

### **Is Anything Too Hard For The Lord?**

Can God make a rock so heavy that even He can't lift it?

When I was in Confirmation Class we thought that one was pretty funny, and a way to stump the Pastor. Little did we know that we were asking a question not too different from the one posed in our Old Testament Lesson for today.

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

It's interesting to me that it is posed here as a question, not as in other places in the Bible when we hear as a confident declaration, “Nothing is impossible for the Lord” or “With God all things are possible.”

Posed as a question, we are invited to ponder our situation in light of God's promises. And how we answer matters.

For if we say, “Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God,” then we are living in a closed universe where things are limited, confined, and ultimately hopeless.

If, on the other hand, we answer, “NO, nothing is impossible for God,” then we are trusting God's freedom to act and to bring about His will for the world and for our lives. To do the impossible!

The gospel in this text, the good news in this story, reaches beyond our frames of reference. It defies reason, worldly wisdom, morality and common sense. It shatters accepted value systems; it questions what is normal.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? So much depends on the answer! And Sarah and Abraham...we know their answer. Sarah laughs – and then lies about it. And in the chapter just before this one, when God tells Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son, Abraham laughs so hard he falls on his face!

God has received the ultimate, “Yeah right!” vote of no confidence from the very people God himself has chosen to bless the world through. Their laughter of disbelief seems to refute God's promise. Abraham's and Sarah's world has been challenged; but they have fended off the attack. At least for now...

Because this story is not the whole story. The whole story is God's purpose and promises for the world, from the beginning of creation through the sending of His Son Jesus on to the end of time.

Abraham and Sarah are minor characters, you and I are bit players – the star of the show is God – it is His story.

So while, our answers matter, not everything depends on them. Because it is God's story – His promise to be fulfilled, not our wishes. That Sarah and Abraham will have a son through which the future will be blessed, does not depend on whether or not they are ready to accept it.

God will work His own will. It will happen, if not in the context of ready faith (which is denied here), then in a context of fearful laughter. And even though the story ends for us this morning with Sarah and Abraham still doubting, they cannot return to the days before God spoke his promise to them. Ready or not, God's promises will be fulfilled.

The Bible is clear in its witness to God's ability to do the impossible. In the New Testament, we hear these words again when Elizabeth and Zechariah conceive John the Baptist in their old age; and again when Mary received word from God that she would bear His very son.

But the question is not restricted to babies and birth narratives. There is the impossibility of discipleship: "Pick up your cross and follow me," the impossibility of community, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." If the story were about us, these would be impossible; but since the story is about God, these qualities of the Christian life - and many more - are possible.

During WWII, Corrie Ten Boom and her family hid Jews (and others) in their home in Amsterdam, until they were caught and sent to the concentration camps. Corrie survived and wrote the book *The Hiding Place* which told their story.

She and her family were Christians and she wrote and spoke extensively after the war. Here's a reflection she wrote: *Love Your Enemy* using the verse from Romans that we just heard...*we feel this warm love everywhere within us because God has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.* (Romans 5:5 LB)

Corrie writes:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him - a balding, heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs

to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, NO FISHING ALLOWED."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

The place was Ravensbruck and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard-one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the seal"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course - how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian, I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein," - again the hand came out - "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there - I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven - and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place, could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there - hand held out - but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do.

For I had to do it - I knew that.

Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the

outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion - I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart."

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5: *because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.* (GUIDEPOSTS

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Notice though, that faith does not make everything we want possible. What is possible is characterized only as everything promised by God. That is, only what is in line with God's good purposes is possible.

God has promised a future for Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. God promises the Holy Spirit, who will show up in ways we could never imagine! God produces and provides for us, but maybe not in ways we're looking for.

This question arises even for Jesus himself in the garden at Gethsemane. There he, too, seeks and raises the question of Genesis 18:14, praying, "Father, all things are possible to thee. Remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." (Mark 14:36)

And here we find that the one thing **not** possible for God is the removal of the cup. What God will not do is to avoid the reality of suffering, of hurt, and of the cross. Which is why our faith in God does not mean 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 a son; they must wait beyond hope well into their old age.

Here's another way to think about this:

I think it's something like the difference between being on the ground and being in the air. When we're on the ground we can only see our immediate surroundings, the things that are right before or behind or next to us, especially in New England where our landscape is mostly forested. Perhaps if we're familiar with an area we can know what lies beyond our sight, but we can still only see so far from where we are.

But when the plane takes off, or when you're looking out from the observation deck of a tall building, it only takes being a few hundred feet in the air, and we see things from a whole new perspective. We can see how the roads and rivers, forests and fields all fit together. We can see for miles; and depending on which way we're facing, we can even see into the future or the past.

I think that's the difference between our perspective and God's perspective. We can only see our immediate needs and wants and consequences. But God sees far beyond what we can even know is out there. He sees how it all fits together, how things beyond our seeing, how things yet to come or things long forgotten are connected to His purposes and promises for our lives.

So is there anything too hard for the Lord? From our perspective, sure, plenty of things. But if we're going to learn anything from Sarah and Abraham it's to begin seeing things from the Godward side of the universe.

And when we do that, the answer is a sure and certain, No!  
With God nothing is impossible!  
Amen.