

## Sixth Revelation, Righteousness, Part 1, Genesis 18:1-15<sup>1</sup>

**Before the Lesson:** Prepare the handout, “What does it mean to be a righteous person?” for the Transformational Exercise.

**Fellowship Question:** (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

When was the last time you ate with someone that you had not met before?

What is something you laughed at today (or this week)?

### Information

Let’s review the growth of Abram’s faith and his relationship with Yahweh.

1. In his first revelation, God speaks - “Go!”- and Abram goes toward a land he does not know.
2. In the second revelation, God shows Abram the land that he will occupy.
3. In the third revelation, God has Abram walk the land, claiming it for himself and his descendants.
4. In the fourth revelation, God reminds Abram that he will be the Father of a great nation – and Abram argues with God! Then God strengthens the promise by “cutting a covenant” (as Abram cuts a heifer, a goat, and a ram in half). Abram’s journey of faith has involved listening, seeing, walking, and sacrificing.
5. In the fifth revelation, God tells Abram to walk with him – to walk in the way of mercy, justice, and humility. God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. The newly named Abraham shows a new sense of partnership by laughing at God’s plans and pointing out their impossibility.

In his relationship with God, Abram has been observant, obedient, and active, for the most part. He has also deferred, laughed, and argued. He is a real human being with limited faith, limited understanding, and limited time as he tries to partner with the eternal God.

What does “partnership” imply about decision-making?

In our next story, Abraham faces a test. How will he treat strangers, people who are not like him?

- Have a class member read Genesis 18:1-8.

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It was a typical day until three men appeared at Abraham's tent. It seems that Abraham did not know who these men were, yet he was effusively hospitable to them.

“*My lord* – This [is a] term of courtly address (not YHWH) ... Abraham initially addresses himself to ‘the greatest’ of the three.”<sup>2</sup>

“Extending hospitality, as the subsequent contrasting episode in Sodom indicates, is the primary act of civilized intercourse. The early Midrash aptly noted that Abraham promises modestly, a little water and a morsel of bread, while hastening to prepare a sumptuous feast.”<sup>3</sup>

“Upon seeing the strangers, Abraham leaps into action, bent on transforming strangers into guests.”<sup>4</sup>

What characteristics of hospitality do we find in this passage? (“It extends to strangers...it follows certain protocol...bowing... ‘Haste’ appears five times... Abraham gives of the best he has (a calf), makes and serves food, remains available to them and concerned about their welfare...The phrase ‘find favor in your eyes’ includes courtesy...He goes beyond what he promised in providing meat...He understands himself to be their servant.”<sup>5</sup>)

How is an act of hospitality an act of faith? How does it reflect the image of God?

Let's listen to some scriptures. How do they relate to this spiritual discipline of hospitality?

- Have class members read 1 Peter 4:8-10; Titus 1:7-8; Luke 24:13-16, 29-31.

In the 21st-century Christian home, what does hospitality to strangers look like?

- Have a class member read Genesis 18:9-15.

The statement in verse 10 (and later in verse 14) reveals who this stranger is – this is the Lord!

The promise that Abraham will have a great nation through his offspring is not new. We might remember that when God revealed to Abraham that this son would come through Sarah, Abraham fell on his face and laughed. (17:15-19) Here, Sarah laughs. Why the laughter? Because this is genuinely funny – and because we laugh at attempts of the impossible.

“We can wonder if the absurdity of this elderly couple producing a child was so outrageous that everyone present could not help but laugh, not in disbelief, for as we are reminded nothing is

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 77.

<sup>3</sup> Alter, 78.

<sup>4</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 182.

<sup>5</sup> Terence Fretheim, *Genesis, The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 463.

impossible for God, but in the ludicrousness of the prophecy. What a healthy image: God, God's angels, and the faith's matriarch and patriarch rolling on the ground in uncontrollable laughter."<sup>6</sup>

God asks two questions about Sarah's giggles: "Why did Sarah laugh?" and "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

"If it is an accusatory question, then it could claim that Sarah should know better than to laugh, for nothing is too wonderful for God. Yet, it seems unlikely that God would be critical of Sarah if not of Abraham in 17:19. More likely, the 'why' introduces a genuine question designed to continue the conversation... God's question in v. 14, also a genuine question, moves Abraham and Sarah beyond their limited view of the future to a consideration of God's possibilities."<sup>7</sup>

Why did Sarah laugh? We've covered the "impossibility" factor – the elders are too elderly. What other reasons might Sarah's laugh be the subject of conversation?

Here's one thought: Maybe this was the first time she'd heard of this.

"God holds [Abraham] responsible for her response. This may be due to Abraham's not informing her of the events of chapter 17, which means that he shares the blame for Sarah's response."<sup>8</sup>

There may also be a theological and a linguistic reason for including this story in the conversation:

"Nothing bad happens to Sarah for her laughing... Maybe that is part of the narrative point: you can laugh at God's proposing, even in God's presence – as Abraham had done about the same news in a prior visit – without negative repercussions. and happiest of endings, their child will be called *Laughter*."<sup>9</sup>

"*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*"

"The precise meaning of the verb (*pale*), translated 'to be wonderful' or 'to be hard/difficult' remains obscure... The term claims God's promises will not fail, that God will always find a way into the future."<sup>10</sup>

"It comes as a question because the gospel requires a decision. That decision cannot come from above. It must come from Abraham and Sarah.... It is an open question that waits for an answer. It is the question which surfaces everywhere in the Bible. We must say it is the fundamental

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<sup>6</sup> De La Torre, 186.

<sup>7</sup> Fretheim, 463.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 78.

<sup>10</sup> Fretheim, 464.

question every human person must answer. How it is answered determines everything else. ... Our text does not permit a casual triumphalism that simply believes everything is possible. Because of the character of God, everything is possible for those who stay through the dark night of barrenness with God. For Abraham and Sarah, there is no simple, painless route to an heir.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Transformational Exercise**

[Distribute the handout, “What does it mean to be a righteous person?” Give time for class members to read the scriptures and to respond in writing and/or in prayer.]

What does it mean to be a righteous person? Some might say it has to do with keeping rules, or obeying religious authorities without question, or living a sinless life.

To be righteous is to live rightly, to live as God wants us to live. We live vertically and horizontally. We are to love God and we are to love our neighbors. Jesus said those were the two greatest commandments in the Law (Matthew 22:37-40).

Abraham and Sarah display righteousness in their demonstration of generous hospitality. Strangers have appeared at their tent flap. Abraham offers them a cool place to rest and be refreshed. Then Abraham and Sarah go all out and prepare a feast. Soon, they discover that these strangers are actually messengers from heaven. The message they offer is remarkable and laughable and inconceivable. When we offer hospitality, surprises abound. There is no telling what we may learn if we will love and listen.

Read these verses about hospitality. How do they relate to hospitality as a characteristic of righteousness?

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:2)

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." (Revelation 3:20).

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 159, 161.

sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25:34-40)

*After reflecting on these verses, pray about your desire to be righteous. Ask God to give you opportunities to be hospitable in this new week.*

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