
The Hopeful Intercessor

Genesis 18

Abraham is a man of manners and hospitality. But that is not the point of this text. We do not come to Genesis 18 with a primary aim to put Emily Post or Vanderbilt on your nightstand. We come to this to see what God is teaching to us as God's people. What does it mean that this chapter of fellowship and prayer follows on directly with God's changing Abraham and Sarah in their identity and status and names? What does it mean that this is just before the awful destruction of Sodom and deliverance of Lot? The answers to those are what this is all about.

This unit will open and close with the picture of Abraham looking out over a scene. It opens here with his seeing his heavenly guests and he entertains them in righteousness. It closes in chapter 19:27 with his looking out over the plains of Sodom and the smoke her destruction rising up. Our chapter will leave us in the middle with his watching the angels depart on their mission.

Fellowship with God (v.1-21)

The seamless movement from chapter 17 to chapter 18 tells us Moses intends to connect these narratives. God has revealed Himself through His covenant in way that confronts impatient believers, changes them by changing their identity and their relationship and they respond with obedience. Upon that obedience God appears to Abraham again by the Oaks of Mamre. God is showing his people that having changed them, He now fellowships with them.

Communion – A Covenantal Meal (v.1-8)

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." ⁷And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Abraham is lounging in the doorway of his tent escaping the great heat of the day. He looks up and suddenly there are three men standing in front of him, but at a discreet distance from the tent. In his culture hospitality to strangers is an important aspect of righteousness. He moves quickly to greet and invite those strangers to a meal.

He recognizes who they are. There is a growing sense through the story that Abraham is aware that this is not just any three men. He rushes to invite them into his tent so that he can be their host. He invites them by offering them a wash, food, drink and rest. He offers to share his bounty with them so that they will go on their journey refreshed. He bows low before them. They are more than they seem at first. They are guests from heaven.

When they agree, he hurries to provide for them. Notice how often Moses says this. He hurries himself to assign tasks. He runs to the herd. He presses for people to get it done quickly. He does not want his guests to have to languish. And what a feast he prepares them! Twenty one

quarts of flour made into flatbread. A whole calf is freshly butchered, cooked and prepared to serve. He also has jugs of curds (maybe a yogurt like dessert) with fresh milk set before them.

He takes the place of a servant host. He brings it in and serves it to them. He then stands nearby as they eat, ready to attend to their needs and wants. He does not presume to sit down with them. He stands with, as we will find later, Sarah just behind him at the tent door.

In our Christian communities, hospitality is an important part of our holiness and relationships. Everyone in the church is commanded to have an open heart and an open home. Hospitality is a qualification for office bearing and for widows to be supported by the church. Abraham here is an illustration of the hospitality that all of God's people are to show. Abraham's willingness to not only serve them, but also to stand ready to meet their needs instructs our hearts. We ought to have this poise. We ought to show hospitality. As the author of Hebrews notes, heaven only knows who our guests may actually be.

Conversation – A Covenantal Promise (v.9-15)

⁹They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." ¹⁰The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

Moses records for us some of the dialog, the conversation. They inquire after Sarah. Where is she? Nearby, in the tent. Now we must not imagine our small camping tents. These tents were almost portable homes, complete with sleeping rooms, storage areas and large family areas. They are probably seated in the family area and Sarah is in one of the other rooms.

The interesting thing here is that the Lord speaks to Abraham but it is primarily for Sarah who is eavesdropping, if you will. The Lord announces that He will visit about this time next year and Sarah will have a son. Now, this is impossible. Sarah has ceased her time of month. She is totally incapable of bearing children naturally. Moses emphasizes this. Isaac will be a miracle.

Sarah laughs in heart. She well knows that she is beyond having an intimacy that will produce children. She is old and worn out. This whole notion in her mind, is silly. But the Lord hears and responds. He asks Abraham why Sarah laughed. Sarah speaks up and denies that she did. God is not going to let her get away with this denial and insists that she did.

In the midst of this conversation comes the central question with its great truth. "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" This is a great question to ask of two old people whose bodies are unable to have children yet have a promise from God that they will. This is not too hard. Nothing God promises is beyond His great power. Isaac's birth like Jesus' depends upon the covenant promises and the mighty power of God Almighty. Sarah who is too old and Mary who is a virgin, will both be visited by God's enabling power to bring a son into the world. One will be the fulfillment of promise to Abraham of descendants; the other will be fulfillment the promise to Abraham of a descendent.

At the center of our fellowship with God and His promises to us is the Lord Jesus, His promised son. All of these texts are pointing Israel to a son who will be greater than Isaac. This will be the great “son” theme through the Isaac narratives. For us, we cannot but hear this glorious message. Our communion with God and all that God is to us comes through His Son.

Confidant – A Covenantal Sharing (v.16-21)

The guests arise to go on their way. Their faces are set toward Sodom.

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, 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 to Abraham what he has promised him.” ²⁰ Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹ I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”

As they prepare to go, Abraham goes with them to see them on their way. This paragraph is so interesting. It shows Abraham becoming the confidant of God. God seems to muse over whether He will hide something from Abraham. What he is hiding has an ominous foreboding to it. It will concern Abraham because it will involve Lot.

Moses then relates the logic of God. Two key issues play into whether God will reveal to Abraham the impending judgment on Sodom.

Abraham’s Standing as the Head of the Covenant (v.18).

This connects us to what has gone before. Abraham’s new status and identity, his relationship with God, means that God may confide in him. He may now need to know and has the privilege of entering into God’s counsels. Abraham’s covenant descendants will be the primary recipients of God’s revelation. It is to them and through them that God, beginning with Abraham, will set forth what God plans and purposes.

Abraham’s Responsibility as the Head of the Family (v.19).

God also will show what He will do so that Abraham can direct his family and descendants in a way that is pleasing to God. Now, some have taken this as a commendation of Abraham. Some translations make it sound that way. That is not the case. God is saying that because He has chosen Abraham to command his household and all his descendants, then God will disclose these things to him.

Two very important Redemptive-Historical lessons arise from this text. Both are centered on God’s revelation of His person, purposes, plans and provisions. In other words, the Word of God. God has chosen to give His divine self-disclosure largely through the descendants of Abraham. And, we need that divine self-disclosure if we are to order our steps aright.

For Abraham, God will show Him what he intends to do to Sodom so that Abraham will not be shaken over the incredible destruction that will take place. This threatens to sweep away Lot and his family as well. And, Abraham must be able to instruct and command his household so that they will truly know what is going on and how to respond to it.

What a great blessing fellowship with God is. As people who have had our identity and our status changed so that we are now the people of God, we have covenantal communion with God. We have the privilege of intimate conversation with Him centering on His promises and the Lord Jesus. We have

been given deep and wonderful insight into all that God is doing, not just in our own lives, but the larger unfolding of all of history.

Intercession with God (v.22-33)

But this kind of close fellowship in the face of the wrath of God on sinners should impel us to intercession with God on their behalf. This is exactly what we see here. Now that God has shown Abraham what He intends to do, Abraham moves toward God to bow in humble intercession on behalf of Lot and the city as a whole. I love the language here: Abraham is standing before the Lord and draws near.

Character – The Justice of God (v.22-26)

²² So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶ And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

Understanding the justice of God, Abraham appeals to the Lord based on His character. He approaches the Lord through asking if God, as someone who is ultimately just, would destroy both the righteous and the wicked together. For example, Abraham argues, if there were fifty righteous people in Sodom, would God wipe all of them out?

This is the main question: will a God who is able to do anything do what is just? The answer is an emphatic yes. God, who has the sovereign right and responsibility to punish the wicked will also save the righteous. In fact, a principle of justice is that, for the sake of the righteous, the wicked may be spared.

What does this mean? This means two wonderful, incredible things:

God may spare the wicked on account of believers.

Many times, God is pleased to spare the wicked who richly deserve their earthly, temporal punishment because of the righteous living among them. Justice and mercy are here intertwined. Thus, the presence of believers among all the nations, may in fact be the reason the wicked are not punished as quickly or as severely as we might desire. This is a part of God’s justice, but it is still at His discretion as to when and how He extends this mercy. So we will see in Genesis 19 where the wicked are punished and the righteous are rescued. Thus, God’s justice and mercy are actually served in another way.

God saves the wicked on account of the Righteous One.

All the wicked who are saved from the eternal wrath of God are delivered because of Jesus Christ, our righteous Redeemer. This principle of “on the account of another” unfolds through Genesis. Clearly, the people of God are being taught that the justice of God is satisfied by the righteous on behalf of the wicked. This is how we are saved. Jesus, our righteous redeemer, has taken our sin on Himself, was punished in our place, so that we might receive His righteousness instead.

Finally, Abraham here acts as an intercessor. He stands as a pleading mediator, not to argue for the deliverance of the wicked, but for the saving of the righteous. Abraham is asking God to deliver Lot. Thus, like many Old Testament figures, he will anticipate the mediatorial role

of the Lord. Jesus is our mediator, our intercessor. His mediation is not a pleading attempt to change the Father's mind. But rather is the presentation of His own sacrificial death as satisfying the just wrath of God.

Compassion – The Mercy of God (v.27-33)

²⁷ Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹ Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." ³¹ He said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

Understanding the mercy of God, Abraham appeals to the Lord based on His compassion. Now Abraham moves from making a legal case to making a personal appeal. This has the plaintive note of loving Lot, not wishing to see him destroyed. Yet, he knows how wicked the place is. While the justice of God will spare the city (and Lot) for the sake of 50 righteous, what will move God to spare the city for as few as 10? His relationship with Abraham and his mercy on Lot will.

Abraham is both daring and hopeful. He approaches with boldness in his requests because he has experienced what having a relationship with God means. It means openness and self-disclosure. It means that, since God has shown Abraham what He intends to do, Abraham can show his heart in his appeal.

Abraham is also humble and lowly. He approaches with an appropriate understanding of his place before God. As he continues to come and reduce the number of righteous people needed to avert the justice of God, he says again and again that he is nothing, dust, low before God.

So, while his praying is bold, it is also humble. This tension is ever the case for our praying. We can come boldly before the throne of grace. But we must never come with a sense of entitlement or impertinence. We must be careful that we are not commanding God, as some teach today. Rather, we come and in our praying, converse with God and make our case. But we do so bent low as petitioners.

I believe two important and related questions are answered in this text:

How does Peter in 2:7-9 Peter know that Lot is righteous?

Why does God deliver Lot from Sodom?

The answer is: Peter knows that Lot is righteous because God did deliver him from Sodom. In other words, we are compelled by reading verses 26-33 in this chapter to conclude that God does not indiscriminately punish the righteous and the wicked together. God says that he will not destroy the whole city for the sake of ten righteous souls. Yet there are not ten. There appears to be only one. And so the city is destroyed. Lot is delivered as is his wife and daughters.

Ah, the mercy of God. Lot would not impress us for his practical godliness as we will see in coming weeks. However, God is merciful to move on Lot's behalf. Connected to that merciful deliverance is the praying of Abraham.

Beloved, be encouraged in your praying for others that God is pleased to gather up your praying into His eternal plan. What a glorious thing it is to partner with Him in the salvation of His people in our neighborhoods and in all the nations.

Reflect and Respond

As we close, let me point you to some practical applications and exhortations.

BE A PEOPLE WHOSE HEARTS AND HOMES ARE OPEN TO OTHERS. So often our homes are treated as safe places of refuge from people instead welcoming places of refreshment for people. Open your heart. Open your homes.

PRIZE YOUR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. Not to press this too hard, but private and corporate fellowship with God are very important. You must have both. And may I exhort all of you to participate in our corporate fellowships. Flocks are our weekly time for fellowship around food, prayer and deepening our understanding of the texts in pulpit ministry. They are the core of the church. When you regularly miss Flock, you will miss out on praying for one another and on hearing initiatives for our church.

DO NOT MISS THE LORD'S TABLE. Abraham's hospitality is dining with God. This is a foretaste of the Levitical sacrificial meals. It is fulfilled in our sharing at the Lord's Table. You should be gathered with us when we have the Lord's Table. We do not treat it casually here: our sharing the Lord's Table is varied in its presentation and participation so that you will anticipate it with joy.

PRAY MUCH FOR THE DELIVERANCE OF BELIEVERS and the salvation of God's people. Abraham is a model of that intercession. He is told what will happen. He responds with prayer and petition. We know the blessedness of union and communion with God and we are warned of the horror of eternal separation from God in the conscious, never ending torment of the fire of hell. Does this in some way motivate passionate praying on our part?

REST IN THE ALMIGHTY GOD WITH WHOM NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE. Trust in His promises and bow to His providences. Remember, it has been 23 years since the first promise and 13 years since impatience begat the trouble of Ishmael. And now, there is one more year to wait. When it seems impossible and it seems it will never come, this is precisely the time to really rest in God.

REJOICE IN THE RIGHTEOUS ONE WHO HAS TAKEN THE WRATH OF GOD ON YOUR BEHALF. Will the just God sweep away the righteous and the wicked together? No. He will save the righteous and punish the wicked. Believe in Him and bow to Him. Turn from your own righteousness and your own wickedness and turn to Him today. Set your hope in Him. Give your life to Him. Be transformed by the great grace He gives.