. Use these prompts / questions as a way to prepare for group discussions – or – for personal times of prayer.

1. Is trust easy for you to give away? Why or why not?
2. Where do you see cynicism at work in your own life? Can you discern its cause or root?

Discuss:

1. What about the sermon stood out or impacted you the most? Do you have any follow up questions about the sermon?
2. The inability to have children in the Ancient Near East was an especially heavy burden for any hopeful mother. This colors the intensity of the narrative – as well as the burden of time that's passed since God promised Sarah that she would have a son. How do you handle delays? Is your first reaction trust or skepticism when God doesn't react the way, or when, you expect?
3. Take a look at your own life. Which laugh is more natural for you – a cynical laugh or a joyful one?
4. Focus on Isaac's name for a moment. His name means "laughter" and would have served as a daily reminder of Abraham and Sarah's original cynicism as well as the newfound joy. The name of Jesus is a similar reminder. It means "the Lord saves." However, the name won't mean much unless we recognize how much we need saving! Discuss Isaac's name and the role it might play in this family's life.

Apply:

Take a "laugh inventory" this week:

First – is laughter a part of your rhythm? What makes you laugh?

Second – is your laughter driven more by cynicism or joy? Do you laugh with a cutting edge or with a soft heart?

Third – do you laugh with others or at others?

What do you observe? Maybe even ask someone you trust these questions about yourself. How can you take the story of the gospel and apply it to your heart so that joy and laughter becomes a bigger part of your life?