

FOUR GUARDRAILS FOR DISAGREEING WITH GOD (Genesis 18:22-33)

Have you ever caught God in what you thought was a mistake? Have you ever wanted to say, “Just hold on God. Wait up a minute. I think you better re-think this”?

If you have ever felt that way, you are in fine company. Many revered individuals in the Bible thought that very thing. Consider Moses. When Moses was 80 years old, God said to him, “I want you to go back to Egypt, the place you fled from 40 years ago, and I want you to tell Pharaoh, ‘Let My people go.’” Moses cleared his throat and said, “Umm, God you picked the wrong guy. I’m not the man for this mission. They are not going to believe me, and I don’t talk so good. You just need to send someone else.”

God came to a prophet named Jonah with a special mission. “I want you to go to Nineveh and preach.” Jonah thought about it for maybe two seconds and concluded, “This isn’t a good idea, not all, and on so many levels.”

This might be like God telling you to go to Red Square in Moscow and call out Putin. Or it’s like going to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea and telling Kim Jong Un that his days are numbered. Or its like going to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan and telling the leaders of the Taliban, “God is not happy with you.”

Jonah’s primary concern, however, does not seem to be his personal safety. He really wants to keep God from making a terrible mistake. The capital of the Assyrian Empire was Nineveh, and the Assyrians were brutal; they were pagan; they were the enemies of God’s people. Jonah knew enough about God to know that if he went to Nineveh and preached that they would repent, and God would spare them. He believed the world would be a better place if there were less Assyrians running around. He was perfectly alright with God annihilating the capital of Assyria. So, instead of going to that great empire, he caught a boat going in the opposite direction. He was trying to keep God from doing something so poorly thought out and so ill-advised.

Consider another prophet who lived maybe 150 years after Jonah. There is a new, big kid on the block—Babylon, the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians are just as bad as the Assyrians, maybe worse. God had used the Assyrians to punish Israel. Now, Habakkuk could read the hand-writing on the wall. God was going to use the Babylonians to punish Judah, and Habakkuk was having none of that.

Habakkuk writes the prophetic book that bears his name, and in it, he complains to YHWH: “God, what are You thinking? You’re going to let Your people be destroyed by a nation that is worse than us? What’s up with that? You gotta be kidding!”

When we get to the NT, we see that Jesus is immediately embraced by the crowds. In addition to teaching them, He also heals them and feeds them. What’s not to like about that? As time goes on, however, the people become concerned with what Jesus is not doing. He is not acting like the Messiah. He is not forming an army and talking about delivering the people from Roman oppression. Instead, he talks about forgiving your enemy and going the second mile. He compliments the Gentiles and even makes a Samaritan the hero of one of His stories.

His hometown gets so riled up, they want to kill Jesus. Jesus says some strange things,

and by the time we get to the end of John 6, many of those who had been following Jesus abandon Him. On one occasion, Jesus foretells His coming suffering and death, and Peter tries to shush Him. He is saying, “Lord, you shouldn’t talk like that.”

So, again, I ask, “Do you ever catch God doing and saying things that you think He ought not to do or say?”

Has God ever whispered in your ear. “You know, I have really blessed you; it’s time you increase your giving and further support the work of My kingdom”? How did you respond? Did you get a shocked look on your face and say, “Lord, have you seen my bank account lately? Do you know what inflation has done to my 401K? Have you been to the store recently and seen the prices?”

Maybe the Lord has nudged you and said, “I want you to witness to your neighbor.” You answer, “Lord, I don’t think that is a good idea. We don’t have anything in common. Why, why, Lord, she’s a, she’s a Democrat.”

“I want you to share the gospel to your co-worker.”

“Lord, I can’t do that. He doesn’t like me. And, more than that, he’s a New York Yankees fan.”

If you pay attention, you will discover that God has a habit of doing things that we have a hard time getting on board with, things that we think we just can’t support, or condone, or even approve. Sometimes, we are at odds with God. We disagree with Him.

Abraham was at that point. God viewed Abraham as His friend, and as friends do, God gave Abraham a heads-up as to what He was about to do. He let Abraham know that He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their great sin and wickedness. Abraham was convinced God was about to make a big mistake, and he let God know about that.

We are going to listen in to the conversation the two had. It is one of the most astounding conversations you will find in the Bible. From it we are going to learn how we can express our discontent and disagreement with God. Did you know that it is okay to disagree with God. It doesn’t mean you’re right, but it does mean that God is big enough to handle it when you don’t agree with Him.

God is not going to say, “Well, just shut up and mind your own business.” He’s not going to say that. He allows you to express what you feel and how you think. That doesn’t mean He is going to change His mind, but He may change yours.

There are some things we need to keep in mind when we want God to change His. I am going to call them guard-rails. They keep us from going off the rails. They keep us from dis-respecting God, which we do not have a right to do. We are going to look at how we can disagree with God but do it in a respectful way.

It may be correct but not really helpful to say, “Well God is God, and He is always right, and we just need to get in line with what He wants to do and the way He wants to do it.” Yes, He is always right, and yes, we do need to get in line with he is doing, but that is far more easily said than done. Getting there is a process, and part of the process is being honest with God about how we feel and what we think.

There is a reason that God says in Isaiah 1:18, “Come now, let us reason together.” If we will come before Him humbly and honestly, and seek to reason with Him, He will

lead us to see things the way He sees them. That takes time, and that takes an investment of ourselves.

Let me read our text—Genesis 18:22-33—and then we will work our way through it and point out the guardrails we need to erect.

Guardrail #1: Be Jealous for God’s Glory.

Abraham wasn’t just being contrary because he had some time on his hand and nothing better to do. God’s plan shocked Abraham. He saw a problem in what God proposed to do. I am sure that Abraham had heard of the despicable things that were being done in those cities, and he certainly didn’t support what they were doing. At the same time, he had family that was living in Sodom—his nephew Lot and Lot’s family. He knew they were not doing those kinds of things. He suspected there were others who had kept themselves clean from the filth that was flowing in those two places. He didn’t think it was right for God to sweep away the righteous with the unrighteous (v. 25).

There is a military term that is now used in other contexts; it is the term “collateral damage.” It seems to me to be a rather clinical phrase. It takes the humanity out of the tragedy of innocents dying when the enemy is attacked. Women, children, the elderly deserve to be regarded as something more than just *collateral*. *Damage* hardly communicates the horror of bodies being torn apart, lives being violently ended.

Abraham was rightly concerned about the honor of God being stained if He allowed the righteous to be destroyed along with the wicked. Such collateral damage was far beneath God. Abraham recognized that, and he wanted God to recognize that.

God knew what Abraham did not know. He knew that other than Lot and his family, there were no righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham should not be faulted for what he did not and could not know. He is to be commended for wanting to protect the honor of God.

I have used the phrase “jealous for the glory of God.” There is a huge difference between being jealous of some-thing and jealous for something. Jealousy is not usually thought of as an admirable trait. The word “jealousy” is sometimes coupled with another word that casts it in a bad light, such as insane jealousy or pathological jealousy, which is an actual, psychological disorder.

I am using the word *jealous* in a good sense. To be jealous for the glory of God does not mean that we want for ourselves what God has. No. It means we want what God has and who God is to be magnified, to be clearly demonstrated.

Abraham was afraid that what God was about to do was going to hurt God’s reputation and rob from His glory.

If you are going to disagree with God, let it be for the fact that you don’t want anything He does to hurt His standing in the eyes of others.

There are some theological positions that people take with which I can’t agree. For instance, some people say that in the end, everyone is going to be saved. Some say that no one is going to go to hell. They honestly think that by taking these positions they are somehow protecting God from other teachings that dishonor them. I don’t agree with

them, but I appreciate their motivation. I think that like Abraham, they don't see the full picture.

It is one thing to disagree with what I teach. There have been times I have looked back at what I have taught only to realize I don't agree with what I said. It is another thing to disagree with what God has said just because it makes you uncomfortable.

There is a sense in which every time we sin, we are saying, "God, I don't agree with what You said. I think I know better than You."

We need to do better than that. If you are going to disagree with God, at least don't do it for selfish reasons.

Guardrail #2: Affirm God's Character.

I like what Abraham says in the latter part of v. 25. He asks a rhetorical question: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" The implied answer to the question is, "Yes. He will do what is right." Abraham was affirming the just and righteous character of God. He is the Judge of everybody, and He will judge justly. Of that we can be sure.

We can also be sure that just as the cries of the wickedness of those two ancient cities and the cries of terrible sin in our day still goes up to God. In his commentary on Genesis, James Montgomery Boice made good use of his sanctified imagination. Pay attention to what he wrote:

Listen! Can't you hear those cries in your imagination? I think I hear the cry of a child—wretched, hurt, and terrified—being beaten by a drunken father. There is another cry. It is the cry of an old man being assaulted by a gang of tough, street youths. I hear his painful cry as they beat him around the face and shoulders. There is the cry of a teenage girl being raped in an abandoned car. And there . . . the cry of a wife abandoned by her husband. I hear the cry of a broken man so trapped by our dehumanizing welfare system that he has given up. I hear the cry of sinful pleasures: the raucous cries in thousands of bars that scar the face of our cities, the cries of prostitutes and those who patronize them, the soft cries of addicts, the arrogant cries of those who have been able to defeat the enemies or ruin their competitors. But wait! Those cries are only a fraction of those millions of cries that are rising every minute of every day from every street in every city and village of our land—cries that are all heard by God, felt by God. Must God's judgment not fall on us too, and quickly? How shall we escape? How shall we excuse ourselves when the only righteous God comes down to see if what we have done is as bad as the accusation that has reached Him?

You and I live in a world where far too often injustice is the norm. The powerful often go uncharged. They may be investigated, but they have the power and the money to protect themselves. Those who lack such power and such resources will experience a different outcome.

Then, there are those who are clearly guilty but because of technicalities, or political

pressure, or overcrowded courts and overcrowded prisons, they are let go or are released far earlier than they should be. On earth, injustice routinely reigns.

The Judge of all the earth cannot be bought. He will not bow to political pressure. He will not be dissuaded from judging justly.

When you are troubled by such questions as:

- What about those in distant lands you never heard about Jesus?
- What about those who are mentally challenged?
- What about babies? What happens then they die?
- What about this case or that instance?

Rest in the knowledge that the Judge of all the earth will judge justly. When you are tempted to disagree with what God has said or what God might do, affirm His just character.

Guardrail #3: Understand Where You Stand.

As Abraham began to plead the case of the righteous who might live in the cities destined for destruction, he caught himself and made an important statement based on an equally important realization. Look at v. 27.

We need to recognize our finiteness when we address the Infinite, our time-boundedness when we speak to the Eternal. Do you remember what God said through the pen of Isaiah in Isaiah 55:8-9? Let me refresh your memory.

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God thinks and acts on a plane with which we are not familiar. It should not surprise us that we often do not understand what God says and what God does. How could we? He is so far above and beyond us.

Haven't you ever had the experience of looking straight at a dog, and as you talk to him, he sort of turns his head as if to say, "I have no idea what you are saying"?

Sometimes we are like that before God. Our ways and thoughts are higher than that of a household pet, but when we compare ourselves to God, His thoughts and ways are even higher. We are finite and He is not.

Abraham uses the word *dust* to describe himself. It is the same word God used to describe Adam and Eve, and by extension, all of us. He said, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

One preacher said, "Being dust-people means that one day we will be dead people" (Andrew Wilson).

It is good for us to say of ourselves what God and His word has to say about us. It will

correct whatever misconceptions we have about ourselves. If we have a low self-image, it will remind us that we are made in the image of God. If we think of ourselves more highly than we should. It will remind us that we are but dust. We are mortal, but God is eternal.

Guardrail #4: Care Deeply for Others.

In our text, we have the first-ever instance of intercessory prayer. Abraham prayed for people he didn't even know. He asked God to stay His hand of judgment. He kept whittling down the number until he got to ten. "Lord, if there are just ten righteous people, will You not destroy these cities if there are ten righteous people living within them." God promised, "I won't do it for the sake of ten."

Quoting again from Boice, "How much the wicked owe to the righteous! For the sake of God's people, blessings have been given to the utterly undeserving, and judgments have been averted from those who otherwise would have perished." He goes on to mention that for the sake of Jacob, Laban's flocks multiplied. For the sake of Joseph, Potiphar's house prospered. For the sake of Paul, all traveling with Paul by ship to Rome were spared when the ship went down. God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ten righteous people, but those ten could not be found.

Jesus said that we are to be salt. We are to help prevent this culture from decaying and spoiling. We are light. We are to keep this world from descending into night and darkness.

If we are to do a good job of being salt and light, prayer is essential. S. D. Gordon wrote, "You can do *more* than pray, *after* you[']ve] prayed. But you can *not* do more than pray *until* you have prayed."

The best way we can show we care is by praying. Christian, pray for your neighborhood. Pray for this city. Pray for our state, and our nation, and our world.

Matt Woodley is a pastor and author. A few years back, he wrote a book on prayer. In that book he tells about the time he was pastoring a church on Long Island. There was a Jewish believer in the congregation. Without fail, every Sunday after the message, this Jewish man, named David, would approach Matt. He would then launch into a 5-minute recitation about how he should have brought out this idea from the text or changed this aspect of his message.

Politely, Matt would thank him for his insights. But after two years of this, Matt got upset. He said angrily one Sunday, "David, what is the deal? Don't you get anything out of my sermons? Doesn't God tell you something? Why must you always nitpick about some minor point of theology?"

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments, and then David laughed. He explained:

Maybe I should explain my cultural background, which is probably different than your ethnic background. When New York Jews like me argue about Scripture, we're asking for a dialogue. When I tell you that I disagree with something you've

said, I'm expecting you to fire back and say, "O, yeah, well I think that you're wrong too, and let me tell you why." You see, Jewish people sometimes get close by working through unpleasant feelings, even by arguing if necessary. Confronting each other is a sign of intimacy in the relationship. So, when I dish it out, I want you to dish it right back. That's how trust and intimacy grow in the relationship.

Matt went on to apply that to prayer. He wrote:

Through my friendship with David, God has started to teach me an important lesson about prayer: sometimes prayer involves being completely honest with God. Sometimes we grow closer to God by bringing to God all of the "unpleasant" things about our relationship: our sadness, disappointments, laments, complaints, and even our anger. Based on the numerous God-given prayers of complaint and lamentation, it's obvious that God can handle our honesty.

And God can handle yours; so, speak honestly to God. Even complain if need be. He can handle that. He will even use that to draw you closer to Himself.