

“TOO HARD FOR GOD?”

In the previous chapter, God appeared to Abraham and promised to give him a son through his wife Sarah. That promise was then confirmed by the giving of the covenant sign, circumcision. In tonight's passage, we see something like a mirror image of that, as the promise that God makes in the second part of the passage is confirmed by the meal that God shares with Abraham in the first section. Here we see God paying Abraham a visit, just as he did in the previous chapter. This time, however, the promise is given in Sarah's hearing, and it is Sarah's response to God's promise that sets the stage for the main thought of this passage. In this text, the Lord tells us that he expects his covenant people to believe what he promises, because faith sees that nothing is too difficult for God.

Though it has been tempting for interpreters through the centuries to see the three men who visited Abraham as a manifestation of God's Triune nature, the text itself provides little support for this interpretation. God is indeed a Trinity, but that is probably not what is being conveyed by the appearance of the three men here. One of the men is identified as Yahweh in verse 10, but the other two leave to go to Sodom in the next section, and they are referred to as angels in chapter 19. This suggests that these men are three distinct beings. One is God himself, or at the least the angel of the Lord, who is so closely identified with God in the Old Testament, while the other two are angelic messengers.

While readers are clued in on the divine identity of Abraham's visitors from the start of the passage, Abraham himself was not aware of this at first. This is the clear assumption of Hebrews 13:2, where this passage is alluded to with the command: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Abraham was entertaining angels "unawares." His gracious hospitality was certainly the appropriate way to respond to guests as great as these. But he did not know who they were, at least not at first. His warm welcome serves to illustrate his godly character. Hospitality was an important virtue in the ancient world. Travelers depended upon the hospitality of strangers. In fact, in the next chapter, one of the indications of the extent of Sodom's wickedness is the extremely inhospitable welcome that the men of the city gave to the angels who were staying with Lot. By way of contrast, the fact that Abraham gave his guests such a royal welcome, and this even though they arrived at an inconvenient time of day, during the midday siesta, serves as a sign of his righteousness.

One of the most striking things about this passage is that it depicts angelic beings, and even God himself, as eating. There are many things about this that we cannot understand, but the text clearly indicates that they did eat. God enabled these three spiritual beings to appear to Abraham in actual bodily form. They really ate the bread, the meat, and the curds that Abraham set before them. Abraham himself could have testified to that. There was one fewer calf in his herd after their visit. Now, why do you suppose God did this? Certainly not because he, or the angels who accompanied him, were hungry. Instead, he did it to further confirm the covenant that he had established with Abraham. In the

ancient world, it was common for the making of covenants to be accompanied by the sharing of a meal between the parties who were entering into the covenant. It is not very difficult to understand why they would do this. There is a degree of intimacy in sharing a meal with another person. Have you ever dined at a restaurant where the tables were crowded so closely together that it felt like you were actually dining with the people at the table next to you? I suspect that even the most extroverted person feels at least a little bit uncomfortable in such situations. It is awkward. There is something unnatural about eating with strangers. To share a meal with another person is to have fellowship with that person. The fellowship may be good, bad, or somewhere in between, but there is no getting around the fact that it is a part of the dining experience. This was something that was more readily recognized in the ancient world, and it is why table fellowship came to have such an important symbolic value in that world. Sharing a meal with someone signified acceptance and affection. It was a way of saying that you were on good terms with someone. We can see this carried over into the New Testament in the instance where the scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. [see Lk. 15:2] The fact that God was willing to accept Abraham's hospitality was very significant. It was a sign of the fellowship that existed between them. It was a confirmation of the fact that God really was with Abraham.

After the meal is over, Abraham's guest gets to the point of his visit, asking, "Where is Sarah your wife?" God wants Sarah to hear the promise that he had given Abraham in the previous chapter, and he wants her to hear it from his own lips. It is unclear whether

Abraham had neglected to tell her about what God had said or if he had told her but failed to convince her. Whatever the case, her response when she hears God say that she will have a child within a year exposes her unbelief. Sarah laughs at God's Word. We can understand why she would be inclined to do so. Not only had she been barren for her entire life, but she was now past menopause. It was no longer physically possible for her to bear children. Nevertheless, her laughter, which she tried to cover up, was exposed by the Lord as a sign of unbelief. And he gently rebuked her for her unbelief with these words: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Here is one of the great sentences in all of Scripture, a declaration of the power of Almighty God, a statement of the fact that there is nothing that is impossible for him. It would be accurate to say that he is a God who specializes in doing the impossible. That is the reason why he waited until Sarah was past her childbearing years to give her a child. It is the reason why he so often chose to make promises to barren women in the Old Testament. It is one of the reasons why he caused his only Son to be born of a virgin. All of this serves as a testimony to the most fundamental truth about the gospel: it underscores the fact that God's plan of salvation is a plan that can only be accomplished by him. For man, redemption is an utter impossibility. But not for God. With him, all things are possible.

Unfortunately, this is a message that people in our culture are incapable of hearing. And the reason why they are incapable of hearing it is because they have been indoctrinated with the idea that there is nothing that is impossible for them. If a person thinks he is capable of doing anything he wants to do, there is nothing impressive about a

God who claims to be able to do all things. Consider the trite sayings that are so often bandied about: “Anything is possible”; “If there’s a will, there’s a way”; “If you set your mind to it, you can accomplish anything”; “The words ‘I can’t’ are not in my vocabulary.” These notions also saturate our popular culture. Several years ago there was a song called “I Believe I Can Fly.” And more recently there was an animated movie about a rat who achieved his dream of becoming a gourmet chef. What rubbish! If that singer really believes he can fly, then why not jump out of an airplane without a parachute? If rats really can prepare gourmet meals, then why not look for your next fine dining experience behind a dumpster in a back alley? Now I realize that people do not actually believe these stories. They do not take them literally. But they believe the message that is being conveyed by them. The people in our culture may not believe in much, but there is one thing that you can be sure that they believe in: people believe in themselves.

And this is where this text in Genesis confronts us. It tells us in no uncertain terms that there are things that are impossible for us. It reminds us that we are finite, that we are limited, that we are bounded. Sarah did not need to learn that lesson. She knew that it would be impossible for her to bear a child. She knew her limits. Her laughter may have exposed her unbelief, but it also demonstrated her awareness of the magnitude of what God was promising. God said, ‘You are going to have a child Sarah,’ and Sarah simply could not believe it. It was far too good to be true. How could this be? Could such a blessing really be lying ahead for her? In a sense, this is what the Bible is all

about. It is about God promising to do that which we know by experience to be impossible. And the test of faith is how we respond to such promises. Can we believe it? Can we really trust God to do the impossible? At first, Sarah struggled to do so, but eventually she did believe, as the letter to the Hebrews tells us when it says, “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.” [Heb. 11:11] Sarah’s laughter exposed her unbelief, but it also indicated her awareness of the magnitude of what was being promised. I wonder how often we reflect upon the greatness of what God has promised us in the gospel. Do we hear the gospel as something that is too good to be true? Are we ever tempted to laugh when we consider the extravagant promises made in the gospel?

There is a sense in which every believer in Jesus Christ can truly say, as Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” [Phil. 4:13] We are still finite, but because of Christ, the impossible has been made possible for us. We have been declared righteous by a just and holy God. We ourselves are being made holy. We are overcoming sin and the world. We have faith that enables us to persevere through life’s many trials. We have an eternal inheritance being kept for us in heaven. For man, such things are truly impossible. But not for God. Nothing is too hard for him. Jesus himself said, “all things are possible with God.” [Mk. 10:27] This is the battle cry of faith. Saints throughout the centuries have won great victories because they believed this truth. It was what caused David to stand up to Goliath. It was what led Elijah to confront the prophets of Baal. It was what enabled the apostles to refuse to be

silenced by the Sanhedrin. It was what emboldened Martin Luther to stand firm before the pope and his minions. God's power is sufficient. There is nothing that he cannot do.

But faith cannot stop there. It will do me no good to believe that God has the power to help me if I doubt that he has the desire to do so. How can I know that this all-powerful God will help me? How can I know that it is safe to entrust my soul into his hands? The same way that Abraham and Sarah knew: because God came down to them, God spoke to them, God established communion with them. Isn't this exactly what Christ has done for us? It is what he did when he first came into this world. And it is what he continues to do today when he comes to his people through his Spirit. Abraham found assurance in God's willingness to share a meal with him. But consider what Christ does for us. He comes to us as the host, the perfect host, offering his own body and blood to be our spiritual food and drink. It was by that blood that he sealed his covenant with us. And it is because of that blood that we can trust him to do everything he has promised us, even when those promises seem too good to be true.