

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 18:1-33

To learn about the omniscience of God, and the mercy of God on the innocent.

Collateral Damage

The 90's brought about a lot of great sources of entertainment, both in music and movies. The action movie genre of the 90's was nearly unparalleled. The movies featured overly macho heroes, tons of stunts, and an outlandish amount of explosions. Even into the 2000's, these actors and directors continued their work. One



notable action movie was *Collateral Damage*, starring the legendary Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger played the role of Gordon Brewer, an LAFD firefighter who lost both his son and wife in a politically motivated attack in Columbia. As innocent bystanders, the mother and child are considered collateral damage, and the rest of the movie follows Brewer as he seeks vengeance on the man who carried out the attack. The whole concept of collateral damage feels wrong on every level because it strikes at the heart of injustice; innocent people should never be punished along with the guilty. This is exactly the premise of one of the main exchanges that Abraham has with God in Genesis 18. A great, “outcry” has been heard by God regarding the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20). As a result, God intends to see for Himself the evil deeds being done and, if true, execute judgment on them. Abraham reasons with God, however, that righteous people would suffer in the midst of the evil being punished, and so God promises to withdraw His judgment even, “for the sake of ten” (Gen. 18:32). God renders just judgment; no collateral damage will be done by Him.

Yahweh, Party of Three

Chapter 18 opens with Abraham back at the Oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18:1). If you recall back to chapter 13, Abraham and Lot's herdsmen began quarreling because, “the land could not sustain them while dwelling together” (Gen. 13:6). Abraham let Lot choose where he would dwell, and after his choice, Abraham moved to the opposite direction, “by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron” (Gen. 13:18). He had apparently remained in that place all along. He is approached by, “three men, standing in front of him” (Gen. 18:2). Abraham's response is indicative of the fact that he recognized them at least as very important individuals. He

has Sarah make an elaborate and expensive meal for them. It is noteworthy that while there are three, he only speaks with one of them. Their identity can be somewhat confusing to be sure. On the one hand they are described as, “the three men” (Gen. 18:2, 22). On the other hand, verse 10 indicates that it was Yahweh speaking to Abraham, and the other two men are later identified as angels (Gen. 19:1). There are at least two possibilities of what is happening here.

A MESSENGER

The intermixing of conversation between God and angels is not an uncommon occurrence in the Old Testament. Often, the angel who brings a message on behalf of Yahweh, or an angel through whom Yahweh speaks is often spoken to as Yahweh Himself. The best example of this occurs with Gideon in Judges 6:7-24. An, “angel of the LORD,” (Judg. 6:11) appears to him, but later it says, “the LORD look at him” (Judg. 6:14). The angel, as Yahweh’s messenger, is received as Yahweh Himself. This is not emphasizing a divine aspect of angels, but on the contrary, it is demonstrating the total emptying of the angel to be fully used by God in these transactions.

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

It could also be an example of anthropomorphism. That perhaps God is not visibly with Abraham, but that the author of Genesis is transmitting this message in human terms that we can understand. There are passages that speak of the, “mighty arm of God” (Ex. 15:16), as well as His face (Ps. 27:8), His hand (Ps. 10:12), His finger (Dt. 9:10), and His back (Ex. 33:23). Plenty of times in the Old Testament, God is *humanized* to some extent to get across a message that would otherwise be difficult to communicate. However, for this passage, this is a weak argument for many reasons. For one, it’s not a literary device that is used until much later in the Old Testament. Genesis includes several examples of God appearing as a human being, and there are a great many reasons we should assume we are to understand it literally. Two, the author goes through great lengths to present this particular transaction as one that actually happened. It is unnecessary and seemingly incompatible to push this literary device onto this story.

YAHWEH APPEARS

The most reasonable explanation for this particular passage is that God merely appears in a way that seems human. God appears later as a burning bush (Ex. 3:2) and a cloud of smoke and fire (Ex. 13:21-22). Up to this point, He has already appeared in what seems like human form (Gen. 3:8; 11:5). Some have suggested that this is perhaps a *Christophany*, or a pre-incarnate Jesus. While it certainly could have been, there is no way to know for sure, and given the emphasis of Abraham in Pauline literature, one would expect Paul to have confirmed that in his writings, and yet he doesn’t. If Yahweh can appear as a burning bush, surely He can appear as a human, the pinnacle of His creation created in His Image.

Omniscient

Yahweh once again reaffirms His promise that Sarah will conceive and give birth to a child (Gen. 18:10). We are not told how much time has passed since chapter 17, but we know it was less than a year for sure (Gen. 17:21). While Yahweh is reaffirming this promise, Sarah is inside the tent preparing the meal that Abraham requested. The text indicates that she overheard the LORD speaking, and hearing the promise of another child (perhaps for the first time), she laughed at the thought of such a crazy possibility. Being old and unable to conceive her entire life, the task would have been literally impossible. However, Yahweh retorts, “Is anything too hard for the LORD” (Gen. 18:14). There is a bit of humor at the end of this exchange. Verse 15 reads, “But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. He said, ‘No, but you did laugh.’” There is only One who is all-knowing, and that is Yahweh. He knows all things, “declaring the end from the beginning” (Is.

46:9-10). He knows what we say before we say it (Ps. 139:4). There is nothing that will not give an account to Him (Heb. 4:13). Sarah thought she was safe from rebuke because she was in private when she laughed in disbelief, but nothing is private from Yahweh, and He confirms this reality here. Her reaction of fear was appropriate. The stark reminder that nothing we do is veiled from the eyes of the LORD is sobering and perhaps scary in light of our sin. We do not want God to see our secrets, and yet we are reminded in this passage that He, in fact, sees them all. This, however, should also remind us of the sweetness of grace. If God, seeing all of my sin, still saves me, how great must grace be?

The Plan Unveiled

The LORD informs Abraham that, “the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah” has been heard, and that He will investigate to see for sure if their crimes are true. This is a curious detail in the story. We have just seen how God is omniscient, knowing Sarah’s thoughts and actions in private, and yet here He is going to confirm something. By simple reasoning, shouldn’t God know already? The reality is, God does know and will enact judgment on the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, but because of the extent of judgment God will show Himself to be equitable and just in confirming the accusations and the outcries against them prior to acting.

Abraham sees the potential destruction and knows it will surely come to pass. The text says that Abraham, Yahweh, and the two angels, “looked down toward Sodom” (Gen. 18:16). The directional gaze downward implies wickedness. Abraham and his people are above the people of Sodom. There is an impending sense of judgment here. Knowing that there were potentially innocent people there, Abraham begins to try and reason with Yahweh by calling to His attention the collateral damage that will occur. His approach is very humble, both in speech and physical posture. It is noteworthy that Abraham never tries to reason with God regarding the morality of Sodom. He doesn’t seem to be in disagreement with the assessment that has been made (or is about to be made), which indicates that the outcries had not only been heard by God but possibly Abraham as well. Abraham’s contention is merely for those who are living there that are not a complicit part of the problem. He refers to them as, “the righteous” (Gen. 18:23). After talking the number down several times, Abraham seems content with no more than 10 righteous people being spared. Abraham, “returned to his place,” and, “the LORD went His way” (Gen. 18:33).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 18:1-5. Where was Abraham in the beginning of the chapter, and what is the significance of this place? Who visited him? Who were they? How does Abraham respond?

2. Read Genesis 18:6-8. What does Abraham have Sarah do? What does she prepare?

Day Two

1. Read Genesis 18:9-11. What do they ask Abraham? What do they tell him will happen by that time in the following year? Why was that particularly shocking news?

2. Read Genesis 18:12-15. How did Sarah respond? What did Yahweh say in response to her laughing? Did Sarah deny laughing?
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Day Three

1. Read Genesis 18:16-19. To where do the three men and Abraham set out? What does the LORD say regarding Abraham?
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2. Read Genesis 18:20-21. What is Yahweh's plan, and why?
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Day Four

1. Read Genesis 18:22-26. In your own words, describe the events that take place here. How is Abraham's attitude towards the Lord? What does Abraham appeal to while speaking to Yahweh?
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2. Read Genesis 18:27-33. Again, in your own words, describe the events that take place. Once again, what does Abraham appeal to when speaking with Yahweh? How does this chapter end?
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Week 14 Discussion: Doubtful

Chapter 18 shows Yahweh reaffirming His promise to Abraham that Sarah will conceive and bear a son, despite her old age and barren womb. The promise is so ridiculous by human standards that Sarah literally laughs at God, and yet God responds, "Is anything too hard for Yahweh?" That response of God was true then, and it is true now. Nothing is too hard for God, and yet, we have difficulty believing this in practice. How often are we presented with an impossible scenario that we don't consider praying over because of how outlandish it is? And yet, "Is anything too hard for Yahweh?" Talk as a group about how doubt disables prayer in your life, and what you can do to counteract it without swinging to the other extreme of *assuming* God will do anything you pray about.

1. Icebreaker: When things get really difficult, do you have a hard time praying for things to work out in your favor? Why or why not?
2. Does doubt affect your prayer life? Why or why not?
3. How does being reminded of God's sovereignty help with your prayer life?
4. Read James 1:6-8. What does it mean to be double-minded? How does double-mindedness weaken our prayers?
5. Read Jude 1:22. How should we respond to others who struggle with doubt? If anyone is struggling with doubt currently, spend some time praying for them to not only have less doubt, but also interceding for them in the things they need prayer for. Remind them, "Is anything too hard for Yahweh?"
6. Read Daniel 3:17-18. What is the appropriate response when God does not answer our prayers in the way we hoped?

Takeaways:

1. God is omniscient, and His promises will always come to pass no matter how impossible they may seem.
2. God was willing to spare the few righteous in Sodom in spite of the many wicked.

PRAYER REQUESTS: