



This morning we will read about the birth of the long promised son, Isaac. As you probably know, Isaac means *laughter* because Sarah laughed when the Lord announced his promised coming. Isaac is one of those rare names in the Bible who is named for the event surrounding his birth, but is still a nice name. But how would you like to be named after one of Isaiah's son? His name was Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, which means, "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil." How would you like to call him in for dinner? Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, it's time to eat. Come in and wash your hands!" Or how about Rachel's last son who she named Ben-Oni just before she died after giving birth to him. His name means "son of my trouble." That would be a depressing name to go through life with, don't you think? Thankfully, Jacob did not like that name and changed it to Benjamin—"son of my right hand." If Karen and I had named our kids after the circumstances surrounding their births, Ryan would have been named "Chocolate Donut" because I ate a chocolate donut *while* Karen was in labor. Kellyn would have been called "Reuben," a good Old Testament name, because that is what Karen ate just *before* she went into labor. And Ethan would have earned the name "Hurry Up," because we barely made it to the hospital before labor was *finished* and he was born. My three children—Chocolate Donut, Reuben and Hurry Up. You can make that into an actual sentence: Reuben, hurry up and eat your chocolate donut!

Though the son of the promise was named laughter and though there really was the laughter of joy and amazement at his birth, it was not long before it led to more sin, selfishness and sadness.

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. ² Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. ⁴ When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

⁶ Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." ⁷ And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

⁸ The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.

⁹ But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, ¹⁰

and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. ¹² But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. ¹³ I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”

This chapter begins with a line of Hebrew poetry. It can be seen more clearly in the ESV.

*The Lord visited Sarah as he had said,
and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.*

Hebrew poetry is not the kind we are used to that contains rhyme and alliteration. Like verses 1-2, much of the Psalms has this kind of Hebrew poetry called parallelism. In verse one, first line presents a thought and the second line contains a parallel thought. The next time you read the Psalms or other poetic sections, keep an eye out for parallelism. You will start to see it everywhere. This type of poetry is helpful because the thought is repeated for the sake of emphasis and beauty. If you are like me, I read some poetry and get done and think, “Now what in the world did that mean?” Can you relate to this? But with Hebrew parallelism, if you don’t understand the meaning the first time, the parallel thought will say it a slightly different way or else fill in the missing information. Verse one actually has four parts to it. The first phrase has a Part A and a Part B and the second phrase of verse one repeats and is parallel to the first phrase. Each line of Part A is parallel in thought to each other, likewise, each line of Part B is parallel in thought. In case those two phrases were not completely clear, verse two also has a Part A and a Part B. It repeats the same thought and fills in the details.

PART A

PART B

verse one

The Lord visited Sarah..... as he had said

and the Lord did to Sarah..... as he had promised.

verse two

*Sarah became pregnant and bore
a son to Abraham in his old age,*

*at the very time God
had promised him.*

The ESV and the King James both have a more literal translation—*The Lord visited Sarah*. Again, I realize that this is poetic language, but the poetry is describing an actual occurrence.

Let me stop and insert a side note here. I want to show you how this Hebrew poetry applies to the days of creation in Genesis chapter one. As you know, huge numbers of born again believers do not hold to a literal six-day creation in Genesis one. We allow for freedom of belief on this issue at our church. You don’t even have to believe it in order to be a member, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t attempt to convince you. Ever since the advent of Darwinian evolution, for the past 150 years, Christians have been presenting one theory after another as proof that God did not create in six literal days. You have probably heard of the Gap Theory or the Day Age theory or some similar theory. For example, the Gap Theory states that there is a *gap* of billions of years in between the first and second verses of Genesis one. All of them have one thing in common—

they attempt to fit billions of years into the six days of creation. The Gap Theory became popular when Scofield included it in the notes of his famous study Bible. Therefore, these theories have become widely circulated and widely believed.

But now, 100-150 years later, nearly everyone has abandoned speculations like the Gap Theory for two reasons. For one, they finally realize that the theory does not hold water. In a word, it has been debunked, but the other reason they have abandoned these theories is because they think they have found something better. The vast majority of Christians who reject these old theories now hold to what is called the Literary Framework theory. All you need to know about this theory is that it dependent upon seeing the Hebrew poetic device of parallelism in chapter one. We can clearly see this parallelism in verses one and two of chapter twenty one but the people who hold to the Framework theory also see it in chapter one. It is actually very debatable whether there is discernible parallelism in chapter one, but even if there is, the fatal flaw in the theory goes like this: since Genesis one is poetry and since poetry is not the same thing as history, therefore, Genesis one is not describing a literal, historical event. Viola! Do you see how easily they dismiss the six days of creation? If we put their main argument into a logical syllogism, it would look like this.

A: since Genesis one is poetry

B: and since poetry is not the same thing as history,

C: therefore, Genesis one is not describing a literal, historical event.

In a syllogism like this one, both A and B must be true in order for C to also be true. However, if it can be shown that either A or B is not true, then it follows that C is not true. Let's take a few moments and see what we can do with this. We don't have time to delve into it this morning, but believe me when I say that point A is highly debatable. There may be Hebrew parallelism in chapter one or there may not be, but for the sake of argument, let's give them this one and assume that A is true. However, this syllogism immediately breaks down in B because we have just shown that poetry and precise history are not mutually exclusive. Verses one and two of chapter twenty one are obviously describing an historical event, right? Not only is it describing an historical event, it is very precise about the time. We know that the Lord had promised to return and visit Sarah again in a year and he did exactly as he said he would. If the Lord did not fulfill his promise in the exact way he said that he would, then he is not faithful and trustworthy and our faith is futile. Do you see our conclusion here? These two verses describe a literal, historical event but they are also a prime example of Hebrew parallelism. Therefore, it is not always true that poetry and history are not exactly the same thing. Point B is false and therefore C is false.¹

Now please understand that among evangelical Christians, the Framework Theory is far and away the most popular theory that attempts to disprove a literal, six-day creation. In fact, if you send your children to a Christian college, I can almost guarantee that this is what they will be taught. When I refer to a Christian college, I don't mean a school that used to be Christian or one is loosely affiliated with a mainline denomination, I mean genuine, evangelical schools that are otherwise conservative and hold to a high view of Scriptural authority and inspiration. It is very rare to find an evangelical Christian college that teaches a literal six-day creation. You would be even less likely to find a seminary that does not teach the Framework theory. I was taught of

form of this theory in the early 90's and one of the chief proponents of the Framework theory has been teaching at the school for almost twenty years. I am not suggesting that you *not* send your children to these schools, but you should be fully aware of what they will be taught when they get there.

With that side note completed, let's get back to Sarah and Isaac. The Lord had literally visited Sarah one year earlier and had promised that in a year Sarah would bear a son. Sarah was standing just outside the tent when the Lord delivered the promise to Abraham. And how had Sarah responded to this awesome promise? She had laughed. She laughed in derision and unbelief. She scoffed at the promise in much the same way that people laugh or scoff at our faith. Have you ever gotten one of these condescending looks from someone who does not share your faith? Maybe it happens when you told a story about answered prayer or dependence on the Lord to an unsaved family member or friend. The other person doesn't come right out and mock your faith, but instead they give you one of those looks—it's a condescending look with a wry smile that pats you on the head and says to you, "Oh, that's nice, little boy. I'm glad you are having a good time with your imaginary friend called God. Now run along and play."

Have you ever received one of *those* kinds of looks? I know I have, and it's very similar to the way that Sarah initially responded to the Lord's promise. Of course she had wanted a son. Every ounce of her being, every motherly instinct within her cried out for this promise to be true but her reaction to the Lord's visit and the Lord's promise was one of silent derision and unbelief. But amazingly, Sarah would have a complete change of heart. As Hebrews 11:11 says, *She considered him faithful who had made the promise*. At what point did she turn her derision into delight? Exactly when did she transition from faithlessness to faithfulness? We are not told when it happened, just that it happened. Maybe she didn't really see the faithfulness of God until she knew she was pregnant. Perhaps it took until Isaac gave his first kick from within the womb, but at some point she moved from unbelief to faith.

The writer wants us to understand that it happened in exactly the way that God had promised—*at the very time God had promised him*. For twenty five years God had been promising to make Abraham into a great nation. Abraham and Sarah knew that they were going to have children but they didn't know how it was going to happen. Ten years into the promise God assured them that the child would come from Abraham's own body (chapter 15). Then Sarah proceeded to take matters into her own hands and speed up the promise by giving Hagar to Abraham as a second wife. As you know, that created quite a mess of things. It wasn't until the 24th year of the promise that it became very specific. *I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son* (Ge 18:10). Now the Lord not only fulfilled his promise to give Sarah a son, he also "visited" her a second time and at the very time he had promised.

This illustrates the title of the message—what God promises, God provides. God will never make a promise without also providing the means to fulfill the promise and the guarantee of final fulfillment. Have you ever thought about all that had to happen in order for this promise to be fulfilled? After all, why did Sarah laugh? She knew that she was well beyond the age of childbearing. In Ge 18:12 she said to herself, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Her body was literally worn out and God had to perform a whole series of miracles in order to fulfill his promise.

First, the Lord had to change Sarah's shriveled up and worn out eggs into new and healthy eggs. Sarah may have been 89 years when she conceived, but she had the eggs of a twenty year old woman. Second, God had to renew her ovaries, fallopian tubes and uterus so that they could release the egg, and then transport and contain the fertilized egg. Without this vital step, having healthy eggs is meaningless because conception would still be impossible. Third, the Lord had to restart all of her female hormones so that conception and growth would occur. The biochemistry of her body went through a complete renewal. Fourth, she was given the strength and energy of a much younger woman. The Lord also had to completely alter the way her body should have responded to pregnancy, and especially childbirth. The Lord increased her cardiac output because giving birth would have been far too much stress on a 90 year old heart. The Lord changed the way her platelets and clotting factor would function because even a young, healthy mother can bleed to death during childbirth, as Rachel did with Benjamin. Without this supernatural step of intervention, Sarah would have surely died during childbirth. The Lord also dramatically increased the elasticity of Sarah's skin, muscles, tendons and ligaments so that Isaac could be born. Isaac was certainly not born by C-section. Finally, the Lord had to restart her lactation hormones so that she could nurse her newborn son.

You are surely more creative than me and could fill in more missing details in this miracle, but the point is that it was a multi-faceted miracle of astounding proportions. Sarah laughed again at the birth of Isaac, but this time it was a very different kind of laughter. Verse six: *God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.* Sarah laughed from unbelief at the promise of a son but after he was born she laughed out of joy and praise. Not only did she laugh, and not only was her son named "Laughter," she knew that others would laugh with her. For the hundreds of people in her household and for the hundreds of millions who have read about it since, this is a miracle of laughter, joy and praise, and it reminds us that ***what God promises, God provides.*** He will always give the provision to fulfill the promise. He will always equip the believer in order to fulfill the call.

This week I was talking with someone who is considering going into missions, but the person was unsure since they were not comfortable speaking in front of others. I reminded this person that not all missionaries will be required to do public speaking. On the other hand, if God calls this person to missions and it does require public speaking, God will equip them to do it.

This reminds me about a meeting we are holding tonight to discuss the future direction of ministry at our church. The outcome of this meeting has the potential to radically change the way we do church, to alter the way we do evangelism, discipleship, service and leadership at our church. I don't want to say too much at this stage, but I covet your prayers for the meeting. First we have to decide if we think that God is clearly leading in this direction. We need to be clear and unified that this is the right direction to go, to know that God is calling us. And then, if God is calling, we need to believe that he will equip us to fulfill the calling.

Sarah and others laughed with joy at the birth of Isaac, but not everyone was happy with the son of promise. As one commentator described it, "The source of one person's joy can prove the cause of another person's jealousy."² On the day of celebrating his being weaned, Hagar's son Ishmael was mocking the little boy Isaac. The book of Galatians says that Ishmael was

persecuting Isaac. My best guess is that Ishmael learned this behavior from his mother. After all, Sarah and Hagar were not exactly soul mates, were they? They were not each others' BFF—Best Friend Forever. When Hagar first became pregnant she despised Sarah. Then Sarah got angry and abused Hagar so severely that she had to run for her life. Next, the bickering, catty mothers dragged their innocent children into the fight. That is always a sure sign of personal weakness when you have to use your children to build up your own self-esteem. We can all be guilty of this at times and it can be difficult to distinguish between enjoying our children's success and living vicariously through them. The first is normal and the second is twisted.

Sarah was so angry that she demanded that Abraham “get rid of that slave woman and her son.” She was so mad she couldn't even use their names. The ESV says that she wanted Abraham to “cast out” the woman and her son. This is the same verb used in chapter three when the Lord drove Adam and Eve from the garden. It is the exact same word used to describe Cain's banishment from the land. When God did it, it was a matter of justice, but when Sarah demanded it, it was a mark of revenge. It was a harsh and bitter demand from an angry mother. Notice the reason she gave for her banishment: *for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac*. Sarah was right about this—Ishmael would not share in the inheritance. We could say that Sarah was “speaking the truth in hate.” Her words were true but her attitude was spiteful. Maybe we don't speak the truth with quite this much hate, but we often do it with not enough love. In what ways do we speak words of truth in an unloving manner?

Sarah did speak the truth—Ishmael was not to be the son of their inheritance—but even this could well have been a form of justification for her incredibly sinful attitude. Can you see how she used God's promise to justify sending Ishmael away? It obviously wasn't the Lord's will for Ishmael to inherit Abraham's estate, therefore, what did it matter if she sent them away. Furthermore, Sarah probably knew that Ishmael was going to be blessed by the Lord. I am not referring to the Lord's assurance in verses 12-13, but what happened back in chapter sixteen. When Hagar was pregnant and ran away from Sarah, she encountered the angel of the Lord in the desert. The angel reassured told her to go back and to submit to Sarah. The angel also told her that the son she was carrying would be named Ishmael. Abraham was the one who gave him the name Ishmael, but how did he choose this name? The most likely explanation is that Hagar told Abraham the story of the angel's visit. Therefore, Sarah could have used this knowledge to justify her actions. Ishmael was not the chosen son, and furthermore, God promised to bless him, so even if they were sent away, they would not die in the desert. A third justification could have been her protective instincts as a mother. Moms take care of their children, right? Ishmael was persecuting Isaac, correct? Therefore, the “Godly” thing to do was to protect Isaac by sending Ishmael away, and since Hagar was his mother, she would also have to go. Finally, she could have reasoned that since Hagar was a household servant, if she and her son were to be sent away, it would be like freeing two slaves. In all of these things, Sarah was using God's word to justify her sinful actions.

In what ways do we use Scripture to justify our sinful actions? Here's a scenario I have heard numerous times. For example, let's say someone wants to get a divorce but there is nothing close to Biblical grounds for the divorce. The husband or wife is just not happy or not “fulfilled” in their marriage. Many will justify the divorce by saying one of two things: God will forgive me OR God wants me to be happy, right? The first excuse presumes upon God's mercy and shows a

total lack of regard for God's holiness. The second excuse turns God into a type of fairy godmother, where he waves his magic wand and turns a pumpkin into a magical stagecoach so you can escape from your unhappy marriage. Both excuses use Scripture or some twisted idea from Scripture to justify their actions. We all justify our sins every day—every day. But the only thing worse than justifying our sins is when we justify them with a thin veneer of righteousness, or when we use Scripture to prove why it was OK to disobey Scripture. If I can tell myself that I am taking the moral or biblical high road, then at least in my own mind, I am justified. Just think about that word—justify. We take a wonderful word that is the foundation of our restored relationship with God and turn it into a tool for doing evil. If I can justify my sin, I will appear righteous and blameless. But that is exactly what Biblical justification means—that we are righteous and blameless because of the work of Christ on the cross. Do you see what we are doing? But we take a powerful term of salvation—justification—and twist its meaning to justify our sin.

How did Sarah go from laughter of derision to laughter and joy of great faith, and then fall back into this awful sin? I think this has to be the low point in Sarah's life. She has what she has been praying, hoping and too often conniving for—her son of promise. She is an exceedingly wealthy woman who was still drop dead gorgeous when she was 65 years old, so she probably looks pretty good at 90. She has all of the blessings a wife and mother could wish for, but she still begged for “the slave woman and her son” to be driven into the desert like two wild animals. How did she fall so far so fast?

This is the universal question about sin, and no one here is exempt from such a drastic fall. Ironically, the source of her jealousy and anger was also the source of her salvation—her own son. Her son was also the seed of Abraham, the son of promise that would lead to Christ. Remember that God chose Abraham and Sarah to be parents of Isaac for the same reason he chose Joseph and Mary. Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for their son to be born. That's a long time to wait, especially when you are 75 years old when the waiting begins. The world waited 2000 more years for our Savior to be born and we have been waiting another 2000 years for his return. No matter how you fell this week, whether you spoke too harshly with your children, whether you failed to speak the truth in love, or maybe you just failed to speak the truth, or even if you are covering up enormous sin in your life, the answer is the same in every case, you need Christ. You need to see yourself justified by Christ alone and not by some flimsy excuse you are telling yourself. He is our savior and he is coming again. He has promised us that he will, and what God promises, God provides.

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¹ I freely admit that I have oversimplified the Literary Framework Theory here. However, I think that I have accurately portrayed the crux of the theory and sufficiently refuted the main premise. For more information on the Literary Framework theory, see Tim Chaffey's book, *God Means What He Says: A Biblical Critique of the Framework Hypothesis*, © 2008 by Tim Chaffey

² Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Genesis 16-50*, Thomas Nelson, ©1994, p. 87.