

(Education for Exultation) the Isaac Factor

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes God's power to fulfill His promises in seemingly impossible situations, as illustrated by the story of Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac.

Duration: 35:10

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:24-26, Romans 9:6-8, James 4:15

Topics: "Isaac"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Gideon from Judges 7 and how God reduced his army from 10,000 to 300 in order to show His power and prevent Israel from boasting in their own strength. The preacher emphasizes that God's ultimate goal is not to make much of us, but to enable us to find joy in making much of Him. The sermon then transitions to the story of Isaac, Abraham, and Sarah, highlighting the faith and trust they had in God's promises. The preacher encourages Christians to cherish and praise God for His grace and salvation, and to let this transformative truth impact every aspect of their lives.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God Ministries is available at www.desiringgod.org. Genesis 18, 10 through 15. He said, now the he here, if you look up to the first line in chapter 18, now the Lord, this is the Lord we're talking about.

Now he said, I will surely return to you at this time next year. And behold, Sarah, your wife, will have a son. And Sarah was listening at the door which was behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old and advanced in age. Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, after I have become old, shall I have pleasure with my Lord again, also old? And the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh, saying, shall I indeed bear a child when I'm too old? Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time, I will return to you at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.

And Sarah denied it, however, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. And he said, no, but you did laugh. Father, the picture that we have of you now in the story of Abraham and the birth of Isaac is a very, very powerful and encouraging story.

And yet it goes against the grain of some natural things that we feel by nature. And I pray that you would therefore come and by your spirit overcome nature and by grace, give us ears to hear and help us to trust you and to believe you. To know the God of this passage and to cast our lives upon you and to solve the problem of our lives with the message of this story.

Message of grace and power where human resources reach their end. So come, Father, please and save souls in this room right now that are alienated from you and establish the saints and make them strong for the. Challenges of this day and week and life.

And humble the proud and encourage the downcast and befriend the lonely and heal the sick and do exceedingly abundantly in this moment, then I can even ask, I pray in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen. Let me do a little review for you last week, because the relationship between this message and last is very close.

Gideon, remember, judges seven is told to go down into the valley and and defeat the Midianites. And there there's so many that it looks like an ocean of camels down there. And he has ten thousand soldiers left after twenty two thousand leave.

And God comes to him and does something very typical of the way God acts and very atypical about the way we act. Let me read it. The Lord said to Gideon, the people who are with you are too many for me to give Midian into their hands.

For Israel would become boastful, saying my own power has delivered me. So it already looked impossible for the army of ten thousand to meet this ocean of Midianites and defeat them. And God says this is too many.

And he dismisses nine thousand seven hundred of them and gets the victory with three hundred. Why? Why does God act this way? He acts this way over and over and over and over again in the Bible. It's going to be the same story today.

Today's sermon is last week's sermon just happens to be a totally different situation, totally different chapter, totally different characters. But the same God, the same point, because he does it over and over again. Why do you pare it down until it is humanly impossible to get a victory here? Answer, God says, because I want the glory.

It's very simple. God is in the business of doing things, so God gets the glory and we get the benefit of the victory. He gets the glory.

We get the pleasures of the victory. I call this last week the Gideon Venture. I call it this week the Isaac Factor.

You could put it in a rhyme. Maybe this will be the one thing you would take away. Why, God? Why do you do things this way? Why do you back us into the corner where it's humanly impossible to do what you say we're supposed to do? Answer.

To magnify my sovereign grace and keep you in your humble place. I'll say it again. He does it to magnify his sovereign grace and keep us in our humble place.

Or if I cared less about meter, I'd say. To magnify his sovereign grace and keep us in our humble and happy place, which sounds awful to my ear, but it is theologically glorious. And so I will say it anyway to keep us in our humble, happy place, which raises this question.

Why is it not bad news to have a God who is so self-exalting? This is a familiar question to us at Bethlehem. Here is God orchestrating things so he gets the glory. Why is that not bad news to have a God who does things that way? The reason it's not bad news is because God himself is so valuable and so satisfying that the most loving thing he can do for us is to make himself gloriously indispensable.

I wonder if you believe that. Let me say it again. God is so valuable and so satisfying as he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ.

That the most loving thing he can do for us is make himself gloriously indispensable. Or another way to put it would be this. The most loving thing that God can do is not to make much of us, but to so work triumphantly and graciously in the Bible and in history and in our lives that we have an eternity of joy in making much of him.

The loving thing for God to do is not to make much of us, but to give us the joy of making much of him. That's the Gideon venture. That's the Isaac factor.

That's the point of last week's sermon. That's the point of this sermon. In fact, I'll tell you a secret.

It's the point of every sermon. God does everything he does to magnify God and to make us glad in that. That's a great reason for being.

Now, today, Isaac and Abraham and Sarah. What shall we learn? If you've got your Bible open still, I want to take you around not only to chapter 18, but to the vicinity, and we'll be jumping from chapter to chapter because you need to see the flow of the story here. Let's go to chapter 11 and get the story from the beginning.

This is even before Abraham called Abram in those days and Sarah to become Sarah are in the promised land. We're at verse 30 of chapter 11. And what we learn is that Sarah is barren.

You see that in that verse, Sarah was barren. She had no child. Now, is that a coincidence that the wife of the father of Israel is barren? It is not a coincidence.

It is a plan. How do I know it's a plan? Chapter 16, verse 2. Sarah said, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. So God has chosen a barren woman to marry the father of the people of Israel.

Now, there we're confronted right off the bat. Why do you do things like that? What are you up to here? And we've seen the answer. He backs us into a humanly impossible situation so that we have to look away from ourselves to him to do what he says he's going to do.

Now, what did he say he was going to do? Chapter 12, verse 2. Chapter 12, verse 2, God says to Abraham, I will make you a great nation. Well, there it is. I will make you a great nation.

His wife is barren. She's barren in chapter 11, verse 30. So we could get that clear that when the promise comes, this isn't gonna happen in any ordinary human way.

I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great. So you shall be a blessing. So if Abraham is going to believe this promise, he's got to believe God, not only that he can predict the future, he can create a future out of a situation that looks humanly impossible.

Now, that's not natural for a man to do. Nobody in this room by nature trusts God to do the humanly impossible in your life. Nobody does that by nature.

We are wired to fix it another way. We are wired to think, oh, my goodness, I think this is God's purpose for my life. It now can't happen.

It can't happen. And so we say we'll make it happen another way than the way God plans for it to happen. Now, Abraham gives a real clear, sad, double illustration of that human bent.

Let's look at the first one here. It comes in chapter 15. Abraham knows he's got to promise he's going to become a great nation.

He's got to have descendants. So let's read verses two to four and see what he says and does. Abram said, oh, Lord God, what will you give me since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? That's a slave that he's got.

And Abram said, since you have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir. So he's got the idea, OK, it's going to happen through a legal heir, if not a physical descendant. Now, here's God's response in verse four.

Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him saying, this man will not be your heir. But one who will come forth from your own body. So now he's trapped again.

He's tried to take up an escape route away from the humanly impossible, and God cuts him off. No, it will not be Eliezer. I have not in mind legal heirs.

I have in mind your body, your loins is going to be your son. Verse four. This man will not be your heir.

One will come forth from your own body. Now that takes some faith here, given his situation. And he talks about that faith.

Verse five. I took him out, said, look up to the heavens, count the stars if you're able to count them. And he said to him, so many.

So your descendants. So not just a little thing he's going to do here, a big thing. And then verse six, Abraham believed in the Lord and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.

God wants us to believe him for what is impossible. And when he does, when we do and we believe him. He reckons it to us as righteousness.

That was escape hatch number one. God cuts him off. No.

Now here's escape hatch number two. Abraham reasons. And so does Sarah.

Well, all he said was, you're going to become a great nation. And he clarified, it's going to come from your body. He didn't say it's going to come from my body, Sarah.

So we've got an out. We can make this happen. I've got a concubine.

I mean, a servant. She could be your concubine and we'll just pretend it's my son and we'll do it that way. That fits the promise.

So let's read about that. Chapter 16 verses one and two. Now, Sarah, Abram's wife had born him no children and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.

So Sarah, I said to Abram. Now, behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go into my maid.

Perhaps I will obtain children through her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarah. Now, drop down to verse 15.

Chapter 16. So Hagar bore Abram a son and Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore him Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael.

That wasn't God's plan to get it done that way. That's not the way he's going to fulfill the promise. God means for Abraham to depend on sovereign grace to do the humanly impossible.

So what happens? Jump over to chapter 17. We're now 13 years later. The boy is 13.

What does that make Abraham? About 99, almost 100. His wife is 90 now. Verse 15.

God comes and says this. As for Sarah, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah, she shall it shall be her name. I will bless her.

And indeed, I will give you a son by her. Now, that is a great setback for Abraham. This makes him very upset that God boxes him in again and says no to his second escape hatch.

Listen to how he complains and pleads in verse 17 of chapter 17. He fell on his face and laughed and said in his heart, will the child be born to a man 100 years old? And will Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child? And he pleaded with God to fill his promise in a less spectacular way. This is the way we are, folks.

We don't want to be dependent on the humanly impossible. We want it to be manageable. We want to take part in this and have a way to get it done to be utterly, totally, absolutely dependent on a way for God to fix our problems that we can't foresee is against our nature.

And therefore, he says, verse 18, Abraham said to God, oh, that Ishmael might live before you. But God said not this point in the first service. I quoted the NASB and those who had the NIV almost came out of their chairs because they're the exact opposite words.

The NASB says no. And the NIV says yes, which creates kind of a problem. So between services, I ran up and got a Hebrew dictionary because I hadn't consulted this text just to make sure what's going on here.

And so this is not a big deal, but it felt like a big deal to some people. The point is the same in both. No, Sarah, your wife will bear you a son.

Yes, but Sarah, your wife will bear you a son. It's a kind of conjunction that has in it a verily, which would be tending toward yes. And however, verily, however, which should tend towards no.

And it's a judgment call as to what you stress when you bring it over into English. The meaning is the same. So bracket that.

Don't fret over it. No, I'm not going to take Ishmael. That's the point.

Or yes, I hear your words and no, I disagree with them. Sarah, your wife will bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

Now, why? Why? Why? Why does God act this way? Chooses a barren woman, cuts off the first escape hatch through a legal heir, cuts off the second escape route through a concubine, waits another 14 years until she's beyond childbearing years and he's 100 years old and then says, I really meant it. You and her, the two physically are going to have a child and it's going to become a great nation. But here's the answer in the text that Irv read earlier.

Let's go to chapter 18, verses 10 to 14, chapter 18, verse 10. I will surely return to you at this time next year. God says to him, I'll return and behold, Sarah, your wife will have a son.

And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which is behind him. Now, Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age. Sarah was past childbearing.

So not only was she barren from the get-go, she's now beyond menopause and she couldn't have children anyway. It's a double impossibility. She laughed to herself saying, after I have become old, shall I have pleasure? My Lord being old also.

And the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh? Shall I indeed and say, shall I indeed bear a child when I'm old? Is anything too difficult for the Lord? There's God's answer. Why choose a barren woman? Why say Eliezer won't do? Why say Ishmael won't do? Why wait another 14 years until it's doubly impossible to get the glory? Is anything too hard for the Lord to magnify his sovereign grace and keep Abraham and Sarah in their humble place? That's the Isaac factor, as I hear it in this text, the Isaac factor. Look at chapter 21, verses one to three.

Then the Lord took note of Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called his name, the son, the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.

If we had time, we'd make it even harder. Chose a barren woman, won't let the legal heir do, won't let the concubine's son do, waits 14 years till it's totally, doubly impossible, fulfills the impossible promise, waits another 12 years and says, kill him. Will you never stop putting me in a place that feels impossible? Answer, no.

No. That's your life, folks, as a Christian. So here you are this morning and many of you are in those situations.

Could be a marital situation, a child, a situation at work, a physical situation. And you say to yourself, this is impossible. There is no godly way out of this.

This is impossible. Answer. Is anything too hard for the Lord? And if you say yes, you're wrong.

And there are so many of these stories in the Bible because we are so wired to say this, this is, this is impossible and it won't get fixed. It's not impossible because God is God. And he means to magnify his sovereign grace and keep us in our humble, happy place.

So let me just apply this very briefly as we close in two ways. Number one, I've already begun. Let me take it back to the beginning of your Christian life.

If you're a Christian in this room, you know how you got saved. I'd love to hear the testimonies. I'd love to hear a hundred testimonies, 800.

I'll tell you how you got saved. I know how you all got saved. God saved you.

It was humanly impossible and God came and awakened your heart, endeared you to Jesus, opened the eyes of the blind, raised the dead, put your arms around Jesus and got you to trust him and love him so that you would be forgiven for all your sins. God did that. How do I know that? How do I know that's a legitimate application of this text? Answer Romans nine, six, seven and eight.

You can look at it if you want to with me just very briefly. I don't have the time to give a long exposition. Let me just draw your attention to this.

The problem Paul is dealing with in Romans nine is that some of his kinsmen are cursed and cut off from Christ and some of his kinsmen are being saved and some are going to hell and some are going to heaven and they're all Jews. And people are saying, wait a minute, if this is true, what becomes of the promise to the Jewish people if he makes a promise to the covenant people and some are lost? Is the promise valid? And his answer in verse six is it is not as though the word of God has failed. Why not? His answer, second half of verse six, for they're not all Israel who are descended from Israel.

Whoa, what do you mean? There's a division in Israel. Physical descendancy doesn't do it. Not Ishmael, Isaac, not Esau, Jacob.

And there's a lesson in that. Namely, let's read it from verse eight. It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise.

That's Isaac are regarded as descendants. And then he quotes the Isaac story. At this time, I will come and Sarah shall have a son against all human odds, against all human possibilities.

I will create children for Abraham out of barren wombs where it is humanly impossible. The point of that story is your life is a miracle. And I don't mean your physical life.

I mean, your conversion is a miracle. If you're a child of God, verse eight says, is not because of the flesh. The flesh simply means what we can accomplish by our own human resources.

We can do a Hagar thing. I wrote an article in the star last year. Remember, oh, that we might not be Israelites, meaning, oh, that we might not be symbolically those who become Christian by human artifice.

Those that do church in the power of the flesh and don't even believe in the miracle working power of God to regenerate people, bring them to new birth, open the eyes of the blind, raise the dead, draw them irresistibly to Jesus and save them irreparably. We don't even believe that sometimes. And that's the whole point of the Bible to magnify his sovereign grace and keep us in our humble place is the point of the story of Isaac and Abraham.

It's the the application Paul makes out of it right here in verses six to eight of Romans nine is they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, nor are they all children just because they are Abraham's descendants. And you are not a Christian because you were born into a Christian family. You must be born again.

God has no grandchildren. You must be born again. And the new birth, according to this text and this story is a miracle not where there's a human impossibility.

If you need another story, remember the rich young ruler. Follow me. He walks away.

Jesus says how hard it will be for rich people to enter the kingdom. The disciples say, well, then who can be saved? And Jesus gives the stunning word is easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle. With man, it is what? Impossible.

Who then can be saved? Jesus answer with men, it is impossible. And then he adds. But with God, all things are possible.

Nobody that, you know, can't be saved. I meant that with double negatives. Nobody that, you know, can't be saved.

What is humanly impossible is possible with God, the hardest sinner, you know, 86 years old, who never has been interested can be saved. One way you can't do it. They can't do it, but God can do it.

That's application number one. And before I leave it, surely you hear the point for you Christians is believe this, cherish this, love this. Praise God for this.

Oh, how it should transform your lives, your breakfast table and lunch table and dinner table. And this room on Sunday morning and your small groups, because our heart should be bursting with humble, brokenhearted gratitude that he plucked us out of hell owing to nothing in ourselves and gave us the gift of faith, brought us to life, gave us new birth, forgave our sins, put his righteousness on us and gave us everlasting life. If that doesn't make a person dance for joy, you haven't seen it.

Oh, how it should transform our lives. Last application. Very briefly.

Can we enter a nine million dollar educational multi-use building in two years debt-free when we have \$600,000 in the bank? I'll say it again. Can we as a church move in to a \$9 million educational multi-purpose incubation, kind of growing without growing room building in two years from today debt-free when the elders asked themselves that question over the last two years, knowing we had to do something, the answer we felt we should say to you is, is anything too hard for God? And that's all. No, that's not all.

Because we read our Bibles and what we saw was not an absolute promise. I'll pay for the building. We didn't hear that.

What we heard was there's a pattern here of activity. God typically, typically backs his people into corners of human impossibility in order that he might work for them so that he gets the glory. And we get the joy to magnify his sovereign grace and keep us in our humble place is the characteristic way of the Bible.

And therefore all the elders are saying is this looks like something we should try. That's all. It looks right to us.

It looks like the kind of thing God might be pleased with. And I do believe he's pleased with it. I call it the Isaac factor or the Gideon venture.

And we're going to venture it. And next Sunday, the name of the sermon is if God wills from James chapter four, why don't you stand with me for a closing benediction now unto him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before the throne of his glory with rejoicing to the only wise God be glory and majesty and dominion and authority before all time now and forevermore. And all God's people said, amen, you're dismissed.

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