

The Journey of Faith
(8) Is anything Impossible with God?
Genesis 18:1-15
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Upon the death of Prince Albert the citizens of Wolverhampton wanted to honour Queen Victoria's late husband, so they commissioned a statue of the Prince and invited the Queen to the unveiling. She accepted the invitation and there was a great flurry of activity to prepare Wolverhampton for her visit:

“The streets were full of tradesman cleaning & decorating buildings. A grandstand to house two thousand spectators, Gas-lit illuminations and a series of triumphal arches were built along the route including a large coal arch weighing almost three tons.... ..More than two miles of festoons were made. The choicest elements in the decorations were, however, the exquisite plants, especially the fruit bearing orange trees, chrysanthemums camellias, and other flowering plants....”

Abraham had no time to prepare for a Visitor of far nobler blood than Queen Victoria. Because one day, out of the blue, the Lord God Almighty paid a visit to Abraham.

“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.”

Picture the scene: 99 year old Abraham is taking a siesta in the shimmering midday desert heat.

All of a sudden, he notices three men standing nearby in the sun! (Only “Mad Dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun!” wrote Noel Coward, everyone else stays in the shade!) These strangers are in great need! Two of them are angels and one is the Lord himself; but all of them appear as only human beings.

Angels often take on human appearance in Scripture, so that they can speak to humans. And God himself also sometimes takes on a human form in the Old Testament to speak to men and women. We call these appearances theophanies. If God appeared to human beings *without veiling his glory*, no-one could bear the sight, for no-one can see God and live. (Ex. 33:20) Some people believe that these divine theophanies were pre-incarnate appearances of the Son of God. In other words,

before Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, he, the Son of God, took on a human form from time to time and appeared, as here in Genesis 18; but we can't, sure.

We know that Abraham is completely unaware of the heavenly origin of these visitors to start off with, because the writer to Hebrews encourages all of us to show hospitality the way Abraham did, with the motive that perhaps one day if we do, we also may “entertain angels *without knowing it*” (Hebrews 13).

Drowsy Abraham opens his eyes and sees three men “knocking on his door.” Let’s watch what this man of faith does when faced with strangers in need. Abraham—an old man in the hottest part of the day— springs into action. First he gets his visitors water to wash their feet—standard hospitality in dusty climes where dust gets between your toes. Second, he sits them down in the shade of his tree, protection from the burning sun. Third, he provides them with what can only be called a banquet—two kinds of drink, milk and a thicker drink called curds; bread—12kg of flour enough to bake over 20 of our large loaves—for three visitors? And then a choice calf prepared for meat.

Ageing Abraham, runs around with a sense of urgency, asking his wife to bake mountains of bread here; running to his herd and personally selecting a calf and directing that it be prepared there; and then once everything is prepared bringing the gigantic meal to his guests—who at this stage he only recognizes as human beings—standing by to serve them personally, though he has a hundred servants who might have done that for him. This is extravagant hospitality extended to complete strangers! to which we must return in a moment.

What happened next? Well the main reason these heavenly visitors came to Abraham's humble tent was to strengthen Sarah's faith! It is only perhaps days ago that the Lord had told Abraham, “*I will bless Sarah and surely give you a son by her.*” (17:16) And while Abraham believed this amazing news—that he a man of 100, his wife a woman of 90 would have a child in the usual way— Sarah was not there yet. Her faith lagged behind, she had big doubts, bordering on disbelief. And so God in his mercy, came down from heaven to strengthen Sarah's faith. Inside the tent, out of sight, she was eavesdropping on the conversation. “*Where is your wife Sarah?*” the visitors asked Abraham. How did strangers know Sarah's name? This is the first moment it dawns on Abraham that someone special was in their midst. “*There in the tent*” replied Abraham.

The inspired author gives us the plain biological details of the case before he tells us how Sarah reacted, so that we can understand her reaction, which was to doubt God's promise and to laugh. How did the visitor know what Sarah said since she "laughed to herself"? Abraham is learning fast that this visitor is God himself.)

What was Sarah's spiritual problem? She limited God to the narrow confines of human experience and earthly possibility—old people don't have babies, do they? The Lord's rebuke takes us to the heart of her disbelief: "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*"

Sarah thinks that some things are just too difficult for God to do, like enabling an elderly couple to have a child in the normal way. That is impossible, can't happen. And this disbelief is going to prove an obstacle to the promise being fulfilled, for if Sarah doesn't believe a child can be born to an old couple she won't co-operate in the means by which this child will be born! So God comes down from heaven to help her.

Sarah also realises that since the visitor knew her inner thoughts, he must be divine; she is frightened and embarrassed by her disbelief and did what is all too easy to do when cornered – she lied, "*I did not laugh.*" And then the gentle rebuke from the Lord, "*Yes, you did laugh.*"

Abraham has already believed, and now Sarah believes—we know that because in a year's time a little baby was born, with what better name that "He laughs" or in Hebrew, Isaac? It's time to draw out three vital lessons from these verses.

#1 The Grace of Hospitality

What a wonderful example Abraham is of lavish and the bountiful hospitality the Lord desires of all his people!

Hospitality, according to Scripture is the befriending or welcome of strangers. In the NT the word hospitality is "philozenos" is made up of two words, PHILO—which means love or befriend and ZENOS which means the stranger. Hospitality is going out of our way to befriend, including welcoming into our homes, total strangers. (We sometimes define hospitality as inviting friends or family, and while that is a good thing, it's not Christian hospitality. Hospitality is inviting those who we do not know, strangers.) And hospitality, brothers and sisters, is a Christian duty, did you know that? "*Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*" (Romans 12:13) "*Show*

hospitality to one another without grumbling. “ (1 Peter 1:9). Elders, present and future, especially must have a reputation for hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8), but every believer is called to exercise the grace of hospitality. Perhaps this is new to you, that showing kindness to strangers is a Christian duty.

I fear, I sense, that during the pandemic some Christians have pulled up the draw-bridge and retreated into their castles! We’ve got out of the habit! And so today I want to challenge everyone who calls himself or herself a follower of Jesus Christ to take seriously the duty to welcome strangers. The motive Hebrews 13:2 gives is this, “*Do not neglect (it’s possible to neglect, pout to one side, omit, forget) to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*” (Hebrews 13:2) One day, for all you know, you may invite someone into your home who proves to be an outstanding encouragement to you! Those of you who practise hospitality will no doubt have experienced this joy! You have been so blessed by the folks who have passed through your home.

I can remember speaking to a missionary when I was in my late teens who had been invited into my home by my parents, I have forgotten his name, but he took a real prayerful interest in me and my future, and I credit him, under God, for being the first one to place in my mind and heart a desire to serve the Lord in a full-time capacity. Wouldn’t have happened if my parents hadn’t shown hospitality to strangers.

We can all make excuses for not showing hospitality, can’t we? The pandemic for sure has been one, but there are many others: “My house is too small,” “I am too busy,” “I am too young,” “I can’t cook,” “I live on my own,” “My house is too messy,” “I am too old,” “With all my responsibility to members of my own family I don’t have time to show hospitality to strangers.” Abraham could have made excuses— I am too old, I am resting, this is the hottest time of the day can’t be running around and cooking.

When I was a student in Liverpool, living in a one-room bedsit, with only a two ring baby belling cookers, I often cooked for folk on a Sunday. I was privileged to grow up in an obedient Christian home where hospitality was the norm, I didn’t know otherwise, our house was like a railway station filled with strangers all week long.

Ask the Lord how he wants you to obey his command. It might start by speaking to a stranger in the coffee hall as well as to those you know. Could you not invite someone into your home for a meal, once a year? Twice a year? Once a month? It need not be

on a Sunday. If you live on your own, club together with someone else and cook a meal together and welcome a stranger. Work it out yourself, talk about it, pray about it; the Lord will show you. You will be blessed!

#2 The Cure for Disbelief

In the second place, we find here God's cure for disbelief. Sarah's spiritual condition is serious. I have called it disbelief because it is perilously close to unbelief, which is a sin. How does the Lord help Sarah? How does he help us?

God takes our disbelief seriously. So seriously that he comes all the way down from heaven to cure Sarah's serious doubt! If you have serious doubts, know this, God takes them seriously.

Secondly, God is compassionate towards those who doubt. His rebuke is gentle "Yes, you did laugh." We're not to judge those who struggle with doubts but be compassionate to them: *"Be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 1:22)*

Third, God reminds Sarah of his power: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" It's a rhetorical question expecting a "no!" *"Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17)*. This is Sarah's big problem, she is limiting the power of God! And fourthly,

God repeats his promise, his promise, his Word. She's already heard it, verse 10, "Sarah your wife will have a son." But God says it one more time, verse 14, "I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

May I ask you, what promise are you struggling to believe at the moment? Know this: God has never once in the history of the world failed to keep a promise: *"Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled." (Joshua 21:45)*

One writer put it so well: *"It may seem to you hard, to the verge of impossibility, that God should keep his word in the conversion of that loved one or friend for whom you have warrant to pray from 2Peter 3:9 "not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance." Hard to vindicate your charter from aspersions with which it is being fouled. Hard to keep your evil nature in the place of death; and to cast down your*

evil imaginations bringing every thought captive to Christ. Hard to make you sweet and gentle, forgiving and loving. Hard to produce from you the fruits of a lovely and holy nature. It may be hard; but it is not too hard for the Lord. For with God all things are possible.”

Remember the power of God; Remember his promises and Hold God to his promises in prayer!

The Grace of hospitality, the cure for disbelief, and here in this chapter we have the Gospel in nutshell. Genesis chapter 18 is filled with the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

#3 The Gospel in a nutshell

Why is kindness to strangers so precious in God's eyes? Because through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God welcomes total strangers into his kingdom! Hospitality is God-like and Gospel-like.

And just as God came down from heaven to cure Sarah's disbelief, so the Son of God came down from heaven in the Person of Jesus Christ to rescue us from our unbelief, and with chords of love to draw us to himself by suffering death on a Roman cross and rising triumphantly from the dead!

If you are a stranger to God, filled with doubts, then today the Lord comes to you through his Word and offers you the gift of faith. May you receive that gift from him, today.