

YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL
El Shaddai, The Mighty One
Genesis 17:1-8

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August 11, 2019

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Your God is too small. The title for this series is borrowed from a 1952 book by that title by J.B. Phillips. The premise is that as preschoolers, we have simple understandings of God. As the years go by, we grow emotionally, mentally and physically but we keep a six-year-old's concept of God. As we go through this series, please remember we're not trying to prove God's existence; we are simply bearing witness to God. Theologian Emil Brunner wrote, "The God who can be proven is not the God of faith" [*The Doctrine of God*, p. 149].

When we think about God, we think of two extremes: God's transcendence (otherness) and God's immanence (nearness). To focus on only one is defective. We need to hold them in tension. To keep that balance, it's helpful to consider the many names for God in scripture. These are only a few of them: Elohim=God, El Olam=Everlasting God, El Elyon=God Most High, El Elohi Israel=God, the God of Israel, El Roi=God who sees, El Shaddai=God the Mighty One or God of the mountains (used 48 times in the Hebrew scripture).

Having just returned from vacation, I'm intrigued by the image of "God of the mountains." The mountains speak of God's passion for beauty as well as God's majesty and grandeur. But standing at the foot of a mountain, I also realize my smallness. We are cut down to size. El Shaddai, the Mighty One.

At this point it would be good to remember that the people of Abraham's day had gods (plural), but they had no ethical dimension. They were just ways to explain rain, fire, flood and the seasons. These gods were capricious while El Shaddai, the One God, proved to be dependable. In fact, every time El Shaddai is used in the Bible, it emphasizes God's protection and blessing.

And that brings us to our text. Abraham has left his homeland of many gods and been called by the one true God who reveals God's self to be El Shaddai (v. 1), the self-sufficient one who doesn't need us but seeks us in relationship. In ancient Middle East culture, there were two kinds of covenants: one between equals and one between the greater and the lesser. This was the latter. So in our relationship with God, the final court of appeals is no longer what feels good, our own self-sufficiency, but God. He has to deal with God as God is, not as he wishes God to be (and so do we!).

What is to be Abraham's response? He is to walk blamelessly, v. 1 (meaning with honesty and transparency). Note in vv. 1-7 that God does all the talking. Abraham doesn't speak until v. 17, way past the portion we read. Abraham does, however communicate (v. 3)—he falls on his face (not just to his knees, but on his face). J.I. Packer wrote that we all cherish great thoughts of self and small thoughts of God. It should be vice versa [*Knowing God*, p. 83]. This is a reminder that

we don't worship to get something from God but simply because God is. We do not manipulate God (remember that the first three of ten commandments are about this very truth).

Even Abraham's name gets change to remind him that encountering the living God brings change to our lives. He was 99. We're never too old to change and grow. We're never too young to experience God. No matter who we are or what we have done. God has a fresh encounter waiting for us. And because Abraham was open, he figured out who he was. Figuring out who we are and why we're here—heavy stuff. And guess what. You will be much more likely to figure out who you are worshiping the true God than looking at your student I.D. or driver's license. To live abundantly, we need a God big enough to capture our hearts, a God bigger than us!

The poet E.A. Robinson once said that the human enterprise is like a spiritual kindergarten in which millions of befuddled infants are trying to spell GOD while using the wrong blocks. El Shaddai. God Almighty, whose relationship with us is laced with love. In the darkest trial, the worst injustice, the loneliest place, the most hopeless struggle with sin—this love shines through. And here is the ultimate thing we can say about God: God is love, made known to us in God's Son, Jesus Christ. Each week in this series, we're going to end with this passage of scripture from 1 John 4:8-10: "God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Amen.