

## BELIEVING OR BLUFFING GENESIS 18:1-14

Then the Lord appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant."

They said, "Do as you have said."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes."

And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" So he said, "Here, in the tent." And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.)

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have

grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” And the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord?

At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.”

There is a man who lives at 314 Clinton Ave, in the city of Metropolis. He has a sturdy build, black hair, and wears glasses. He grew up on a farm in Smallville Kansas, but he hails from the planet Krypton.

When the laws are obeyed and the city is at peace he works as a newspaper reporter at the Daily Planet with his friends Jimmy and Lois - but when the bad guys take to the streets with their diabolical schemes, mild-mannered Clark Kent ducks into the nearest phone booth and emerges as the greatest comic book superhero of all time - the legendary, **Superman**.

*“Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound... it’s a bird, it’s a plane – no, it’s Superman!”*

Yet Superman has a *fatal flaw* - an Achilles heel - a chink in his armor – there’s one substance that will sap the strength right out of him. It’s a green, radioactive mineral found on a distant planet... called *Kryptonite*.

If I asked you, *“Is there anything too hard for Superman?”* We’d all say, *“Yes! He can do **almost** anything, except escape the deadly grip of Kryptonite!”*

It seems to be true of all our Super Heroes, that as powerful as they are, they all have a *lethal liability*.

If they were totally invincible the plot would be too predictable... the story would lack suspense.

Besides, we humans are so conscious of our own limitations it's hard for us to imagine anyone totally invincible! We all have our kryptonite - our besetting sins - our fatal flaws. We all have our weaknesses.

That's why when we draw up a Super Hero he has to have at least one insurmountable defect.

There is though, one Superhero who is *totally invincible*... for whom nothing is impossible! And He's not *legendary*, but *living*. He's not *fictional*, but *factual*.

You don't learn about His exploits in a comic book, but on the pages of Scripture, and in real life today!

Abraham learned firsthand what the Bible teaches us all... *there is nothing - no nothing - too hard for God!*...

And most Christians will nod in agreement when we discuss God's omnipotence. "*Sure, God can do anything,*" but do we really believe that statement?

Let me ask it another way, *do we live as if it's true?*

All too often we worry, and doubt, and wonder what we'll do if God doesn't come through. We view our own *personal plot* as unpredictable - our outcome uncertain.

We live in such needless suspense all because somewhere, deep inside we're afraid that somehow God might fail us. We act as if God had some fatal flaw that He's been hiding - *that God has His kryptonite*.

This was Sarah's attitude when the Lord came to renew His promise of a child. Sarah was 90 years-old when Abraham and the Lord Himself sat down for dinner under the trees of Mamre. Sarah was in the wintertime of her life - Abe was 10 years her elder.

One day, three men approached their tent. Verse 1 prefaces the story by pointing out that one of the men was the Lord - probably the pre-incarnate Christ. Yep, the baby born in Bethlehem had been to Earth before!

Around the year 2200 BC, the Lord Jesus and two angels came to Abraham's tent on a hot, summer day.

Sarah knew God is Almighty - nothing is impossible for Him! Sarah was a believer. She believed the stories of creation, and Noah, and Babel. Any other time, she'd be happy to declare her faith in God's omnipotence, and in the certain reality of miracles...

*That is until she was confronted by the bizarre nonsense of **her** having a child! So she laughed. She chuckled inside. In her heart the old girl mocked God.*

In Genesis 18:12 we're told, "**Sarah laughed within herself...**" But the Lord hears secret snickers.

He asked Abraham, "**Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?'**" Then the visitor asked again, and I'm sure it was loud enough for Sarah to hear... "**Is anything too hard for the Lord?'**"

**In the days of Jeremiah** the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian army. The sacking of the city was imminent, but God spoke to Jeremiah, and told the prophet to buy a tract of prime real estate.

Jeremiah's purchase was the most ludicrous financial investment of all time! In a few days all the property around Jerusalem would be possessed by the Babylonians. God was asking Jeremiah to purchase land He would never occupy! *Why waste the moo-la?*

In Jeremiah 32:17 the prophet is bewildered. He prays, "Ah, Lord God!... You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for you... **(but)** "you have said to me... "buy the field for money..." yet the city has been given into the hand of the Chaldeans."

Jeremiah recognized the truth that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. *Nothing is impossible for God.* But when the prophet finishes his prayer the Lord questions him with his own words...

We're told in verse 27, "Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. *Is there anything too hard for me?*"

God will see to it that one day the Jews will retrieve their land, but does Jeremiah believe God's word to the extent of buying the property even when he sees no possibility of occupation? The Lord is asking Jeremiah what He's asking Sarah - and what He's asking us today... **You say you believe, but do you really?**

Most of us are well taught believers! We have little problem affirming our faith in the doctrine of God's omnipotence. *Theoretically speaking*, we believe!

We can even argue for the existence of miracles *until...* God personalizes a promise - monograms a miracle. We're all in, until He puts our initials on it, and says, "*This is the miracle I want to perform in your life.*" That's when we suddenly get antsy and skeptical.

I can sing the right songs - and quote the right creeds - and memorize the right verses - and make the right statements of faith - but do I *really, truly* believe?

Here in Genesis 18 the Lord is challenging Sarah - He's challenging us - are we *believing* or just *bluffing*?

***Believing or bluffing?*** How real is *your* faith?

**Back in America's pioneer days** a weary traveler came to the banks of the mighty Mississippi. It was early winter and the river was frozen. The traveler had to cross on foot, and he was scared that the frozen water wouldn't be able to hold his weight. He dropped to his hands and knees - and inched his way across.

Halfway across the sheet of ice the timid trailblazer heard singing and laughter. He turned to see a joyous, old man driving a wagon loaded down with coal.

The heavy wagon rumbled right across the ice.

The crawler had been afraid the ice would crush under his weight - when in reality, the ice was able to support a wagon filled to the brim with hefty coal.

And this describes some of us... All too often we're creeping through life on our hands and knees. Each move is filled with worry and fret. We live in a sweat - wondering if the ice underneath us is about to crack.

And it's all because we're not quite sure if God is able to hold us up. Your life would be carefree - you could be singing and laughing... *but you lack faith!*

**Three attitudes** got in the way of Sarah's faith. First, **the limitations of her hands.** Second, **the logic of her head.** And third, **the laughter in her heart.** And these same three conditions stunt - and undermine our faith!



The first impediment to Sarah's faith was **the limitations of her hands**. When she heard the Lord's promise I'm sure her first thought was **"We've tried..."**

*"We've tried, and tried, and tried... For 70 years we've done all that's humanly possible! I've been to the gynecologist. Abe has been to the urologist. We've gotten our cards punched so often, we had free visits.*

*We've been tested. I've taken my temperature every morning. I've kept track of my most fertile times. We spent the kids college fund on fertility drugs. We've done all we can possibly do and still the crib is empty.*

*And if it hasn't happened by now, it's just not going to happen."* I can hear Sarah's conclusion, **"And if we've done all that can be done, what else can God do?"**

In Matthew 19:24-26 Jesus told His disciples, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

They were puzzled, "Who then can be saved?"

"But Jesus looked at them and said... "with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Too many times we project our own limitations on God. As long as I can identify, or formulate a way for the situation to occur, then I'll believe it can happen.

But the moment I run out options - *when it becomes impossible for me - when it surpasses my limitations* – then I conclude it must be impossible for God.

J.I. Packer writes, **"Though modern people cherish great thoughts of man, as a rule they have small thoughts of God."** We opt for confidence in our puny selves, rather than faith in Almighty, all-powerful God.

**In the days of the Prophet Elisha** the city of Samaria was under siege by the Syrians. To make matters worse the region was in the midst of a severe famine.

Food was so scarce a donkey's head sold for 80 shekels, and a dove's droppings cost you 5 shekels.

*Talk about serious inflation!* I don't know the current prices of dove's droppings, but I'll bet you can pick up a pint or two of dove's droppings pretty cheap!

In fact, conditions in Jerusalem were so dire and desperate women were killing their babies for food. The people of Israel had resorted to cannibalism.

We learn from Scripture that the famine was the result of the king's sin, but the king blamed it on Elisha. He sent a battalion of soldiers to arrest the prophet.

In 2 Kings 7:1, Elisha tells the king's men to return with a message, **"Tomorrow about this time a seah (8 gallons) of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria."**

This represented a massive shift in Israel's economy.

In fact, when one of the royal officers heard Elisha's message to the king, he scoffed at such a prediction. He said, **"If the Lord would make windows in heaven, could this thing be?"** And (Elisha) said, **"In fact, you shall see it with your eyes, but you shall not eat of it."**

Here's how the story ends...

There were lepers outside Samaria's walls who lived off the city's garbage. But because of the famine there were few scraps. So instead of starving to death, they



decide to go over and surrender to the enemy. If they're killed, they'd be put out of their misery. If they're taken prisoner, at least they'll get a prisoner's rations.

The next morning they walk into the enemy's camp, but no one is there. The whole army has gone AWOL.

In the middle of the night God had confused the Syrians. They heard noises they thought were horses and chariots. They assumed Israel had hired Egyptian mercenaries to rescue them. They all left and fled.

The hungry lepers found enough food still on the table to feed the whole city. In fact, there was such a surplus that *a seah of fine flour sold for a single shekel*.

The word of the Lord had been perfectly fulfilled!

And when the scoffing officer rushed out into the gate of Samaria, he got caught in the stampede rushing to find food. He was trampled and killed just as the prophet predicted! *He saw it, but he never ate it!*

The king's officer scoffed at the prospects of a miracle because ***he didn't see*** how it could be carried out - **but God had resources he knew nothing about!**

We forget who God is! Psalm 115:3 tells us, "**But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.**"

We should realize, our God has limitless resources!

Martin Luther once wrote to his friend, Erasmus, "**Your thoughts of God are too human**" Sadly, that's true of us. We project our human limitations on God.

Man measures according to the degree of difficulty.

A touchdown counts 6 points, while a field goal counts just 3 points, because the TD is more difficult.

If you sink a basket standing under the goal it counts 2 points, but a made shot from 21' earns you 3 points.

The greater the distance of the shot the greater the difficulty, and the greater the difficulty the more points.

But *degree of difficulty* doesn't apply to a limitless God. If nothing is impossible, then one situation isn't any more difficult or demanding than another?

In other words, if we have faith to ask God to heal a head cold, why don't we ask God to heal a terminal cancer, or even cause an amputated leg to grow back?

When nothing is impossible... healing a cancer is just as easy as healing a cold! We hinder God when we project on Him *the limitations of our own hands*.

The second impediment to Sarah's faith was **the logic in her head!** What the Lord promised Sarah, not only surpassed *the boundaries of her abilities*, it also exceeded *the limits of her imagination*. It wasn't logical!

A 90 year old woman, conceiving a child, carrying it to term, then delivering it successfully just couldn't be fathomed. Sarah had already *maneuvered through menopause*. And Abe was pushing 100 - not exactly at *peak potency*. You didn't have to possess a degree in physiology to know this is not suppose to happen!

**This was the dilemma Mary faced** when the angel told her she'd been chosen by God to have a Child.

In Luke 1:34 she asks, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" Mary had never taken a biology class, but she was smart enough to know virgins don't get pregnant! God was suggesting to her the illogical!

And that's when the angel told Mary, "For with God nothing will be impossible." We need to understand, real *faith* takes us where our mind can no longer *figure!*

Over the last generation mankind has made enormous technological progress. The world's aggregate knowledge now doubles every two years.

The life's work of an engineer prior to the computer age can now be duplicated in 30 seconds on a PC.

In 1000 BC King David's fastest mode of travel was horseback. When he sent a letter it was by messenger. And if he had ever gotten tired of politics, his best prospects for getting a job would've been in agriculture.

Nearly 2700 years later George Washington rode a horse. He sent correspondence by messenger. And if he had needed a job his best bet was on the farm.

But jump ahead just 200 years since Washington...

Today, if man wants to travel he can climb aboard a 757 and soar through the sky at 600 mph. If he wants to send a letter he can email it instantly. And if he's looking for a job there are any number of vocations he can pursue. Human knowledge has increased.

But the problem with *all our knowledge* is that it's caused us to think we *know it all!* If there's something we don't understand - if it's beyond our ability to figure out – we assume it's impossible. It can't exist or occur!

If I can't fit it under a microscope - or scan it into a computer - it must not be true.  
*How arrogant is that!*

We've deified our own human intellect. The creed of an entire generation has become, "If I can't explain it, I won't believe it." Thus, we scoff at the supernatural.

It reminds me of the dad who asked his son what he learned in Sunday School? He said the story of Moses.

The father asked him to recite it... "Well, Moses went behind enemy lines to rescue the Hebrews. He built a pontoon bridge so he could cross the Red Sea. Then he radioed for B52s to drop bombs on the Egyptians."

The dad turned to his little boy, and asked, "Wait a minute, son, is that really what your teacher told you?"

The little guy scratched his head and said, "No, but Dad, if I told you the truth you'd never believe it!"

The Jews in Israel wear yarmulkas. I'm sure you've seen the little skullcaps. When I was in Jerusalem I bought several... here's *my Bulldog Yarmulka*... and just in time for baseball season, *my Braves Yarmulka*.

But do you know why a Jew wears a yarmulka?

While I was in Jerusalem an Israeli told me, "It reminds us there's someone higher than ourselves."

We would do well to wear that reminder. It might keep us humble. For it's our intellectual sophistication that hinders our faith... This is why God will sometimes

work in ways that deliberately challenge what appears logical and rational. He loves to wait until the odds are ludicrous, and the situation is utterly hopeless...

When the messenger came and told Jesus that Lazarus was sick, He deliberately delayed. By the time Jesus arrived Lazarus had been dead four days.

There was a Jewish superstition that a person's spirit remained close-by after their death, hoping for an opportunity to return to the body - but after three days, any possibility of resuscitation was deemed hopeless.

When Jesus asked if they'd open Lazarus' tomb, the dead man's sister, Martha, warned, "Lord, he stinketh."

Martha believed Jesus could *heal* Lazarus because she had seen His healing before - with her own eyes.

But she never considered He could raise the dead - that would be untenable. Yet Jesus did *the illogical* to demonstrate that His power supersedes *our logic*.

**This is the reason God thinned out** the army of Israel from 32,000 troops to 300. This meant the Midianites outnumbered Gideon 450 to 1. The victory God was engineering would leave no question as to Who deserved the glory! All the credit belonged to God!

This is also the reason God used a little boy named, David, to slay the Philistine giant, Goliath. Instead of an Israeli champion, God used a untried, untested kid.

God loves to use the absurd to show-off His power.

As He told the Corinthians, He loves to use the weak to defeat the mighty - the foolish to confound the wise.

And this is why God waited until feeble Sarah was 90 years old, and ancient Abraham reached 100, to give them a child. **God loves to *anoint the absurd*.** His works highlight our ignorance *as they demonstrate His power*.

There's Italian proverb, "**He who leaves God out of the equation does not know how to count.**" God loves to defy human limits and logic to fulfill His purposes.

God's miracles not only *demonstrate His power*, but they also *humble our intellect*, and *stretch our faith*.

Poet Annie Flint writes, "**I know not, but God knows - Oh, blessed rest from fear! - All my unfolding days - To Him are plain and clear - Each anxious, puzzled "Why?" - From doubt or dread that grows - Finds answer in this thought: - I know not, but He knows. -**

**I cannot, but God can - Oh, balm for all my care! - The burden that I drop - His hand will lift and bear - Though eagle's pinions tire - I walk where once I ran - This is my strength to know - I cannot, but God can."**

The third and final impediment to Sarah's faith was **the laughter in her heart!** Sarah laughed because she doubted - not only *God's ability to bless* - but more seriously, she doubted *God's willingness to bless*.

Sarah had made such a mess of her family life, trying to help God keep His promise of a son. Her impatience and self-reliance had created a tragedy...

When God first made Sarah the promise she was 65 years old. I'm sure initially she believed God, but as the years rolled on she thought of ways to help God out.

She gave her handmaid Hagar to Abraham to bear a child on her behalf. Hagar was the first surrogate mom. She went into the tent a *maid* and came out a *mom*.



Of course, Sarah's intentions failed miserably. Hagar was a hassle, and her child was more than Sarah could handle. She tried to help God, but it backfired.

Walk the streets of East Jerusalem today, and you can still feel the tension between Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, the Jews and the Arabs. Sarah's progeny is still reaping the consequences of her sin.

I would imagine, Sarah assumed that because of her blunder God had nullified His promise. If God had planned on giving her a child – *well, she's blown it now.*

I wonder, how many of us have given up on our dream - what we thought was a God-given promise? If the promise were repeated today how would we react?

*Would we snicker... roll our eyes... even laugh?*

I believe Sarah reasoned away her miracle, *"If God had wanted to give me a child, I don't deserve it now!"*

Sarah's laugh indicated she not only doubted God's power - and His wisdom - she also doubted His mercy, and love, and kindness, and above all, His forgiveness.

It's been said, *"Some of us believe that God is all-mighty and **may** do all - that God is all-wisdom and **can** do all - but that God is all-love and **will** do all, there we stop short." God's kryptonite is not my sin!*

At times, I'll trust God to do something great until I sin. But after I blow it, I think God has backed out - that my sin has voided out His plans. I'm no longer usable.

*But not so!* God doesn't give up on us when we sin. The Bible tells us the blood of Jesus continually cleanses us from sin. Even when we sin God remains as determined as ever to *use us, grow us, mature us!*

**Nothing is too hard for God!** Of course, that doesn't mean God will give us whatever we want, whenever we want it. He doesn't work at the snap of our fingers.

God refuses to be used or manipulated. His power serves **His purposes**, *not our whims and wishes*.

It's been said of God... **"He has us in His hands, but we never have Him in ours."** God is in charge, not us.

But I love Philippians 4:13. It speaks so boldly of God's promise. Let me read it to you in the Amplified Version, **"I have strength for all things in Christ who empowers me. I am ready for anything and equal to anything through him who infuses inner strength into me, (that is, I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency.)"**

Again, let me state it, **God has no Kryptonite.**

His awesome power is not only infinite and invincible, it's also gracious and clothed in His mercy.

Once a pastor saw a little boy coming out of Sunday School, and wanted to test his Bible knowledge...

He asked, **"Tell me one thing God can do and I'll give you a shiny apple?"** The little boy replied, **"Sir, I'll give you the whole barrel of apples if you can tell me one thing God cannot do?"** Nothing is impossible for God!

How do you answer the question the Lord put to Abe and Sarah, **"Is there anything too hard for God?"**

Don't let **the limitations of your hands** - or **the logic in your head** - or **the laughter in your heart** get in the way of you trusting our living and limitless Lord!

So, here's the question one more time...

Are you just quoting the right words? Just going through the religious motions. Or do you really believe God's promises? ***Are you believing or bluffing?***

Eugene Clark was a hymn writer and musician. Yet he suffered from crippling arthritis. Over time his fingers no longer cooperated with his musical instincts.

Eugene Clark also lost the vision in his eyes.

Yet Eugene never gave up. He asked for a recorder to be brought to his bed, and he composed his praise to God through dictation... I want to close with his most popular hymn, written in 1964. It became his anthem...

***"Nothing is impossible when you put your trust in God - Nothing is impossible when you're trusting in His Word - Hearken to the voice of God to thee - "Is there anything too hard for Me?" - Then put your trust in God alone and rest upon His Word - For everything, Oh everything, Yes everything - Is possible, with God."***