

A MOTTO FOR LIFE (Genesis 21:1-7)

Do you have a motto by which you live your life? While there are many good ones, there are some mottos that I just don't understand. For instance, there is the motto: "Live life one day at a time." I think the laws of physics are such that you have no choice but to live life one day at a time.

Some mottos are just wrong. Maybe you've heard: "That which doesn't kill you makes you stronger." There are plenty of exceptions to that sentiment such as heart disease, strokes, gunshot wounds, auto accidents, autoimmune diseases, and a host of other things. Not every bad thing makes you stronger. Some things cripple you for life.

Let me give you some good mottos. Here's my Top Ten:

- If you're tired of starting over, stop giving up.
- Sometimes you win; sometimes you learn.
- Be who you needed when you were younger.
- A good laugh and a long sleep are the two best cures for anything.
- Better an "oopsi" than a "What if?"
- Grow through what you go through.
- If you can't beat fear, just do it scared.
- The future you want is in the work you've been avoiding.
- Stop measuring your worth with someone else's ruler.
- Stop trying to fit into places you've outgrown.

There's one motto that I've seen in many places. My guess is you have, too. I've seen it as framed artwork adorning a wall in many homes. I've seen the words of this motto emblazoned on the side of a shopping bag. Casket makers have even printed these words on the inside of a coffin as a tribute to the deceased.

Before I share those words, let me rehearse the story of their origin. In 1904, Bessie Anderson Stanley of Kansas entered a contest magazine contest in which she was to answer the question: "What is success?" Bessie won a cash prize of \$250 which she used to pay off the mortgage on her house. When she died in 1952, the opening lines of her poem were inscribed on her gravestone. Her poem was entitled "Success," and here is how it began:

*He has achieved success
who has lived well,
laughed often, and loved much.*

It has taken the better part of 70 years, but everywhere I look, I see those three words: Live. Laugh. Love. Retailers have made piles of money putting those words on wall hangings, coasters, pillows, and all sorts of other items. The online retailer Etsy recently reported that they have 8,123 products on their website bearing the words *Live, Laugh, Love*. Wayfair stocks over 56,000 such items. Some retailers are living, laughing, and

loving it all the way to the bank all thanks to Miss Bessie.

I have no beef with that motto. I just think it is somewhat insufficient. I think there are a couple of other things we should add to it.

With that in mind, turn to Genesis 21. The blessed day for Sarah finally came. Twenty-five years earlier and on numerous occasions during the intervening years, God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son. They had plenty of time to get the baby's room ready. Now, the bassinet will no longer be empty. Let's read the first seven verses. From these verses, I see three words that serve as a good motto by which to live.

Learn: God Does Just What He Says

Look again at v. 1. Notice the two phrases of this verse: "as He had said" and "as He had promised." Invariably, God accomplishes what He says He will do; He performs what He promises. He doesn't just get close. "Good enough for government work" is not a motto by which our God lives. He does exactly what He tells us He is going to do.

In that, we are unlike Him. We have good intentions, of course. We are well-meaning. We plan on doing certain things, but for one reason or another, we just don't get around to doing them. Maybe we got busy or the weather didn't cooperate or we got sick or we were just too exhausted.

When God says something, circumstances never get in the way. Emergencies never arise that divert His attention. He never forgets. New information never emerges that causes Him to change His mind or leads Him to re-think His plans.

While His promises are certain, His timing isn't always in line with our expectations. Over and over, the Bible instructs us to wait on the Lord. Abraham and Sarah had to wait. They waited a good 25 years. As the saying goes, "Some things are worth waiting for." One of those things is God's activity in your life, God's promised blessings.

We have many tutors in life. We have the testimony of others. We have the Word of God. We have the Holy Spirit who helps us to understand God's Word. Another teacher is our own experience. That is why we need to pay attention to what happens, and we need to reflect on what happens. These teachers are all unanimous. They agree that God does what He says.

The story of the Bible is the story of God promising and then God delivering what He promised. God warned our first parents that if they ate of the tree they were forbidden to eat from, they would die. They did, and they did.

God told Noah that He was going to bring floodwaters upon the earth to destroy all flesh except Noah and his family and all the animals that were on the ark that He instructed Noah to build. God did just that.

God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and through him to bless the world. He did what He promised.

Time does not permit us to go through all the promises we find in Scripture along with their fulfillment, but indulge me by letting me show you one chapter of the Bible that speaks of the word of the Lord four times. This chapter centers on the ministry of

Elijah during a dark day in Israel's history. Ahab was the king, and he was a wicked king. He promoted the worship of Baal. In chapter 16 of 1 Kings, we are told, "Ahab did more to provoke YHWH, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings who were before him" (16:33).

It is 1 Kings 17 that I want you to notice. Elijah announces to King Ahab that it is not going to rain until he, Elijah, asks God to send the rain. Look at v. 2. God tells Elijah to go hide in a certain brook. God will take care of him. He stayed by the brook until the brook dried up.

Look at v. 8. He tells Elijah to move to a certain town and to live in the house of a certain widow, and the widow will feed him. He meets the widow, and she tells him she only has a little flour and a little oil. She planned to make it for her and her son, and then they would die because there was nothing left. He says to her, "No. You make it for me, and then God will keep you well-supplied in flour and oil until it rains again."

Amazingly, she does what he asks her to do. Look at v. 16.

After this, the widow's son gets sick and dies. God, however, used Elijah to bring that dead child to life again. He presents the son to her who is alive and well. Look finally at v. 24. The point of the chapter is that God's word is true and it can be trusted.

The Bible is a Book of promises made and promises kept.

Best of all, God promised to send a Savior. Paul in his letter to the churches of Galatia wrote of the fulfillment of that promise: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4).

Jesus promised to prepare a place for us and to come back for all those who are His. Based on God's long history of making and keeping promises, we have no reason to doubt the certainty of His return and the promise associated with His return.

We also have every reason to believe that judgment is coming upon those who have rejected Him and have chosen not to receive Him as Savior and Lord. Since God does just what He says, we can be certain both of His promises and His warnings.

Learn is the first word of the motto. There is a second.

Listen: Let's Do What God Commands

Take note of v. 3. Where did Abraham get the name Isaac? The name means *he laughs*. You might think Abraham named his son that because he and Sarah and everyone who heard about the birth of a baby to a dad who is 100 and a mom who is 90 couldn't help but laugh at the unlikeliness of it all. He gave Isaac his name because of what we read in Genesis 17:19, "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac." Abraham was simply being obedient to God. He did what God told him to do.

The obedience didn't end there. Look also at v. 4. This Abraham did in accord with what God told him in Genesis 17:10, 12-13.

There is a single word in the Greek NT that is translated as *hear* or *listen*. It is used 427 times. It is the word used in Matthew 17:5 where the disciples Peter, James, and John are enveloped by a cloud a voice speaks to them. The Voice says of Jesus, "This is My

beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.”

It is the word used by Jesus again and again in His seven letters to the churches of Revelation. In each letter, Jesus says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (John 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Are we listening for and to the Son of God? Are we listening for and to the Spirit of God? It is also the same word that is used in John 10 where Jesus taught that the sheep hear the voice of their Shepherd, and they follow Him.

We often use the word *listen* to convey the idea of obeying. When a child, a student, or an employee does not do what he or she is instructed to do, the parent, the teacher, or the boss might say, “You didn’t listen to me.”

It has been observed that during a time of war, recruits pay much greater attention to what they are being taught in basic training than recruits during a time of peace. The former possess a keener awareness that what they are learning may very well save their lives. Listening well can mean the difference between life and death.

Consider the story of Robert Kupferschmid. He was an 81-year-old with no flying experience until June 17, 1998, when he was forced to fly an airplane. That was the day that he and his 52-year-old pilot friend, Wesley Sickle, were flying from Indianapolis to Muncie, Indiana. During the flight, the pilot slumped over and died at the controls. Suddenly, the Cessna 172 single-engine plane began to nose-dive. Kupferschmid grabbed the controls, leveled the plane, and got on the radio where he pleaded for help.

Two different pilots heard the call. Mount Comfort was the closest airport; so, the two pilots gave Kupferschmid a steady stream of instructions on climbing, steering—and the scariest but most important part—landing.

Emergency vehicles were called out and ready for what seemed like a certain disaster. Witnesses said the plane's nose nudged the center line and bounced a few times before the tail hit the ground. The Cessna ended up in a patch of soggy grass next to the runway.

Pilots have a saying, “Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing.” It wasn’t pretty, but Kupferschmid made a good landing. He walked away uninjured. The inexperienced pilot listened and followed the instructions as if his life depended on it because it did.

In the same way, we should listen and obey God’s instructions and commands as if our lives depended on it because they do.

The final word of our three-word motto is the second word of the motto I referenced earlier.

Laugh: God’s Good Blessings Bring Joy

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that there are two kinds of laughter. Actually, I think there are three. There is a cynical, unbelieving kind of laughter that is expressed in the phrase, “Don’t make me laugh.” That is the kind of laughter Sarah experienced in Genesis 18. She overheard one of the heavenly visitors tell Abraham that Sarah was going to have a baby. She put her hand to her mouth and laughed quietly. The whole idea was preposterous.

If before the season began you told me that the Colorado Buffaloes, who won only one game last year, were going to run the table and win the national championship this year, I would have laughed and said, “You’re crazy.” I still would laugh and say you are crazy, but I wouldn’t laugh quite as loudly. It might be nervous laughter. That is the second kind.

While there is cynical laughter and nervous laughter, there is another. It might be called an authentic or genuine laugh. It is occasioned by the remarkable goodness of God. That is the kind of laughter found here in Genesis 21. The combined age of Abraham and Sarah is 190, and they are the proud parents of a bouncing, baby boy.

We read the words of Jesus in Luke 6:21b. He said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

God is especially skilled at moving us from a state of desperation and grief to a place of abundance and joy. Jesus claimed that He came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

I like the way the NLT renders Psalm 126:5-6. It reads, “Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.”

Laughter and joy are not targets we aim at; instead, they are byproducts of our work coupled with God’s blessings. The joy God gives even increases our productivity. We read in Nehemiah 8:10, “And do not be grieved, for the joy of YHWH is your strength.”

Sometimes children’s movies teach important lessons that can benefit adults. I am thinking of the movie *Monsters, Inc.* We have been talking about mottos, and that company had a motto: “We scare because we care.” This company supplied all the energy for the town of Monstropolis. In the movie, monsters would sneak into children’s bedrooms at night and cause them to scream. The scream would be sucked into a scream canister and converted into power.

By the end of the movie, the scream collection business was not going well, and the plant was going to be shut down. One of the monsters, however, had a bright idea. Instead of collecting screams, he decided to collect laughs. He and his friends discovered that laughs yielded much more power than screams. Fear is powerful, but joy is so much more.

As a pastor, my job is not to play on your fear. I want you to know and experience the incredible power of joy—the joy of the Lord, not the joy of the world or the joy of a weekend. That kind of joy is temporary and often leaves you feeling exhausted.

Live, Laugh, Love. It’s a good motto. Personally, I think Learn, Listen, Laugh is a better one. The secret to living life well, however, is not found in hanging a cleverly worded motto on your wall.

Instead, we need the Word of God inscribed on our hearts. That is the job of the Holy Spirit, and God promised to do that very thing. We read in Jeremiah 31:33, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” That verse is repeated in Hebrews 10.

Ask God and let God do that for you. God’s Word is far better than a motto because the power of God stands behind it, and He will help you live it.