

Genesis 18
Psalm 90
Matthew 11

“Hospitality and Judgment, Part 1”

July 19, 2009

How do you respond to strangers?

I realize that there have been a lot of cultural changes in the last 4,000 years!
But hospitality refers to love of strangers.
Today we tend to use the word “hospitality” to refer to entertaining friends.
But the idea in scripture has to do with how we treat strangers.

I’m not going to try to change modern English usage!

We will continue to use the word hospitality in its ordinary, modern sense!
But Hebrews 13:2 states well what the biblical concept of hospitality is all about:
“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Where the English says “hospitality to strangers”
there is only one Greek word:
philoxenias (literally, love of strangers).

After all, everyone loves their friends!
There is nothing uniquely Christian about having friends over!
The question is
what do you think of strangers?

Over the next couple weeks

we’ll be looking at two different concepts of how to treat strangers.

This week we see Abraham’s hospitality.

Abraham shows hospitality (love of strangers) because of what sort of man he is.
God has established his covenant with Abraham,
and he has called Abraham to “walk before me and be blameless.”
As the heir of the promises of God (the heir of the world)
he is the Son of God.

And so when Abraham shows hospitality to these strangers,
God brings Abraham into his council,
and welcomes Abraham’s input into what he should do with Sodom.

Next week we will see the sort of hospitality offered in Sodom.

And we will see what sort of men the men of Sodom are.
And we will see God’s response – bringing judgment against the city.

1. The Hospitality of Abraham (18:1-8)

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre,

Why does the LORD come?

What is the purpose of the LORD appearing through the ‘three men.’

To put it simply, this is a test.

God had said, “Walk before me and be blameless.”
This is a test of what sort of man Abraham is.

Abraham’s hospitality demonstrates the answer!

Abraham settled by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 13:18.

This is near Hebron in the southern part of the land.
This was the place where Abraham had built his third altar
(the first two being at Shechem and Bethel).

This place will be the place where Abraham dwells
in the land of his sojourning.

Mamre was the name of one of his allies in Genesis 14,
so the “oaks of Mamre” refers to owner of the land where Abraham lives.

It has the effect of reminding us that Abraham is a sojourner
with no place to call his own.

*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.*

*2 He 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 3 and said,*

*“O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight,
do not pass by your servant.*

*4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet,
and rest yourselves under the tree,*

*5 while 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.”*

This is what hospitality should be.

Abraham sees three strangers approaching him “in the heat of the day”
(the hottest part of the day when everyone seeks shelter).

Nonetheless, Abraham does not wait for them to come to him;
but he runs to them.

His haste demonstrates his eagerness to show kindness to them.

We don’t know if Abraham understood at first who this was.

He refers to the leader of the three as “Lord” –

but “Adonai” would be a name used for any great person,
and Abraham at least understands that this is someone important.

Notice that throughout the narrative, the text refers to the speaker as Yahweh
(the LORD)

but Abraham always addresses him as Adonai (Lord).

So they said, "Do as you have said."

Now, recall that Abraham offered water for their feet and a morsel of bread.

Listen to what he does:

*6 And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said,
"Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes."
7 And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good,
and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly.
8 Then 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.*

I want you to think about this for a minute.

Because it took hours for Abraham to do all that is described here.

We live in a day when this sort of thing would be absurd.

How long does it take to slaughter a calf and cook it?

How long does it take to bake bread from scratch?

And these three travelers are just going to sit there and wait,
while their host disappears for hours.

No doubt a servant came and washed their feet.

And so they sat under the tree for hours, waiting for their meal.

It's a different pace of life,

a world in which the time you devote to caring for a traveler
matters more than the speed with which you feed him.

Think about that the next time that you have people over!

Don't worry about timing.

If dinner is at 6:30 – don't fret when the chicken still isn't done at 6:45!

Jesus often reflects on the theme of hospitality.

After all, he was often a guest himself.

How many times do the sayings of Jesus occur around a table?

One of the most famous is when Martha is busy serving,
and she complains that Mary is listening to Jesus
rather than helping in the kitchen.

Luke 10:38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at

the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

What makes this story so interesting is that Martha is doing everything right!
She is busying herself with all the sorts of things that Abraham had done.

But Jesus' words to Martha suggest that Martha has missed the point of hospitality.
She was "distracted with much serving"
and Jesus says that she was "anxious and troubled about many things."

There is none of that in Abraham.
Abraham is running about delightedly,
overjoyed to be serving these strangers.
Martha is running about distractedly,
missing the point of the one who sits in her house.

There is a time for serving and a time for listening.
And having brought refreshment to his guests,
Abraham now listens.
Notice that he stands while they sit.
He waits upon them.

2. The Laughter of Sarah (18:9-15)

*9 They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?"
And he said, "She is in the tent."
10 The 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.
11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years.
The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.
12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying,
"After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"*

There are all sorts of puns and word plays in here.
First there is most famous and obvious one:
In Genesis 17 Abraham laughed (yitshaq).
Now Sarah laughs. (titshaq)
And the name of their child – Yitshaq (which means "he laughed")

But there is another pun which is more central to the narrative of Genesis.
This question here in verse twelve:
when my adonai (lord) is old, shall I have ednah (pleasure)?

Why didn't she say, "shall I bear a child?"
That is obviously what she means.

What does she mean by "shall I have pleasure?"

She is not talking about pleasure in the sense of enjoyment
(after all, childbirth is not particularly "fun").
The word "ednah" is closely related to the word Eden,
and has to do with a range of meaning from fertility to abundance.
Just as the land of Eden was turned from *tohu vbohu* (a barren wasteland)
into a land of abundance and delight by the Word of the LORD,
so now Sarah will be transformed from a barren woman:
the *tohu vbohu* of her womb will become fruitful and abundant.

In short, Abraham and Sarah, are transformed into the new Adam and Eve.
Earlier Sarah played the part of Eve
in convincing her husband to go in to her maidservant, Hagar.
And at that time, in chapter 16, we saw that Sarah hoped that she would be "built"
through Hagar.
The idea is that through the bearing of the promised seed,
the city of God (the holy temple) is being built.

But Abraham and Sarah are part of the *reversal* of Adam and Eve.
Adam and Eve move from fruitfulness to barrenness.
Abraham and Sarah move from barrenness to fruitfulness.

But Abraham and Sarah cannot bring about the promises of God.
When they try to "play God" they wind up replaying the fall.
But when they submit to the Word of the LORD,
then God brings life out of death,
restoring the beauty and fruitfulness of this 90 year old woman.

*13 The LORD said to Abraham,
"Why did Sarah laugh and say,
'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'
14 Is 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."
15 But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.
He said, "No, but you did laugh."*

There is a gentle rebuke here,
just as there was for Abraham in chapter 17.

But what is the point of this?

After all, God has already promised to Abraham that Sarah will bear a son?

Peter reflects on this in 1 Peter 3, as he considers the story of Sarah,
and he exhorts his hearers:

*3 Do not let your adorning be external—
the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry,
or the clothing you wear—
4 but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart
with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit,
which in God's sight is very precious.
5 For this is how the holy women who hoped in God
used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands,
6 as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.
And you are her children, if you do good
and do not fear anything that is frightening.*

Peter is reflecting on what it means to suffer as a Christian.

And he thinks that Sarah is an excellent example.

Sarah – who had faithfully followed her husband out into the “promised land” –
where they had no future:

no land,
no children,
nothing but God’s promise.

We marvel at Abraham’s faith,

who for 24 years lived in a land not his own,
watching his barren wife shrivel up,
and learning that God’s promises were really for 400 years in the future!

But what about Sarah?

She feels in her own body the impossibility of God’s promise.

The way of women had ceased with her!

And while her husband has heard the voice of the LORD,
it is not at all clear that she ever had.

Truly we should marvel at the faith of Sarah –

who believes the promises of God as relayed through her husband,
and even after 24 years of sojourning
she still calls him, “my lord.”

But now the angel of the LORD has come to speak to her
and to assure her of God’s promises.

But what does all this have to do with Sodom and Gomorrah?

It would be easy to focus on Abraham and Sarah and their little domestic situation.

Ah, isn’t it sweet – they believe God’s promises!

But the problem of Genesis is that humanity is set on destroying themselves.
The story of Genesis is not simply the story of the coming of the Seed of the Woman.
The story of Genesis is the contrast between the Seed of the Woman
and the seed of the serpent.

After all, the three men are not *primarily* here to talk to Abraham and Sarah.
They are here to investigate Sodom:

3. Abraham in the Council of the LORD (18:16-33)

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 (literally, "I have known 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."*

You can see again how God's election of Abraham
does not make Abraham's obedience irrelevant.

God chose Abraham.

God has known him.

When you know God (or rather, when God knows you!)

your whole life is reoriented as you become a part of *his* household –
his family.

And so Abraham is to command his household to do what is right and just.

Waltke puts it very succinctly:

"Righteousness portrays a way of living in community
that promotes the life of all its members,
a life promoting social order in recognition of God's rule.

A righteous person rightly orders community,
and a just one restores broken community,
especially by punishing the oppressor
and delivering the oppressed." (p269)

And Abraham is to teach his children the way of the LORD,

"by doing righteousness and justice,

so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

The covenant includes both the unconditional promise that God will fulfill,
and the condition that Abraham must still do righteousness and justice.

After all, if Abraham turns around and goes back to Ur,
then that would have been the end of the story.

But the point here is that *because* of God’s covenant with Abraham,
because of who Abraham is in relationship to God as the covenant mediator,
therefore God welcomes Abraham into his council.

Notice what is going on here:

God includes Abraham in the discussion about what to do with Sodom.

Why?

Because Abraham is the son of God – the heir of the whole earth.

He is the seed of the woman – the one through whom all nations will be blessed.

If he is going to teach his children the way of the LORD,
he needs to be educated in that way.

*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.”

You might say, “but God already knew everything about Sodom and Gomorrah!”

That is true,

but God is training Abraham how to be a just and wise ruler.

A just and wise ruler carefully investigates accusations.

And so God sends the two other men toward Sodom.

*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?”

As we’ll see next week when we come to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah,
this is a picture of the final judgment.

At the final judgment God will be just.

The wicked will be destroyed,

but the righteous will be vindicated.

Human justice (on this side of the fall) is always imperfect.

Sometimes (tragically) we condemn the innocent and acquit the guilty.

But God never does.

We need to distinguish what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah
or the Flood, from God's common wrath.
There is a common wrath that falls upon all of humanity:
natural disasters, wars, famines, diseases –
all these are a part of God's common wrath.
They fall upon the righteous and the wicked.
What God does with Sodom and Gomorrah
is an expression of his judicial wrath.
To put it another way,
Sodom receives a foretaste – a preview – of the final judgment.

When God destroyed the whole earth in the flood,
it was because *everyone* deserved death (except Noah).
When God sent fire from heaven against Sodom and Gomorrah,
it was because everyone there deserved death (except Lot).

Abraham understands that the judge of all the earth must do what is right.
And God agrees.

*26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city,
I will spare the whole place for their sake."*

And notice that in the future this pattern will continue:
God saves Lot from Sodom,
God saves Rahab from Jericho.

And so he talks God down from 50 to 10.
But as you listen to verses 27-32,
hear how Abraham speaks wisely and properly to the LORD.
He understands that he is speaking to God.
But he also understands that God has required him to take this place.

He stands in the divine council,
and the Lord of all the earth expects him to decide wisely.
Indeed, the future of his own children depend upon his words here.

With the same measure with which Abraham passes judgment on Sodom,
God will later judge Israel!

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.”

God has promised that if there are ten righteous men in Sodom,
then he will spare it.

I should point out that ancient cities only had around 100 households.
God says that if a tenth of the city is righteous, he will spare it.
It may be that this is the root of the Jewish requirement of having ten men
in order to start a synagogue.

*33 And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham,
and Abraham returned to his place.*

I would like to close by connecting this passage with Matthew 11.

In Matthew 11, Jesus says that the cities where he did his mighty deeds
are worse than Sodom.

Jesus says that at the judgment Capernaum will be brought down to Hades.
“For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom,
it would have remained until this day.
But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment
for the land of Sodom than for you.” (Mt 11:23-24)

Sodom was a wicked city – they did not love righteousness and justice.
But if someone had come and performed the great signs that Jesus did,
Sodom would have paid attention.

And then a few verses later, Jesus – this man who owned nothing,
who had even less than Abraham! –
this Jesus says,
“All things have been handed over to me by my Father,
and no one knows the Son except the Father,
and no one knows the Father except the Son
and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.
Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,
for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.” (Mt 11:28-29)

Jesus is here claiming to sit in the Divine council.

He has inherited Abraham's position.

Indeed, he speaks with greater authority than Abraham,
because he claims the right to judge between Sodom and Capernaum!

But also notice that Jesus has inherited Abraham's hospitality as well!

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus washes the disciples' feet.

And he offers rest to those who come to him.

After all, when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son,
there is an echo of Abraham there:

a elder statesman sees a visitor approach –
he runs to greet him,
and shows lavish hospitality,
even slaughtering the fattened calf.

Even so, our Lord Jesus sought us when we were strangers,
and brought us to himself and lavished us with his bounty!

We were strangers, but our Lord Jesus Christ has welcomed us to himself.

Therefore, may we show the same care for strangers –
for travelers and sojourners –
those who are rootless and dispossessed.

We certainly need to work on building our community,
but that community needs to be one that is regularly showing hospitality
(showing love to strangers).