

A Child of Laughter: The Gift of a Wise and Loving Mind

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Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (*Genesis 17:17*)

Laughter can have so many different qualities. When Sarah is described as laughing, she is called to account for this response. But Abraham’s laugh wasn’t. It had a very different origin and quality.

God had told Abraham that he and his beloved wife were to have a child. They had longed for this child for decades, probably at times being filled with worry about why no child had come, sometimes with frustration and anger, sometimes with sadness and despair. They knew human physiology well enough to recognize that once Sarah had reached menopause that it was impossible. And now God was saying that they would have a son. All the hopes, dreams, disappointments, and human expectations that had gone before perhaps rushed through Abraham’s mind and he laughed when he reflected on how little he knew or understood. He would have been sure that he and Sarah were too old, absolutely sure, and yet now he could see that God’s perspective of what was possible far exceeded his. This brought laughter to his lips.

If you consider just the literal story, you might wonder why a loving God would have apparently put Abraham and Sarah through all these years of disappointment, contributing finally to Sarah’s decision that her and her husband’s heir would have to be born of her handmaid, Hagar. Was the long delay some kind of test? Certainly not. In all that the Lord does He holds our eternal happiness and welfare immediately before His eyes. He loves us more than we could possibly imagine and yet the way that this love is shown isn’t what we would expect or think would be best from our own perspective.

For example, some people thinking from their own understanding cannot believe that hell could exist as a place of relative misery and deprivation if God is all loving. They believe that an all-powerful God could and should make everyone capable of being welcomed into heaven. No matter what kind of life a person has led, the Lord should be able to miraculously wash all the evil away leaving a pure and heavenly creature behind. Such a perspective doesn’t understand how heaven works.

Other people have just assumed that heaven is a place and that anyone who wants can and should be admitted there. There is a somewhat humorous story of a person in the life after death who held a similar view. He describes what happened to him when he tried to enter heaven before he was ready. When he entered a heavenly community he reported:

“I saw angels in white garments. And surrounding me and looking me over, and they began to murmur, ‘Look, a new visitor not dressed in a garment of heaven.’

“Hearing this, I thought to myself, ‘It appears I am in a similar situation as the one who the Lord says went to a wedding without a wedding garment.’ So I said, ‘Give me such garments.’

“But they laughed.” (*Conjugal Love 10*)

The angels laughed when the man asked for a garment of heaven. We might imagine that this was derisive laughter, but it would be better to picture it as the laughter of someone who like Abraham recognizes that human perspectives on how things work can be remarkably at variance from what is real. This laughter brings humility and a greater willingness to listen and to follow the Lord.

In contrast it seems that when Sarah heard of this news that her laughter was somewhat derisive and scoffing and this is why she was questioned about why she laughed. Her laugh had scorn and denial within it. When directed at an idea the Lord would teach us it is spiritually dangerous.

This story of the promise of child to Abraham and Sarah is part of the saga of their life as recorded in the book of *Genesis*. This saga from Abraham's initial call onward can be seen on a deeper level as a reflecting a spiritual journey we must go on if we are to follow the Lord and be spiritually reborn. Earlier steps refer to our beginning recognition that something should be different and a growing motivation to accomplish this change. They reflect our need to learn, to make basic decisions from this knowledge about what we will and won't do. They show the value of rules for life and their limitations. The birth of Ishmael, a son whose father was Abraham and his mother was Sarah's handmaid, Hagar, represents the adult rational capability to understand more deeply than simple superficial rules drawn from what the Lord has taught. Then the Lord instituted a special sign for the covenant that He was establishing with Abraham and his descendants: the rite of circumcision. This ritual act represents our conscious use of our best understanding in the work of self-examination and repentance. The Lord calls us to examine or reflect on the patterns of our motivations, thoughts, and actions, recognizing the patterns that are hurtful to us and others, the ones that the Lord commands against. Once we have recognized what these patterns are, we can acknowledge them before the Lord, ask His help to fight against them, and then do our part each day to consciously live differently.

Repentance in its truest sense cannot take place before a person has reached an adult understanding. This is represented in the story of Abraham by all the events that came before the birth of Ishmael. But Ishmael wasn't to be the heir of the covenant the Lord promised to Abraham. The first adult understanding that a person attains does not grow into true wisdom by adding more knowledge and experience. True wisdom comes only to a person who has shunned false ideas, evil motives and actions as sins against the Lord. The promise of a child born to Abraham and Sarah is the promise of this true wisdom. It is a promise of a huge change that can take place in our lives, one that takes us from a natural understanding with its tremendous limits and misperceptions, to a spiritual understanding which is far more insightful, focused and wise. These two levels of understanding or these two rational faculties come to a person in quite different ways. This is spoken of in the following passage from the *Arcana Caelestia*:

With each human being . . . his first rational too is conceived and born through the influx of his internal person into the life of his external person's affection for knowledge, but his second rational results from the influx of good and truth from the Lord by way of his internal person. This second rational he receives from the Lord when he is being regenerated, for at that time he senses within his rational what the good and truth of faith are. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2093:4)

Our first rational comes from worldly learning and from the motivations that we have hereditarily from our parents as well as from the innocent and loving states that the Lord gives us from our earliest childhood. The second rational comes from an in-flowing life from the Lord that we can receive for the first time when some of these hereditary inclinations to evil have been removed through self-examination and repentance.

Abraham and Sarah's son was named Isaac which in the Hebrew language means laughter. The first rational, represented by Ishmael, more easily laughs with a touch of contempt. The second rational, represented by Isaac, laughs with delight in what is good and true sometimes in contrast to what a human perspective sees. Unfortunately, much of laughter doesn't arise from this heavenly delight.

Very much is contained within laughter, for the most part something of contempt which, though it does not show itself, is nevertheless lying underneath, and is easily distinguished from

cheerfulness of the mind which also produces something that appears like laughter. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2216)

We can know something of heavenly laughter from the good natured joy we can take in the observations of young children. A person need not look down on a six-year-old for his or her misperceptions. Consider a young child who was given the simple request to do a small chore. A child can respond to this request by stating “Why do I have to do all the work in the house.” This grumpy misperception of how the household really works can cause us to chuckle without our needing to feel contemptuous. Or can you picture a little child, having learned about heaven, firmly announces to his parents, “If you won’t go with me, I’m not going.” Again, we can smile at the child’s concept of being able to refuse to pass from this world to the next unless accompanied by his parents, but have no contempt in our hearts.

True wisdom of life and the kind and useful perspective it brings cannot come apart from learning from the Lord and living according to this knowledge. We read:

The first and foremost element of the rational with a person is truth, and therefore it is the affection for truth, which exists with a person to enable him to be reformed and so regenerated. Reformation is effected by means of concepts and facts, which are matters of truth. These are being constantly implanted in good, that is, in charity, so that in this manner he may receive the life of charity [or wise kindness]. It is therefore the affection for truth with a person that predominates in his rational. For the situation with the life of charity, which is the life of heaven itself, is that in people who are being reformed and regenerated it is constantly being born and developing and increasing. This growth is achieved by means of truths. Therefore, the more truth that is implanted, the more is the life of charity perfected. *Thus as is the nature and the amount of truth present with a person, so is the charity present with him.* (*Arcana Caelestia* 2189:2)

The last line of this passage is emphasized in the original text. Truth is essential to charity. But this truth doesn’t come directly from learning factual knowledge or forming human concepts. It is a gift from the Lord that comes to a person who is actively shunning evils as sins.

The possibility of the kind of change that this state of mind can bring is hard for some human perspectives to believe. When told of this angelic state, a part of the human mind can scoff derisively. “What me! Spiritually become as white as snow? Not likely!” This part of the human mind doesn’t believe in the miraculous changes that regeneration can bring to our lives. It can laugh just like Sarah laughed. It cannot help it because of its perspective. We cannot help but start with many flaws and misperceptions. We cannot help but start with many worldly and self-centered motivations. But this can be changed:

Human rational good is such that it has much within it which is derived from worldly delights, for that good is formed not only from truths but also from the delights of the senses and from many other delights that exist in the world. When a person is being reformed and regenerated spiritual good is implanted by the Lord in those delights, and by means of this good that which is worldly is mellowed, and after that accordingly receives its happiness from that spiritual good. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2204)

The Lord does call us to be part of a miraculous change in our lives. He calls us to learn and live according to what we’ve learned. He calls us to reflect on the patterns of our lives and recognize the evils that can exist there and to seek His help in becoming a new person. The changes that this can bring are wonderful, so wonderful that a wise person might laugh with joy at the miracles they produce. AMEN.

Lessons: *Genesis* 17:15-21, 18:9-15, *Arcana Caelestia* 2072, 2203

Genesis 17:15-21

¹⁵ Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶ And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a *mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall be from her."

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall *a child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?"

¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

¹⁹ Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his descendants after him. ²⁰ And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."

Genesis 18:9-15

⁹ Then they said to him, "Where *is* Sarah your wife?" So he said, "Here, in the tent."

¹⁰ And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which *was* behind him.)

¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; *and* Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.

¹² Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

¹³ And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear *a child*, since I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."

¹⁵ But Sarah denied *it*, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

“And laughed” means the affection for truth. This becomes clear from the origin and essential nature of laughter. In origin it is nothing other than the affection for truth or the affection for false ideas, which produces the mirth and pleasure exhibited in the face by means of laughter. This shows that the essential nature of laughter is nothing else. Actually laughter is something external belonging to the body since it belongs to the face; but in the Word interior things are expressed and are meant by exterior. . . That “laughter” here means the affection for truth becomes clear from the fact that this verse records Abraham's having laughed, as did Sarah both before Isaac was born and after, and also from the fact that he was given the name Isaac from “laughter”, for the word “Isaac” means laughter. *Arcana Caelestia* 2072

[T]he human rational as regards truth is such that it is not able to understand what the Divine is, for the reason that that truth is immersed in appearances, and consequently that which it cannot understand it does not believe, and that which it does not believe does not affect it. The appearances in which the rational is immersed are such that they do affect it, for the appearances themselves bring delight and therefore if deprived of appearances the rational imagines that no delight is left, whereas heavenly affection is not immersed in appearances but in good and truth themselves. But as rational truth is of this nature, it is also excusable and permissible for it to be immersed in appearances and to take delight in them. Such truth immersed in appearances is represented here by “Sarah” when the Lord joined Himself to the Divine. This explains why it is said that she stood at the tent door and that she laughed and said, “After I have grown old shall I have this pleasure?” by which is meant that the affection possessed by rational truth had no inclination to change its state. *Arcana Caelestia* 2203