

## Genesis 18:1-15

### *Doubting God*

I know some of you here today have traveled to Europe for vacation or business. Also, a number of you have lived in Europe during military assignments. When you do the tourist thing in Europe, there's one thing you see a lot of. Cathedrals. Who could imagine that there were so many cathedrals in Europe. Unfortunately not to many of those cathedrals hold services any more, or if they do there's just a few people who show up.

Cathedrals in Europe generally look similar. The ceilings are lofty, the interior is dark, and the pulpit is way up above everybody's head.

Everything about a cathedral is designed to make you feel small and God to seem big. On the one hand that's not a bad thing.

The Bible says, God is mighty, God is exalted by His power, God is great. It says God is *the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy*. God Himself, says, *I dwell in the high and holy place*.

He's the one before whom *the nations are as a drop in a bucket, And are counted as the small dust on the scales*. Isaiah 40:15 The prophet asks who else *has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, Measured heaven with a span And calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales And the hills in a balance?* Isaiah 40:12

A few years ago Sandy and I stopped off for a couple of days in Paris on our way to India. While we were there we toured the cathedral of Notre Dame. It took 200 years to build is 425 feet long and has towers 275 feet high. Notre Dame has 176 massive stained glass windows and an organ with 7800 pipes. And let me tell you, when you walk in there you're really get snapped out of this, "I'm so important," and "Life's all about me," mindset we tend to have. All of a sudden God's is real big and we're real small.

The truth is, God is way bigger than any of us even begins to imagine. Those cathedrals are presenting a reality that we would do well to understand and remember. God is so far above us in character, strength, and wisdom that we don't begin to measure up to Him.

We need God to forgive us. That's why Jesus Christ died on a cross. We need God to

direct us with His wisdom. That's why we have the Bible. We need God to work in our lives. That's why we pray.

But there's another side to God's character that doesn't come across as well in those massive buildings. That's the very personal side of God.

So while it's true that He's the Almighty, it's also true that God is described with terms like friend, father, shepherd, and husband.

### **Open you Bible to Genesis 18 page 15**

As we begin chapter 18 this morning I want us to see that...

#### *I. God Is A Personal God Who Makes Personal Promises*

#### **Read verse 1**

There are some extraordinary passages in the Bible. This one definitely makes the top 10 list.

Remember, this is around 1900 BC. There weren't too many God followers around. Most people were idol worshippers who were clueless when it came to Jehovah God.

Out of this idolatrous culture God calls Abraham. Even Abraham's father worshipped idols. But God calls Abraham to leave his home and travel to the land of Canaan, or Palestine as we would call it today.

God makes an unconditional covenant with him. In this covenant God promises him that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, that his descendants would own the land, and that the nations would be blessed through him.

The rest of the Bible is the story of Abraham's descendants, the Jewish people, and in particular, one descendant, Jesus Christ.

At this point Abraham is around 100 years old and his wife Sarah's, biological clock has stopped ticking altogether. But God had promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a son together.

This child would be a miracle child. God's covenant was one of grace, not works, so he would have to be born through supernatural intervention.

So here's Abraham, doing what any other smart nomad in the region would be doing, sitting in the shade in the heat of the day. He's just sitting there resting when all of a sudden God shows up.

### **Read verses 2-5**

I told you this was an extraordinary passage.

Some people have seen the trinity in this because God is clearly identified and there's three individuals. But now remember, the Bible is it's own best interpreter. Look at the first verse of the next chapter. **Read 19:1**

One of the three speaks as God in chapter 18 and two are clearly said to be angels in chapter 19. That should settle it for us.

What's unique is that the Creator of all the universe, the judge of all the earth, the king of righteousness stops in for a visit.

### **Read verses 6-8**

One of the hallmarks of eastern culture is hospitality. All this bowing, foot washing, and cooking might seem exaggerated to us but it was common curtesy in Abraham's day. In fact it's still that way in most of the Middle East.

One of the reasons Ossama Bin Laudin has been so hard to catch is the power of Afghan and Pakistani culture.

You show hospitality to a stranger who is on the road and once you do you are obligated to protect him.

I don't know that Abraham really understood who the two angels were but it seems like he has stranger number 3 figured out.

God is a personal God. He knows us by name. He has the hairs on our head numbered. He's promised never leave us or forsake us. He might not show up tonight for dinner but here's how well He knows us...

**Turn to Psalm 139 page 554**

## **Read verses 1-4**

God is so intimately involved in our lives that there's no detail that He's not aware of.

At times He might seem far off. There might be lonely times when we feel like God's forgotten about us. The problem is, we've gotten everything completely backwards. Not only is God a personal God who hasn't forgotten us, He knows every minute detail of our lives.

He knows every thought before we think it. God knows every word before we speak it.

Does that unnerve you? Does that make you just a bit apprehensive when you think that God knows all your thoughts. Does it trouble you when you read here that God knows what's down in your heart?

Psalm 139 isn't here to trouble us, it's here to encourage us.

## **Read verses 13-14**

God formed us in our mother's womb. God created us who we are. God knows us more intimately than we know ourselves and He loves us with a perfect and personal love.

See why Psalm 139 should encourage us?

If I knew everything that's ever gone on in your thoughts I'd have trouble loving you. You're not always so loveable, are you? And if you knew everything I've ever thought you wouldn't feel very loving toward me either.

But God knows it all and He still loves us with a perfect love. He loves us so much that He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, to a cross to pay for our sins. He said, *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.* John 15:13

Not only that but Jesus encouraged His disciples with this. He said, *No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.* John 15:15

Abraham was referred to as “The friend of God” three different times in the Bible. Through Jesus Christ we’re made friends of God too. We’re friends of God who get to claim all His precious promises of peace, protection, joy, and eternal life.

That’s an amazing love. **Back to Genesis 18**

For Abraham, this meant a personal visit from his personal God.

*I. God Is A Personal God Who Makes Personal Promises*

*II. Our Response To God’s Promises Does Not Determine Their Truth*

**Read verses 9-12**

Dr. Lee Berk (who is a psychoneuroimmunologist) and fellow researcher Dr. Stanley Tan at Loma Linda University School of Medicine, has produced carefully controlled studies showing that the experience of laughter lowers serum cortisol levels, increases the amount of activated T lymphocytes, increases the number and activity of natural killer cells, and increases the number of T cells that have helper/suppressor receptors. In short, laughter stimulates the immune system, off-setting the immunosuppressive effects of stress.

Reportedly a good laugh can help: reduce stress, lower blood pressure elevate mood, boost immune system, improve brain functioning, and help protect the heart.

So laughter is a good thing. Unless your laughing at God. Then it increases stress. Case in point, Sarah.

Sarah had been listening behind the tent flap. She heard everything the stranger said. When he got to the part about her having a baby she couldn’t help it. She didn’t laugh out loud. That would have been rude and culturally unacceptable. She laughed within herself.

Now last week we saw that Abraham had laughed too when he heard this promise. The difference was, Abraham laughed with joy. His was an excited laugh.

Sarah laughed because she thought the whole thing was a joke. Sarah looked at her physical condition and Abraham’s age and thought, “No way.”

She laughed, but she laughed at the promise of God, not with with the promise of

God. She laughed because she doubted God.

It's one thing to say, "I don't see how God's promise can be fulfilled. My faith is weak but I'm going to ask God to strengthen my faith. I'm going to take Him at His word."

That's a faith that's honest. That's a faith that admits human frailty but trusts anyway. God honors that type of faith. It isn't the strength of our faith that honors God it's the fact of our faith.

What Sarah was saying wasn't, "I don't see how this can happen." She was saying "God can't do this." She was just doubting God.

A couple of things about this type of doubting God.

1. Doubting God is sin. God had already included her in the promise. Chapter 17:16 *I will bless her and also give you a son by her.* What Sarah was doing was saying that God is a liar. Failure to believe the promises of God is to call God a liar.

2. Doubting God leads to other sins. Look down at verse 15. *Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh."* She didn't say, "You're right, please forgive me." She just lied.

When we sin all we're doing is opening the door to more sin. I can't tell you how many people have said to me, "I don't know how I got to this point in my life. I couldn't have even imagined being this sinful."

They got there step by step. Calling God a liar is like taking a giant step downward.

3. Doubting God is serious stuff. Hebrews 11:6 *Without faith it is impossible to please (God).*

It doesn't matter what else we have going for us. It doesn't matter how many times we show up in church. It's irrelevant how much we give, or how many classes we teach, or what an incredibly nice guy we are.

We think what we do is the real important thing and faith is just a side issue. God says it's the main issue. In fact, **Look at I John 5 page 1084**

**Read verses 10-12**

God says that believing Him is so important that if we don't believe the gospel we go to hell. Forgiveness for our sins, eternal salvation comes by faith alone. That's the way God eliminates any human works and receives all the honor.

But back in Genesis 18 we get to see God's mercy in spite of Sarah's doubt. Remember, our response to God's promises doesn't determine their truth.

Salvation and eternal life are conditioned upon our faith. But the promises are determined by God. **Read verse 13**

Abraham is probably thinking, "Why are you asking me, God?" Or maybe he's thinking, "Oh no. Sarah's really blown it now. God's surely going to change His mind."

God could have said to Sarah, "Since you haven't believed me I'll use someone else to fulfill My promises."

Just remember, our response to God's promises doesn't determine their truth. God had already said the promised Messianic line that would eventually lead to the Savior, Jesus would come through Abraham and Sarah. Regardless of Sarah's lack of faith it would happen just the way God said it would.

Have you ever tried to talk with someone about heaven and hell and had them say, "I don't believe in hell." Like that settles it. They don't believe in hell so there's no hell.

They don't believe in hell so ultimately what you have to say about Jesus really doesn't matter because if there's no hell we don't need a savior.

But remember, our belief or disbelief doesn't determine truth. This is from the New York Times. September 15. "Peter Schlisko, aged fifty-four, an inmate of the Sprlgside Home, thought he could fly, and this morning jumped from the roof. He was very badly injured in a 60 foot fall.

The doctors do not believe that he will recover."

For whatever reason Mr. Schlisko was convinced he could fly. In fact, he was so sure he jumped off a 6 story building. The thing is, his sincerely held belief didn't determine what was true.

His belief was ultimately impacted by the truth, not the other way around.

*I. God Is A Personal God Who Makes Personal Promises*

*II. Our Response To God's Promises Does Not Determine Their Truth*

*III. God Is Faithful To Us, Even In Times Of Doubt*

### **Read verses 14-15**

*Is anything too hard for the Lord?* James Boice writes, "This is one of the great rhetorical questions of the Bible. It deserves a personal response from everyone who hears it."

So here's the bottom line. Is there any problem in your life too big for God? Is there any difficulty that's too much for God to handle? Is there anything that's got you worried that would cause God to lose sleep?

Maybe your area of doubt is God's forgiveness. Maybe you've been coming to FCC for a while and you've heard the Good News over and over again.

You believe what the Bible says about your sin. You accept what the Bible says about God's judgment on sin. You've heard about the cross where Jesus died for your sins. But somehow you just can't seem to believe that you're included.

Somehow you think your sins are just too bad for God to wipe clean at the cross. Here's the question. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*

Here's what the Bible says: 1 Corinthians 15:3 *For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* Galatians 1:4 *who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age...*

1 John 2:2 *And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*

1 John 4:10 *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

If nothing is too hard for God, how come your sins are the exception?

Maybe though you've trusted Jesus Christ for forgiveness, you know He died for your sins but you just can't seem to hang on to the assurance you're really forgiven.



Maybe your afraid that tomorrow you'll do something and you'll loose your salvation.

You know that the Bible says, *For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."* Romans 10:13 You might have even memorized Jesus' words in John 5:24 *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.* You know the verses. You know the promises. But you're still doubting God. *Is anything too hard for the LORD?* Isn't the Good Shepherd able to keep His sheep?

God is faithful even in times of doubt. But the other side of that is God wants us to grow and mature in our faith so the times of doubt grow fewer and farther between.

Sarah doubted God. She laughed to herself and God exposed her lack of faith. But He didn't do it to destroy Sarah, or to bring her down. She was part of the Messianic line. She was an ancestor of The Lord Jesus Christ.

Sarah was such a key person in the plan of God. And rather than beat her down with guilt or destroy her with shame, God even used her failure and doubt to produce character and faith in Sarah's life.

Look what happens. **Turn to Hebrews 11 page 1069**

Hebrews 11 is called the great faith chapter. It lists significant men and women of the Old Testament and shows how they lived by faith. And right in the middle of people like Noah, Moses, and Abraham we have verse 11.

**Read verse 11**

Think about what we've read about Sarah so far.

**Turn back to Genesis 16.** This is 13 years before she laughs at God's promise.

**Read verses 1-3**

At that point Sarah was clueless about the power of God. Then in chapter 18 she laughs in unbelief. But God didn't stop working on her heart.

Did you know God loves us just the way we are? We can't earn His love, we can only receive it. None of us deserves the love of God.

But along with that, God loves us too much to let us stay where we are.

Sarah couldn't earn the love of God. Nothing that she did or didn't do changed God's love. But God in His love had a plan for her that included growing in faith.

When Isaac is finally born she laughs again. **Flip up to Genesis 21:6 . Read verse 6**

That wasn't a laugh of doubt. That was a laugh of delight at her miracle son.

That faith started growing after God rebuked her. She got the message. God was faithful even though she struggled with doubt and in her struggle she finally began to see the hand of God.

*By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.*

Of all the religions in the world, only biblical Christianity presents us with a God who is personal and knowable.

He was personal to Abraham and Sarah, and He's personal to us. The key is faith.

Remember, it isn't our response that determines truth. It isn't our faith that makes something true. Our faith has to be directed towards the truth that God's already revealed.

God's truth clearly shows us that we're sinners before Him. God's truth clearly shows that He sent Jesus to be the substitutionary sacrifice for our sin. God's truth clearly shows that *everyone who believes is justified from all things*. Acts 13:39

Sarah struggled in her faith just like we all do at times. Sarah learned the lesson though. *Is anything too hard for the LORD?*

How about you? Have you learned that faith lesson? Or I guess a better question would be "Are you learning it? Are you in the process that leads to the point where you can say *"God has made me laugh?"*

God has made me rejoice in who He is and what He's teaching me in my life.