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Old Testament

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

Context: Today we hear two connected stories from Abraham and Sarah's journey: first, God's seemingly impossible promise that Sarah will bear a son in her old age, and then the joyful fulfillment of that promise. These passages invite us to consider how faith, doubt, patience, and God's timing intersect in our own lives.

A SON PROMISED TO ABRAHAM AND SARAH

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (MAM-ray), as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground.

He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little 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 hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes."

Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife, Sarah?"

And he said, "There, in the tent."

Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

So, Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?"

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 wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.

He said, "Yes, you did laugh."

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.

Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.



Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

OVERVIEW

Genesis 18 begins with Abraham welcoming three mysterious visitors near the oaks of Mamre. During their visit, they announce that Sarah, though elderly and long past childbearing years, will have a son.

Sarah overhears and laughs quietly to herself because the promise seems absurd. God responds with a question that becomes one of the central themes of Scripture: **“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”**

Genesis 21 records the fulfillment of that promise. Sarah gives birth to Isaac, whose name means “he laughs.” The laughter of disbelief in Chapter 18 becomes laughter of joy in Chapter 21.

The story is ultimately about God’s faithfulness, even when circumstances appear hopeless.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before (Genesis 17)

In Genesis 17:

- God formally establishes the covenant with Abram.
- Abram becomes Abraham (“father of many nations”).
- Sarai becomes Sarah.
- Circumcision becomes the covenant sign.
- God specifically promises that Sarah herself—not another woman—will bear the covenant child.

Abraham also laughs when he hears the promise (Genesis 17:17), a detail often overlooked because Sarah’s laughter receives more attention.

Today's Passage (Genesis 18 & 21)

The promise is repeated through mysterious visitors.

Key themes include:

- Hospitality toward strangers
- Divine visitation
- Human doubt
- God’s faithfulness
- The movement from promise to fulfillment

Immediately After (Genesis 21:8–21)

The narrative quickly becomes complicated.

Tensions emerge between:

- Sarah
- Hagar
- Ishmael



Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. The story reminds readers that even when God's promises are fulfilled, human relationships remain difficult and imperfect.

See Addendum on Ishmael

Broader Context of Genesis

Genesis explores:

- Creation
- Human failure
- Covenant
- Promise
- God's relationship with humanity

The Abraham cycle (Genesis 12–25) focuses repeatedly on one question: **Can God's promises be trusted when circumstances suggest otherwise?**

Again and again, the answer is yes—but often only after long periods of uncertainty. The birth of Isaac becomes the central proof that God's covenant promises can survive human weakness, doubt, and delay.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Childbearing in the Ancient Near East

In Abraham's world, children were essential for:

- Family survival
- Economic security
- Inheritance
- Social standing

A childless couple often faced social embarrassment and uncertainty about their future. Sarah's infertility was therefore not merely personal sadness; it carried significant social consequences.

Age and Survival

Average life expectancy was much lower than today, though biblical figures are portrayed as living unusually long lives. Ancient listeners would have immediately understood the impossibility of a ninety-year-old woman giving birth.

The story intentionally pushes beyond natural expectations.

Hospitality Culture

Abraham's lavish welcome of the visitors reflects one of the strongest values in ancient Near Eastern culture.

Travelers depended on local hospitality for survival. Providing food, water, shade, and protection was considered sacred duty.

Abraham's hospitality becomes a model of faithful living.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Approximate Biblical Timeline

- Creation narratives: Primeval history



- Abraham's call: traditionally around 2000–1800 BC
- Covenant established: Genesis 15–17
- Three visitors arrive: Genesis 18
- Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: Genesis 19
- Isaac born: Genesis 21

When Isaac is born:

- Abraham about 100 years old
- Sarah about 90 years old

See Addendum on Biblical Biological Aging

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language

These passages were written in Hebrew. The final form of Genesis likely reached completion during the first millennium BC, though it preserves traditions much older than that.

Major English Translation Stages

- Latin Vulgate (late 4th century)
- Wycliffe Bible (1380s)
- Tyndale Bible (1520s–1530s)
- Geneva Bible (1560)
- KJV (1611)
- RSV (1952)
- NRSV (1989)
- NRSVue (2021)

Important Translation Nuances

The Hebrew “Laugh” can mean:

- laugh
- rejoice
- mock
- play

Isaac's name (**Yitzhak**) comes directly from this root.

This means the story contains a literary wordplay:

- Abraham laughs.
- Sarah laughs.
- God notices the laughter.
- The child is named “Laughter.”
- The fulfilled promise produces joyful laughter.

The entire narrative revolves around this single Hebrew word.



SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Many scholars see this story as operating on multiple levels.

- Historically, it is about Abraham and Sarah.
- Metaphorically, it becomes a story about hope surviving impossibility.
- Sarah represents every person who has waited so long that disappointment has become normal.
- The promise represents possibilities we have quietly abandoned.
- The visitors represent moments when new hope unexpectedly arrives.
- The laughter represents the tension between faith and realism.

Modern-Day Context

Many people experience "Sarah moments":

- A broken relationship that seems beyond repair
- A long illness
- Financial hardship
- A dream abandoned years ago
- A community that appears to be declining

The story does not promise miraculous outcomes in every situation. Instead, it teaches that God's work often begins precisely where human certainty ends.

Grant County, Indiana Context

This passage speaks powerfully to rural communities.

Many towns across Grant County have experienced:

- Population decline
- Economic changes
- School consolidations
- Aging congregations

It can become easy to assume that the best years are behind us.

Sarah's laughter is the laughter of people who have stopped expecting anything new.

Yet Scripture repeatedly reminds us that God often works through unlikely people, unlikely places, and unlikely circumstances.

Just as God brought unexpected life to Abraham and Sarah, communities can discover renewal where decline once seemed inevitable.

The lesson is not optimism for optimism's sake. It is openness to possibilities we have stopped imagining.



HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

1. Practice Radical Hospitality

Abraham welcomed strangers before knowing who they were. Faith often begins with openness and generosity.

2. Be Honest About Doubt

Sarah's doubt is not hidden. Scripture includes her laughter because faith and uncertainty frequently coexist.

3. Trust Timing More Than Timetables

God's promises rarely unfold according to human schedules. Waiting is often part of spiritual growth.

4. Stay Open to Surprise

Many of God's greatest works in Scripture occur where people least expect them.

5. Celebrate Fulfillment

Genesis 21 reminds believers to pause and recognize blessings when they arrive.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Why do you think Sarah laughed?*
2. *Is Sarah's laughter disbelief, self-protection, humor, or all three?*
3. *Have you ever stopped hoping for something because too much time had passed?*
4. *What does Abraham's hospitality teach us about welcoming strangers today?*
5. *Why do you think God chose an elderly couple rather than younger parents?*
6. *What does Isaac's name ("he laughs") teach us about remembering God's faithfulness?*
7. *Is there a difference between doubt and unbelief?*
8. *What promises of God do people struggle to trust today?*
9. *How might this story apply to churches facing declining attendance?*
10. *What does "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" mean in practical terms?*



Gospel

Matthew 9:35 – 10:6

Context: As Jesus' ministry expands, he sees the spiritual and physical needs of the people and calls ordinary disciples to join him in the work of healing, teaching, and proclaiming God's kingdom.

THE HARVEST IS GREAT, THE LABORERS FEW

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

THE TWELVE APOSTLES

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

OVERVIEW

Matthew 9:35–10:6 marks a major transition in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has been traveling throughout Galilee teaching, preaching, and healing. Seeing the crowds, he is moved with deep compassion because they are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Rather than trying to meet every need himself, Jesus calls twelve disciples and sends them out as apostles. He gives them authority to continue his work and instructs them to begin their mission among the people of Israel.

The passage teaches that compassion leads to action. The answer to human need is not merely sympathy but participation in God's work.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Immediately Before (Matthew 8:1–9:34)

- Healing a man with leprosy
- Healing a centurion's servant
- Calming a storm
- Casting out demons
- Healing a paralytic
- Restoring sight to the blind
- Raising a girl from death



These stories demonstrate Jesus' authority over disease, nature, evil, sin, and even death.

The final miracle before today's passage is the healing of two blind men and a man unable to speak. Jesus' ministry is accelerating, and crowds are growing.

Matthew 9:35 serves as a summary statement of everything Jesus has been doing.

Immediately After (Matthew 10:7–42)

After naming the disciples, Jesus continues giving instructions for their mission:

- Proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is near.
- Heal the sick.
- Care for the vulnerable.
- Travel lightly.
- Expect opposition and rejection.
- Remain faithful despite persecution.

The focus shifts from Jesus alone doing ministry to a community of disciples carrying on his work.

Broader Context within Matthew

Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as:

- The promised Jewish Messiah
- The new Moses
- The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy
- The teacher of God's Kingdom

Matthew is organized around five major teaching sections, much like the five books of Moses.

This passage begins the second major discourse in Matthew, often called the "Mission Discourse."

A central theme of the Gospel emerges here: Disciples are not merely followers; they are participants in God's mission.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

First-Century Judea

The Jewish people lived under the authority of the Roman Empire.

They faced:

- Heavy taxation
- Political instability
- Military occupation
- Religious factionalism

Many people hoped for a Messiah who would restore Israel politically and militarily.

"Sheep Without a Shepherd"

This phrase would have carried enormous significance.

In the Old Testament, shepherds often symbolized kings, priests, and leaders.

When leaders failed, prophets described Israel as sheep without a shepherd.



Examples include:

- Numbers 27:17
- Ezekiel 34
- Zechariah 10:2

Jesus is not criticizing the people.

He is lamenting the failure of leadership that has left people spiritually exhausted.

Why Only Israel?

Jesus instructs the disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles.”

This can sound exclusionary to modern readers.

Most scholars view this as a temporary stage in Matthew’s narrative.

The mission begins with Israel because God’s covenant promises came through Israel.

By the end of Matthew, the mission expands dramatically: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)

The movement starts locally before becoming universal.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Event	Approximate Date
Abraham	c. 2000–1800 BC
Moses and Exodus	c. 1300–1200 BC
David's Kingdom	c. 1000 BC
Prophets Ezekiel & Zechariah	600–500 BC
Birth of Jesus	6–4 BC
Jesus' Ministry	AD 27–30
Events of Matthew 9–10	AD 28–30
Crucifixion & Resurrection	AD 30
Gospel of Matthew Written	AD 80–90

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original Language

Matthew was written in Greek, likely between AD 80–90.

The author relied upon:

- Earlier traditions about Jesus
- Likely portions of the Gospel of Mark
- Collections of Jesus' teachings
- Oral testimony within the early church



Major English Translation Stages

Translation	Date
Wycliffe Bible	1382
Tyndale New Testament	1526
Geneva Bible	1560
King James Version	1611
Revised Standard Version	1952
New Revised Standard Version	1989
New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition	2021

Significant Translation Choices

Compassion

This is much stronger than simple sympathy. It literally refers to feeling something in one's inner being or gut. Jesus does not merely notice suffering. He feels it deeply.

A modern expression might be: *"His heart broke for them."*

Harassed and Helpless

The Greek suggests people who are:

- Exhausted
- Worn down
- Abandoned
- Thrown aside

The image is of people overwhelmed by life's burdens.

Apostle

- One who is sent
- Messenger
- Representative

The disciples become apostles when they are commissioned and sent. Faith moves from learning to doing.

Harvest

This does not imply conquest or recruitment.

The image is of gathering what God has already prepared.

The emphasis is on readiness and participation.



SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Many scholars see “sheep without a shepherd” as a metaphor for communities experiencing disconnection, uncertainty, and inadequate leadership.

Today the image might describe people who are:

- Lonely despite technology
- Overwhelmed by information
- Distrustful of institutions
- Divided politically
- Searching for meaning

In Grant County, the metaphor might apply to:

- Families struggling economically
- Elderly residents living alone
- Young adults uncertain about their future
- Communities divided by politics and culture
- People overwhelmed by addiction, anxiety, or isolation

The key insight is that Jesus *first* sees.

- Before he teaches.
- Before he sends.
- Before he acts.

He notices.

Compassion begins with paying attention.

The harvest metaphor is equally powerful.

The problem is not that there are no people seeking hope.

The problem is that there are too few people willing to serve.

Many churches spend energy asking, “How do we get people into church?”

Jesus seems to ask: “Who is willing to go where the needs already exist?”

That shift changes everything.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

1. Look Before You Judge

Jesus saw the crowds with compassion, not condemnation. We are called to understand people's struggles before criticizing their choices.

2. Move from Sympathy to Service

Feeling concern is good. Acting on that concern is better. The disciples were sent to serve, heal, and help.



3. Recognize Your Calling

Not everyone is called to preach. Everyone is called to participate. Teaching, listening, visiting, mentoring, feeding, encouraging, and praying are all forms of ministry.

4. Start Nearby

Jesus begins with the people closest at hand. Before changing the world, we can serve our neighbors.

5. Trust Ordinary People

The twelve disciples were not religious celebrities. They were ordinary people. God frequently works through ordinary people willing to say yes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Why do you think Jesus described the people as “sheep without a shepherd”?*
2. *What does compassion look like in today’s world?*
3. *Why do you think Jesus chose ordinary people as disciples?*
4. *What modern examples of “harassed and helpless” people do you see?*
5. *Why might Jesus tell the disciples to start with Israel first?*
6. *What gifts do ordinary church members have that can help God's work?*
7. *Is the biggest challenge today a lack of need or a lack of workers?*
8. *What would it mean for our church to be part of the harvest?*





Addendum

Ishmael, Isaac, and the Origins of Islam

After Isaac is born, tension develops between Sarah and Hagar, the Egyptian servant who had earlier borne Abraham a son, Ishmael (Genesis 16; Genesis 21:8–21). Concerned that Ishmael might share in Isaac's inheritance, Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham is distressed, but God assures him that Isaac will carry the covenant promise while Ishmael will also become the father of a great nation.

From a biblical perspective, **Isaac becomes the ancestor of the Israelites**, and through that lineage come Judaism and later Christianity. **Islamic tradition traces its ancestry through Ishmael**, whom Muslims regard as Abraham's son and an important prophet. Islamic tradition teaches that Ishmael and Abraham were associated with the establishment of the sacred sanctuary at Mecca, though this connection is not stated in Genesis itself.

This means that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all look back to Abraham as a foundational figure, but through different historical and theological lenses. While the modern conflicts of the Middle East cannot be reduced simply to Isaac versus Ishmael, many people view the story symbolically as the beginning of two great family branches that would shape much of world history.

One of the often-overlooked lessons is that **God blesses both sons**.

Isaac receives the covenant promise, but Ishmael is not abandoned. God protects him, hears his cries, and promises that he too will become a great nation. In that sense, the story is not primarily about God choosing one child and rejecting another; it is about God working through different purposes while continuing to care for both.

That observation can be particularly helpful when discussing relationships among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam today. The story begins not with strangers, but with family.

Whether or not we view the connection exactly the same way historically, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all look back to Abraham as a spiritual ancestor. That's a remarkable thing when you stop and think about it.

Islamic tradition says yes, through Ishmael. Historians generally agree that Islam intentionally identifies itself with Abraham through Ishmael, though tracing precise genealogies over thousands of years is difficult.

Biblical Biological Aging

Many scholars view the ages symbolically or theologically rather than as modern biological ages, although opinions vary.

The traditional Jewish and Christian understanding is straightforward:

- Abraham was 100.
- Sarah was 90.
- Isaac's birth was a literal miracle.

The point is that the couple was well beyond normal childbearing years, emphasizing God's power and faithfulness.



Scholarly Perspectives

Many modern scholars note that the ages in Genesis are part of a broader pattern:

- Adam lives 930 years.
- Methuselah lives 969 years.
- Noah lives 950 years.
- Abraham lives 175 years.

These numbers don't fit modern human lifespans, leading many scholars to conclude that the ages serve a literary or theological purpose.

Three Common Scholarly Approaches

1. Symbolic Numbers

Some scholars believe the ages communicate significance rather than chronology.

Ancient cultures often used numbers symbolically. The exact number may have been less important than what it conveyed about blessing, honor, wisdom, or divine favor.

2. Legendary or Epic Storytelling

Others see the patriarchal narratives as preserving historical memories that were shaped over centuries of retelling.

In this view, extraordinary ages function much like legendary details in other ancient traditions—highlighting the importance of the figure rather than providing a birth certificate.

3. Theological Emphasis

Many scholars focus less on the number itself and more on what the number accomplishes in the story.

Whether Sarah was 90, 75, or simply "far beyond childbearing age," the narrative point remains:

Humanly speaking, this should not have happened.

The age magnifies the miracle.

What About Metaphor?

Many mainline Protestant scholars—including many within the UMC tradition—would say the story can carry theological truth regardless of how literally one interprets the ages.

In other words: The story is trying to tell us something about God, covenant, trust, and hope—not necessarily teach biology or demographic statistics.

For metaphorically minded readers, Abraham and Sarah become symbols of situations that appear “too late,” “too old,” “too broken,” or “too impossible” for renewal.

A Fun Question

If Abraham had been 55 and Sarah 45, would this story still have been told?

Probably not.

Why?



Because the extreme ages force the listener to confront the central question: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

The ages are not the point. The promise is the point.

A Little Bonus Nugget

It’s interesting that Scripture never says Abraham and Sarah doubted because they were old. They doubted because the promise contradicted everything they had experienced.

That’s a very modern feeling.

Most of us have our own versions of “ninety years old” ... a relationship, a church, a community, a dream, or a hope that seems past its expiration date. The story invites readers to consider whether God’s possibilities extend beyond our assumptions.

That’s why, whether one reads the ages literally, symbolically, or somewhere in between, the story continues to resonate thousands of years later. It isn’t really about a 100-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman. It’s about what we do when life tells us something is impossible and God says, “Not so fast.”