

## God promised. God delivered. Sarah delivered.

In the name of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not, brothers and sisters in Christ.

I felt like I had been lied to, like a promise that had been made to me, was being broken over and over again. I was cold and alone and I desperately needed what was promised to come true. I watched and I waited, hoping, longing, expecting the promise to come true. Each time it seemed to fail was ever more demoralizing. Finally, I reached the point of disdain for the promise. I saw it repeated again, a third, a fourth time, and with each time my cynicism only grew. I had reached the point where I was no longer *expecting* what was promised to actually come true. Hope was lost, as was my faith in the promise, and there I was still cold and alone.

What was that promise? Maybe you were expecting something deeply personal or highly theological, but here is the promise that kept failing--5 hours of heat. Let me explain. I was headed to the woods for the opening weekend of deer season. Before I left, I ran across a bag full of hand and toe warmers in our closet. As I scanned the bag, each sealed package promised 5 hours of heat, some of them more, 8 or 10 hours. What a promise! A welcome source of heat for days spent cold and alone, watching, waiting, expecting the deer that never came.

As the cold days and sub-freezing nights passed, I began to look to these little packages of heat to deliver on their promise! Such a simple concept. Open, place, wait up to 30 minutes, enjoy the warmth. Each time, with freezing toes I opened, placed, waited, but they never delivered. The promise failed with package after package. I had been lied to. The second to last package I placed in my boots, chuckling to myself at the wasted effort because I didn't believe it would result in a single second of heat or relief. I had grown so distrusting, so cynical of the promise that I never even bothered to open the last package.

Finally, I found the root of my problem. Apparently, hand-warmers have an expiration date--and this one says 2012. 8 years past the date, the promise of 5 hours of heat had long expired. These little pouches were as good as dead, but my disdain for them was alive and well. They didn't deliver what was expected! That together with the frustration of the deer that never was, was enough for me to leave my hunting trip demoralized and defeated. Unfulfilled expectations can turn the heart sour!

Alright pastor, enough about hunting! Get to the point! Well, finally it hit me out there in the deer stand as I mulled over the story of Abraham and Sarah in preparation for today. Abraham and Sarah were expecting for 25 years. I grew resentful about my hand warmers not working after 30 minutes. Imagine 25 years of expecting! No, Sarah wasn't pregnant for 25 years, but as hard as it sounds to be pregnant (as my wife so graciously reminds me), maybe that would have been easier. At least the promise would have been in-hand! Instead, they were waiting seemingly empty handed--watching, hoping, *expecting*--and every so often God would repeat the promise but it just didn't seem like he was ever going to deliver.

Let's get the timeline of the story in our heads. God comes to Abram at age 75 while he's living in his father's household in the land of Haran. "The Lord had said to Abram, **"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; ...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."** (Genesis 12:1-3 NIV 11). This is the first promise to Abram that he's going to have offspring even though his wife Sarai had been unable to have children thus far.

Some time passes and Abram starts to wonder because he still remains childless. So God comes to reassure him of the promise in a vision, **“A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir! “Look up at the sky and count the stars--if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” (Genesis 15:5)** Abram believed the LORD—the word for believing gives us our word “Amen”. They watched and waited for 10 years since they had left their former life and land behind and still no child. It would be so easy for expectations to grow dim and the heart to grow sour.

So they try an experiment to take things into their own hands. Sarah gives her maid-servant Hagar to Abram and he fathers a child with her. But them going outside of God’s design for marriage wasn’t the way God was going to do what he had promised. He had promised a child of their own flesh and blood. It did however prove one thing. Abram was still able to conceive a child at age 86.

So what does God do? 13 more years pass and nothing! And this was the most personal and emotional thing to wait for God to deliver on. It seemed from the perspective of sheer time that after 24 years, the promise had simply expired. Abram was now 99 and the book of Romans tells us his body was as good as dead as far as child-bearing is concerned and Sarah’s womb was also dead at age 89. (Romans 4:19).

But here comes God once again to repeat the promise, even changing their names. **“No longer will you be called Abram (which means “Exalted Father”); your name will be Abraham, (meaning “Father of Many”) for I have made you a father of many nations. And “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; he name will be Sarah (which means “Princess”). I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” (Genesis 17:5,15,16.)**

**Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” (Genesis 17:** This is the good kind of laughter--the kind you get from news that brings inexpressible joy. He believed that God would still deliver on his promise after all this time as well as his youthful vigor had passed. So God tells him to call the boy *Isaac*, which means “he laughs”.

But that name actually has some irony to go along with it--a different kind of laughter. Not long after, God comes once more to repeat the promise to Abraham as well as Sarah. Three visitors show up unannounced to Abraham’s tent for lunch. Little did Abraham know at the time that it was really the LORD and two angels. But one of them says, **“I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.” (Genesis 18:10)** Sarah had been eavesdropping from the tent and was listening. **“So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” (Genesis 18:12).** Nearly the same content of the question Abraham asks when laughs for joy, but it’s clear to the LORD that she’s not laughing for joy. It’s a cynical laugh, at this moment distrusting the promise and disdaining the One who promised it. She had heard it repeated through the years and never come true. She had watched and waited and hoped and expected and now all the promise seemed to be was a joke. She was forgetting who had promised it!

So we’ve got two kinds of laughter in the story of Abraham and Sarah--the laughter of joy in the promised renewed and the sarcastic laughter of doubt that the promise was as dead as her womb. Abraham and Sarah stand at one end of the timeline of salvation waiting for the offspring to come who would bless the whole world, and we stand at the other end waiting for

him to come back! But that disdainful laughter has been contagious throughout the centuries. We find those cynical giggles bubbling from our unappeased expectations, as if we have the right to expect anything from God except the disdain we truly deserve. We laugh to ourselves in the dark corners of our heart-

“God is going to work the COVID pandemic of 2020 out for our good?” Fat chance of that happening! He might as well be up there sleeping?” “We’ll receive what we ask for in Jesus’ name? I’m praying and nothing is happening. “God is going to return at any minute to judge the living and the dead and bring salvation for those who are waiting for him?” Been waiting on that not just 25 years but 2000 years. This ridicule of God is no laughing matter, it’s the echoes of unbelief from our sinful nature that threaten to overtake us.

And it certainly would if God were not faithful to his promises. But he is the God of his Word and he is faithful to his every promise. He promised a son and a son he gave. **“Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. (Genesis 21:1-2).**

***God promised. God delivered. Sarah delivered*** a son at last. Simple as that! There’s only ever doubt in *our* minds about what God is going to do when it seems to us like he’s taking his sweet time. The Scriptures remind us, **“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.” (2 Peter 3:8)**

Here may be some insight into why God waited so long to fulfill his promise. He was waiting until the time that there would be no question in anyone’s mind this was a miracle of God’s power and faithfulness. Sarah had been unable to conceive, now she was long past childbearing. But Abraham fathered a child at 86. 13 more years would safely prove that both their bodies were as good dead!

That’s the point. **“Abraham is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” (Romans 4:17).** There was no chance at their age of them humanly conceiving a child in Sarah’s dead womb, but God gave life to the dead. He resurrected Sarah’s womb and called the promised child into being in the same way he raised the lifeless body of Christ Jesus from the dead. Abraham trusted that promise and **“This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” Those words were not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness, for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” (Romans 4:22-24)**

Abraham against all hope believed that God was faithful. **“He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, ... but being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.” (Romans 4:20,21).** The Bible also tells us that Sarah, whom God had rebuked when she laughed in disbelief, had her faith renewed. The Heroes of faith chapter in Hebrews 11 tells us, **“By faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. (Hebrews 11:11).**

So the Lord turned her scornful laughter into the laughter of joy. When she gave birth they named the boy Isaac (laughter) and **“Sarah said, ‘God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’ (Genesis 21:6).**

God promised! God delivered! That's the expectation of our faith that will never go unfulfilled or unanswered. The Bible assures us, "**No matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.**" (2 Cor. 1:20). The long promised Son of God to bless all nations? Ours, we long to celebrate the coming of our Savior at Christmas! Forgiveness? Ours through Jesus' blood and righteousness, credited to us by faith! Life from the dead? Ours, because God gives life from the dead through the resurrection of Christ. God promised. God delivered. "And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God." Yes, Lord we believe what you have promised! Come and take your people home! Amen! Now Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful! (Hebrews 10:23). Amen.