

Foundations: Is Anything Too Hard For The LORD?

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James 1:5-8; Mark 9:15-29; Genesis 18:1-16

Our final Scripture reading today is from Genesis 18:1-16. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way-- now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread." Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way."

One of the worst insults in our culture is to call someone a quitter. It's been ingrained in us by our culture – giving up is one of the worst things you can do. We were taught that a winner never quits and a quitter never wins. When he resigned from the presidency, Richard Nixon made sure to add first that he had never been a quitter. Country musician Shania Twain made the radio with a song about a guy with all sorts of bad habits who won't give them up because, as he says, "I ain't no quitter." And despite all his bad habits, the singer stays with her man because she ain't no quitter, neither.

There's certainly biblical precedent for not giving up – Jesus taught His disciples to pray persistently without giving up; Paul taught us not to grow weary in doing good, because in good season we will reap the rewards if we do not give up. But the Bible is very clear that we should in fact quit sinning. Even the book of Ecclesiastes says there is a time to search and a time to give up. So perhaps there are the right times and places and actions to give up, and others where we should persevere.

But at the heart of it, why do we have so many quotes and thoughts about quitting? I think it's because many, many things are very, very hard to do well. How many of us had piano lessons only to quit because it became too hard – or too boring? How many of us played a sport until it just became too much for us? A well-rounded person quits doing all sorts of things that they simply can't excel at, that are too hard for them. And we have expectations for others based on how hard something is. We pretty much expect our kids to get high school diplomas. College degrees? Definitely helpful in the long term, but they aren't for everyone. Graduate degrees? Probably not, at least for most of us. Even how much we tip tends to be based on how hard it was to put together our order at a restaurant.

This brings us to one of the central concepts in today's lesson, one that we'll focus on in a few minutes. What are our expectations of God? What do we think is too hard for Him? What do we not ask of God because we think it won't be accomplished? It's a good question for us to ponder as we look at this amazing passage where God literally shows up at Abraham's doorstep. We'll get to it in a moment. First, we need to understand what it is going on here and what it says to us about how believers treat others.

From the outset, the narrator tells us that God Himself visited Abraham in person. There are three men that appear to be traveling – at the start of chapter 19, we learn that two of them are angels. The third is God. From a theological perspective, this is almost certainly Jesus before His incarnation as a human being.

Scripture says that no one has seen the Father. Moses was only allowed to see the glory of the Father from His back – as God told Moses, “No one may see my face and live.” Yet both Moses and Abraham see God face to face. This is difficult to understand before the New Testament era, but now we realize that this is Jesus bridging the gap as He always does. It is Jesus who comes and visits the camp. This is not explicit, and of course, we could be wrong about this. But the church fathers down to the reformers like Luther and Calvin almost all agreed that when God appeared to Abraham in human likeness, it was the pre-incarnate Jesus fulfilling the will of His Father even then.

But Abraham doesn't know any of this. In fact, he doesn't really know who these men are when he greets them. We might be surprised by this because he seems incredibly deferential, and he is. He bows low to the ground, speaks to them reverently, and prepares a meal for them. But none of this is terribly surprising given the context. Near Eastern and Middle Eastern hospitality is something that continues still today. When I was doing my research for the sermon, I read about visitors to the Bedouins in the late 19th and early 20th century who found themselves greeted by sheiks and tribal leaders in almost the same fashion that Abraham greeted the heavenly travelers.

But what is surprising is the lengths to which Abraham goes to show hospitality. He has Sarah prepare a huge amount of bread, enough to feed the travelers not just a meal but for a few weeks. He runs to the herd and chooses a calf for them – which was striking because at the time, meat was a rare delicacy and not standard fare. He sets out a feast before them, and he does it in record time. And while Abraham may think that something is unusual with the three noblemen, he does this out of his generosity and kindness; he does not yet know this is God visiting him.

And while this might not be our key focus of the day, it's something for us to chew on as we consider our future as CrossWay and how Jesus calls us to be His followers. *How hospitable are we?* Hospitality was expected in Abraham's culture, but not like this, not with this graciousness and speed. And can you imagine how wide Abraham's eyes must have gotten when his visitors start asking about his wife Sarah without them even having been introduced, or when the LORD says he will return the same time next year and Sarah will have a son?

It was from this incident that the author of Hebrews 2000 years later would say, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Think too of all the people in Jesus' day who had Him into their homes without realizing the King of Kings was in their midst. Some served Him graciously; others, like the Pharisees, insulted Him without providing even the basest hospitality.

Hospitality looks very different in our day. You might consider someone a close friend yet never have been in their home. Gatherings of friends happened, at least before COVID, as often at the neighborhood bar and grill as they did in houses. As many families require every adult in the household to work, there's not a lot of time to prepare for company. And as far as strangers go, we rarely have strangers come by. We don't want the local roofing company guy to knock on our door, let alone stay for dinner! And we know our guests from out of town would be more comfortable at the local Holiday Inn than on a pullout couch. Times have changed.

But the basic concepts of hospitality haven't changed at all. Welcoming someone into our lives is still essentially the same. The backdrop has changed, the places have changed, but it's still the same scenario. We choose at the grocery, the restaurant, at our workplaces, in line at the convenience store, waiting to pick up our kids from school, sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office – am I going to be hospitable? Am I going to be welcoming? Am I looking out for myself, or am I looking out for the person who might become a new friend, the person that God might have steered into my path today? And am I willing to invite someone into my life who I might not otherwise because it is the godly thing to do? This isn't a matter of putting out the fine china or having a guest room ready – it's about living life in expectation that God will bring people into our midst that need us to show His love to them.

Do you know that in the New Testament, all three of the major letter writers – Peter, Paul, and John – all specifically mention being hospitable as a trait Christians should have, particularly towards other Christians? Paul wrote to both Timothy and Titus that in choosing elders, to qualify, a person had to be hospitable. Widows put on the list for aid from the church were to be known as hospitable. This is a great big deal, and it's illustrated for us in Abraham.

The last eighteen months have been difficult on hospitality. We've finally restarted our Meal and a Movie Night and have Trunk or Treat next month. We still don't have a finalized worship location, but we want to be welcoming to those who might come into our midst. The reality is, hospitality in its everyday forms is the most effective tool for evangelism we have. Those who hear my messages may be intrigued by what they hear, they may find a presentation about Jesus fascinating or not, but our everyday lives of faithfulness, kindness, and hospitality towards others are the way that God brings new brothers and sisters into the Kingdom as they see what we have and desire the same sort of lives too.

So let's now move into the other key element of this passage – what is too hard for the LORD? When God tells Abraham that at his return, Sarah will have a son, Sarah overhears it. Now what happens next is fascinating. Sarah laughs to herself, but everything else is her thoughts. And unlike Abraham last week, her laughter about God's promise isn't one of mirth but one of bitterness and lack of faith. Honestly, her bitterness we can understand. To not be able to have children in that era was a deep and painful blow, and for this person, whoever he is, to be making these kind of statements, raises her hackles. After nearly 90 years, now she'll have a child? What nerve!

And the LORD calls her on it. He not only asks Abraham why Sarah laughed, he tells Abraham Sarah's thoughts behind her laughter. And He puts it bluntly...is anything too difficult for the LORD? At this point, it's clear that these travelers are not just special guests but God Himself along with angelic companions. Sarah lies out of fear about it, and who doesn't get that? To be told your own thoughts after you thought them? To be in the presence of the Almighty? Of course she is afraid, and of course she wants to deny her bitter laughter. But God is just like, "Oh yes you did." In the Hebrew it's just that pointed. It isn't a point of conversation or an inquiry – it's a fact.

Sarah's problem is not that she doesn't want a child; it's that she can't see that God is the God of the impossible. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:28, "God chose the lowly things of the world, the despised things, the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in His presence." He constantly turns things on their heads, accomplishing what no one else could even possibly imagine. Sarah is not yet in a place to see that. God has blessed Abraham with goods and servants and animals, but the biggest promises had yet to be fulfilled. It is not that Sarah has no faith; it's that her faith has limits at the line of what she considers to be possible. She's quit trusting God in this area of her life because it's too hard.

And this leaves us with our key concept for the day, that question that we need to mull over and answer for ourselves: *what do we believe is too hard for the Lord?* It's a more difficult question than we might think, because in our faith our first response is much like Sarah's, to say, "Oh, I don't believe anything is too hard for the Lord." But our true response might be buried deeper, like Sarah's response was, buried in bitterness or anger or regret. When we look there, we might find answers.

There are so many places that we might spot it – different for each person, but ultimately leading to a helplessness, hopelessness, or cynical resignation. I'll be candid with you today...if you had asked me thirteen years ago when we moved to Detroit if I'd be preaching on my lawn to a handful of people in person and a handful more on the Internet, I likely would have laughed at you. I look at our troubles getting a place to worship on Sunday mornings regularly and part of me says that God is chastening us, disciplining us, training us, building us up in faith, through the struggle. And part of me says, "God, can't you make this happen for us?" When some businesses reject you and others ghost you, when the best suggestions made by friends come up wanting, I want to trust, but I also wonder – is this too hard for the Lord? No, it's not. There are any number of reasons God has put us in this position. I am not privy to those. But I have to believe that if God wants to make a way for us to worship together all in person again, He will indeed find us a way.

I don't know where you find this problem in your life, but we dig deep, we can find places where we've quit trusting God. Maybe you've been waiting for a spouse for years, decades, or maybe just a good friend you can trust and rely upon. Maybe you've been hurt here, burnt by bad relationships gone sour, burnt by trusting someone only to have your business made everybody's business. Maybe your family life hasn't gone as planned. Maybe your job life has gone downhill. Maybe you're struggling with being stuck or addicted, whether to a habit you can't break or a cynical or toxic relationship you can't set aside, and it feels like it must be too hard for God to break the cycle.

Maybe you aren't sure that God can heal the hurts of your past, hurts you've brought on yourself and hurts that have been brought on by tragic circumstances and painful difficulties. Maybe you just want to feel joy and happiness again and you're not sure how God can bring that about. There are plenty of things to feel burned about. We have friends who've been jilted at the altar and friends who've suffered infertility and friends whose spouses up and left without a trace. We have friends, even some of you here at the church, who've suffered with debilitating illnesses and issues and conditions. And when it all piles on, it's easy to think, "The Lord can't fix this."

While it is true that not everything we suffer will be completely and permanently fixed in this life, we also believe that God does the impossible, and does it far more often than we give Him credit for. God is not a genie or a Santa Claus to make our every wish come true. Some things are not too hard for the LORD, but He won't do them because they ultimately aren't good for us. But many things that God has intended for us, He's intended in His timing for His purposes, so that He might be glorified through them. Nevertheless, God will accomplish them.

I encourage us all to take a thoughtful look at our lives, and then to repent of those places in our lives where we have quit trusting in God. Confess them and hand them over to God. Admit that we've made God too small in our minds. Acknowledge those places where we've laughed at God like Sarah rather than trusting in Him to deliver.

Because we really do have two choices...cynicism or contentment. We can be cynical and bitter, angry at the way that things have turned out, living in the expectation that God won't come through. Or we can live in contentment, even when God hasn't done what we've wanted on the timeline we expected, because we have hope in Jesus. We have hope in life after life, when wrongs will be set right and righteousness will be restored. We can live contentedly with what we have, knowing that nothing is too hard for the Lord and that He will come through when He feels it is best for His glory and our good.

Truly, we cannot be both convinced cynics and Christians at the same time. God breaks through all the time. The great cynic of the New Testament, Thomas, loses his skepticism when he encounters the risen Jesus and is given the offer to place his hands in Jesus' wounds. Cynical Sarah will come around in Genesis 21 – I promise. Our struggles are real and they are hard. But don't quit on faith. Jesus came so that we would have a Savior we know sympathizes with us, who lived a life far harder than ours, who though never sinning died a criminal's death that we might be forgiven. The Father who raised His Son Jesus from the dead? Nothing is impossible for Him. Let us believe it always. Amen.

