

Genesis 18:16-33
Abraham the Negotiator

God's divine attributes have been known since the creation. As Scripture plainly declares, "for since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). We do not know all that there is to know about God, but we can know what He has chosen to reveal about Himself. We can know that He exists, and that He is eternal, immutable, and infinite. We can know that He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. We can know that He is holy, good, and sovereign. This is not all we can know about God, but Scripture clearly states that we can know Who God is and what He is like.

It is also true that God is what He is all the time. That is, God does not emphasize one attribute at one time and another attribute at another time. He is all that He is all the time. This may seem difficult for our finite and fallen minds to conceive, especially when some attributes of God seem to conflict with one another. How can God be both just and merciful? How can God be loving and judge? But these dilemmas are our problems not His. In fact, that we cannot understand God fully is itself, an attribute of God. We must trust what Scripture teaches about God, and not try to conform God to an image we can fully comprehend.

This is important to remember because, as we look at our particular passage this morning, God and Abraham are discussing the future of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. To those without a clear understanding of the attributes of God, it may seem that God might behave in a very un-godlike way. But as the narrative unfolds we can see that God is what He has always been, perfectly just and perfectly merciful.

It is also worth appreciating that the literary style of this passage mirrors in many ways that of the previous narrative. In verse 1 the 'men' arrive and, in verse 16, they prepare to depart. The action begins in Mamre, and that is the place to which Abraham was returning at the end of his negotiation with God. Each passage is framed by a vital question - "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14) and "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25). And, curiously, in each section it is a sound that prompts the Lord to action - the laughing of Sarah and the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Lord Contemplates

Abraham had completed his duties as the perfect host. When "the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom . . . Abraham was walking with them to send them off" (v. 16). Like Adam in the Garden and like Enoch also, Abraham literally "walked with God." They left the oaks of Mamre and headed toward the valley of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is not possible to precisely locate the place from which Abraham and the Lord and His angels looked down upon the doomed cities. Tradition holds that it was near the modern village of Beni Na'im, located some three miles east of ancient Hebron. The Dead Sea was about eighteen miles distant to the south, and could be seen between the gaps on the hills. Wherever it was, it was from this very spot that Abraham would soon look down on the destruction that was to come. As Scripture relates, ²⁷Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he

had stood before the Lord; ²⁸and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace” (Genesis 19:27-28).

As they walked, the Lord contemplated the other reason for His visit and said aloud, “shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (v. 17). It seems that God was not talking *to* Abraham, but rather speaking to His angels *about* him. Peculiar as it may seem to us, Scripture often describes God as being deliberative. Consider,

“Then God said, ‘let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26).

“The Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Genesis 6:7).

“⁶The Lord said, ‘behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech’” (Genesis 11:6-7).

God allowed Abraham to overhear His deliberations “since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (v. 18). This was a reminder of the original promise (Genesis 12:2-3). That is, it was the divine election of Abraham in the first place that permitted him to be able to listen to the counsels of God.

And God emphasized His choice of Abraham. As God said, “I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him” (v. 19). We must appreciate the sequence of events described here. The choice of Abraham resulted in his being righteous. Abraham had no righteousness in himself; whatever righteousness he achieved was the gift of God. Election, promise, and blessing were linked perfectly. Cause and effect were clearly demonstrated. Because God chose Abraham, Abraham would grow in righteousness, and God would then use him to bless the nations. God’s sovereign, unilateral covenant with Abraham was clearly stated.

The Hebrew word for ‘chosen’ is *yāda* which implies a sense of familiarity. It was more than simply the covenant term, it was personal and relational. God expressed personal confidence in His choice of Abraham. That was why Abraham was allowed to listen to the counsel of God.

As a consequence of his being chosen, Abraham was to instruct his family and his household in “the way of the Lord” (v. 19). The idea is that of a lifestyle, rather than the particular obediences required to fulfill what would be the Mosaic law. For example, “you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him” (Deuteronomy 8:6). To not “walk in the way of the Lord” became

an Israelite shorthand for doing evil. Regarding the wicked king Amon of Judah, it was said that “²¹he walked in all the way that his father had walked, and served the idols that his father had served and worshiped them. ²²So he forsook the Lord, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the Lord” (2 Kings 21:21-22). Because Abraham had been chosen by God, he had the obligation to influence those around him for the kingdom of God. We, too, are so chosen. And we, too, bear the same obligation to our family and those with whom we come in contact.

Thus the responsibilities of Abraham (and ourselves) were not merely ceremonial, such as circumcision. They were also ethical. He was to be not only righteous, but also to be just. Abraham, in fact, acted in the role of prophet to his family, speaking the truth of God to them and offering the promise of blessing or the equally certain consequence of punishment for disobedience. These became central truths to the Israelites. Consider,

“The way of the Lord is a stronghold to the upright,
But ruin to the workers of iniquity” (Proverbs 10:29).

“For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:6).

This idea of doing what was right had increasing significance with regards to social justice. For example, “You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16:19).

“Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

“Thus says the Lord, ‘do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place’” (Jeremiah 22:3).

It was because they had not followed the “way of the Lord” that God and His angels had come to Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord was to hold Sodom and Gomorrah accountable for their sin. “²⁰The Lord said, ‘the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. ²¹I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know’” (v. 20-21). While the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah was the motivation for the Lord’s visit, their sin was the cause.

We must not think that the motive given for the visit was to be taken literally. That is, the appearance of the Lord and His two angels was not due to the fact that God did *not* know what was happening in the two wicked cities and *needed* to see for Himself. God knows all. Remember similar language in the Tower of Babel narrative,

“⁶The Lord said, ‘behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech” (Genesis 11:6-7).

Perhaps the best explanation for this use of language relates to the context of God demonstrating His justice. That is, God wanted to show that He was not simply acting out of anger. The impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a deliberate action. And Abraham must have sensed this. After all, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were not unknown, even to Abraham and his contemporaries. For years their reputation had been manifest. It had been recorded years ago that “the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord” (Genesis 13:13).

As Abraham had been commanded by God “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (v. 19) so we may see the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as violating that injunction. That is, as notorious as their sin was, the sins of these two cities were not exclusively of a sexual nature. The language itself, the idea of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah ‘crying’ out, indicates that there was much more to their sin than deviant sexual behavior. For example, when confronting Cain, God said “what have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is *crying* to Me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). When the last plague befell Egypt, the Lord promised that “there shall be a great *cry* in all the land of Egypt, such as there has not been before and such as shall never be again” (Exodus 11:6). Such cries were not those of the offense of sexual sin alone.

Centuries later, when pointing out the unfaithfulness of Jerusalem, Ezekiel compared it to that of Sodom and, in so doing, gave some detail as to the specifics of that sin. “⁴⁹Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. ⁵⁰Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it” (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Isaiah echoed these sentiments,

“¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord,

You rulers of Sodom;

Give ear to the instruction of our God,

You people of Gomorrah.

¹¹What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?”

Says the Lord.

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

And the fat of fed cattle;

And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.

¹²When you come to appear before Me,

Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?

¹³Bring your worthless offerings no longer,

Incense is an abomination to Me.

New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—

I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.

¹⁴I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,

They have become a burden to Me;
I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood.
¹⁶Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Cease to do evil,
¹⁷Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:10-17).

Thus the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not only sexual sin, but rather a violation of the commands of God to practice justice and righteousness generally. Their sin was so great that God was moved as He had been in the days of Noah when “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

Abraham Negotiates

At that point in the conversation, “then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord” (v. 22). Thus the angels departed for Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham was left before his God. To “stand before” is used in Scripture to relate a moment of worship (Jeremiah 7:10), but more often it refers to the role of the prophet (1 Kings 17:1) as it does in this case. Abraham must have understood the implications if God indeed had His understanding confirmed about the sins of the wicked cities of the plain. If the report proved true, Abraham knew that their destruction was certain. So, Abraham began to intervene on the behalf of the cities doomed to destruction.

Negotiating with God was not unheard of among the Israelites, though none ever bargained as repeatedly as did Abraham on this occasion. For example, Moses often urged the Lord to spare the frequently rebellious Israelites.

“¹¹O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘with evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore

by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’ ¹⁴So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His

people” (Exodus 32:11-14).

What is unique here is that Abraham was interceding not on behalf of the chosen people of God, but rather on the behalf of wicked outsiders. Contrast Abraham with Jonah, who could not abide the idea of God being merciful to Gentiles. And Abraham did not merely ask once and then leave it at that. He pleaded with God. He bargained. He badgered. Remember the illustration Jesus gave,

“⁵Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, ‘friend, lend me three loaves; ⁶for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; ⁷and from inside he answers and says, ‘do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs” (Luke 11:5-8).

Abraham’s buttressed his argument by calling upon God to remember His divine attributes of justice and mercy. The dilemma was this - if the cities were destroyed, the innocent suffered; but if the cities were spared, then the wicked escaped punishment for their sins. Both of these outcomes would compromise God’s mercy and justice. But, as we will see, neither of these outcomes occurred.

Abraham began his plea with a series of rhetorical questions. “²³Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (v. 23-25).

Abraham was basing his request on what he knew about the character of God. He was not challenging God but rather testifying to God’s righteousness. Abraham knew that God was true to Himself. And since God was righteous, He would act righteously. Also, Abraham acknowledged that God was the “Judge of all the earth.” This expression is used only here in Scripture, but the plea to God as sovereign ruler is found elsewhere.

“¹The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice;
Let the many islands be glad.
²Clouds and thick darkness surround Him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne” (Psalm 97:1-2).

“And He will judge between the nations,
And will render decisions for many peoples;
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,
And never again will they learn war” (Isaiah 2:4).

“Let the nations be aroused
And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,
For there I will sit to judge

All the surrounding nations” (Joel 3:12).

The language of God’s judgment emphasized the dilemma. To “sweep away” was often the biblical metaphor for destruction brought about by divine judgment.

“²⁵Then Moses arose and went to Dathan and Abiram, with the elders of Israel following him, ²⁶and he spoke to the congregation, saying, ‘depart now from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing that belongs to them, or you will be swept away in all their sin.’ . . . ³¹As he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open; ³²and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions” (Numbers 16:25-26, 31-32).

To ‘spare’ often meant to forgive, or to take away guilt. The two terms are contrasted here. As are the terms ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked.’ This contrast occurs most often in the Psalms and Proverbs. To be righteous conveys the idea of conformity with the moral law of God, and the wicked are those who did not conform. Since “the Lord is righteous in all His ways, and kind in all His deeds (Psalm 145:17), He could be expected to act accordingly. The Lord would not destroy the righteous with the wicked.

And God said He would act in accordance with His divine attributes. “The Lord said, ‘if I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account’” (v. 26). Emboldened by the Lord’s positive response, Abraham then entered into a dialogue with God as he gradually negotiated the number of righteous required to spare the wicked cities.

“²⁷Abraham replied, ‘now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ ²⁹He spoke to Him yet again and said, ‘suppose forty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it on account of the forty.’” ³⁰Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it if I find thirty there.’” ³¹And he said, ‘now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.’” ³²Then he said, ‘oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the ten’” (v. 27-32).

Notice that Abraham did not challenge God’s understanding of the wickedness of the cities. He also did not defend their behavior or try to excuse it in any way. Abraham was not pleading mercy for the wicked, but rather begging God to distinguish between the righteous and the wicked as He passed judgment. Notice also, that Abraham recognized who he was in the negotiation. He admitted that he was “but dust and ashes” (v. 27). Abraham was aware that it was God’s sovereign exercise of His grace alone that would determine the matter. Abraham had nothing with which to barter. He could simply, humbly ask.

Yet, we must also admire Abraham’s relationship with God that allowed him to talk (pray) to Him in this honest, and straightforward fashion. He did not search for eloquent words. He did not presume upon God. Abraham simply, honestly spoke to God and poured out his heart about something that concerned

him. He did not fear, he did not shy away. But Abraham also understood who he was in the conversation.

We might wonder why Abraham stopped at ten. Why not five, or even one? Perhaps because ten was generally understood as the smallest possible social unit; ten Jews would be all that was required to form a synagogue for example. Or it may be that Abraham assumed that Lot had been able to influence at least that many during his stay there. Or it may be that the number was not important. It was God's mercy and justice that was being called upon to discriminate between the righteous and the wicked, and so the actual number will not matter.

“As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the Lord departed, and Abraham returned to his place” (v. 33). The Lord had the last word. His angels would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous could be found there. As we will see, that number could not be found.

Takeaways

There is much to appreciate in this passage. First, we can again see clearly that Scripture teaches God's sovereign election of His people. God chose Abraham, and the righteous that Abraham achieved, and the blessing that he became to all the nations of the world, was the consequence of his being chosen by God.

Second, we can see that being chosen by God carries with it certain responsibilities. Abraham was to influence those in his household in a way that furthered God's kingdom. Abraham was to lead by both example and by precept. That is, he was to live a certain lifestyle and also teach those in his charge. We, too, are commanded to do the same.

Finally, we can appreciate that what is on display here is not the power of Abraham's negotiating ability, but the mercy and justice of a holy and righteous God. That is the theme that runs through this narrative. God commanded it of Abraham and He demonstrated it Himself. God is always all that He is. He is always just and He is always merciful. Let us praise God for Who He is and pray for God's grace to be worthy of His calling.