

The New York Times... a few years ago... featured an article exploring our concepts about **friendship**. ... The author tried to nail down a definition of what “friendship” means from several researchers in the field of communication... and he reported that all he got was an uncomfortable silence... followed by "er" or "um."

"*Friendship is difficult to describe*"... said one of those experts (Alexander Nehamas)... a professor of philosophy at Princeton. Professor Nehamas wrote a 300 page book attempting to do just that. ... In it... he writes... "*It's easier to say what friendship is not... It is not a means to obtain higher status, wrangle an invitation to someone's vacation home, or simply escape your own boredom...*" "Rather" ... Mr. Nehamas said... "*friendship is more like beauty or art, which ... is appreciated for its own sake.*"

Ronald Sharp... a professor who teaches a course on the literature of friendship added... "*It's not about what someone can do for you, it's who and what the two of you become in each other's presence ... People are so eager to maximize efficiency of relationships that they have lost touch with what it is to be a friend.*" When it comes to our human relationships... I like what Professor Sharp had to say... (LISTEN TO IT AGAIN): "*It's not about what someone can do for you, it's who and what the two of you become in each other's presence...*"

(BUT DO YOU KNOW WHAT?) ... I think that the concept of friendship is quickly changing today. Its commitment to goodness and mutual improvement has been lost. We have ceased to believe that a friend's highest purpose is to summon us to better ourselves... A friend today must

be fearful about offering any moral advice and correction. We practice... instead... the nonjudgmental friendship of unconditional acceptance and support. ... Everyone seems to be caught-up in a “therapeutic” friendship... [to quote] another researcher (Robert N. Bellah's) scornful term.

We seem to be terribly fragile now. A friend fulfills his/her duty... only when they take our side... validate our feelings... support our decisions... and help us to feel good about ourselves.... (whether or not we are clearly in the wrong.) ... Your friend is only your friend if they are willing to tell white lies... make excuses when we do something improper or unethical... They will do whatever they can to keep the boat steady. ... Why...? Because everyone today... knows that any true friendship... must only be fun and friction-free!

... ..

Jesus calls His followers – “His friends.”

John 15:15 (ESV)

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

How much of this modern sense of what a true friend is... do you think He has in mind...? ... As our friend... will He always take our side...? ... Validate our feelings...? ... Support our decisions...? ...And help us feel good about ourselves...?

No! But how sad... that this is only what some people who regularly go to church want... (They want and expect a phony relationship with Christ...

that will never happen. ... Jesus does not operate from our misguided concept of friendship.)

Let's go back to the passage in John 15. This time I will start where Jesus first began discussing the concept of friendship. Go up... just one verse before John 15:15 to verse 14...

John 15:14 (ESV)

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Obedience is required. ... But here is my point: Jesus calls you and I into a special kind of friendship... where He wants to ***better*** you and I. ... Friendship with God... is all about what we become... by being in His presence!

(LISTEN!)... The greatest problem facing man today... and even those who are part of the Church... is this: "**How to be a friend of God.**" A friend is a person who holds affection and respect for another person. ... If they have feelings and respect for one another... they become attached... (they become friends.) ... But the converse is also true. If they do not have affection and respect for one another... they are not friends - they are enemies.

God actively pursues us. He wants a growing... intimate relationship with us. But we must properly ***respond*** to His initiating. ... Our passage in Genesis 18... today... will illustrate this for us. Abraham and Sarah will show us... both the proper... and the improper way... to respond to God... as He comes to initiate and deepen a friendship with us.

But first... let me give you three quick references... where the Bible mentions Abraham as "the friend of God."

James 2:23 (ESV)

and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.

2 Chronicles 20:7 (ESV)

Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?

Isaiah 41:8 (ESV)

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend;

Scripture attributes a second name to Abraham. It is “The Friend of God.” ... and Genesis 18 will show us Abraham’s excellent response to a visit by his friend – (God)... when He came to deepen the relationship. It resulted in more blessings for Abraham.

We have already seen that Christ wants you and I as His friends. So let’s look now... and see... the proper way to deepen our friendship with God.

Genesis 18:1-8

This chapter begins abruptly with ***'And the LORD appeared to him'***... a statement which immediately alerts the reader to the importance of the three men who visited Abraham. ... Although they are called “men” in verse 2... one is Yahweh (the LORD)... and the other two are identified as angels in 19:1. ... It becomes clear in chapters 18-19 that the LORD and the angels take the appearance of men for the sake of the mission that they are carrying out. ... The LORD Himself is prominent in chapter 18... but only the angels go to Sodom in chapter 19.

The sun sat high over Abraham's encampment under the great trees of Mamre outside Hebron. ... The morning chores were complete... and workers had returned to their tents for the customary siesta. ... It was high noon... the time of day in eastern lands... when all sensible people took their afternoon siestas. ... So the sheep... donkeys... and camels were clumped under the shade of the trees in midday sluggishness. And Abraham was sitting at the shaded entrance of his tent enjoying the lull.

The goatskin tents of pastoral nomadic people were designed to hold in heat at night (with the flaps down)... and to allow a breeze to pass through during the day (when the flaps were up.) ... Sitting at the entrance during the heat of the day would provide needed shade... while a person enjoyed whatever breeze might be blowing across the plain... and be able to guard the tent's contents.

When Abraham looked up... he saw three men standing nearby. ... Abraham had neither seen (nor heard) their approach. They were simply there... looking at him. ... The abrupt way in which they are introduced in the narrative suggests that one moment there was nothing there... the next moment... there they were! ... Abraham rubbed his eyes. ... Whatever would men be doing out in the burning heat of the noonday sun? ... Then the truth dawned upon him. Those were more than mere men.

His response was spontaneous and from the heart... as... despite his hundred years... he ***ran*** toward the men and bowed low to the ground before them... in an act of worship. (The very word for “bowed” that is used here... is used elsewhere in Scripture and is translated as “worshipped.”)

Abraham even granted them the respect of addressing the leader as "my lord" ("ādōnāy"), saying, "O my lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant."

The sleepy camp flew into fast-forward as Abraham hurried to Sarah... told her to be quick... and then ran to a servant... who then hurried off.

The minimalist "something to eat" became a huge feast. There were only three guests... but three seahs (six gallons) of fine flour were baked... plus a whole calf... and the meal was served along with curds (yogurt) and milk as a compliment to the savory fare. ... This was A LOT of food! ... It was a royal feast. ... As the three feasted... Abraham... the good host... stood discreetly by... willing to assist in any way.

Abraham acted in a manner consistent with the Eastern laws of hospitality. (You see)... In the nomadic society of the culture... there is a dependence factor... that makes such reception of strangers... a survival necessity. Such reception... was to be a sign of great virtue in the one showing hospitality. Meeting another's need for food or shelter was one of the most immediate and practical ways to obey God. ... It was a time-honored relationship builder... with a very practical aim. (You see...) Hospitality was done to transform potential enemies into at least temporary friends.

However... Abraham apparently recognized the majesty of these visitors (because of what we read in verses two and three... of his bowing himself to the ground in the posture of worship... and his calling the leader "adonay." ... For Abraham... this was more than showing hospitality. It was worship.

Remember also... that Abraham had recently experienced a coming of the Lord to him (in the appearance of man.) So... why wouldn't he recognized One of these visitors as the Lord... Who we have just seen speaking with him in the previous chapter of Genesis...?

Why did the Lord approach Abram in this manner? ... Could not the message that He came to give him... be given from heaven... or in a dream? ... Yes it could... but the manner of this communication was probably meant to underscore that Abraham was His friend. Abraham had a personal... intimate relationship with the Lord... and everything God did here shows that He wanted to deepen it.

Did God and the two angelic beings need the food that Abraham prepared for them...? Were they dependent on it for their sustenance...? ... No! When Abraham offered it... they could have very easily declined and politely told Abraham the truth that it was not necessary. ... So why didn't they...? Why did they allow Abraham to go to all this trouble...?

Because... in the ancient world... and especially in Israel... to eat together was important for the making of treaties or confirming covenants. So... when the Lord was ready to specify the fulfillment of the promise of a son... He came in Person... and ate a meal in Abraham's tent.

Nothing could have communicated the close relationship of the covenant better than this. What better way could there be than the familial intimacy of a meal to communicate the close relationship on which the promise was based. Later the same day, when the two angels departed for Sodom, the

Lord stayed behind with Abraham, and they talked face to face as the Lord explained what was to follow (cf. vv. 16-33). Such intimacy!

Likewise... down through the ages in worship... fellowship with God has been signified by a communal meal... Have you noticed that every time in Scripture whenever God wants to have intimate fellowship with us... He institutes a commemorative meal. The Old Testament is filled with feasts and other occasions for eating together. ... The Israelites (for example) have “eating the peace offering in the presence of God” (prescribed in Lev 3; 7)... and then later the church is commanded to celebrate Holy Communion at the Lord’s Table. Celebrating communion (which we will do a little later in our service)... symbolizes the intimate relationship that God wants with us!

So God initiated a time of developing a closer fellowship with Abraham... and notice how Abraham responds. The swiftness of his service cannot be missed in our passage.

Genesis 18:6-7

This swiftness reveals a **zeal** in serving the Lord. Are you zealous in serving God...? How might it be affecting your friendship with Him and the deepness that He wants with you...? ... And what is the quality of your serving Him...? Is it just enough to appear sincere...? “Good enough for God”... or “Good enough for the church”... sometimes is far less than our best.

Abraham would use his best to serve these heavenly guests. He did not give them leftovers but he gave them the best he had. He used 6 gallons of flour to make bread and a whole calf for only three guests.

And because Abraham was a wealthy man... he could have had his servants do everything. ... But look how Abraham acted. Having seen to the comfort of his guests... he excused himself and dashed off to supervise the cutting and the cooking of the steaks. ... Then he himself... with his own hands... set the table. ... We read, "*And he took butter and milk and the calf which he had dressed and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.*" ... He had already served his guests in a wonderful way. Standing by them meant he was ready to give more service should they request it.

This means that Abraham had to sacrifice in order to serve. Any time you serve the Lord... you will have to do some sacrificing to serve acceptably. That is why so few would say that they are as intimate with the Lord... as they know they should be. Their friendship with God is lacking... because they do not want to give up much of anything.

Also... please notice that Abraham would stick to his service... until his guests left. ... He had stamina in his service. ... So many of us start out with great energy... but soon cool off and quit. ... Not Abraham. ... He was steadfast in service to the very end of the visit by the heavenly guests.

I have noticed (and so have many others) that it is very common today in church after church... that a good program or class is started in the church... and it begins with great zeal. People are excited. The event is

initially very well attended and there is great fervor at its beginning. But then... in a short amount of time... all of this starts to wear off.

Someone once told me that the average amount of time that it takes a new program in the church to experience sudden dis-interest... is 8 weeks. Through the years... I have watched for this... and I have seen that it is about right. The consistent pattern seems to be... that only after two months... even a **strong** excitement wears off... and the event become less and less attended. ...

(CHURCH!) Please prove me wrong on this... with our new Christian discipline accountability group that we have begun after our Sunday morning worship service. Today will be our third meeting. ... But let's keep the attendance and enthusiasm going well beyond the average 8 week mark.

We have seen three things from Abraham that foster a deeper friendship with God. Here are three things that will increase our intimacy with God: #1. Is sacrificial service... #2. Is a sustained zeal... and #3 goes back to one of the first observances we had with our passage. It is an instinctive reflex in the presence of God. #3. Is the swiftness of service.

Whenever we come into the presence of God... there can be no flippancy... no hand-in-pocket casualness... no off-hand frivolity.

How often we walk into this sanctuary on a Sunday morning... or we approach our personal quiet-time at home with the Lord... with a careless indifference. We do not always recognize His presence... or even approach Him with any real expectation of a life-altering experience.

How important it is that we put ourselves into an attitude of humble... eager... excited expectancy. The Lord has come! If you do not have any sense of anticipation when you come into His presence – make that the first thing you pray about.

No gathering of the Lord's people... or a time that is devoted to our personal fellowship with Him... is to be regarded as a routine... ordinary event. ... We yawn and look around... after all it is just another passive thing... that I know I am supposed to do. But what haste there should be... to recognize that the Lord is here! ... How deplorable it is that professing Christians should allow themselves a familiarity with holy things that breeds contempt.

So we read that that aged man... well versed in the things of God... "ran... and bowed himself to the ground." ... Abraham's haste and humility teach us the much-neglected lesson of reverence in the presence of God. It was not a matter of forced or artificial posturing. ... It was a question of spiritual intuition... an overwhelming sense of the presence of God... which we must have... otherwise we will not become more intimate with God. Don't simply accept as normal... a lack of God's Name being hallowed... whenever you come to Him.

Now we come to Sarah's response to God's coming to her to develop a more intimate relationship.

Genesis 18:9

The meal was over and the dishes carried away... and the Lord glanced at Abraham. "*Where is Sarah, your wife?*" He said... (as if He did not know!)

There is no doubt in my mind that He even knew that Sarah had her ears glued to the tent flap.

The question... "*Where is your wife Sarah?*" seems odd and superfluous. If the visitors were recognized simply as passing strangers... they would be rude to pry in this way. ... On the other hand... if they were recognized as supernatural visitors... they would have no need to ask for information.

The reason this question was asked was to evoke Sarah into the conversation. God wanted greater intimacy with Sarah... as well.

According to their custom... it would have been inappropriate for Sarah to be sitting around the table and talking with three strangers. She was to be more modest and not include herself in their meal and fellowship. So she listened from behind the curtain... and the visitors knew it. This was the best way to engage her in the conversation and develop within her... a greater intimacy with the Lord.

Genesis 18:10

This is a repeat of the very same message that God had spoken to Abraham... in the chapter before. Why is this reenactment necessary...? It was for Sarah's sake. Evidently Sarah was not comforted when Abraham came and said... "*Guess what Sarah! God is going to make you part of the promised blessing!*" ... Sarah was more than likely still depressed and thinking that she had been left out.

God understood Sarah's reluctance to believe Abraham... so He came to say it again... when she could hear. God was removing an obstacle... for her having a deeper friendship with Him. In an act of grace... God gently works with her.

Do you have any obstacles that need to be removed... before you can have a deeper friendship with God...? Ask God to remove it... and then believe that He will.

Genesis 18:11-15

Sarah's response was exactly what we might expect. ... But I don't believe the laughter of Sarah was the laughter of caustic unbelief. I think it was rather the laughter of hardness that years of disappointment had produced. She was not being sarcastic. She was just accepting reality. We sense the melancholy in her.

Please notice that God gently rebuked Abraham for Sarah's laughter... The Bible says that she denied the laughter... being fearful... BUT nothing more is said. ... Sarah has no punishment... There is only this very gentle rebuke of the Lord.

This is a clear statement about God's knowledge of the difficulty humans have in loving Him. ... We often fall prey to hard times... and find ourselves growing hard for self-protection. ... We anticipate that God will be very angry with us... and expect His punishing sword to fall. ... We are fearful... as Sarah was that our hardness may cost us any relationship with God that may be left.

But this rebuke without punishment becomes a word of comfort. It is God saying to Sarah, *'I know how you feel.'* The fact that we build up emotional shields to protect ourselves does not mean loss of relationship to God. Sarah was okay. God was going to do his work. Sarah still had her misgivings about the promised son becoming reality. God was telling her *'I*

understand. It's hard to love me in this world! Understanding a God like that does make him somewhat easier to love, however.

The world's disappointments can feel like having rocks thrown at us. At times we can find ourselves growing emotionally hard in order to keep the rocks from doing their damage. It is nice to know that this will not cause us to lose our relationship with God. ... But eventually we must come to the same point in our friendship with God... that He nudges Sarah to... We must recognize that nothing is impossible for God.

"Is anything too hard for the LORD?" The obvious answer is, *"Of course not!"* ... Make it a habit to insert your specific needs into the question. *"Is this day in my life too hard for the Lord?" "Is this habit I'm trying to break too hard for him?" "Is the communication problem I'm having too hard for him?"* ... Asking the question this way reminds you that God is personally involved in your life... and nudges you to ask for His power to help you.

But... in **our** using this question... *"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"* a word of caution... would be wise. ... (LISTEN!) ... When we face difficult circumstances... we cannot claim this verse as confidence that God will change our circumstances. ... He is capable of changing any circumstances... but perhaps the harder thing that He will do... is to help us to accept our circumstances... and grow through them.

In 1967... teenager Joni Eareckson took a dive into water that she thought was much deeper... and it changed her life forever. Her story has been told so often that it may seem redundant here... but there is an important point

that is not often made — one that gives us a vital insight into how God works in our circumstances.

Her broken body (at first) brought her into denial and bitterness. ... And when Joni began to confront her paralysis... she was encouraged by some friends to have the faith that God could miraculously heal her. ... After all... "*nothing is too hard for God.*"

As she explored this faith, she struggled with the difference between faith that God **could** heal her and faith that God **would** heal her. ... Would it take just as much faith to believe that God would heal her spirit without healing her body... and use her in his service regardless of her limitations? Doesn't God do a hard thing when He uses any of us... despite our limitations?

If you had told Joni (then)... that thirty years in the future... she would be an internationally known painter (using only her mouth to hold the brush... and an author of more than twenty-five books (translated into thirty-three languages)... and an inspirational speaker... whose radio broadcasts have been aired by some eight hundred stations daily - ...she may have considered... that all of this... would be a much more difficult accomplishment for God... than healing her paralysis. ... If you had told her that in addition... she would have produced a number of albums and videotapes... and founded a ministry to and for the disabled... that put her in the national and international spotlight as their spokesperson - ...she may have thought that healing was the **easy** way out for God. ... As it turns out... Joni's faith that she could be transformed... was of far more use to God... than her faith that she could be healed.

Here is the point: We must be cautious that as we accept by faith that nothing is too hard for God... we do not begin to dictate to Him which hard thing he must do. ... He tends to have things in mind that go far beyond what we are able to ask or even think.

Genesis 18:15

We can fool others, but not the unblinking, omniscient eye of God. He sees how our shoes fit and the soap residue on our hands. He knows our unspoken thoughts.

Similarly, the Apostle John has written... "*God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything*" (1 John 3:20). ... And Hebrews gives it classic expression: "*And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account*" (4:13).

God knows every inner thought whether they be the thoughts of humans or angels. No human... whether in a dark rain forest or atop a Manhattan skyscraper... has a thought that is not known to God. ... He perfectly knows all things.

And isn't it incredible to consider that He knows all about you... and yet He pursues an intimate relationship with you anyway...? Respond to Him today. Cultivate a deeper relationship with Him. Let God call you His friend. What greater friend can you have...?