



God Made Me Laugh

Genesis 21:1-21

In the midst of our difficulties, it is hard for us to see anything else. Our problems take control of our thinking: they direct our steps, our thoughts, and our actions. They even come to inhibit our following through with the routines of living, many times even directing us down the path of depression. If we do not actually become depressed, oftentimes we come to think that there is no way of escape from our problems, for we feel that our circumstances are somehow beyond God's control. Why is it so hard for us to remember what God has done in the past and reflect on what God can do now within our present reality?

Some time had passed since Sarah and Abraham had been hoping for the blessing of a son. They had become desperate at various times. They had taken things in their own hands, even though God had already promised them a son. They had been unable to wait patiently. When God had made the promise, they had laughed at the pronouncement. On more than one occasion, they had ignored their responsibility to depend on God and to wait for God to act. Now God had provided the son they had so desired, and they could not believe it. At this son's birth, they named him Isaac, which means laughter.

The text tells us there was a feast when Isaac was weaned. We are not given many details about the event, but it would seem to be a very important marker, setting apart the date at which Isaac would be able to survive, escaping a critical stage of infant mortality. It was as if at this point the uncertainties of not having a son were finally defeated before the child not simply born, but also alive, active and eating on his own. It was the promise brought to concrete fulfillment in a more ample manner, and a reason for celebration for Sarah.

This was not the end of the subject, however. Life is just not that simple. Isaac was for Sarah and Abraham the blessing they sought, but his birth did not end the conflict they had occasioned by making decisions in conflict with God's direction. In a short span of time, conflict surged between this son, Isaac, and Abraham's first son with Hagar, Ishmael. Perhaps the conflict was imaginary, for it arose from Sarah's uncertainties, doubts, and insecurities.

The son's very name recalled that God had granted laughter at the conclusion of their problems and despair. What it did not do was to grant them strength to remember and trust that the very same God who had given this son would care for his according to the promise. Their laughter changed all too quickly and they lost the small bit of confidence in God they had.

When Isaac was weaned and celebrated, the difficulties resulting from the abuse of Hagar came back to torment Sarah. Ishmael, Hagar's son, also lived and was playing with Sarah's son, causing her to become jealous. Sarah did not want Ishmael to be Abraham's heir as he had every right to expect. Ignoring that Ishmael's birth had come as a consequence of her own idea, now Sarah wanted to get rid of the complication Ishmael symbolized. Hagar had fled from Sarah in the past as a consequence of her abuse. Now Sarah was the one who wanted to force her to flee with her son from the camp and the ties of the blessings of being a son of Abraham. Sarah lived in torment from the consequences of her stratagems and sought a way to wipe away what she had done. She did not seek God's guidance before making her decisions and acting. Ishmael's existence was due to Sarah's initiative and the attempt to get rid of him was likewise her initiative.

Sarah had not learned to depend on God. She made her own plans. She acted according to her own personal strategies. She depended on herself and the resources she saw at her own disposition. Giving herself into God's hands was something that brought her much uncertainty. She had laughed upon seeing God's provision, but that laugh was in part a demonstration of her insecurity before God's provision. It was no laughter of enjoying God's blessing in a trusting way. It was a laughter that was full of both surprise and insecurity.

For Hagar, it was not so very different. They were two different women, yet they had much more in common than they realized. Sent away by Sarah and Abraham, Hagar fled toward the desert as before. Once again she placed her son in a bit of shade to await the coming of death. She was near the place where she had named a well, "The God who sees me." That experience, however, she saw as the adventure of another life with no impact on her present worries. She had not learned from that experience to depend on and trust in God. It was just an adventure left behind and forgotten or that she considered irrelevant before the crisis of her present condition.

That is how we normally treat the problems in our journeys with God. It is hard for us to recall the ways in which God has come in the past to care for our needs. The problems of yesterday have passed and new problems call us to ignore what has gone before. It is as though our encounters with God's special provision pass on to become part of the history of other civilizations and have nothing to do with our present difficulties. The problems of the past are no longer our problems, for they have been resolved. Today's difficulties take their place with a vengeance.

So it was with Hagar. She traveled in the direction of the same place where God had provided water for her during her earlier escape. Now, however, she forgot that the same God could help her once again. She forgot that God still saw her, or at least she ignored the fact. After all, why had God allowed her to be cast away from her home and the protection of Abraham? Abraham already had another child, and she considered it likely that she was no longer of any importance to Abraham or God. She felt sorry for herself without bothering to seek God's guidance. With so many problems, how could she imagine God loving her and being ready to meet her needs?

Even without Hagar seeking, God came to her. In the midst of her desperation, God came to lift her spirits and show her the way out of her problems. There was water. There was a future. There was a way to travel in confidence. The simple fact that she did not see it without God's help did not mean it was not there. Her lack of vision and perspective did not limit God. They only limited her. Hagar had the option of seeking God's guidance, but on not looking for God, she enmeshed herself in problems that had ready-made solutions, even if she had not seen them.

Hagar's problem as well as Sarah's was not what she imagined. Ishmael and Hagar did not bring the conflict that Sarah imagined, and the water Hagar sought was no problem. For both women, the biggest problem was where they placed their focus. Focusing on their difficulties, real or imaginary, they lost sight of God's solutions for their lives. How different are we? It is as hard for us as for Sarah and Hagar to look to God amid our difficulties? The story could be different. It could be that we might find in God a reason to laugh at our problems, simple on recognizing the He is faithful toward us. We have no real reason to remain anguished with the difficulties of living. God is on our side. Will we allow Him to give us a reason to laugh?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*