

Good evening and welcome to our *continuing* series in the book of Genesis.
Tonight we're looking at God's encounter with Sarah *through a tent wall!*

You know this story is a very *human* story –
there are lots of little details in it that add colour and
allow us to see into what is really going on.

You'll see at the end of the passage –
there is this whole argument between God and Sarah about whether Sarah laughed when God said “next year
you will give birth to a son”.

Now this is actually central to Sarah's story.
This is not just a piece of irrelevant information!

When Sarah laughed
it was a laugh of **disbelief** – *she is saying the last time Abraham and I swung from the chandeliers - was
about 30 years ago! and if he tried it now he'd probably break his neck!*
it was a laugh of cynicism (*who do you think you're kidding – there's no way I can have a child!!*); and
it was a laugh of hopelessness (*I am 90, my body is as good as dead, and I don't believe you!*).
Her laughter was cynical and disbelieving and hopeless...

But, go forward 2 chapters –
Go forward to the place where she **actually** gives birth to Isaac
and we find his name means laughter –
And Sarah says “God REALLY has brought me laughter” –
But this time my laughter is of joy and wonder and hope realised!!

So in a sense this passage is about laughter -
the difference that God makes in our life

So that's what I want I want to talk about tonight.

the way God changes us...

I want to look at 3 things tonight

- 1) **Firstly, That** God comes to Sarah
- 2) **Secondly, How** he comes to Sarah; and
- 3) **Finally, Why** he comes to Sarah.

That he comes to Sarah, **how** he comes and **why** he comes.

So First,

1. **God comes to SARAH.**

God has *already* come to Abraham in the last chapter and in the chapters before.

He has already said

I'm going to give you a son,

and from him will come the salvation of the world, the Messiah.

So Abraham already **knows** that God has made this promise.

Abraham has already had HIS encounter

But not Sarah

God has never come to Sarah

until in Genesis 18

three strangers appear, three Wanderers, three nomads appear
(seemingly out of nowhere) and take Abraham by surprise.

Abraham looks up and suddenly he sees three guys standing in front of him and he goes into a frenzy of activity to offer them lunch – as any good Bedouin would do – he offers them hospitality.

v2 and Abraham looks up and sees three men standing nearby.

*You can imagine - Oh gosh where did you lot come from! and When he saw them, he **hurried** from the entrance of his tent...*

He says, "stay for lunch! and

v5 "they agree"

*v6 So Abraham **hurried** into the tent to Sarah.*

"Quick," he said, "we need lunch!"

*Then he **ran to the herd** ...*

this is a 100 year old bloke doing an impersonation of Usain Bolt!

and gives a calf to a servant, who

notice this

***hurries** to prepare it to set the meal before them.*

You know I have visited my mum's family in India only once as an adult.

I was about 30 and I was in Bombay for business

and so I took a taxi into the suburbs and

arrived in the evening in front of their very poor home.

When I entered

I discovering that my great Aunt and Uncle couldn't speak a word of English and

of course I can't speak a word of Hindi or Bengali

So it was going to be a long night of charades

But worse, I discovered laid before me

"a banquet fit for a king that would actually feed half the empire"

That would have been OK – except I was going to be the ONLY one eating!!

Now in India (as in many places) it is absolutely necessary to finish everything put before you.

Its not at all polite to leave food

So I ate alone, while my great Aunt watched from a distance,

she smiled every time I looked at them

and whenever my plate was nearing empty

she'd come forward and fill it again from the central pots

And after one hour of solid eating,

I was full and I hadn't even made a dent on the food!

What struck me was their utter enthusiasm to serve,

and to watch from a distance while I ate...

v8 reads

And while they ate, Abraham stood near them, under a tree.

And then v10, the Lord says.

"Where is your wife Sarah?"

"There, in the tent," he says.

***Then the LORD** said,*

"I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now God has not come because he fancied a take-away!

He has come for Sarah

first he asks “where Sarah is”,
then, when we know she is right there behind him;
then the whole of the rest of the passage is about his interaction with her

God has not come to Abraham – he has come to Sarah
And he has NOT come because she needs more information
when God talks with Sarah he tells her nothing that she didn't already know
Abraham will already have told Sarah that God says she will give birth in a year's time.
Sarah already knows the promises of God,
She already has all the information she needs

God comes to her because

It is not good enough to know ABOUT God you need to know him yourself.

It is not good enough to know about God's promises **through someone else** you need to know them yourself.

Sarah knew stuff about God's promises but she didn't really believe them herself
She believed stuff through Abraham's encounters with God but she had never done business with God herself.
God has come to put that right.

Everything she knows about God has been through Abraham, and that is not good enough.
Everything she knows about God has informed her head but not changed her mind

Here is the first idea...

We have to have our own faith.

We have to make-up our own mind up.

We have to do our business with God ourselves

Its no good following the faith of our husband or wife or brother or sister or parents or friends – it has to be OURS.

John Stott, a great man of God, one of the most influential Anglican Christian thinkers of our age, said recently that he grew up going to church every week. reading his Bible pretty regularly saying his prayers until he was 17. But he knew his faith was hitched to his parents faith...

He said then “I was listening to a sermon on Revelation chapter 3v20 “behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door. I will come in to you and eat with him and he with me”

And this is what Stott says

*I realised that I had been **around** Jesus people all my life.*

I believed a lot about Jesus.

But he had always been on the other side of the door in my life,

He was outsider looking in.

I had said my prayers everyday

but it had been like whispering them through a keyhole.

So one night on the 15th February

When the others were asleep,

when the lights were out,

I crept out of bed, knelt and as simply as I knew how “I opened the door of my life and invited him in”.

Sarah was listening to God – but he was outside the tent
She was listening to him through a tent door...
She knew a lot about God but she had never trusted him personally
She knew a lot about his promises but it was her husband's faith / his story / his encounters that she trusted in...

My friend, that is not good enough.
Your faith needs to be yours
You may know a lot about God in your head – but has he changed your mind
You may be surrounded by the faith of others - but have YOU ever invited him in.
The promises of God make no sense until you do!
You'll not get it – until you trust
It will always seem like God is distant until you make it your own!
You need to invite him in for yourself – Do you see?

God came to Sarah –
not to tell her stuff - she already knew it all
God came to Sarah that she might make it hers
for her to make her own mind up
That's what we need to do – to make our mind up and make it ours.

so God came to her

2. secondly, See HOW he came...

If you contrast, the way God came to Abraham in Chapter 15
with the way he comes to Sarah they are completely different!

In Genesis 15 God comes in darkness to Abraham.
In Genesis 18 he comes in daylight.
In Genesis 15 he appears as a smoking torch and fiery smoke striding through pieces of dead animals.
In Genesis 18 you have a man with sore feet ☺
In Genesis 15 Abraham has a sense of crushing dread
In Genesis 18 God is gentle... **and look how gentle he is!**

When Sarah laughs, it says a lot about her.

We already know that without a child, she must feel (inaccurately) like a loser;
We know she must believe (without logic) that somehow she has let everyone down
Her laugh is full of disappointment
She tries hard but she sees Hagar and Ishmael and although she knows she shouldn't be – she IS jealous
Her laugh is the laugh of someone who finds it hard to love herself!

v12 She thinks

"After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

The word for “worn out” is a word that means “useless”
After I am so useless – she says
After I am so valueless?
After I am such a failure??
You can feel her pain and her self-doubt!

Who are you kidding she thinks!

She is pouring disdain upon herself AND upon God.

And how does God react?

When Sarah laughs at him – how does he react?

Does he say

How dare you mock me you insignificant humanoid spec?

I am the Lord God Creator of the universe – how dare you mock ME!!”

No, he simply asks why she laughs,
He doesn't tell her off!
He doesn't damn her doubts!
He doesn't condemn her... and so compound her misery!
Do you see how gentle he is!
Its amazing

He comes to Abram in dread
He comes to Sarah in gentleness.

Look

God may come into your life in power and drama with fear and shaking and he may convict you of your sin and make an unmistakable impact upon your life –

Or

he may come quietly imperceptibly and whispering in the back of your mind

He may make a big difference between “how you behaved **before** you were a Christian” and “how you behaved **afterwards**”; and you may have a dramatic testimony that they could write a book about –

OR

There may be almost no visible change, because you have grown up in and around people of faith.

It doesn't matter.

It is not the experience of God that counts – it is God

It is not the blessings of God we seek – it is God

How God comes to you – doesn't matter

He may come and convince you of your sin and guilt; or

he may come and convince you of his love and your preciousness

which comes first doesn't matter.

So do not worry that your Christian experience is not like someone else's

Don't hanker after their experience or encounter

You don't have to imitate anyone else -

it just has to be YOUR decision.

So is God saying something to you tonight? Are you listening?

Is he saying

– look you can't live through the faith of anyone else any longer

- you can't just keep me on the outside of your life

you must invite me in.

3. And here is the reason why - why did God come to Sarah?

You see here is the heart of the story:

God came to deliver a promise that would transform her life and laughter

To transform her being “disappointed” to being “deeply joyful”

In some ways,

the key to this passage is found in this little exchange in v13 where

God says,

why did Sarah laugh like that?

why did she disdain herself and me?

why is she so **without joy** when she hears my promise over her?

surely nothing is too hard for the Lord?

And the Hebrew word for “hard” here means “wonder”.

Surely “**wonder** is not too hard for God”
Surely “God can produce **wonder** in her life?”

Sarah, look at your life,
look at the way you have discounted my promises to you
its because you don't really believe them for yourself
you doubt I can make you full or wonder - wonderful!

*Have you ever seen a child experience new things?
Have you ever seen the footage of Rwandan children when they are playing wit those soap bubbles?
There is delight and wonder!*

*Have you ever taken a child to the zoo and watch them as they see a dolphin jump out of the water?
Or to Disney when they come face to face with Winnie-the-Pooh!
there is wonder there!
There is a “Wow” there!*

Wonder is “joy of life”!

As we get older we lose the wonder!
The truth is that as we all get older, we begin to lose the wonder of life!
- take a four-year-old to the zoo, and they say “Wow”.
- take a 14-year-old to the zoo, and they say, “whatever”.

There are two things are going on here...
Firstly, we live in a “wonder killing” culture.

In our culture
Mystery is merely something to be explained away.
Wonder, is for the naive.
Love & beauty? – our universities will tell us these emotions are simply chemical reactions of a biological machine that has evolved by random mutation!
They'll tell you - there is no “you” apart from your brain –
and the brain is simply a highly complex biological computer that has evolved, not through the direction of a creative loving being, but by blind random chance!

If you talk about truth or morality or justice,
They'll say, there is no such thing as objective moral truth or justice.
These are simply evolutionary constructs, and there is an absolute morality, or justice beyond ourselves
We live in a wonder killing culture.

But you can't live without wonder.

Why is it that our society is facing unprecedented levels of depression?
Why is it that our society is called broken?
Why is it that our newspapers are so cynical in the way they approach everything?
Because we have lost our sense of wonder.

the Psalmist says “I am fearfully and wonderfully made”.
Talk to someone who struggles with self value.
Will they say “I am fearfully and wonderfully made?”

No they look at themselves and say “I am worthless – useless, rubbish”
They have lost their wonder!

But you can't have a society without wonder

Can a murderer look at their victim and say “wow I see the beauty of God in you” – no!

Can a thief look at their next target and say – “you are fearfully and wonderfully made?” – no!

Can Sarah look at herself and say “I am made in the glorious image of God?”

No.

Why? because they have lost their sense of wonder!

firstly, we live in a wonder-killing culture and it impacts all of us

But God comes to give you back that wonder!

Because, secondly, it's natural, once you've experienced something to need something bigger and better to get that “wow factor back again”.

God gives you that

The infinite can never be explored by the finite

Indeed the more we know of God – the more our wonder will increase

Do you think heaven will ever get boring?

Do you think a life lived for God is ever boring

You just don't know what you are saying !

The more you know of God the more impressed you will be

The more you discover of God the more you will realise that you haven't even begun to scratch the surface

The more you know of God and who he is

the more you will be staggered by the cross

the more you will see your value (that someone so great will sacrifice himself for someone so humanely speak, so small!)

the you see his grace the more amazing it becomes

Can you look at the God of the universe, powerful and mighty without beginning without end,

Can you encounter him in your imagination NOT have a sense of holy fear?

Can you look at this same God and see him humbled, ill-treated, mocked and crucified for you –

and NOT have that electricity run through your spine as you see him hanging there?

Is there not a wonder that God would consider you this valuable?

This is grace.

This is love undeserved.

This is sacrifice beyond imagination.

The Angels see it and there is wonder in heaven because of it!

This is wonder.

And the more you know God, the more you step out in faith to follow him, the more you push the boat out

the more you discover the wonder of why you are made!

Wonder is the stuff of life and joy.

Are you missing the wonder?

Revelation 3:20 says

behold, I stand at the door of your life and knock if you hear my voice, and will open the door.

I will come in, and I will eat with you and you with me.

You know what makes a great supper party?

Its not the food, it's the guests

it's the laughter they bring, the joy they bring.

I would have you know that tonight

I would have you stop speaking to God through a key-hole

I would have you move beyond your parents faith, your friends faith, for it to be YOUR faith.

I would have you make your mind up to encounter God

and to begin the most wonder-filled journey...