

October 24, 2011

Sermon Overview:

After excruciating tension and delay, this week we arrive at the birth of the long awaited child. And yet it is reported in a few short anti-climactic verses. Nestled between Abraham’s international affairs with King Abimelech (20:1–18; 21:22–34), the birth appears insignificant. But appearances can be deceiving. Isaac’s birth is the key promise in the Abrahamic narrative; everything else depends on it.

Laughter is an important word in this story. Isaac’s name means “he laughs” or “laughter”, and the word appears 5 times in these 7 verses. Isaac’s name would be a reminder of his parent’s previous responses to the promise (Gen 17:17; 18:12). It would also denote the joy that God brought into their lives, and the lives of so many others, through his faithfulness to his promise. In the end, Abraham and Sarah’s God turns their laughter of disbelief into a joyful laughter. He does this in at least two ways.

God fulfills his promise to Abraham: Verses 1–2 emphasize that God’s faithfulness extends to the details. He did exactly what he said he was going to do when he said he was going to do it. Isaac’s birth did not depend on the strength of human faith, but on the reliability of God’s promise. Abraham and Sarah could rejoice in knowing that God’s word is trustworthy. Through the birth of his son, Laughter, Abraham’s apprehensive laughter would have been put to rest and replaced by joy.

God fills Sarah’s heart with wonder: The years of waiting had taken their toll on Sarah. The pain of suffering had calcified into bitterness. Sarah had lost hope that God would intervene and stopped marveling in God’s power. She needed a renewed sense of God’s miraculous work on her behalf. The birth of Isaac gave her just that. The miracle of a son born to a ninety-year-old barren woman transforms her view of God: “God has made laughter for me” (21:6), and fills her heart with wonder (v7).

What about Israel?

As the first recipients of this message, Israel would have identified with Isaac; for had the Lord not been faithful in fulfilling his promise, there would have been no Israel. This text would encourage them to rejoice in how God miraculously and faithfully called them into existence and encourage them to continue to rejoice in all the ways he would miraculously and faithfully sustain their existence.

What about us?

As Christians, we can rejoice in much the same way. Yet we look to the ultimate son of promise, Jesus Christ. His miraculous birth gives even further cause for rejoicing in the God who miraculously and faithfully keeps his promise. Through Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, and through sending of the Holy Spirit, God has called us into existence. Every Christian is a miracle of grace and thus a cause for wonder. Every Christian can rejoice in the certainty that God will miraculously and faithfully keep every last one of his promises, even down to the details.

Questions for Preparation and Discussion *Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D.) Study based on the English Standard Version*

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. If you have ever had a nickname, what is it? What does it remind you of? [D]

Looking at the Bible:

2. Read Gen 21:1–7: In the Bible, naming is very significant. It denotes the authority of the one who names (Gen 1:29–30; 2:19–20), and something special about the one named.
 - a. What is the significance about Abraham naming his son “Isaac “ (v3), especially in light of Gen 17:19? What can we gather from Abraham circumcising his son (v4)? [D]
 - b. Doubtless, Abraham and Sarah would have called their son’s name countless times as he grew up. What memories and emotions might have come to their minds as they said Isaac’s name? What effect do you think this would have had on their lives? [D]
3. Compare Gen 16:1–22 and 18:10–14 with Gen 21:6–7. How has Sarah changed? [D]
 - a. What, if anything, is different about her view of God? [D]
 - b. What, if anything, is different about her view of herself? [D]

Looking at Our Hearts

4. Which of God’s promises do you embrace with a nervous apprehension? [P/D]
 - a. How might that be stifling your ability to live in joy? [P/D]
 - b. How might God be using this text to replace your doubt with joy? [P/D]
 - c. Take some time to reflect on the ways he has shown himself faithful to you in the past. [P]
5. How might the painful situations that you have faced made it difficult to experience wonder? [D]
 - a. How can the gospel renew our ability to experience wonder? [D]
 - b. What specific practices might your group adopt to cultivate wonder? [D]
6. How could Isaac’s name, which stood as a memorial of Abraham and Sarah’s sin, have brought them joy and wonder? What in our lives might function this way?

Praying for Each Other

(Use these suggestions alone or with other prayer requests to help focus your time in prayer together).

- Pray for those who because of life’s pain, find it difficult to experience joy and wonder.
- Pray that God might do and use specific things to fill our hearts with wonder.