

## **“The Tyranny of the Ordinary”**

**Genesis 17:15-18:15**

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### **Text Comment**

- v.15 Sarah’s importance to salvation history is underscored by the fact that she is the only woman in the Bible whose name was changed! [Waltke, 262] It appears that Sarai and Sarah are simply versions of the same name ("Princess"), but by this renaming Sarah was given her own place in the promise made first to Abraham. All of that promise was made to her as well.
- v.18 Abraham's reaction was incredulity, unbelief, as shown by his effort to steer God into a more reasonable path. Take Ishmael instead! But his were honest doubts and God dealt gently with him as he always does with those who prove their readiness to believe with their obedience, as Abraham will in vv. 23ff.
- v.19 Isaac means “he laughs.” It is, to be sure, God’s response to Abraham’s skeptical laughter, but a name which will prove a perpetual reminder of how God did the impossible in bringing Isaac into the world.
- “The laughter of God in the Bible...invariably expresses his reaction to the ludicrous attempts of men to act independently of his will... (Pss. 2:4; 37:13; 59:9).” [Sarna, 127]
- v.21 As we noted in a previous sermon, God was generous to Ishmael, but he did not make his covenant with him. The twelve sons of Ishmael are listed in chapter 25.
- v.27 Stress is being laid on the alacrity and the scrupulosity with which Abraham obeyed the commandments that God had given him. Already here we find the diverse circumstances of the people of the covenant: a community of various ages, stages of life, and of folk who came into the family in different ways. This is the idea featured at Pentecost but on a still larger, grander scale. Both the elect and the non-elect within the covenant receive the sign of the covenant, as they have ever since.
- 18:1 Some of us were a few months ago in this very country, but it was winter and chilly. But for much of the year it is hot! The 19<sup>th</sup> century British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, himself a Jew, said of summer in Jerusalem that it becomes a “city of stone in a land of iron, with a sky of brass.”
- v.2 That is, the men showed up during the mid-day siesta. The three men, as was suggested in 18:1 and will be confirmed in 19:1, were actually the Lord and two angels. “The Lord” in v. 1 is “Yahweh.” What we have here is a theophany, the appearance of God in the form of a man; not yet an incarnation, but an anticipation of the incarnation. “Standing” there waiting is the near eastern equivalent of knocking on the door. [Waltke, 267]

- v.3 The form of the Hebrew word used for “Lord” here (vocative in the plural, *Adonai*, otherwise used only for God) suggests that Abraham at least understood that the three men were no ordinary visitors. [Sarna, 129]
- v.8 A *seah* is two gallons of grain! Abraham is presented here as the “consummate host.” “Something to eat” turns out to be a great banquet. [Waltke, 267] The conventions of near eastern hospitality may seem over-blown to us, but they continue to this day in that part of the world.
- v.12 Sarah must have been a very godly woman. See how she speaks of her husband! Why can’t Florence be like that?! The point is that one who knows Sarah’s thoughts can also open her womb!
- Sarah had the same incredulous reaction as her husband had and also needed a stronger faith. Abraham had either not yet told her of the promise that she would bear a son -- perhaps knowing she wouldn’t believe it -- or had failed to convince her.
- v.15 The Bible never glosses over the failures of its heroes, even those of the matriarch of Israel. [Sarna, 130]

Now, this wonderful text is applied later in the Bible in two very different ways. In Hebrews 13:2 it is referred to as an example of godly hospitality and the reward that attends it. The lavish arrangements made for unexpected visitors, the dropping of everything to welcome them even at a most inconvenient time, the sumptuous banquet passed off as a mere “morsel of bread,” the host standing until the guests had eaten -- all of this is still characteristic of Bedouin hospitality. How entirely appropriate all of this seems to us who know that Abraham was welcoming to his tent and table the Lord himself and two of his angels. But Abraham did not know their true identity until later. Hence the command in Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels *without knowing it*.” Take encouragement from Abraham’s example, brothers and sisters. God loves to reward the hospitable; he will come himself to their homes. But, in a still more important application of this same history, the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:18-22, uses it to illustrate the nature of faith as the instrument by which salvation comes to those God saves. (vv. 18-22):

“In hope he believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ He did not weaken in faith, when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, *fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness.’ But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord...”

In other words, Abraham’s faith in God – even a somewhat tottering faith such as Abraham and Sarah illustrate here -- faith in the face of what seemed a promise impossible of fulfillment, *is a*

*picture of salvation by faith in Christ from sin and death.* That is why Isaac was given to Abraham and Sarah so late in their lives. He could have been given to them when they were much younger, but he was not. God delayed; through decades he delayed to fulfill his promise, *in order that it might be clearly seen that God was doing the impossible, that he was doing what Abraham could never do.* The question the Lord asked Abraham in v. 14, rhetorical as it was -- “Is anything too hard for the Lord” -- is the narrator’s evaluative viewpoint and the burden of this history. *God* can do what *we* cannot. *He* can do what is literally impossible for *us* to do. To put it in the language of the Protestant Reformation, what we are taught here is that salvation is *sola gratia*, by grace alone, which is to say by the gift, the work, and the power of God alone.

Paul is using this history in an entirely appropriate way. Just as impossible as it was for Abraham, at one hundred, to father a child by Sarah, who was ninety and long past menopause, so, by any merely human calculation, it was impossible that Jesus of Nazareth should rise from the dead after being crucified and buried. The birth of Isaac was like the resurrection of Jesus in this fundamental respect: they were both humanly impossible. And so the birth of Isaac is very like our being saved from sin and death. That is humanly impossible as well; something only the Almighty could accomplish. But God has done it and does it today for all who believe that God can raise the dead, the spiritually and the physically dead. This history then, of Abraham and Sarah struggling with doubts, but then believing that God would give them a son in their old age is an enacted prophecy of the way of salvation. *And it is a reminder of what a great and powerful thing true faith really is, even if it is beset by doubts from time to time!*

Now, if this is truly the nature of gospel faith-- to believe that God can and will do what seems to us utterly impossible, then we are better able to see clearly the great problem that now confronts the world, especially the Western world, in connection with the gospel and the Christian faith. Thinking of salvation in these terms -- of a genuinely miraculous outcome only the Almighty could bring to pass -- it is easier to see why it is that so few in our society are embracing Christ and his gospel for themselves and why comparatively few are even interested in thinking about the Christian message of salvation from sin and death.

The great problem, the great impediment, the great obstacle to the advance of the gospel in our culture is *precisely that salvation doesn't strike anyone as impossible anymore; as a promise so stupendous, so unlikely of fulfillment, that we should have to trust Almighty God to do the impossible.* People do not see that the forgiveness of their sins or their reconciliation to God or the hope of eternal life is something as utterly remarkable, as breathtaking as a centenarian and a nonagenarian conceiving a child or as a dead man rising triumphantly to new and everlasting life!

The problem with Christianity, with the Christian faith in our culture, is not that it demands that a person believe that God the Son became a man and lived and died and rose again for man's salvation. The problem -- certainly for most people -- is not that it requires one to believe that Jesus walked on the water, or turned water into wine, or fed 5,000 with a few fish and loaves of bread. The problem is not even that Christ requires of his disciples a life of obedience and service quite contrary to their tastes and inclinations. These are problems, to be sure, but they are not the gospel's great problem, not today, not in the western world.

The real problem, the first and foremost problem confronting Christianity in our day, in this historical moment, in our part of the world, is that, even to get started with the Christian message, one must believe that the salvation it offers is something so stupendous, so utterly beyond our achievement, that only God himself could give it to us. It requires us to believe that the salvation of people like us *is utterly miraculous*; indeed, that it required a whole host of miracles to accomplish it; miracles as great in power and effect as the creation of heaven and earth. If you are never tempted to laugh incredulously as Abraham and Sarah did, *you don't really understand what is being said to you; what promise is actually being made to you; what future is spread out before you, and what had to be done to make all of this possible!*

But that is not how people think nowadays about the Christian message! The impossibility of it, the desperate unlikelihood of it, the divine glory of it has simply disappeared, and the result is that the gospel has been rendered feeble, powerless, and, above all, uninteresting to most people. In an antinomian age such as our own, a permissive age, an age in which it has become a high crime to pass judgment upon the choices people make, it is very hard for anyone, including us, to think of his or her spiritual condition before God as like a very old man and a very old woman who want to have a child of their own. Most people today assume, as a matter of course -- we hear it every day -- that there is nothing particularly amazing about salvation. While they might not put it so baldly to themselves, they would agree at bottom with the famous sentiment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, Heinrich Heine, "Le bon Dieu me pardonnera, c'est son métier." "The Good God will pardon me; it is his job!"

Accordingly, to the modern American, the gospel does not seem to hold out anything much worth their time or attention, much less that they should place their hope and faith in it in defiance of all the obstacles in the way of their belief: the opposition of the culture, the sacrifices they would be required to make, the humility demanded of them before God and man, and so on. They see no reason why to believe that God's favor toward them should be as unlikely as Abraham and Sarah at one hundred and ninety respectively conceiving a child.

The reason for this is that people today do not see themselves in Abraham and Sarah's condition, unable of themselves to do what must be done and absolutely dependent upon the good graces of Almighty God. In our day, in our culture the Christian view of man in sin has long since been abandoned and the result is that the gospel has lost its power to hasten us to God as the only one who can help us, if only he is willing. The good news is a message about God doing what must be done because it is impossible that we should do it. But the modern man asks: What is impossible, what is even unlikely about God being gracious to men such as ourselves? Why should he not be? And, really, why does he need to be? In his *Letters to Malcolm*, C.S. Lewis confides this to his fictional friend:

"...I've been reading Alexander Whyte. ... He was a Presbyterian divine of the last century, whom I'd never heard of. Very well worth reading, and strangely broad-minded -- Dante, Pascal, and even Newman, are among his heroes. But I mention him at the moment for a different reason. He brought me violently face to face with a characteristic of Puritanism which I had almost forgotten. For him, one essential symptom of the regenerate life is a permanent, and permanently horrified, perception of one's natural and (it seems)

unalterable corruption. The true Christian's nostril is to be continually attentive to the inner cesspool." [97-98]

I mention that for several reasons. I am a great admirer of C.S. Lewis and am glad to know he was an admirer of Alexander Whyte, for whom I have an even greater admiration. It is always gratifying when one's heroes admire one another! It vindicates my own admiration for them. Further, Lewis, critical reader that he was, immediately captured the very essence of Whyte's preaching: the reality, the ferocity, the tenacity, the abomination, and the ugliness of sin leading to a tenacious concentration on Jesus Christ as the only possible savior of sinners like ourselves. But in reading those words I was also reminded of what Lewis was probably unaware: that by the end of his ministry, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Whyte's refusal to relax his emphasis on the desperate nature of the human condition was the reason for the decline in his popularity as a preacher. People didn't want to hear that message any longer. *And in our day, a century later when the seeds of that disinterest have now come to full flower, they are long past being interested in hearing that message at all!*

Modern western men and women have been taught, and they have been most willing pupils, that man is basically good and that if he is not good his badness is as much the fault of others as his own, and, in any case, his failure is not so much moral as natural. And so human sinfulness is not regarded as a weight so heavy that man cannot lift it, an obstacle so high and wide that he cannot get past it, or a trap so powerful he cannot escape it. Whatever needs to be done, he can do it himself. And if not, few care, least of all God! Whatever needs to be done will be done. As C.S. Lewis and many others have pointed out, the era of democracy has greatly strengthened this way of thinking.

"Proletarianism, in its various forms ranging from strict Marxism to vague 'democracy'... [is] self-satisfied to a degree perhaps beyond the self-satisfaction of any recorded aristocracy. They are convinced that whatever may be wrong with the world it cannot be themselves. Someone else must be to blame for every evil." [*Present Concerns*, 64-65]

Consequently, it does not seem absurd at all to the modern mind to believe that God will deal kindly or look with favor upon him. Of course he shall. What is there for God to dislike? Why should he not receive me? It would be unfair of him not to. And so he does not laugh in unbelief like Abraham; she does not bitterly and hopelessly give vent to her skepticism as Sarah did because the thing she longs for and God has promised is simply impossible to believe possible. *Come on, be honest. Do you think of yourself as someone impossible to be saved apart from the stupendous achievement of Almighty God, moving heaven and earth to deliver you from yourself? do so?* Even if you know it is so, how often do you actually feel that it is so? We breathe our culture's self-satisfaction and moral complacency like air and drink it like water.

But is this self-satisfaction reasonable and defensible, or is it actually utterly absurd; a kind of sick, though willing delusion? There are various ways to address this question, but I'm going to address it differently this morning than I might otherwise have done and I have done often in the past. I listened to a sermon of my son-in-law's, a sermon he preached several weeks ago on Good Friday, and I am shamelessly going to steal (let's make it "borrow") his approach and the illustration he used with which to make his point. We could talk about sin and about how many sins we are

always committing and how we pile up sin upon sin day after day, month after month, and year after year. I could hunt out, it's really quite easy to do, all the excuses and mitigations we offer for our sins and demonstrate how pathetic they really are. I could describe the sort of damage our sins do, to ourselves and others. I could talk about our utter failure to live the far higher life that our own consciences tell us we were made to live. It is not hard to prove how comprehensive is our moral failure and I have often given you the evidence of it.

But I think for a modern audience, this may be a more effective approach.

Some of you, I know, have been to St. Peter's in Rome and as you entered the church have stood on the near right side, in a small chapel off the nave, admiring in wonder Michelangelo's *Pieta*. It is, as you know, a marble sculpture of Mary, the mother of Jesus, with her now dead son draped over her lap. It is an astonishing performance of a true genius. It is a masterpiece of design. Though it appears to the eye so beautifully natural, the figures are actually all out of proportion, owing to the difficulty of depicting a fully-grown man cradled full-length in a woman's lap. If stone can be made to look life-like, it is so in this great work. The emotion on Mary's face, the folds of her dress, her right hand under his arm pulling up his flesh, his rib cage and his abdominal muscles, his foot hanging in mid-air. Marble has become cloth and flesh. *It shimmers!* The total effect, the appearance of the corpse, the delicate but powerful emotion of the entire scene is simply wondrous!

But you can't see it as well as once you could. On May 21, 1972, Pentecost Sunday as it happened, a mentally disturbed man named Lazlo Toth walked into the church and attacked the sculpture with a geologist's hammer. With fifteen blows he removed Mary's arm at the elbow, knocked off a chunk of her nose, and chipped one of her eyelids. To make matters worse, onlookers took many of the pieces of marble that flew off the sculpture. Later, some pieces were returned, but many were not, including Mary's nose, which had to be reconstructed from a block cut out of her back. From a distance there is no obvious evidence of the restoration. The sculpture is as beautiful as ever, but tourists now must look at it through a bullet-proof thickness of acrylic glass.

It is this picture of something of incalculable beauty being ruined with by a man wielding a hammer that is such a perfect picture of human life in this world. God made this world and he made us for this world. He made it all perfect, and good, and beautiful; everything in its proper proportion, everything shimmering. He made the world worthy to be loved and made us to be lovers of it and of all it contains. He gave us great powers to use in serving him and one another, in which service he intended that we would find immense satisfaction and perpetual delight. It was all so surpassingly beautiful at first!

And what have we done with this beautiful world and this beautiful life? At best we have turned it into something petty and unworthy. More often we have actually ruined it and defaced it. The love that we were made to fill this world with and to bless others with, the goodness we were to share generously with others, we have either kept to ourselves most of the time or have squandered until we have nothing left to share. This world and our own lives are the *Pieta* with the chips constantly being hammered out of it, with the arm broken off, Mary's missing nose, with the pieces being guiltily spirited out of the church in our pockets, and with the hammer

blows still ringing in the great nave of God's sanctuary. *That is human life in sin: the taking of something very great and making it small; something extraordinarily beautiful and making it ugly; something able to fulfill the longings of the heart and making it instead a bitter disappointment!* That is human life in this world. It is your life and it is mine and it is the life of everyone else. Day after day and year after year we chip away at the shimmering beauty God made, sometimes a whole arm, more often a chip here or a chip there. And sometimes we stoop so low as to pick up the chips that others have knocked off, slide them into our pocket, and steal them away to make sure they'll never be put back on the statute. How appallingly different this world is from what we know it ought to be. How different our lives from what they might have been and should have been. I can say this confidently because everyone looking over the world sees the ugliness everywhere they look and if they would only be honest with themselves they would see the same ugliness in themselves.

It is not the way people think about their lives, to be sure, but it is not very difficult to demonstrate that this is the way they *ought to think about them*. So, instead of thinking about how many times we and everyone else breaks the commandments of God – a useful measure of our moral condition true enough – think instead of how we have marred the beauty that God made. Hammering away day by day at the beautiful and the good and the perfect, destroying what God has made, marring it, defacing it. *That is our problem and it is as intractable as the problem of a hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman, long years past Sarah's menopause, who want to conceive a child.*

Martin Luther complained that in his day man approached God "as if He were a shoe-clerk's [maker's] apprentice." And today men are doing that again. There is no reverence for God because there is no real sense of the weight and the danger of human sin in God's world. Speaking of faith in God, the subject of our text this morning, the *Augsburg Confession* wisely and beautifully put it: "This whole doctrine must be related to that conflict of terrified conscience, and without that conflict it cannot be understood." [Art. XX] And that is the conflict of conscience that is missing in the modern west.

What western man suffers under today is the tyranny of the ordinary. Life goes on in all of its ugliness, small and great; he is used to it. He is subject to relentless propaganda, reinforcing his own happy illusions; he is never made to face facts about himself, about his life, about his relationship to his Maker. He blithely assumes that all is well, though he has the evidence of his own pervasive moral failure before his eyes every day as well as the moral failure of the world (which he is quick to judge and condemn), and with it the evidence of God's displeasure and judgment. There is a false peace that has taken hold of the human heart in our time, a brutish and dishonest ignorance of God and of his holiness and of our persistent rejection of that holiness, a blithe unconcern regarding the difference between what is and what ought to be.

And the contemporary church is contributing its share to this false peace, by its fear to offend, and by its failure to proclaim the utter impossibility of a sinner's salvation apart from the miracle of grace that only God can perform! Years ago, shortly after the days of Alexander Whyte, the great Presbyterian scholar and churchman, J. Gresham Machen, saw this clearly -- this effort to take the amazing, the impossible out of Christianity.

"The fundamental fault of the modern church," he wrote, "is that it is busily engaged in an absolutely impossible task calling the righteous to repentance. Modern preachers are trying to bring men into the church without requiring them to relinquish their pride; they are trying to help men avoid the conviction of sin... But it is entirely futile. Even our Lord did not call the righteous to repentance, and probably we shall be no more successful than he." [Christianity and Liberalism.]

God does not ask you to believe in something that anyone and everyone accepts as true, that everyone finds easy to believe. He asks you to believe both that you are helpless and that he alone can help you: that he alone can lift that mountain of guilt that is now flattening your soul against the ground and that he alone can take out of you that love of sinning which dominates your heart and life. The kingdom of God, Abraham and Sarah illustrate, the rest of the Bible teaches, and all human history confirms, is not for the well-meaning, it is for the desperate! We hear the bell-like tone of true faith in that wistful laughter of Abraham and Sarah who can scarcely believe that even God could do make such a thing come to pass! *But he did and does still today!*