



Lesson 9 | A Faith that Bargains with God

Genesis 18:1-33

God does not need our help. After all, He is all-powerful and can do whatever He wants. Yet God desires to partner with humanity as He carries out His will. God could save anyone He wanted to without our help. Yet God chooses to use us to reach people. God could do whatever He wanted without any of our prayers. Yet God chooses to work in answer to our prayers. It's an eternal mystery how the God who needs no one chooses to partner with broken, sinful humanity in carrying out His purposes, but that is exactly what the Scriptures teach. The story from Abraham's life that we will study today shows us one of the first times that God consciously involves humanity in the planning and executing of His will.

Why do you think God wants to involve humanity? Why not simply do everything Himself?

What are some of the other ways that God includes us in His work?

The chapter we have come to in Genesis is perhaps one of the strangest and most incredible of all the chapters we have read so far. God appears to Abraham, but this time He comes in the form of a regular man who eats a meal that is prepared for Him. After this, He tells Abraham once again that Sarah will have a child, then He decides to tell Abraham what He is about to do. The chapter ends with a long debate back and forth between Abraham and God about whether Sodom should be spared, and how many righteous people there would need to be in the city for that to happen. While all this might seem strange at first glance, a careful look at this passage will show us incredibly important lessons about faith.

Abraham Shows Hospitality (18:1-8)

In Ancient Near Eastern culture, showing hospitality to strangers was considered an important part of life. When strangers came around, they were supposed to be welcomed and their basic needs were to be met. When Abraham sees guests coming his way, however, he goes above and beyond what would be expected of him in showing kindness to these strangers. A careful study of this passage shows how impressive Abraham's hospitality really is.

What are some of the ways these verses highlight the kindness of Abraham in welcoming his guests?

Abraham's Immediate Welcome

The first thing to notice is when this greeting happens. Genesis 18:1 says that Abraham is resting in the heat of the day, when it would have been customary to take a break. When he looks up and sees travelers, however, he immediately jumps up, runs to them, bows before them, and greets them. If you picture a 99-year-old man running toward a group of strangers, it's almost a humorous picture. Yet this is how the Bible depicts Abraham's welcoming of his guests. After this, we read the word "quickly" three times and "run" once more to hammer home the point that Abraham does not want his guests to wait.

Abraham's Extravagant Welcome

But what he offers his guests seems a little over the top as well. He tells his guests he will get them a morsel of bread, but then has Sarah prepare a large portion with some of the best flour.¹ Not only that, but Abraham goes through the trouble of having a delicious calf prepared for his visitors, along with curds (KJV "butter") and milk. This would have been a big meal, and Abraham has it prepared as quickly as possible before waiting politely as his guests eat.

Hospitality and the Believer

This passage might seem a little harder for us to apply, since we have very different customs. Yet as we seek to understand and apply this passage, there are two things we should note. 1) We are commanded to show hospitality, even if it looks different today, and 2) God chose to include to Abraham in something much bigger while Abraham was engaging in "ordinary" obedience.

The New Testament looks to the example of Abraham as one who showed hospitality and ended up entertaining angels without even knowing it (Hebrews 13:2). The word for "entertain strangers" is *philoxenia*, which means "love of strangers" and referred to the ancient practice of hospitality. While we may not be expected in American culture to immediately give a meal to everyone who knocks on our door, we should seek to carry out the practice of hospitality in whatever way we can. This can mean inviting people over to our homes, but it can also mean seeking to show friendliness to strangers wherever we go (and especially at our church). The goal is to show a loving and welcoming spirit to all people, especially people we don't know.

Why don't we invite people into our homes more often?

What are some ways you can engage in the practice of hospitality?

But beyond the issue of hospitality is the fact that God blesses Abraham and includes him while Abraham is diligently doing what honors God. When God finds Abraham, He finds Him doing right by welcoming

¹ The exact amount for a "measure" (Hebrew *Seah*) is debated, but it would seem to be a large amount. Three Seahs would apparently be at least 3 full portions, if not much more. This was more than a quick bite.

strangers and treating them with great respect and honor. The New Testament teaches that if we are faithful in the little things, God will also make us ruler over much. Greater opportunities of service to God normally come to those who are already being obedient to what they know God would have them to do.

What are some of the “little ways” we can be faithful to God, day in and day out?

God Promises Sarah a Son (18:9-15)

God has already told Abraham that Sarah will have a son in Genesis 17, and Abraham’s response was to laugh. Now, God will reiterate that promise within earshot of Sarah, and she will laugh. Not surprisingly, Isaac’s name means laughter – a gentle reminder that what God did was so impossible even Abraham and Sarah thought the idea sounded laughable.

God’s Promise concerning Sarah

Sarah was not a part of the conversation between Abraham and these mysterious guests, but she was able to hear from inside the tent. Once again, God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child, and He again lets Abraham know that this will be soon, within a year’s time. This was clearly said for Sarah’s benefit, as her actions become the focal point of this episode of the story going forward. It’s likely that Sarah knew what God had told Abraham, especially since it involved a name change for her from Sarai to Sarah. But now God wants Sarah to know directly from him that this will happen.

Sarah’s Response

Sarah responds by laughing in her heart at the preposterous nature of the promise. She is too old; Abraham is too old; this just never seems like it is going to happen.² Her response shows that at this point, she doesn’t believe this could happen. When the visitors point out that she laughs, Sarah becomes nervous and denies it, but it would seem this confrontation is enough to push Sarah to faith. As with Abraham, Sarah’s eventual response is faith, as Hebrews 11 makes clear (v 11). While at first Sarah couldn’t bring herself to believe, when God firmly declared what His will was, Sarah apparently believed God to be faithful and trusted Him to do what He said.

How does God confront our unbelief and push us to greater faith in His promises?

God’s Firm Assurance

God responds to Sarah’s laughter differently than He did to Abraham’s by asking two rhetorical questions. The first points out that Sarah laughed, and the second asks if there is anything too hard for God. Of course,

² There is some debate as to what the “pleasure” in verse 12 refers to. It is not clear if Sarah means that she will not have the pleasure of being a mother, or if she is suggesting that she and Abraham are too old to be intimate together and have a child.

we all realize that the “correct” answer is to say “no, nothing is too hard.” But are we truly ready to believe that? This does not mean we will get whatever we want, but it does mean that when God promises to do something, all the power of an infinite God stands behind that promise to accomplish it. God may not do everything we would like Him to do when we would like Him to do it, but we can be confident He will do everything He has said He will do.

Why do we sometimes doubt that God will do what He said?

God Shares His Plan with Abraham (18:16-22)

What happens in this section is truly remarkable. The creator God, who knows the end from the beginning, is bringing Abraham into the inner circle of what He is about to do. Not only that, but this appears to be an invitation to include Abraham in the decision-making process, as the following dialogue makes clear.

God’s Plan

We begin to understand a little bit more about the nature of this visit in these verses. We know from verse 1 that somehow from this group God was appearing to Abraham. Now we see that this group is headed over to visit Sodom to see if the report that they “heard” concerning Sodom and the cry of injustice was accurate. While of course we realize that God is all-knowing, His plan here shows that He was demonstrating tangibly to humanity that He wanted a first-hand look at all that was going on.

What other story in Scripture depicts God as going to investigate what humanity was up to?

What are the parallels and what are the differences between these accounts?

In Genesis 19, we see that two of the angels head into the city, which means the third was standing back and talking with Abraham. Yet it is not an angel that Abraham dialogues with, it is God Himself! Here we have a Christophany, an Old Testament appearance of Jesus before His incarnation.

God’s Rational for Including Abraham

God decides that He will tell Abraham His plan, and He gives two reasons why He wants to do so. First, God knows that Abraham will become a great and mighty nation. But second, we read this interesting phrase where God says, “I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord” (Genesis 18:19). The grammar here is a bit tricky,³ but the idea seems

³ The Hebrew word for “that” (*lema’an*) in the phrase “that he will command his children...” gives the purpose or the result of something. The same word is used in the second part of the verse to give the result of the obedience of Abraham’s family (“so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him”). For this reason, many translations take the normal Hebrew verb “know” to here mean something more specific like “choose” – “I

to be that God has a special relationship with Abraham and desires to see Abraham lead his family well, so God wants to bring Abraham in to be a part of what He is planning. God is here treating Abraham as a partner, not just a menial slave that must do whatever he was told.

Can you think of other passages of Scripture where God brings humans in so that they can participate in the planning and executing of the divine plan?

How do we reconcile God's sovereignty and the fact that God allows His plans to be affected by human input?

Abraham Intercedes for Sodom (18:23-33)

Once the two angels have left to investigate Sodom and see if it is bad as they have heard, the third mysterious visitor stays behind to discuss things further with Abraham. What follows is a barter, back and forth, that might seem odd to us but is the proper way to do business in a middle eastern culture.

Abraham Appeals on Behalf of the Innocent

When Abraham hears the news that Sodom might be destroyed, his mind and his heart no doubt go back to his nephew Lot. In fact, we know this is a burden on Abraham's heart because when God does later rescue Lot, Scripture points out that it was due to God thinking of Abraham (Genesis 19:29). But Abraham does not go to God and ask Him, "Please don't destroy that city, my nephew lives there!" Instead, he comes and asks God about the righteous that might be living in the city. He asks God not to punish the innocent with the guilty. Abraham shows a concern, not just for his own family, but for all those who might be affected unfairly by the judgment that would sweep everyone away.

How can we have a concern for the innocent and for justice today?

Abraham Appeals to the Character of God

The ultimate rationale for Abraham's pleading, however, is not just that innocent people might die. Ultimately, his appeal is based on the character of God. It would not be fitting to destroy a large group of innocent people along with the wicked. As a child might say, "That's not fair." As Abraham points out, that would be unjust. There is an interesting play on words in the Hebrew behind the phrase "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). Here the word for "Judge" and "right" are based on the same root word for justice. In other words, Abraham is asking "Shall not the One bringing justice [i.e., the Judge] in the whole earth do justly?" Abraham bases his argument on the very character of God. God is a God of justice, therefore He cannot act unjustly.

One important thing to realize about this passage is that Abraham is not trying to "twist God's arm" so that God does something that is out of character for Him. Abraham is instead reminding God of His

have chosen Abraham so that he will lead his family..." For other examples where "to know" means essentially "to choose" see Jeremiah 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5.

character and calling for Him to practice that character consistently. Abraham is appealing for his nephew, as anyone would expect. But his appeal is based on God's character, rather than an appeal for God to violate His character.

Can you think of other examples in Scripture of those who ask God to do something by appealing to His character?

How can we appeal to God today by reminding Him of His character?

Ultimately, of course, Abraham's appeals are unsuccessful as there are not even 10 righteous people living in the city. But this incident of Abraham's meeting with God and bartering with Him gives us a powerful example of God's desire to work with humanity to accomplish His purposes. As those who are part of the family of Abraham (Galatians 3:7-8), we are called to participate with what God is doing in the world. This means praying that God's will be done, appealing to God to be faithful to His character, and seeking to be God's agents of change to those all around us. We should marvel at the fact that while God doesn't need us, He chooses to use us. Although He knows better than us, He listens to us. And although His will is going to be done, He will do it through us.