

“Cynicism Confronted”
Genesis 18:1-15
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READ Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ²

Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³ He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.

⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.” “Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.” ⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” ⁷

Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. ⁹ “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There, in the tent,” he said. ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” ¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.” ¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.” But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

There are two attitudes that can too easily creep into our everyday thinking. They can begin to overwhelm our outlook on life. They can even begin to erode our relationship with God. Those two attitudes are skepticism and cynicism. Now I know some of you doubt anything good can come from such a discussion and others of you couldn't care less (pun intended!).

Too early in our lives our disappointments made us wonder if there were any guarantees. As young children our mothers taught us to pray that our "owies" (our minor injuries) would go away and they did but then we prayed that our grandfather wouldn't die and he died anyway. As we grew older we noticed with greater frequency that things didn't go the way we wanted them to in spite our wishes and prayers. Skepticism began to take root and increasingly we doubted that God was actively involved in our lives. Stories of answered prayer were always about others and we doubted them anyway – always trying to find a rational explanation. As disappointments in life mounted, the skepticism matured into cynicism – an emotionless absence of expectation. We no longer even expected God to be at work in our lives and when it was suggested that he was, we scoffed.

There's an old English word for this attitude – it is the word "accidie or acedia." That is a one-word description of an attitude, a life, which has become dead toward God's grace. It is the life lived with no anticipation, no excitement, no looking forward with eagerness, no promise, no hope – just a dull "take what comes", "expect no more", fatalism. Cynics live in a cold, lonely and unproductive world. And a "Christian cynic" is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. A Christ-follower cannot remain a cynic. I do **not** mean that a Christian can't become cynical, but I do mean they should not remain that way. I do mean that God desires to intervene in the lives, the thinking, of cynics. And what we are going to see today is how God does that – how he graciously intervenes in the life of a skeptic maybe even a cynic.

In the book of Genesis we are told the story of Abraham. But today I most of all want you to think about that remarkable woman to whom he was married – Sarah. She had moved with him some 600 miles from the city of Ur to the city of Haran. Then she left her family and set out with him for places unknown – not even sure when they left

where they were going. She pretended to be his sister, at his insistence, in order to save his life. She had lived with him and stood by him for the 24 years since they had been promised a homeland and a large family. In those years we have seen Abraham's faith developing BUT what about Sarah's faith? What was happening to Sarah?

The last time we heard directly from Sarah was in chapter 16 when she invited Abraham to have a child by her servant woman, Hagar. And Sarah's comments steeped in bitterness were these: "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." That is not the strongest statement of faith that could have been uttered. Between that experience and the one before us today, God came to Abraham again and reiterated his promise that Abraham would inherit a homeland and that he would have a large family. And specifically God promised Abraham that **Sarah**, his 90 year old wife, **would be** the mother of that large family. But when we come to the incident in chapter 18 we don't find there has been much movement in the heart, the faith, of Sarah.

Let me remind you of what happens. It's a rather interesting, short, story with a lot of local color. There are some humorous spots mainly because of the surprises. And the point of the passage seems to fairly jump out at us – a point that Moses, the author of Genesis, would have wanted his followers to believe, and certainly one we must believe today.

Apparently not long after God appeared to Abraham in chapter 17, where God asked Abraham to circumcise himself, his son Ishmael and all the males in his employment, Abraham was sitting by his tent in the hottest part of the day. Things had gotten back to normal. And normal meant that a siesta was called for. Whether Abraham dozed off or was just sitting there daydreaming, we don't know, but at one point when he looked up he saw three men standing nearby. They clearly caught Abraham's attention. He jumped up and hurried over to them. They were doing what middle-easterners did – they didn't approach Abraham's tent too closely – they waited a short distance away and waited to be approached.

Well, Abraham didn't disappoint them, he hurried to them and with a typical flowery greeting, that sounds syrupy sweet to us, he invited them to stay. He bowed and said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way – now that you have come to your servant." Today we might say, "Come on in, sit down and relax, make yourself at home. I'll find us something to drink and just a little something to eat. Oh, it's no bother. I'm glad you've come." And they responded with, "Very well, do as you say"- like our, "Well, if you insist."

As Moses retells the story, he tells **us** something that Abraham, at this point in the story, didn't yet know. We have been told in verse 1 that this was the Lord who came to Abraham. Later in the chapter we are told that two of the men separate from the third and travel on to the city of Sodom and there they are identified as angels. This third man then was a manifestation of God himself. God entered into Abraham's and, most importantly, Sarah's lives, to graciously correct her cynicism. But even though Abraham didn't know it was the Lord himself, he must have suspected these were not the usual way-faring, drop-in guests. I say he must have suspected something, for two reasons. First of all, the author places a great deal of emphasis on the motion in the scene. Everything that happens is in a hurry. Abraham **hurried** into the tent and told Sarah to **quickly** make bread. Abraham **ran** out to the herd of cattle nearby and selected a calf to butcher and cook. His servant **hurried** to prepare it. At the same time, the guests are seated quietly under a tree.

You get the picture of an "I love Lucy" comedy where out front everything is moving slowly and serenely but behind the scenes there is this great commotion. Abraham walks slowly away from his guests and then runs like mad to get everything going, only to walk slowly back into the presence of his guests.

Not only does the excitement give a clue that Abraham suspects these are unusual guests but **the size of the meal** he serves is the other clue. He had Sarah make up 5 gallons of dough and that from the finest flour. He had his servant prepare not a lamb or a goat but a much more expensive and special veal. He had said he was going to

get them a little something to eat and what he served was the very best he had and a lot of it – a meal fit for a king. And in typical oriental fashion, as they ate, he stood nearby.

When the meal was over they began their business with a question. The question itself must have startled Abraham. “Where is your wife Sarah?” How did they know her name - her new name at that? Certainly this is no usual guest. And the next statement from the man confirmed it. He said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” What Abraham had suspected was true – This was God in Abraham’s home. God was present right there with them.

Now the storyteller gives us, what to me, is another rather humorous aside – while Abraham and the man were talking, where was Sarah? The man talking had his back to the tent entrance and Sarah, inside the tent, was right behind the tent-flap, listening. You can picture her with her ear up to the tent wall, straining to hear each word.

Now to make the point that he wishes to emphasize, the author interjects at this point a reminder for us. He stops the flow of the story to remind us that both Abraham and Sarah were old, very old he emphasizes and to make matters more difficult, Sarah was past the age of childbearing – she was past menopause. This, of course, was in addition to the fact that she never could have children, even when she was younger, because she was barren.

Now with that in mind, hear again what the man said: “I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.” It is at this point in the story we are told about Sarah’s cynicism. Again, remember the picture – Sarah, inside the tent, probably with her ear to the tent-flap, is straining to hear and she does. And when she hears those words, she laughs to herself and she thinks this thought: “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Sarah’s thoughts are bitter. Her laugh was cynical. “Humph, it could never happen!” There doesn’t appear to be an ounce of anticipation, of hope, of kindled excitement for the possibility. She has long since given up on surprises from God. In her thinking, the miraculous doesn’t happen. In spite of God’s provision in so many ways, some extraordinary, (like when the Pharaoh let her

and Abraham leave Egypt with their wealth even after they had both lied to him) she had given up on God. God spoke to her in her own home and she laughed at God.

We are asked to believe the humanly impossible. Have we grown skeptical or even cynical? God promised that if we confess our sin he will forgive us – do we believe him or do we in essence laugh at his word and consider ourselves still needing to make up for what he promised he would simply forgive? God promises that those who trust in Christ will have eternal life – will live even though we die – and yet we, in essence, laugh at his word and consider this life all there is and live like it. God promises that he is with us here, now, every minute of every day, in the person of his Spirit - and yet we, in essence, laugh at his word and act as if we are alone, wondering where God is. God promises to control all the circumstances of our lives to bring about our good, never to break us but to make us, and yet, in essence, we laugh at his word thinking that we are on our own when the hard times come. God promises to build his kingdom through us and yet, in essence, we laugh at his word when we have no expectation that he will use us to accomplish his purposes.

Imagine Sarah, like us, laughing at God. God had spoken to her, promising again that she would have a son and she laughed. And it was the laugh of cynicism. “Sure it will, I’ve heard that before!”

I am so grateful **God didn’t give up on Sarah** right then and there. Instead, he **demonstrated** something **and** he **reminded** Sarah of something that could turn her cynicism to faith. What did the Lord demonstrate to Sarah? After Sarah laughs to herself and thinks her cynical thoughts what does the Lord say? “The Lord said to Abraham (but for Sarah to hear), ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’” It was surprising enough that this man knew her name, even her new name – but like any good skeptic, that could be explained – someone must have told him. It was also surprising that he would know the promise that had been made to Abraham but that too could be explained. But Sarah had laughed how? - “to herself” – there was no sound. Sarah had only thought her thoughts – she had said nothing aloud. “How could this man possibly have known that I laughed and what I thought?” “There is only one

explanation possible – this is the all-knowing Lord who is outside my tent talking to my husband, Abraham.

Even cynicism gives way, when the impossible happens. For Sarah, God demonstrated the impossible – he knew her very thoughts. Not only did he demonstrate his omniscience but he also reminded her of his power. The next statement, I believe, is the focus of the passage – “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” It is as if the Lord said to Sarah, “Remember what you know to be true – I am the Lord who created the heavens and the earth, I am the Lord who flooded the earth and saved Noah and his family, I am the Lord who delivered you from Egypt, I am the Lord who brought your husband back to you when he attacked five, more powerful, kings from the east, I am the Lord who sits before you today and promises you again, “I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.” “I am that Lord, Sarah, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” “Is it truly impossible for you to have a child – when I say it will happen? To that Sarah lies and says, “I didn’t laugh.” But the Lord said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

The author tells us Sarah was afraid. Rightly so! Imagine such a thing happening to you. In her fear of the Lord, who is right outside her tent, she denies she had been cynical – who wouldn’t? Who wants to tell the Lord what he can’t do?

But again the Lord is gracious – he doesn’t let her off the hook. He lets her know that his statement wasn’t a lucky guess – he truly is the Lord, the one who knows her very thoughts, the one who is all powerful. He is the one she is to trust. Does she? A year later 90 year old Sarah had a son – the son of promise – Isaac. Sarah was essential to God’s plan and God did not leave her behind. He graciously intervened in her life and gave her even more reason to believe.

Our cynicism too will give way when we are taken back to the truth. It is when we forget **who** we are talking about that we become skeptical and cynical. Our faith is not in some lesser being that might fail. Our faith is not in ourselves knowing we will fail. Our faith is in the living Lord – the one for whom nothing is too hard!

Cynicism fades when we focus our attention on the God who has promised. In the person of his Spirit, He is present with you here today and tomorrow. He is the God who knows everything, even your thoughts. He is the God for whom nothing is impossible. It is in his care and guidance you live each day – He can be trusted.

Cynicism laughs at God and lives a fatalistic life. Faith believes God and lives an expectant life of God-like possibilities. What about you? Are you a cynic or a believer?