

## **Willing and Able?**

### **Genesis 18:1-15**

How often have you been through the wringer in life and wondered whether God was going to do anything about it? How often have you asked yourself, in the most honest moments of reflection, whether God was really able to do anything to help you? And how often has that hanging question over whether God could really do anything led you to the darker pondering over whether there really is a God like the one the Bible talks about after all?

In the quiet moments in life's storms, questioning God's ability to do something in your life leads very easily to questioning God's existence. Into that experience that many of us wrestle with at different stages of life, God speaks in Genesis 18:1-15.

But before we get to all that, we start where scenes in the Bible often start - around the meal table. In v.1, we read that the Lord appeared to Abraham at the place he was living. This is an insight for us as readers as to what is going on, we don't have any indication yet that Abraham recognises who his visitor is.

Or should I say, visitors? Throughout this chapter, there's a bit of chopping and changing between references to a group of three men, and this other identity of the party speaking with Abraham and later Sarah as 'The Lord.' The language keeps changing between singular and plural.

It is a strange dynamic, and it carries on in the passages to follow that we'll see in the coming couple of weeks. This party of three is, in some shape or form, The Lord God and His entourage of messengers. We meet them here at the start of chapter 18, on their way to inspect the city of Sodom to see first hand the reality of people's lives and conduct there.

This party of God, or God's messengers, or both; is going to be in for a rough reception in chapter 19 - but more on that next week. In contrast, here in Genesis 18, Abraham provides for these as yet unidentified guests with all the hospitality he can muster.

Hospitality was a big deal in this ancient Middle Eastern culture. Providing for the physical needs of your guests, and providing shelter and protection to them, was culturally of absolute importance. It was more Glasgow than Edinburgh. It was more, 'Come in for your tea!' than, 'You'll have had your tea.'

So Abraham's actions in hurrying to prepare a meal for these guests were not unusual. vv.6-7 show the urgency of the matter in Abraham's mind; the words 'hurried,' 'quick,' and 'ran' are all there. As well as being urgent, he is lavish - he has Sarah bake bread with three seahs of flour. My Bible's footnote tells me that means baking 22 litres of flour.

Now, other than the silver locks and piercing blue eyes, I'm no Paul Hollywood - but even I know, that's a massive amount of bread, more than this dinner party can possibly eat. More than that, Abraham goes to order a whole calf be prepared for this meal.

Ancient Middle Eastern Custom dictated that you brought out more than you offered in the first place (a bit like any lady from the Western Isles who offers you a cup of tea will invariably actually bring seven cakes for you as well). But even at that, Abraham is going above and beyond expectations here, providing lavishly as he prioritises hospitality.

I'm commenting in this way on these first eight verses as a reminder to us of the priority of hospitality in the way we are to live as God's people. The same God, our Lord Jesus Christ, took care of His disciples' physical needs in washing their feet and told them to do likewise. The same God gave us a symbolic meal as the regular sign we are to share in for our life together following Him - the Lord's Supper, as we looked at a couple of weeks ago.

The same Lord talks about life with Him, and especially eternal life with Him, being about *Him* preparing a place at *His* extravagant feast for *us*. In Psalm 23, which we sang earlier on, David rejoices: 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.'

Hospitality brimming over beyond full is God's priority towards us, and His eternal destiny for those who accept the invitation. So how far is it our priority towards one another? And - as with Abraham in this passage - to the strangers who cross our path?

Providing hospitality is in the character of God, and it is in the DNA of the church as we saw in Acts 2 in our September family service. We will have different roles to play in this area: Some of us lack money, some of us lack physical space, some of us lack time - some of us lack all three! But how far are each of us using what we do have of these things?

Some of us are particularly gifted in hospitality, and others of us not. Those who are gifted in this area will *need* to find an outlet for it; and perhaps tonight's stewardship evening (where again we gather over food) will provide an opportunity for discovering that.

But here's the bottom line: Hospitality is a priority for God and His people. Hospitality to one another, and hospitality to the stranger. And when you are someone who has been given sufficient resources for this, like Abraham, then it's a lavish, too-much-on-the-table kind of hospitality that makes the other feel richly blessed.

*Question: How do you offer hospitality to other people?*

By v.9, Abraham's guests are enjoying their meal. I don't know what you talk about when you're having people over for a meal - but a meal with guests is often where life gets shared and significant things get discussed. Still, nothing would have quite prepared Abraham for what his guests brought up in conversation in v.10.

Revealing Himself now as the Lord God speaking through this party of visitors, God suddenly declares to him, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.' What follows in the passage narrates exactly the kind of thing that often happens in the dynamic of God's relationship with human beings.

In v.10, God makes a promise that seems incredible. In v.11, the narrator takes a moment to remind us of just why this promise seems not only incredible, but impossible. Both Abraham and Sarah are getting very old now, and we're told quite specifically that Sarah has been through the menopause.

In the face of a promise like that and the reality of the situation that has been spelled out, what is Sarah's reaction in v.12? It is to laugh, and express disbelief in the promise. Can you blame her? Would you have been any different? Are you, in fact, any different when it comes to God's promises to you?

Here's how God reacts in turn in v.13. *He questions* human disbelief. And then *He reaffirms His promise* to them. We think of our experiences of doubt and disbelief as times where we are questioning God. And we are - that's

what Sarah did in v.12 - but are you aware when you go through such a time that God is also questioning you back?

Human disbelief and doubt is, after all, very questionable. Disbelieving a God who has always done what He said He would do in Abraham and Sarah's life is a questionable thing to do. In our case, where we are in the unfolding of history, disbelieving a God who is prepared to give His own Son to die in our place to deliver every promise to us, is a questionable thing to do.

Here in this exchange between Sarah and Abraham and the Lord God though, God focuses on this: Disbelieving that God will do something seemingly impossible which He has declared He *will* do is very questionable.

God's simple question to them is this: 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' The word translated as 'hard' here refers to something that is beyond human possibility - 'supernatural' might be a good word to use. 'Is anything too supernatural for the Lord to do?'

It's a rhetorical question, of course. The answer God is looking for in our intellects and in our hearts is, 'No. Nothing is too hard for the Lord.'

I wonder how you react to that? Inside, are you going, 'Amen! Praise God!' Or is something in you churning because, as you hear those words, that situation that you've been praying about which God hasn't changed for months or years just comes jolting back to the forefront of your thoughts?

I'm going to pause to give you a moment of silent reflection. This is a moment for you to speak with God, and tell Him how you honestly feel about His declaration that nothing is too hard for Him. Come and face God for a minute, but don't forget to bow.

*Silent Reflection - 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'*

There's another passage where God uses this phrase, and it's in Jeremiah 32:27. It's in a chapter where Jerusalem is on the brink of being invaded by the Babylonians, just as God had announced through Jeremiah. Destruction and punishment was certainly coming, and Jeremiah knew it, though Israel and her leaders deluded themselves and wouldn't hear it.

But God calls Jeremiah to buy a field. Buy some land, make an investment in this place that is about to be turned over and from which Jeremiah and all God's people are going to be turfed out.

And he's called to do it as a prophetic sign of another promise that God makes in that chapter - that although God's people would be punished and exiled, the day would come when God would bring about the return of God's people to Jerusalem.

That seemed like a difficult thing to believe and cling on to with an army surrounding the very walls of the city. But it was a promise God had made to Jeremiah and to all God's people there, so it was to be believed. Because, as God put it again in that conversation, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' No.

That story is a reminder not only that God is *able* to do all things, but that what He actually *wills* to do is not always comfortable and smooth. In Genesis 18:1-15 we're reading about the happy and welcome promise that Sarah will get a child. But just one chapter later we'll read about the less fluffy but no less certain promise that God will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for the saturation of sin in their lives.

When it comes to God's dealings with us, the question is not what God is *able* to do; but what He is *willing* to do. Jesus' life and speech and action makes this really clear to us, as we'll see in a few snapshots from Mark's gospel.

In Mark 2:40-42, a man with leprosy speaks to Jesus like this: 'If you are *willing*, you can make me clean.' Jesus reacts, filled with compassion we are told, like this: 'I am *willing*. Be clean!' And immediately, supernaturally, the leprosy is cured.

In Mark 9:21-27, a desperate father whose son has been foaming at the mouth with demonic possession, asks the *other* question of Jesus: 'But if you *can do anything*, take pity on us and help us.' 'If you can?' asks Jesus in response. 'Everything is possible for him who believes.' Jesus goes on to heal the boy completely with the same supernatural power.

Do you notice how Jesus reacted differently to the two men? To the one who asks, 'Are you *willing*?' Jesus has no questions to ask in return; He operates as if this is the normal way for people to approach Him. To the one who asks, 'Are you *able*?' Jesus responds with the same questioning of human disbelief in God's ability that God responds with in Genesis 18:14.

The point is this: When we ask God to intercede in some way, we are being taught to assume that He absolutely *can* do it if He wants to. The only question is whether He is *willing* to do it.

Now for those of us who are struggling with God over something He's not doing, that doesn't take away all of our issues. If we get as far as accepting and confessing that 'nothing is too hard for the Lord,' then instead of wondering if He's as powerful as He says or if He really exists; your questioning goes down different avenues - does God care? Is He just? How can He *let* this happen?

*These* are the questions that strugglers in the Bible express - strugglers like Job and Jeremiah - so these are the questions worth exploring in a relationship with God. Job and Jeremiah, though, *never* questioned God's ability, and in fact they often expressed His sovereignty and power. It's *because* those things were a given that they struggled so much with God's will, actually.

This is all to point us towards letting God's Word teach us the right questions to ask of God. If anyone wants to meet up and talk over their questions, please do be in touch - and please take me seriously. If you're fine, that's great. But if you're not, I do care, and I want to listen and to pray with you.

Whilst you're wrestling with your issues, here's something challenging to consider: God might just know what He's doing. A commentator called John Walton says this about Genesis 18:14 - 'When we face difficult circumstances, we cannot claim this verse as confidence that God *will* change our circumstances.'

He cites the example of Joni Eareckson, who as a teenager in 1967 took a dive that led to her body being paralysed. She was encouraged to believe that God could miraculously heal her, since, 'nothing is too hard for God.' As she wrestled this one out in her faith, she began to find the difference between believing that God *could* heal her, and that He *would* heal her.

Over the decades that followed, Joni Eareckson could testify to how God did incredible things through *His will*, which was *not* to change her difficult circumstances, but to transform her as a person through them, to help her discover her gifts and to use them, to bless countless people through her ministry and to give disabled people a spotlight and platform of representation that would never have happened otherwise.

I pray for miraculous healings for people. I have every confidence that God can do it. But I am always open to His saying no - which He usually seems to do, it must be said. God does not always change our difficult circumstances, and you'll hear something of that in Robert and Denise's testimonies. But God does bring about His good and wise will, which again I think you'll hear from these two.

If you think your circumstances are tough, try this snapshot from Mark for size, and see if you can't learn from this remarkable prayer. In Mark 14:36, listen to the words and the train of thought that Jesus expresses to God the Father concerning His *own* life and struggles. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane in the hours before He is arrested, stripped, tortured, spat on and crucified to take the punishment for my sin and yours...

“*Abba, Father,*” He said, “*everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*” Can you pray *that*? Have you prayed *that*? I invite you to discover the transformative power of learning from Jesus on that one.

To be fair to our passage today, we should finish on a different note. Because Genesis 18:1-15 is not about humans asking for something and being told no. It is about God giving them something wonderful that they never asked for and could never dream of. God does not always say, ‘I will do it’ when we ask things of Him, although often He does. But sometimes, God also breaks into your life to say ‘I will do it’ about something you never even thought of.

The promise in this chapter is for Abraham and Sarah. They will have a child. That's God's promise to *them*, not you and me. But God's character and way of working are to be learned from here, because these things are always consistent throughout the Bible and throughout our lives.

What does God promise *you*? The promises of God to us which are sure and certain and not speculative, wishful thinking on our part are the ones God has declared to us in His Word. Grace breaks into your life when you believe the promises of God in Christ.

Plenty of people can say that they never asked Jesus to die for them, or to break into their life and change everything, but God did it anyway. Dealing with the ultimate human problems of guilt for sin and of death; God said ‘I will do it’ and sent Jesus to die on a cross and rise to life.

He was as good as His Word; these things have happened, and the promise is that everyone who depends on Jesus Christ *is* forgiven completely, *does* have a new life, and *will* live forever with God beyond death.

Now, just as Sarah could not believe God's break-in-to-her-life promise of unsolicited blessing; some people have trouble believing these promises of God to us. '*Really?* I'm *forgiven* for that cloud in my life that I've been so hung up about? *Really?* I have a new start and I'm innocent in God's eyes? *Really?* I'm going to live *forever* after I die?'

Now, honestly - do you find this stuff hard to believe? And is that a question of whether God would be *able* to deliver on these promises to you, or whether He would be *willing* to deliver on these promises to *you*? The good news of the Bible is, folks, that God says that He is both willing and able.

*Silent Reflection: I am forgiven. I am a new creation. I will live forever.*