

No Laughing Matter

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Preacher: Jeremy Martinson

[0 : 00] Kara, please come and serve us. This is Hebrews chapter 11, and Kara is going to read two verses, verses 11 and 12. Hebrews 11, 11 and 12. And if you've been putting a bookmark or your finger in the book of Genesis, you will need to do that today, and we will be looking, starting in Genesis 12. So Hebrews chapter 11 and Genesis 12. So this is Hebrews 11, verses 11 and 12.

By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead were born descendants, as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. Thanks, Kara. Do you know what Ripley's Believe It or Not is? Kids, are you familiar with Ripley's Believe It or Not? Maybe you've seen a book at the library.

Sometimes they publish cartoons. You might go to one of those touristy type places, like Branson or Hollywood or something like that, and you might even get to go to kind of, I think they call it a museum. Maybe it's somewhere between a museum and a sideshow. I'm not really sure. But Ripley's Believe It or Not, it's a franchise of museums, books, other media. If you're not familiar with that, that kind of gets you in the ballpark of where I'm going here. And in their books and in their museums, in the cartoons that they publish on social media, which by the way, they do publish little cartoons on social media, they present oddities, curiosities, remarkable achievements that people have accomplished, things that challenge conventional beliefs or expectations.

And as the name Ripley's Believe It or Not suggests, some of the artifacts are so extraordinary and wild and weird that you would just wonder whether it could possibly be true, which is why they have a slogan or a catchphrase, seeing is believing.

This is a picture of a mannequin in one of the Ripley's Believe It or Not museums. Robert Wadlow is this fellow's name. He was eight feet, 11 inches tall.

[2 : 37] Now, not as tall as Goliath, but very tall. This is a guy named, oh, sorry, this is a portrait of Jimi Hendrix. This one's for Ryan.

A portrait of Jimi Hendrix made out of guitar picks. Okay. This is a guy named J.T. Taylor.

Taylor. And J.T. Taylor can put his lip, his lower lip, over the top of his nose. Now, I know you are all going to want to try this, so you go ahead and do it all right now while we're all together because we love each other.

You probably can't do it. I saw this and I thought, that can't possibly be true. And so I did a little further investigation and sure enough, he is actually a real person and he really can put his lower lip over the top of his nose.

You kind of want to look away, don't you? Isn't that the way it works? You kind of want to look away, but at the same time, you're kind of drawn into this, which is why Ripley's, believe it or not, makes money.

[3 : 55] Because these things are so astonishing. And the more astonishing, the more likely it is for us to say, I've got to see that. Here's one more. It's a dress made out of Starburst wrappers.

Perhaps your mom, maybe your dad can show you kids how to fold Starburst wrappers. It was kind of a thing, maybe a while ago.

Maybe you've never known that, but it was kind of a thing to be able to fold Starburst wrappers. Anyway, life is hard. And sometimes life feels impossible.

In fact, sometimes we say things like, this will never get better. They will never understand.

I will never get this right. This is a no-win situation. When we experience circumstances that seem impossible, it is so tempting for us to doubt God's goodness and God's provision and God's wisdom.

[5 : 04] And not surprisingly, that doubt that we experience leads us into sin. We worry.

We try to control circumstances. We manipulate people to get what we want. We make decisions based on our understanding rather than trusting in the Lord with all of our hearts. The gospel offers you a better way to responding to circumstances that seem impossible. And that way is by faith.

Seeing, contra Ripley, is not believing. But hear this. Believing expects to see.

Last week we met Abram. And if you remember, kids, he was an idolater. Do you remember what that word idolater means? We learned it last week.

[6 : 12] An idolater is someone who worships idols. Bows down to idols. Does not worship the one true living God. And we notice that Abram was from a place called Ur where they had many idols.

Not just one. You could bow down to whatever idol you thought you needed something from that day. But God graciously calls Abram out of the city of Ur, away from everything that offered him security and significance and a future that mattered.

God calls Abraham and Abram obeys. And for the rest of his life, Abram lives out of a tent in the promised land. But never takes possession of the promised land.

Why? Hebrews tells us because he was looking forward to a city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. So to get us back into the story of Abram, here is Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 through 3.

The Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation. And I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

[7 : 34] I will bless those who bless you. And him who dishonors you, I will curse. And in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. So here's what I want you to pick up as we kind of re-engage with this story of Abram.

God makes Abram three promises or one promise with three facets or aspects or categories. He promises that Abram will be a blessing.

He promises Abram will have land. And he promises that Abram will have descendants. Blessing, land, and descendants.

Now here's what happens as we continue in the narrative of Abram in Genesis. Abram repeatedly puts each of God's promises into jeopardy.

This is what we notice as we read the story of Abram in Genesis. He repeatedly puts each of God's promises into jeopardy. Here's what happens first.

[8 : 40] In the second half of this chapter that we just read, the author records that there is a severe famine in the land that God promised Abram. A famine so severe that Abram takes his family and leaves the promised land to go to Egypt.

Now we know that Abram married up. That means he knows that his wife is very beautiful, very attractive. Probably he didn't deserve her, but somehow he got her.

That's what we mean when we say you married up. Okay? Abram knows this. And so as he's arriving into Egypt, he says to Sarai, his wife, When we get there, would you please tell everyone that you're my sister?

And we're like, why would you do that? Well, if you're my husband, they will kill me and take you. But if you're my sister, they will give me gifts because of you.

This is twisted logic. But this is where Abram was. So they get to Egypt and sure enough, it's true. The Egyptians notice Sarai and they take her and bring her into Pharaoh's house.

[9 : 53] This is not good. Verse 17. But the Lord, chapter 12, verse 17. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

So Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister so that I took her for my wife?

Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go. And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him. And they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. What did God promise? You will be a blessing. What has Abram become? A curse. God promised that he would be a blessing to the nation. And instead, because of his doubt and his unbelief in God's promises, instead, Abram has become a curse to the nations.

When Abraham left Ur, he brought along his nephew, who proved to be an awful lot of trouble. Chapter 13 and verse 5.

[11:11] And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together.

And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time, the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.

Verse number 8. Then Abram said to Lot, Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen.

We're family. Let's not fight about this. Verse number 9. Uh-oh. Verse 9. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me.

If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left. What did God promise Abram?

[12:17] Land. Second promise. Land. What is Abram doing? He's about ready to give away the land. You take whichever side you want, and again, Abram puts God's promise in jeopardy.

Lot chooses to move towards Sodom, and Abram settles in the land of Canaan. Despite Abram, God's promise remains unbroken.

Genesis 15. We have one promise left, right? A blessing, land, descendants. Genesis 15, verse 1. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Fear not, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. But Abram said, O Lord God, what will you give me?

For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eleazar of Damascus. And Abram said, Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.

[13:38] And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.

Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

God promises Abram that he will be a blessing. God promises Abram that he will have the land.

And God promises Abram that he will have descendants like the stars of heaven.

But here is the problem. Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. Children, do you know what that means? It means she doesn't have any babies. She hasn't had any children. They don't have any kids. It's just Abram and Sarai. And so, Abram and Sarai try to help God keep his promise.

[14:49] Chapter 16 and verse 1. Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.

And Sarai said to Abram, Behold, now the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant. It may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And once again, Abram puts God's promise in jeopardy. They take matters into their own hands. They are going to control the circumstances. They are going to manipulate people. They are going to make decisions with their own understanding rather than trusting in the Lord with all their hearts. This reminds me how I respond when I think God needs my help to make a circumstance work out the way that I think is best.

[15:59] Genesis 17 and verse 1. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty.

Walk before me and be blameless that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly. Then Abram fell on his face and God said to him, Behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

No longer shall your name be called Abram, Exalted Father. What a wonderful name. But your name shall be Abraham, the father of a multitude.

For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you and I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you and I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I will be their God.

Two things that I want you to make sure to notice. Abram is now Abraham and he is 99 years old. But God restates his promise to make him a father of nations and that kings would come from Abraham.

[17:48] Verse number 15. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, my princess, but Sarah, princess, shall be her name.

Not just my princess, which is a lovely name, but Sarah, princess, to match with the breadth of the promise given to Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude of nations.

Sarah also receives from God a name change to be princess. That's good stuff right there, isn't it? Girls, you like that? Yeah, princess.

Yes, all right. Verse number 10. Oops, my page turned. That was a problem. 18.

Sorry, I'm still on the wrong page. 17, verse 16. I will bless her and moreover, I will give you a son by her.

[19:00] I will bless her and she shall become nations. Kings of people shall come from her, from Sarah.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old and shall Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?

And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. And God said, No, but Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac.

I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. Here's what I want you to notice. Abraham is 99.

Sarah is 90 years old. And yet God also restates his promise to Sarah. She also will be the mother of nations and kings will come from her.

[20:05] What a remarkable promise from God. In spite of their doubt, in spite of their attempts to make things work out the way that they wanted things to work out, God has remained faithful.

chapter 18 and verse 1. The Lord appeared to him, to Abraham, by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.

He lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

Let a little water be brought and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree while I bring a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves and after that you may pass on since you have come to your servant.

So they said, do as you have said. And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, quick, need three sillas of fine flour, six gallons of flour.

[21:23] Knead it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf tender and good and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds.

I think this is yogurt, probably not cheese curds, although we all would probably prefer cheese curds. But I think this is yogurt. He took curds and milk and set the calf that he had prepared and set it before them.

And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. Verse number nine. They said to him, where is Sarah, your wife?

And he said, she is in the tent. The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year.

And Sarah, your wife, shall have a son. And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

[22:32] I love that little, that little sentence. So fascinating. She's listening. Now, Abraham and Sarah were old.

We already know this, don't we? Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. We don't know this yet. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.

What does that mean? The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. Simply, she is too old to have a baby. You could use the word inconceivable.

Because in this case, it means exactly what you think it means. Sarah is physically unable to conceive a baby.

notice how Sarah responds to God's promise. Verse number 12. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, after I am worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure?

[23:58] Abram jeopardizes God's promise that he will be a blessing when he lies about Sarah in Egypt. Abram jeopardizes God's promise of land when Abram offers the whole lot to lot.

But here, in chapter 18, God's promise seems particularly fragile, doesn't it?

He's supposed to have descendants. Both of them are supposed to have descendants. As many as the stars of heaven if you can count them.

But Sarah is unable to have a child. John Sailhammer says it like this.

These verses bring the promise to the brink of failure, pushing the unlikelihood of its fulfillment far beyond the previous levels.

[25 : 16] It was not only that Sarah was barren or that Abraham was old. These obstacles are in themselves great enough to demonstrate that the promise when fulfilled came from God alone.

But the author takes the reader a step further. Sarah was even past the physical age of bearing children. a child was not simply unlikely.

It was now impossible that Sarah should have a child. No wonder then that Sarah laughs.

It is inconceivable that she would have a child. A child. verse 12 again.

So Sarah laughed to herself saying after I am worn out and my Lord is old shall I have pleasure the Lord said to Abraham.

[26 : 28] Why did Sarah laugh? Did you notice that little point in the text? Verse 12 I read it twice.

Sarah laughed how? To herself. But the Lord knows that she has laughed to herself.

Verse 13 the Lord said to Abraham why did Sarah laugh and say shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Notice this in these two verses because I think it's pretty compelling.

Sarah has said after I am worn out but the Lord reinterprets what she says and Sarah saying after I am worn out becomes will I really have a child?

[27 : 29] Sarah says my Lord is old speaking of Abraham but the Lord reinterprets that and gives Sarah the responsibility for saying those words now that I am old.

You see that? And then one more the Lord says is anything too hard for the Lord? Implying what about what was happening in Sarah's heart?

That Sarah is saying this is impossible. This is too hard for the Lord. And then after the author of Genesis establishes for us these facts tactfully revealing Sarah's most intimate knowledge of her own body and demonstrating the impossibility of God's promise coming true, the Lord restates the promise.

Verse 14 At the appointed time I will return to you about this time next year and Sarah shall have a son.

But Sarah denied it saying I did not laugh for she was afraid and he that's the Lord said no but you did laugh.

[29 : 04] Does Sarah have faith? Does she believe God's promise? It doesn't seem like it from this text does it?

I'm glad that the Lord says he will return in a year instead of nine months. Because it gave Sarah three months to have faith.

Despite her initial doubt, we know that Sarah did begin to believe God's promise. It's not because of what Moses records for us in Genesis.

It's because of what the author of Hebrews says to us in chapter 11. Hebrews chapter 11 and verse number 11. By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive.

Aren't you glad that Jesus gets the last word on your sin, child of God? If we didn't have this chapter of Hebrews and we didn't have this verse about Sarah, we would be left to wonder whether Sarah ever had faith at all.

[30 : 28] We would see her as the one laughing at God's promise and then denying it in her heart even though the Lord himself is there and knows exactly what is happening in her heart.

Aren't you glad that Jesus gets the last word on your sin, child of God? that we can believe God's good promise to us that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ?

Jesus gets the last word on your sin. And when Jesus records the last word on this story, this account of Abram and Sarah and closes the book, if you will, on the end of Genesis chapter 18, Jesus says, by faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive even though she was past the age. Why? Since she considered him faithful who had promised. biblical faith is not some kind of blind faith.

God does not ask us to check our brains when we come into the door of this worship gathering. And God does not ask you to set aside reason when you open God's word for yourself and you read what he has for you.

[32 : 12] He doesn't ask you to set aside reason. Faith is not a leap in the dark. Faith is careful thoughtfulness about God and his promises.

Faith is not anti-reason. God doesn't ask us to check our brains at the door. Faith is careful thoughtfulness about God and his promises.

Sarah hears the promise that she will have a son but she knows it is impossible for her to have a baby.

So Sarah laughs. Wouldn't you laugh if you knew it was impossible wouldn't you laugh? But something happens inside Sarah in those next three months.

Something happens before she conceives baby Isaac. Sarah weighs the impossibility of her physical limitation against the impossibility of God breaking his promise.

[33 : 32] and she says what? Look it may seem impossible for me to have a baby but if I have to weigh this impossibility against the impossibility of God breaking his promise to give me a son I choose that impossibility.

God will not break his promise. Somehow he's going to do a miracle inside of me and allow me to conceive.

And sure enough the author of Hebrews tells us by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive even when she was past the age. even though she knows it's impossible she knows that God is faithful to his word so it's even more impossible for God to break his promise.

Faith then is careful thoughtfulness about God and his promises. I suspect that we all have difficult circumstances.

I suspect that we all have circumstances that we may consider impossible. Perhaps a broken relationship maybe an unresolved conflict within a family maybe an injustice that can no longer be made right maybe an offender who refuses to make amends maybe you have a family member who has not yet trusted in Jesus and it seems impossible.

[35 : 21] Maybe you have a child who is rebellious and hardened to the gospel or a co-worker who is terrible to get along with or a boss who is overbearing.

Perhaps you have lost so severe that it seems that what is lost will never ever be found. Let me echo the Lord's words to Sarah.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? faith means trusting God even when everything inside of you wants to laugh.

Follow Sarah's example. Weigh what seems humanly impossible against what God says is impossible that he would ever break his word.

Weigh these two options. Give careful thoughtfulness to God and his promises. Promises to be near the broken hearted.

[36 : 45] To wipe away every tear from your eyes. Promises to be your refuge when you feel exposed.

Promises to be your strength when you feel like giving up. Promises to be your hope to press on when you want to quit sharing the gospel.

Promises to be your security when you're afraid. To be your satisfaction when this world leaves you wanting. Promises to give you all that you need for life and godliness.

Promises to provide sufficient grace when life is hard. Weigh what seems humanly impossible against what God has said to you in his word.

Give careful thoughtfulness to God and his promises. That's faith. That's faith. God doesn't ask you to set aside reason.

[37 : 50] He asks you to consider him faithful and to trust him even and especially when your circumstances seem impossible.

And listen, if you can't muster faith to believe, then be like the man in Mark chapter 9 who cries out, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.

Pray. Pray and ask God to give you the faith to take him at his word. Don't listen to Ripley.

Seeing is not believing, but believing expects to see. This story in Genesis 18 is primarily about Sarah and her faith.

We know this because after Sarah died, Abraham remarried and had other children. God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled because of Sarah's faith in God.

[39 : 04] Sarah's faith in God led to the descendants like the stars of heaven. I wonder how will your faith impact future generations?

I can't help but remember an angel's visit to another woman.

She was also promised a son. It was also inconceivable! that she would have a child.

It was impossible for her to be pregnant not because she was too old but because she had never been with a man. Do you remember this woman from Luke chapter 1 and verse 34?

And Mary said to the angel how will this be since I am a virgin and the angel answered her the Holy Spirit will come upon you the power of the most high will overshadow you therefore the child to be born will be called holy the son of God and behold your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son this is the sixth month with her who was called barren notice this in verse 37 for nothing will be impossible with God it reminds me of what the Lord said to Sarah is anything too hard for the Lord nothing will be impossible with God verse 38 and Mary said behold I am the servant of the Lord let it be to me according to your word and the angel departed Mary weighed the physical impossibility against the divine impossibility that

[41 : 03] God's word fails and her careful consideration led to faith how has Mary's faith impacted future generations oh my her faith led to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and his impossible birth and his obedient life and his atoning death and his glorious resurrection has led to the salvation of a humanly innumerable company of people followers of Jesus those who believe what God says in spite of the fact that it seems impossible like the stars of heaven like the sand of the seashore are you by faith one of Abraham and Sarah's descendants come to Jesus come to

Jesus he'll give you rest for your soul let's pray good father we are grateful to be here humbled to have your word privileged to have it in our language and to receive it help us now as we consider these things to believe what you have said help us to take you at your word even when life feels impossibly hard help us to trust you even when we really want to laugh give us courage to believe please stir up inside of us fresh faith and would you please as we take a few moments now would you please help us to prepare to receive the

Lord's supper father where we are inclined to doubt help us to confess to receive forgiveness and to press on in faith holy spirit would you please show us our doubt show us where we are not believing God's promises to us and help us to confess those things brothers and sisters let's take a few moments and do that now father we love you we are grateful to be your children thank you that Jesus gets the last word on our sin thank you that if we confess our sin you father are faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness we plead the blood of our savior

Jesus and claim this forgiveness by grace alone help us to persevere in faith in Jesus name amen