

“Arguing with God”
Genesis 18:16-33
www.SoundLiving.org
Dr. Jerry Nelson

More than once in my years I have found myself thinking, but rarely daring to say aloud to the Lord, the words, “What kind of God are you?” The implicit charge in such a question must border on the blasphemous. “What kind of God are you” implies that God is somehow deficient or worse, that he is wrong – even unfair, unjust.

What do you do when you disagree with God? God allows a Slobodan Milosovich to order the killing or deportation of hundreds of thousands of Albanian Kosovars. I hear and see the reports coming out of Serbia and Kosovo or the Sudan and ask why God doesn't put a stop to it. But my questions in those situations, so far away, are usually more academic than personal and I find myself somewhat detached and largely emotionally indifferent to the situation. But when the situation affects me or people I love, when it affects people I know personally – the questions of God are no longer academic. What do you do when you disagree with God? When God doesn't stop your husband from walking out on you and your children. When God doesn't intervene and heal the cancer that is eating away the life of your father. When God doesn't make your rebellious daughter wake up to reality and turn her life around. When God allows people in boardrooms on the other side of the country to make decisions that mean you are suddenly without a job. “What kind of God are you?” He chooses to act or not to act in ways that are at least confusing, if not downright wrong from our perspective. What do you do when you disagree with God?

In our text today we have the story of a man, Abraham, who disagreed with God. He heard what God was about to do and to him it was wrong – “What kind of God are you?” And when he disagreed with God, Abraham argued with him until one of them changed their mind. Abraham verbally wrestled with God. Listen to the way the author of Genesis describes the situation.

Genesis 18:16-33: *“When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷ Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? ¹⁸ Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”²⁰ Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”²⁶ The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.”³⁰ Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”³¹ Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.”³² Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”³³ When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.”*

According to the first part of this chapter, it is the Lord, who is one of the men, who here in verse 16 gets up to leave. Earlier the Lord had appeared to Abraham to tell him that in spite of Abraham’s wife’s cynicism, Abraham and Sarah would miraculously have a son through whom God would carry out his promises to Abraham. That mission accomplished, the Lord, and the two angels with him, got up to leave. Good host that he was, Abraham walked along with them for a ways. On that walk, the Lord elected to tell Abraham what He, the Lord, was about to do – destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Even though this scene is of a place far away and a long time ago, if we have ever had a crisis in our own lives we can imagine the fear

Abraham must have immediately felt. His beloved nephew Lot lived in that city along with his family. These were the only family members Abraham and Sarah had in that country. And they were about to be destroyed. And so Abraham prays – yes, this is a prayer - the longest prayer recorded in the Bible thus far. This is a man talking to God – arguing with God.

As I have read and reflected on this incident I have come to believe that God desires to teach us the value of arguing/prayer because through the argument, either God or we will change our minds.

Think with me about what God does in this incident.

I. First of all, God invites our passionate engagement of him. God made this discussion, this argument, possible. Our text tells us that the Lord decided to bring Abraham into the discussion. To himself or to his companions, the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” The answer apparently was, “No, I won’t.” **He wanted to** talk to Abraham about this. As much as we take it for granted, it is an amazing thing that the Lord of the Universe wants to talk to us. It is not just to the Abrahams, the apostle Pauls, the Calvins and the Billy Grahams of the world but you and me that he wishes to engage. The Lord made himself available to Abraham and he makes himself available to us today. It is an awesome thing that we can open our mouths, or even just think the thoughts in our minds, and know that God hears.

Not only did the Lord make himself available to Abraham for conversation but also ***the Lord shocked Abraham into this dialog.*** No one engages God more passionately than when a crisis comes. Our prayers tend to become lazy, infrequent, repetitious, and almost pointless until God breaks into our lethargy. He so much desires our passionate engagement of him that he will use every means to break into our thoughts.

God got Abraham’s attention. And God got an earful. This was a no-holds-barred, bare-knuckle prayer. God does not want our half-hearted, “it makes no difference if it happens or not,” prayers. God wants to engage us in the real stuff of life – the things that matter now

and for eternity. When the most difficult things occur in life – they are God’s gracious invitation to a passionate dialog with him.

Just five days after the Columbine shootings, I spoke on the theme of “tragedy and the sovereignty of God.” One of the points I tried to make was that when crises come, one temptation, in our fear and then anger, is to pull away from God or to become fatalistic about what will happen. But God wants us to wrestle with him, to engage him – passionately. God invites our passionate engagement of him.

II. There is a second thing God desires from our prayers – He desires our participation with him in the outcome of the situation. Did God tell Abraham about the impending disaster on Sodom just to get Abraham riled up enough to talk about serious things? Yes, he wanted Abraham’s passionate engagement **but for a purpose**. He invites Abraham’s participation in what will happen and even whether it will happen. Now this gets very complicated for me because I am committed to the biblical idea that God is sovereign and he is not subject to anyone or anything but his own will. If God is controlled by anything else, then he ceases to be God. But in this passage, as in others, God indicates that he involves us somehow in the decisions that are made.

Our prayers don’t just change us they affect God. In chapter 19 verse 29 we are told that when Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed “he (God) remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe...” The very clear implication is that what Abraham did affected the outcome of this situation. James wrote, James 5:16 “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and **effective**.” In God’s will, Abraham became the means that God used to accomplish his plan. Abraham was crucial to the outcome. Prayer is not optional it is essential. Again, the clear implication of this text is that if Abraham had **not** prayed things would have turned out differently. We, and our passionate prayers, are the means God uses to accomplish his will. So God **not only invites** our passionate engagement of him **but he also demands** our participation with him in the fulfilling of his will. In the midst of a crisis is the worst time to withdraw from God – our passionate prayers are more essential than ever in that time.

III. There is a third thing God wants in our prayers, our dialog with him:

God wishes to remind us of who He is – the God of perfect justice – who never makes a wrong decision. As we have already noted, Abraham’s prayer is passionate, even angry. The Lord told Abraham what was about to happen and then stood there in front of Abraham inviting a response – and he got it. The text says, *“Then Abraham approached him (the Lord) and said: ‘Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of the all the earth do right?’”*

When we ask, “What kind of God are you?” we are asking an amazingly bold, even brash, question. There is every indication that Abraham starts out with the assumption that God is dead wrong in this case. He erupts: “You can’t do that God!” Is it possible that you aren’t just after all? Is it possible that you can’t be trusted? Is it possible that on occasion you could end up allowing or doing something that is unjust? Is my cancer, or my loss of income, or my son’s rebellion, or my divorce one of those exceptions?

It appears that Abraham’s first response to the crisis was fear, doubt and even anger. So how does God deal with that? God doesn’t slap him down with a “How dare you speak to me like that?” response. God tenderly responds to his fears and says, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” He thereby assures Abraham that “Yes, the Judge of all the earth **will** do right! No mistakes will be made.

It seems to me that Abraham’s tone of voice and attitude change dramatically over the next couple of verses. When he next speaks he says, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people? It appears that Abraham has calmed down considerably but he still questions the justice of God. Notice he says, “Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?” It is as if he is saying,

“Okay God, I know you are just but **how** just are you? Are you just not only in the general but also in the particular? When it comes down to just five lives will you still be as concerned about absolute justice? And again the Lord says, in essence, “Yes, Abraham, I am that particularly, perfectly just?”

Yet again we see a change in Abraham’s demeanor for when we get to verse 30, Abraham knows he is pressing the point. He says, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found?” And then two more times in a spirit of much greater humility Abraham presses God on **exactly how careful God will be** in his justice. And each time God tenderly assures Abraham that he is who he claims to be – the God who is **perfectly just – no mistakes** will be made – not in Sodom, not in Lot’s life and not in Abraham’s life.

It was in the very arguing with God that Abraham was reminded so powerfully of the nature of God. Ask God the hard questions. Wrestle with him. Engage him. Walk away and you will **never** have the privilege of hearing so clearly who he really is. When you wrestle with God he wins every time so that you wind up the real winner.

IV. That leads me to the fourth thing God wants to do in our prayers, our dialog, our arguing with him: God wants to strengthen our faith in him.

Over the course of Abraham’s argument with God, Abraham learns that God is perfectly just. God will do nothing rash. Every detail and every person will be perfectly accounted for.

In the bombing of Yugoslavia several years ago there was much talk about collateral damage – damage done inadvertently, not by design but by mistake. What Abraham has learned in his argument with God is that there will be no collateral damage in Sodom. Every person will be accounted for and God’s justice will be perfect. God can be fully trusted even in this life and death situation. And there will be no collateral damage in your life – God is perfectly just!

Abraham still had much life to live. And Abraham’s faith still needed to grow – to become stronger. To be strong enough to stand up even when God was silent – as would happen in Abraham’s life and

happens in ours – times when the dialog seems like a monologue, that you are talking but God isn't answering.

C. S. Lewis wrote the book The Screwtape Letters. It is a fictional account of a devil, named Screwtape, giving his apprentice devil nephew, named Wormwood, advice on how to defeat Christians. Talking to his nephew one day, the demon Screwtape tells how God usually gives new believers a powerful sense of his presence but that changes over time. After a while, "God leaves the creature to stand on its own two legs- to carry, from the will alone, duties which have lost all relish. "It is during such (difficult) periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the creature He wants it to be. "Hence, the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those that please God best..." "He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away his hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles." "Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still (determining), to do our Enemy's will, looks round a universe from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

(Screwtape Letters 47) That's the kind of faith God wanted Abraham to have – the kind of faith he wants us to have. And Abraham's argument with God strengthened that kind of faith.

As our text ends we don't know if Lot lived or died. It is in the next section that we learn that answer. But Abraham's faith was not now built on whether Lot lived or died. His faith was built on God – the God of justice – and Abraham would trust God to do the right thing, right down to the last detail. Abraham prayed for one thing – the safety of Lot – but what he got was far more – he got a lesson about God. Wrestle with God and you will always get more than you asked for.

A young soldier with wounds that left him severely handicapped the rest of his life wrote this poem:

I asked for strength that I might achieve;

I was made weak that I might obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things;

I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy;

I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life';
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I have received nothing I asked for, all that I hoped for.
My prayer is answered.

(quoted in Bloesch The Struggle of Prayer p91)

In all of life: God invites our passionate engagement of him. God demands our prayers as participation in the outcome. God wishes to remind us of who he is. And God wants to strengthen our faith in him. Yes, it is right to argue with God!

I close with a quote from a contemporary pastor – Ben Patterson

“It is a precious intimacy with the heart of God that can see through all of our disappointments the tender and loving hand of God at work for our good. That intimacy comes only after years spent in dialog with him, a dialog that is sometimes quiet and peaceful and sometimes wrenching and devastating. But through it all there is the same loving God, no matter how we feel him to be at the moment – adversary or advocate, mother or father, friend or enemy. Through it all he is at work for our good, and his victory over us will also be his victory in us when the wrestling is over.” (Patterson 148)