

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "God of the Incredible in Relationship with Imperfect People"

Text: Genesis 18:1-15

RGGJR/FBCCS/6-13-21 **UNEDITED**

- "Nana" is both a name used for a beloved grandma and the name of the pagan **moon** god of Ur of the Chaldees—Abraham's former homeland. They are actually probably pronounced *nan-nah* and *nah-nah*.
- In Ur, Na(h)Na(h) was identified with the moon. According to that trusted source GotQuestions.org, *"the moon was worshiped as the power that controlled the heavens and the life cycle on earth. To the Chaldeans, the phases of the moon represented the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death and also set the measurement of their yearly calendar. Among the pantheon of Mesopotamian gods, Nanna was supreme, because he was the source of fertility for crops, herds, and families. Prayers and offerings were offered to the moon to invoke its blessing. (Got Questions.Org)*
- With **Grandma Nana**, there is the possibility of having a growing, joyous relationship of love. With the **moon god** Na(h)na(h), there is only detached, cautious, respectful, fear with no personal interaction. There is no possibility of any human being growing a personal relationship with Na(h)na(h) the moon god.
- In his continuing "inspired" effort to teach the coming generations of Abraham's offspring what their God is like—who he is and how he relates to human beings, Moses tells the story of the first half of *Genesis 18*.
- At first glance, one might conclude that this first half of chapter 18 is a nice, soft interlude before the story of the destruction of Sodom. Some readers, in fact, do suggest it was recorded to acquaint us with the *hospitality* customs of the day.
- You will probably guess I think it is here for more than a colorful history lesson on ancient Mesopotamian dining.

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- I find *Genesis 18:1-15* provides at least 3 important truths about who God is and how he relates to his people. I say, "at least" because I would have said just 2 until I studied it again this time and realized I missed an emphasis any six-year old kid in Sunday School would never have missed.
- Let's read the first 8 verses and see what they told that 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Israelites the ones who were about ready to enter the promised land.
- Let's also see what they might tell us about our same God—***Yahweh***—known as the ***LORD*** in all capital letters here.
- Remember, we were just told this God—*Yahweh*—The ***LORD***—is the covenant *El Shaddai* who is the one who is *almighty* and thus able to keep all the promises of the covenant with Abraham.
- However, he is able to keep the promises he has covenanted not only with Abraham but also with Abraham's offspring to come—***everlastingly***. He is the God who is not thwarted by the passing of generations—by the passing of even millennia of time.
- One way or another, God, *El Shaddai*, will indeed do everything he has said he will do and he will do it righteously. Those children of Abraham who trust God and walk before him in faith will participate in the blessings that empower the fulfillment of those promises.
- Again, please remember we are not talking heaven or hell issues here but personal, individual participation in the redemptive plan of God in history. This personal participation is a reward of experiencing God's intended LIFE because it is part of the fulfillment of the created purpose for humans existing.
- So, now let's first read about the microwave-speed, desert dinner for 3 visitors. Look at *Genesis 18: 1-8*. **READ Genesis 18:1-8**

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- We've visited these trees before, in chapter 13, when Abram gave Lot his choice of territory. Remember, Lot looked toward Sodom. The consequences of choosing what looked best by the world's standards of appearance are about to come back to bite Lot.
- After, what becomes a momentous separation, Abram encamped his family near Hebron near the remarkably "great trees of Mamre"
- It was one of the places Moses noted where Abram built an altar of worship to the LORD marking the spot.
- Another trustworthy source, "Wikipedia" notes that, to this day, there are trees and a place or two marked as the original Oaks of Mamre. "A long-standing tradition is that the **Oak** of Abraham will die before the appearance of the Antichrist. The main **oak** trunk has appeared to be dead since 1996. Following construction work in the 1970s, a wooden ring in the form of a chalice was built around the tree, and its roots began to die. It fell over a few years back but the intent is to preserve the wood as the tree mentioned in the Bible.
- If as a wandering, ancient near eastern potentate Abraham had any tent-site he called "*home*," this may have been that site. As we were spending time watching chemical drip into her heart, Mary and I talked just a bit about the concept of "thin places" — *holy places where one encounters God* in what seems a special way.
- The idea seems to have entered some branches of Christian theology by way of some Celtic paganism passing into Celtic Christianity. When I read these verses, I suspect, Abraham, having been born and raised in the paganism of Ur of the Chaldees, likely thought of the Oaks of Mamre near Hebron as a sort of "thin space" — a holy space where one encounters God.
- Indeed God—the LORD—El Shaddai does show up in a wonderful an unexpected way.

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- Immediately Abraham recognizes a lord over him maybe even the LORD who is God, and bows before him in subjection to his authority.
- Abraham, as powerful a human potentate as he has now become, knows he serves this LORD God. Now Abraham has a chance to serve Him in a very humanly relational way by sharing the hospitality of his home and his family.
- It was very hospitable to offer water to their dirty feet in preparation to enter the family dwelling. It was relationally thoughtful to suggest some rest in the shade of the great trees. It was absolutely relational in the sense of fellowshiping together to invite the *known* strangers to eat a meal in the home.
- People love to have Grandma Nana(s) join them for dinner but no one, in those days, ever invited the moon god Na(h)na(h) to wash his feet, take a rest in the shade and to join them in fellowship at their family table. The pagan gods were not looking for nor offering any personal relationship to human beings. But, Moses, with these verses reminds the children of Abraham that their God—the LORD—Yahweh—El Shaddai—the Almighty maker and keeper of the covenants was not like the moon god.
- The God who had tied himself to them by his own promises and his own covenant was a God who offered not simply power but **true relationship**.
- It feels as if they had to *microwave* a meal of freshly baked bread, the best veal fresh off the hoof, and some yummy goat or camel milk with curds.
- Or, maybe the LORD and his two companion travelers were more patient than I might have first suspected. Maybe the LORD was willing to take a break from his journey to develop more of a

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relationship with Abraham his servant. Maybe that relationship with Abraham was as important—or even more important—than immediately dealing with the Creation-corrupting sin of Sodom.

- At this point, I wish it read that Abraham sat down next to the Yahweh—the LORD Almighty—and ate beef and curds with him. Instead, it said Abraham stood nearby under a tree. He watched his LORD eat what he had prepared as his servant.
- The pagans did attempt to feed their gods with offerings. But they did not stand near by and watch them eat at their family table.
- Abraham and the LORD have a relationship but Abraham does not forget who is eating his choice beef. This is the LORD God of the covenant. Abraham's children will have a relationship with this God but they will also need to remember who He is and the complete respect and obedience he deserves.
- Many years later in the time of King David, the Bible records the story of the immediate death of a named Uzzah as a graphic example of how much respect and obedience their relational God deserved and required in their relationship.
- If those 12 men who walked with Jesus had any inkling of what he meant by calling himself the "I Am" that is that he was the LORD of the children of Abraham—if they had even a hint of his identity, you can imagine how amazed they must have been over the nature of the relationship he desired to have with them.
- In John 15, Jesus describes this, now more fully revealed relationship. It is meant to be as close as a vine is to the fruit it bears by its nurturing connection.
- Later in the same chapter 15, John records Jesus describing this:
- ***John 15: <sup>9</sup> "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you obey my commands, you will remain in***

***my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.***

- That meal under those oak trees was only a hint—a beginning—but it was the truth establishing the pattern. Their God was a relational God who invited them not just to use him for good luck in life but to know Him.
- Of course, by our time we know even more clearly the nature of our God. He is the relational God. He has eternally existed in a perfect relationship of Father, Son and Spirit.
- Here already, in Genesis 18 we learn that if we want to image God we must be in relationship with him and in relationship with one another.
- Knowing that God—the LORD—El Shaddai is our God is not really about getting religious things done, it is about relationship. IT is about loving him as he defines that love and loving one another as he defines it as well.
- So lesson 1 from the first half of 18 is that our God is relational. If we reject or neglect that truth by how we live our lives, we have created for worship, a dead, false-god—a senseless ***idol*** of our own making.

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- We are not called to religion but to relationship based on the truth God has revealed in his Word.
- Now, consider the second lesson about who our God is in verses 9-14. **READ Genesis 18: 9-14**
- Why is the LORD always seeming to ask questions at such critical times. "Adam, where are you?" "Where's your wife, Abraham?" "Peter, do you love me?" Questions make us think, learn and remember in a different mental mode than simply hearing statements of facts. The visiting LORD could have just said: "Your wife Sarah is nearby and is going to overhear this."
- There was a reason for the visitors coming. The questions focuses that reason on Sarah.
- The LORD promises a natural born son to Sarah in about a year. Two senior citizens, that Moses describes as a couple too old to ever *expect* anything like this to happen, will have a baby boy together.
- "**Sure,**" says Sarah from behind the thin tent wall! She says it rolling her eyes and chuckling to herself at the absurdity of the idea when considered from her limited human perspective.
- Even though Sarah laughs to herself and speaks her thoughts to herself, the visitor knows both. The LORD makes lesson 2 by asking a rhetorical question. **The NIV translates it, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"**
- Come on NIV! Put some color and excitement in the translation here. That gets the point across but it misses the power of the words used. The force is more like is anything too **wonderful**, too **incredible**, too **amazing** that the LORD, El Shaddai, can't make do it if it fulfills his purposes?
- The answer is, of course is no! Absolutely nothing is too amazing for the LORD. Nothing is too incredible for him to do! Nothing is just too

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wonderful to consider it possible that the LORD can do it!

**NOTHING!!!**

- Can the LORD who created the universe make a baby possible for Sarah and Abraham. Well, of course, when you put it that way, sure he can!
- That's the point. The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation is always to put it that way! There is nothing impossible for their LORD when needed to fulfill his purposes through them.
- The nature of their God is that he is incredible, wonderful, and amazing in his power on behalf of his purposes in his people of faith.
- Of course, humans thinking from their own, I am the center of the universe perspective, can easily twist this to mean *nothing I want* is impossible for God to do. From there it is only a short step to nothing I want is impossible for me to get if I just somehow connect that desire with God-stuff.
- The Israelites would come to struggle with that idea. We are Abraham's children. Nothing is too incredible for Abraham's God. Abraham's God will do the incredible things we want him to do for us.
- I am desperately asking God for some incredible things right now. Some of you are desperately asking God for so marvelous things right now. When I read the passage from John's Gospel, chapter 15, a few minutes ago, I purposely read far enough to include these words: **"Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."** Some believers today drop the "then" from that truth to turn this into a promise of receiving all the *incredible* things their heart desires.
- The "then" is critical. The "then" is the contingency in the formula. When we are *abiding* in the vine in the way Jesus describes—when



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we are *bearing* the fruit he anticipates from this abiding—God will do all we ask—all the incredible things necessary to make us part of accomplishing his plan.

- We are in a relationship with our LORD who will do marvelously, wonderfully, incredible things we can probably not even imagine to allow us to accomplish his purposes of redeeming this world.
- I might have read through verse 15 and called it a day with that summary statement I just made but reading the text this time I found the closing emphasis was a bit different.
- Look at verse 15. **READ Genesis 18: 15**
- We were told the LORD knew Sarah's internal thoughts and chuckle at the "unbelievable" idea she and Abraham would produce a son.
- Now we are told that Sarah is confronted her with her unbelieving thoughts. At first the proximity of these words made me assume the LORD confronted her directly. However, maybe it was Abraham on the basis of the LORD's revelation to him.
- "You laughed!" "No I did not laugh!" "Yes, you did laugh!"
- Mike drop! End of story! Case closed! God knows your true thoughts and inner emotions Sarah—Raleigh. You can't hide these from the LORD.
- Moral of that story and so many Psalms? Don't try to hide. Don't try to lie to God. Don't try to act as if you have more faith and less questions than you do. It's a useless game to try to play with the God of the Universe.
- In a little less than a year Sarah would learn an incontrovertible truth about God as a baby boy will be born. Her God is indeed incredible! He does actually do unbelievable things to accomplish his plans.

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- Any six year old would probably have picked up on the idea that God knows about us even when we think we are hiding from him. "*He sees us when we're sleeping; He knows when we're awake!*"
- I would make it a more specific lesson here about *knowing*, having *faith* and about *growing trust* in *relationship* with God. We are not there yet. God knows about our doubts. He knows our faith is not perfect. He knows we still sometimes don't trust him absolutely. We really can't hide those realities from him in any real relationship we have with him.
- But look, in spite of those realities—or maybe especially because of the reality of the imperfect faith of Sarah, God did what he did *when* he did it and gave an old man and a old woman a newborn son of promise—a son of faith not of a human—I can fix it spirit.
- How often must God seem to wait so long? How often does he seem to wait long until we are forced to admit we have reached the realm of impossibility for us to "just-do-it?" Then He acts so we can see that nothing is too wonderful—too incredible—too hard but for God—not us?"
- Mercifully, even with imperfect faith God acted through Sarah for his purposes. I am thankful for that because my faith is not yet perfect either!
- Our God is relational. Our God does wonderful and incredible things for his purposes through us. Our God can work through us even as our faith is in the process of becoming more pure—even as we are still growing in our trust in our relationship with Him.
- We don't have to be perfect and without any questions in order to bear fruit for the LORD!