

In the Beginning

Message 15

Friendship With God

Genesis 18:1-33

The Need for Friends

I hope you all are having a good time here at camp. It looks like you are. Perhaps the most significant element to having fun at camp is friendship. Even a lousy camp can be fun if you have good friends there, and the best facility and program cannot make a good week if you don't have friends. I trust you feel you are among friends here this week.

I think it is likely that Abraham had few real friends. Remember, Abraham grew up in Ur in Mesopotamia, perhaps the most prosperous city in the world at that time. No doubt Abraham had a comfortable home and was surrounded by friends – men he grew up with and whose company he enjoyed. God called him to leave Ur, and ever since he has been living in a tent in Canaan. Canaan was not unpopulated, but the level of civilization was much lower. And Abraham didn't even live in a city. He lived out in the fields with his animals and servants. At first he had his nephew Lot as a companion, but when their flocks became too numerous, Lot moved to Sodom, a city in the plain. Abraham was left alone up in the hills. Of course he had Sarah, and she meant a lot to him. And he had his servants – hundred of them. But I doubt that he had many real heart-to-heart friends among the servants. I think we get a picture of a man for whom obedience to God meant a solitary life. So it's not surprising that Abraham rejoiced to see some visitors show up at his tent door.

Abraham's Hospitality

Hospitality

Identity of the visitors – must have been divine

- prophecy
- knew Sarah laughed
- “I will return” as the Lord (v.14)

Sarah: Flawed but Faithful

Sarah – progress of sin

- eavesdropping
- unbelief
- lying
- sin always leads to more sin

Sarah's virtue

- recognized Abraham as lord
- 1 Peter 3:8

Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands,...³ Do not let your adornment be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel –⁴ rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.⁵ For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands,⁶ as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror. 1 Peter 3:1, 3-6

- received faith (Heb. 11:11)

“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the

age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.” (Hebrews 11:11)

- women, do you have the faith to submit to your husband as lord?
- men, do you have enough faith to be a lord to a wife?

The Lord’s Purpose

We learn in the next paragraph that the second part of their task was to visit Sodom and see if her sins were as great as she was accused of, and whether Sodom deserved destruction for her wickedness. Now of course God sees and knows all things, and does not need to send messengers to earth to gather information for Him. This visit was not to be for gathering information, but to conduct a formal inquiry, rather like a judicial hearing. The Lord already knew that “the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave”. He is not so much going to see “if” their sin deserves punishment, but to verify “that” it is as great as it appears. After the Lord’s personal visit, no one will be able to say that Sodom was denied a fair hearing. And the events of the next chapter vividly bear out the cries raised against this city.

So off they went, with Abraham, as a good host, accompanying them part of the way. Now what was only implied in the previous paragraph is clearly set before us here, that is, that one of these figures is God Himself. In verse 17 we read, “And the Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?’” The following two verses record the Lord’s thoughts, and verses 20 and 21 contain His subsequent dialog with Abraham. Perhaps this completely mystified the Old Testament saints, but for us, we understand this as nothing else than a pre-incarnate visit of Christ, the second person of the trinity. In some way that is still mysterious, Christ took a human form before He was joined to our nature in Mary’s womb, and appeared to Abraham to instruct and strengthen him in his faith. Christ was the Messenger of the Covenant long before He preached the gospel on the shores of Galilee!

Verses 17 to 19 comprise a divine soliloquy, rather unusually embedded within the narrative. Here is a priceless glimpse into the mind of God as we see Him reviewing His reasons for discussing with Abraham the judgement on Sodom. Central to God’s thinking is that He *knew* Abraham. Some translations use the word “chose” in verse 19, and the Hebrew word is a very broad one and able to bear that meaning. But more to the point is the heavily covenantal language in these verses. God does not mean that He is acquainted with the facts of Abraham’s life, but that there is that intimate knowledge which accompanies His relationship with those whom He chooses. God’s covenant was never merely a contract, but was the pledge to “be your God” and that “you shall be my people.”

In addition, God decides to reveal His plan to Abraham because of the magnitude of Abraham’s position. It is fitting to dignify the father of many nations with counsel about the future of the nations around him. There are things our president may discuss with other heads of state, but withhold from their ambassadors. So God freely shares his intentions with Abraham.

Finally, God reveals the fate of Sodom so that Abraham “may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” Here is an obligation laid upon Abraham, to learn from God the matters of righteousness and justice, and to teach these to his children and household. This is only appropriate, if he is to be the father of nations and a blessing to the whole earth. Why should his children be any different from the evil nations about him, and how might they be a blessing to others unless they learn from the Lord how to rule in righteousness and justice? So God explains to Abraham how He rules so that Abraham will learn and teach his children to do likewise. In this manner God will fulfill His promise to Abraham.

But it is essential at this point to grasp that the promise precedes the command. Abraham will not become great because of his great obedience. Genesis has already shown the deficiency of Abraham’s walk,

and has revealed that it is his faith by which his righteousness is reckoned [15:6]. Abraham could not earn God's favor anymore than anyone, but having secured God's favor, he is instructed in righteous living. The promise does not cancel out the command, but rather enables us to keep it. The central fact here is God's having known Abraham. When Abraham was in idolatrous Mesopotamia, God called him and gave him the promises. Following from that is the command of God, and the obedient response of Abraham.

Now in surveying this paragraph as a whole, we can see that the revelation of God's plan was really a revelation of God Himself. For the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was not an issue of abstract principle, but was the expression of the character of God. God's character is expressed in the phrase "righteousness and justice", and these are the issues at stake with regard to the wicked cities. The God who knew Abraham is a God of righteousness and justice. He is the God who also knew and called us in to a relationship with Himself. We also were like Abraham, unable to do good, and living in idolatry. Before and apart from any action of our own, God reached out to us in our sin, called us to Himself, and gave us the incredible promise of eternal life. We, also like Abraham, have the revelation of God. It is right here in this passage, and in the whole Bible. We are clearly instructed in the character of our God, and like Abraham, also have the obligation to instruct others in righteousness and justice. Furthermore, we who have been called into the teaching ministry of the church have a double measure of this obligation. May we constantly rely on His grace to persevere in our preaching. May God grant us always to be faithful to this calling!

Abraham's Appeal

The next paragraph records Abraham's response to God's plan of destruction for Sodom and Gomorrah. The most striking aspect of Abraham's prayer, for that is what it really is, is the basis of his appeal. How often in your prayers do you seek to gain a hearing with God by your fervor, or your sincerity? Are we not often like the child who begs his mother for a cookie and hopes to obtain his goal by dogged persistence? Finally Mom may grow weary and give in, just to get some peace and quiet. Well, fervor, sincerity, and perseverance are important ingredients in prayer, but Abraham wisely approaches God with a sound argument. God is not like a harried mother, but like dame wisdom. We insult God by treating Him as a mindless creature whom we could wear down.

No, Abraham appeals to God's character and in so doing is able to get away with challenging His plan. Furthermore, Abraham challenges God on precisely that issue in which God seeks to instruct him - righteousness and justice! He argues, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" and "Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?" Here is a remarkable man. No sooner does God set out to teach him something, than he immediately grasps the lesson. Here also is a remarkable God, who teaches His children by leading them through His own difficult decisions. Most remarkable of all is the friendship between Abraham and God. Notice the ease with which they communicate, Abraham freely offering his views, yet with the humility required of a creature, and God graciously bearing with Abraham as he learns that compassion go with justice.

Why should Abraham care to pursue this argument with God? What is Sodom to him? Of course, Lot lived there. He was worried about the fate of his nephew. But certainly Lot could have been rescued so that the evil wretches in Sodom might be purged from the earth. Abraham could not have been oblivious to the wickedness of these cities of the plain. Should not a righteous man have rejoiced to see them overthrown? But several years earlier Abraham had rescued these very cities from kings of the east. Apparently Abraham was less zealous for their destruction than we may have been. Once before, and now, Abraham is a blessing to these nations. Right before our eyes we see God using him to reveal divine forbearance toward sinners.

So how do we fit into this picture? When we pray do we appeal to God's character? Do we urge Him to act in righteousness and justice? Or are we focused upon our own selfish interests. Do we seek to get

what we want by much loud noise and sustained commotion? The Baal worshipers prayed thus. No, let us follow the example of Abraham, and pray for our enemies, arguing with God on the basis of His own character. Let us come before Him as our familiar friend, but with humility and reverent perseverance. Let us, in our prayers, truly be a blessing to the whole world.

Abraham a Preview of Christ

So far we have seen the magnificent graciousness of God in calling sinful Abraham into His covenant, in granting him a child, and in exalting him to be a great blessing to the whole earth. We have seen the wonderful kindness of God in entering into a close friendship with Abraham and confiding His plans for Sodom. We have seen the faithful response of Abraham as he seeks to persuade God to spare Sodom and the cities on the plain – his wise appeal, his humility, and his reverent perseverance. We have been moved to worship God for His graciousness to us in calling us into His covenant, and we have been challenged regarding our faithfulness in prayer.

But we would be remiss if we stopped here, without noting that Abraham is more than an example for us to follow; he is also a preview of Christ. Christ also looked out over an evil city, and was moved to tears by its wickedness [Lk. 19:41-44]. He foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem because she would not repent and believe in Him. In Matthew 23:37 He cries out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” John 17 records His fervent prayer for His followers, and at the end of his life He prayed for the forgiveness of those who killed Him [Lk. 23:34]. Abraham points us to Christ, who heard the will of the Father, and did all He heard.

But Christ went far beyond prayer, and even took the punishment for us. That fire and brimstone which fell on Sodom and Gomorrah fell on Christ as he hung on the cross. We all were destined to die by fire for our sins. Only because Christ took our place may we escape. Furthermore, Christ ascended and now sits in heaven where He still prays for us. 1 John 2:1 calls Jesus our “advocate”. That means he argues our case before the Father. In Hebrews 10 [19-25] we are urged to pray because Christ has gone before us to the Father. In other words He makes our prayers effective. Even when we fall short of wisdom in our prayers, Christ takes our requests and presents them to the Father. Because He is now in heaven, He opens the way for us and, in some mysterious way, we enter heaven too when we pray.

Last of all, Christ also comes to us here on earth. His parting words while He was here in the flesh were, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” This is a true statement, for it was made by Him who is the Truth. Christ is present with us now, just as he was present with Abraham. Then He stood in pre-incarnate human form, and now He walks with us by His Spirit, but the reality of His presence is undiminished.

So although Abraham had the privilege of speaking with the Lord in His physical presence on this occasion, we have the far greater blessings of the New Covenant in Christ – the constant presence and assistance of the Holy Spirit, and access through the veil directly into the presence of the Father. If Abraham almost moved God to spare Sodom, think of how much greater efficacy our prayers are through Christ! Take heart, and let us not grow weary in our ministry of prayer for the nations. May God, through our prayers, make us a blessing to the nations.

God Our Friend

The unifying theme of this chapter – God is our friend.

– Visits us

- enjoys our company
- comforts us
- encourages us
- confides in us
- counsels with us

Thus Abraham was called “the friend of God” [James 2:23], and as one friend tells another what is on his mind, so does God with Abraham.

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