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NOTHING TOO DIFFICULT FOR GOD

Genesis 18:9-15

By

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Genesis Lesson 38

Nothing Too Difficult For God Genesis 18:9-15

One of life's embarrassing moments is when you're in a crowd and you laugh at something which no one else laughs at. About all you can do at that point is to turn your laugh into a cough to try to cover it up. At those moments, you wish you could become invisible.

Have you ever thought about how embarrassing it would be if your thoughts were uncontrollably linked to your vocal cords, so that whatever you were thinking was broadcast for everyone to hear? Instead of, "I'm pleased to meet you," you would blurt out, "Oh, no! I'm going to miss the kickoff if I talk to him now!" Instead of, "Great sermon, pastor," as you go out the door, you would hear yourself saying, "I thought it never would end!"

You can identify, then, with poor Sarah. She laughed when God did not. She managed to conceal her laughter, but that doesn't work with the Lord, who knows the very thoughts and intentions of our hearts. When the Lord said, "Why did Sarah laugh?" she denied it and said, "I didn't laugh." But the Lord knew differently and said, "No, but you did laugh." It wasn't a laughing matter to the Lord.

The problem was that Sarah's laughter reflected her unbelief in the promise of God. Unbelief is a more serious sin than most of us realize. To doubt God's promise is tantamount to calling God a liar. It is to say that I know better than the eternal Creator. It is to demote God from His place of sovereign power and to promote myself over Him. God doesn't take kindly to unbelief.

All of us struggle, at different levels, with the problem of unbelief. Perhaps, like Abraham and Sarah, you've prayed for something for years, but God has not answered. Life is passing you by while you wait. You struggle with doubt as you often wonder whether He is hearing your prayers. You may have suffered some tragedy, such as the loss of a close loved one, and you wonder, "Where was God when this happened?" Maybe it's a family prob-

lem that has dragged on for years. You wonder, “Why doesn’t God do something? Why doesn’t He answer?” Sometimes I’ve struggled with doubt when I’ve needed some small thing that would be easy for God to provide, something which I knew would further His work, and yet in spite of my prayers, God did not answer.

The Lord’s word to Sarah speaks to all who struggle with unbelief (and that’s all of us): *“Is anything too difficult for the Lord?”* The absurdity of the question gives it its punch. How could anything be difficult for the Lord, who spoke the universe into existence? And if nothing is difficult for Him, then how can I persist in my unbelief? God goes for the jugular. He makes us confront our doubt. This story of Abraham and Sarah waiting all these years for the promised son teaches us an important spiritual lesson:

God brings us to the end of our strength so that
we will trust in His ability to do the impossible.

By nature we all trust in ourselves most of the time, and in God only when we really have to. If we trust in ourselves, then we glory in ourselves. But God’s purpose is that we glory in Him alone. So through various means He graciously brings us to the place where we have no hope except in Him, so that we trust in Him and He gets the glory. The first step in this process is ...

1. God brings us to the end of our strength.

After the meal, the guests ask Abraham, “Where is Sarah your wife?” (18:9). It’s an interesting question, since they know the name of Abraham’s wife without any mention of it by Abraham. Later the Lord knows what Sarah is thinking. And yet here He asks, “Where is she?” Why does He ask this? I think the Lord asked so that Sarah, hearing her name spoken, would eaves-drop on the conversation to follow. Abraham had already heard the promise concerning Isaac (17:15-19). Surely he had told Sarah. But she was struggling with doubt. So now the Lord comes so that Sarah can hear it straight from His mouth and believe.

Note that the Lord begins by promising that which was humanly impossible: “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son” (18:10). We are informed, “Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind

him." The Lord couldn't see her from where He was standing. We're also reminded that Abraham and Sarah were old, and that Sarah was past the age of childbearing (18:11). It was humanly impossible for her to bear a son. She was already through menopause. In her natural strength, she was barren.

That's where the Lord wants us in our relationship with Him, to recognize our weakness so that we will trust His strength. Many people mistakenly think that the reason they struggle in their Christian lives is that they're too weak. That isn't so. The reason we struggle in our Christian walk is that we do not recognize our own weakness for what it is, and so we trust in ourselves rather than in the Lord. When we see our weakness and cast ourselves on the Lord's strength, then we're strong. God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who are helpless. When they helped themselves, Abraham and Sarah came up with Hagar and Ishmael. When they were helpless, God gave them Isaac. Hudson Taylor used to say that when God wanted to open inland China to the gospel, He looked around until He found a man weak enough for the task.

This applies to salvation. One of the main things that keeps people from God's salvation is the notion that they can do something to contribute to the process. They think that if they clean up their lives a bit, or if they go to church or give money or whatever, they can qualify for salvation. But Scripture is clear that Christ didn't die for decent folks who have worked hard to put their lives in order. Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6). You can't receive the salvation He offers until you see yourself as a sinner, quit trying to save yourself, and cast yourself upon His free and sovereign grace, crying out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" Salvation is not a matter of human ability combined with God's ability. Salvation is totally of the Lord.

But our problem is that even after we've trusted in Christ for salvation, we mistakenly think that we're competent to live the Christian life with just a little help from the Lord. And so the Lord has to bring us again and again to the point of helplessness, where we acknowledge our own insufficiency and depend His all-sufficiency. This is illustrated many times in the Bible.

Take Hannah (1 Samuel 1), for instance. She was another barren woman who desperately wanted to have a son. The Lord wanted her to have a son, too. So do you know what He did? He closed her womb! That's a strange way to give a woman a son! Her husband's other wife, Peninnah, who was not a godly woman, had many children. How frustrating for Hannah, crying out to the Lord for a son, to see Peninnah, who didn't seek the Lord, with many children!

But that's how God works with His people. He wants us to see that without Him, we can do nothing. If Hannah could have had children on her own, like Peninnah, she wouldn't have needed the Lord. And the Lord wasn't getting any glory from Peninnah and her brood. She could get along quite nicely by herself. But when Hannah finally had Samuel because the Lord gave him to her, she sang a song of praise and gave Samuel back to the Lord to serve Him.

God wants each of us to see that our situation is humanly impossible without Him. That way, we'll look to Him for His power, praise Him when He delivers us, and He will be glorified through our lives. But sometimes, instead of trusting Him with our impossible situations, like Sarah, we doubt Him. What is the source of our unbelief?

2. Unbelief stems from a human perspective that leaves God out.

There is a difference between Abraham's laughter (17:17) and Sarah's laughter, as seen in the fact that the Lord did not rebuke Abraham for laughing, but He did rebuke Sarah. Abraham's laughter may have stemmed from his being startled or astonished at what the Lord had just told him. He had it fixed in his mind that Ishmael would be the son of the promise (as 17:18 shows). But apparently the Lord, who knows our hearts, knew that Abraham was not doubting God's promise to give them a son through Sarah. He was just surprised by what God had said.

But Sarah's laughter was different. It stemmed from her unbelief which stemmed from looking at things from a human perspective. She was past the age where she could bear children. Besides, she had been barren even when she was younger. Remember,

Sarah's comment in 18:12 represents what she thought to herself, not what she said out loud. The gist of it was, "I'm too old even to enjoy sex with my husband, let alone get pregnant and bear a child!" Adding up all the human factors, she concluded that she could not in any way bear a son at age 90. But she left out one crucial factor in her calculations: the power of the omnipotent God to do that which is humanly impossible!

We're so quick to calculate from our human perspective how God is going to be able to do His work. Before Jesus fed the 5,000, He asked Philip, "Where are we going to buy bread, that these may eat?" (John 6:5). Here were about 20,000 hungry people (including women and children) in a remote place. The disciples had already told the Lord their solution: "Send them away, so that they can buy bread" (Mark 6:36). But the Lord tested Philip by asking, "Where are we going to buy bread?" It was a humanly impossible situation.

Philip should have said, "Lord, apart from Your power, there is no way that we can come up with enough bread to feed this crowd." But what did Philip do? He got out his calculator and determined that 200 denarii (200 day's wages) worth of bread wouldn't even be enough. So what? The disciples couldn't have scraped together 200 denarii if their lives depended on it. But that's how we think when we look at things from a human perspective. We calculate, but we leave God out of the calculation.

Perhaps you're facing an overwhelming problem right now. Maybe it's the salvation of a loved one, and you've thought, "There's no way this person is going to come to faith in Christ. He's just too far gone in sin. He's been addicted to drugs for years. He's been drinking and lying and living for self, with no possibility that he's going to change." No human possibility! But is anything too difficult for the Lord? With God, all things, including the salvation of the chief of sinners, is possible! Factoring God into any situation suddenly changes the equation!

As I said, we tend to shrug off our unbelief as if it's no big deal. But God doesn't do that. There's a theologically staggering verse in Mark 6:5, which states that Jesus could do no miracle in His home town of Nazareth, except for healing a few sick people. The next verse adds that "He wondered at their unbelief." Even though God is sovereign in His almighty power, He has chosen to

limit His working through our faith. So He views unbelief as a serious sin, and He confronts it in His people, just as He confronted it in Sarah:

3. The Lord confronts our unbelief so that we will see things from His perspective.

The Lord's confrontation got Sarah to face her sin and to look at things from His perspective. Isn't it interesting that the Lord first confronted Abraham about Sarah's sin (18:13)? The Lord viewed Abraham as spiritually responsible for his family (18:19), so He asked him, "Why did Sarah laugh?" Again, how ironic that the Lord who in His omniscience knew that Sarah, behind Him inside the tent, laughed (the text says she did it silently, "within"), asks, "Why did Sarah laugh?" He wanted Abraham and Sarah to think about that question. The answer was, "Sarah laughed because she didn't believe the Lord."

As I said, unbelief is sin because in effect it calls God a liar and me the truthful one. It says, "I know better than the omniscient, all-powerful God, what He can do or not do!" It implies either that God doesn't know what He's talking about or He isn't able to do it. So the Lord asks a second question, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" Is there anything you can think of which would make the Lord exclaim, "I'm not sure I can pull it off!"?

Unbelief is also serious because invariably it leads to other sins. Sarah denied that she did what the Lord says she did: "I didn't laugh." The text adds that she was afraid. But how foolish to think that we can hide our sin from the Lord who knows every thought in our heads! The Lord didn't let Sarah off the hook. He confronted her with the truth: "No, but you did laugh" (18:15). He got her to face her sin of unbelief and to think about things from His perspective with the rhetorical question, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?"

The most loving thing the Lord can do is to make us face our sin of unbelief: "No, you did doubt Me. Admit the truth yourself, because I know your heart." Then He lovingly gets us to consider things from His almighty perspective: "I could never be in any situation which would be too difficult for the Lord to work."

Think about it: Is there any problem you're facing that is too hard for God? Is there a family problem that just got so bad that the Lord would have to say, "Now it's too tough for Me to handle"? Are any of your circumstances outside of His control? Do you suppose He's in heaven, wringing His hands, and saying, "Oh no! I didn't expect that to happen! I can't deal with it now!?" Can you dare to think that there is some sin which you have committed or some awful habit to which you are enslaved which the Lord is not able to forgive and deliver you from? Is anything in your life too difficult for the Lord?

A woman once came up to the famous Bible teacher, G. Campbell Morgan, and asked, "Dr. Morgan, should we pray about the little things in our lives, or only the big things?" In his British manner, Dr. Morgan drew up and said, "Madam, can you think of *anything* in your life that is *big* to God?"

The Lord's rebuke brought Sarah to faith. Hebrews 11:11 states, "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised." In fact Sarah received more than faith. Her reward was faith, laughter, and the Lord's commendation (as James Boice, Genesis [Zondervan], 2:156-157, points out).

4. When we trust God to do the humanly impossible, He rewards us.

Because she faced her sin of unbelief and thought about things from God's perspective, Sarah received the *faith* to conceive Isaac. Faith is a gift God is ready to give us the moment we will turn from our unbelief and see Him for who He is: the God for whom nothing is too difficult.

Also, Sarah received *laughter*. Her laughter of doubt (18:12) was replaced with the laughter of joy when Isaac was born (21:6). In fact, Isaac's name means "he laughs." Since that was the name God gave the boy, it means that God wanted to give Abraham and Sarah the right laughter of His blessing in place of the wrong laughter of doubt. God has a way of turning our sin, when we repent, into that which brings praise to Him and joy to us.

And Sarah received *commendation from God*. In 1 Peter 3:6 the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to use Sarah as an example of a holy

woman who submitted to her husband by calling him "lord." The only place in the Bible it is recorded that Sarah called Abraham "lord" is in Genesis 18:12, right as she was laughing at God's promise. The Lord, in His grace, looked beyond Sarah's doubt and picked out her submission to her husband and held it up as an example.

In the same way, the Lord is gracious, ready to forgive us and meet our every need when we turn from our unbelief and trust in His mighty power. He may not give us an instant answer. As with many of those in Hebrews 11, the great chapter on faith, we may die without receiving the fulfillment of His promises this side of heaven (Heb. 11:13, 39). But that doesn't undermine the faithfulness or power of our great God, the God with whom all things are possible. We may not understand His ways and the reason for His delays. But we dare not doubt His goodness toward His chosen ones or His power to fulfill His purpose with them in His time and way.

Conclusion

Jeremiah the prophet was a godly man who faithfully spoke God's word to a disobedient people who rejected both him and his message. For years he warned them of coming judgment if they did not repent, but they didn't want to hear it. They mocked him, threw him in a muddy pit, and listened to the false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear, that God wouldn't judge them for their sin. Finally, just as Jeremiah had warned, the powerful Babylonian king Nebuhadnezzar came and besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah was thrown into prison by the wicked Jewish king Zedekiah because he was predicting a Babylonian victory.

In that bleak situation, a strange word came to him from God. The Lord told him to buy a field from his cousin because he was the closest relative with a right of redemption. This would be like telling someone to buy a house in Sarajevo when it was under siege. It was obvious that the country was about to fall to a foreign king, who would confiscate all property. So you would be throwing away your money. But God told Jeremiah to buy it as a testimony of the Lord's faithfulness to His promise to restore His people to the land. So Jeremiah obeyed God and handed over the precious little money he had to purchase this field. In that context Jeremiah

prayed, "Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You" (Jer. 32:17). The Lord confirmed Jeremiah's prayer by answering, "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?" (Jer. 32:27).

If God has you in a humanly impossible situation, it is to bring you to the end of your own strength so that you will trust in His ability to do the humanly impossible. You may not ever see the answer in your lifetime. But you can trust in Him and give glory to Him, knowing that His Word of promise will stand, and that He has not forgotten His promise to you. In Genesis 18:10, the Lord says to Abraham and Sarah, "I will *surely* return to you" God's Word to us is always *surely*, even when circumstances shout, "No way!" Remember God's question, "Is anything too difficult for Me?" and trust Him to do what is humanly impossible. May He bless you as you wait on Him!

Discussion Questions

1. What would you tell someone who said, "I want to believe, but I just don't have the strong faith you have"?
2. How can we know whether God's delay means "no," or whether we should keep seeking Him for the answer we desire?
3. Sometimes Christians say that we need a certain amount of self-confidence. Is this biblically sound? Why/why not?
4. What is the hardest thing you've ever had to trust God for? Why was it so difficult?

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