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The Privileges of Friendship with God (Genesis 18:16-33)

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Last week, as we began to consider God's unusual visitation of Abraham in Genesis 18, we focused on the person of Abraham himself as a shining example of what it means to be what the Bible calls a "friend of God." Abraham exhibited all the marks of someone whom the Lord regards as His friend. He was devoted in His service to the Lord, a fact that was illustrated by the way he waited on the Lord personally, when the Lord showed up at His tent in visible form in the heat of the day. He lavished hospitality on the Lord by providing Him and the two angels who accompanied Him a sumptuous meal. Abraham also showed himself to be a friend of God by his devoted service to his own family. Later in this same chapter, God describes Abraham as one whom the Lord has chosen "to command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (v. 19), and that is just what Abraham did throughout his entire life. Finally, Abraham showed himself to be a friend of God by his devoted service to his unbelieving neighbors, a fact we will consider in greater depth this morning, as we look at Abraham's intercessory prayer for the people of Sodom.

The main point of last week's sermon, therefore, was to show how Abraham himself exhibited all the personal characteristics of a friend of God by his devoted service to the Lord, to the members of his own household, and to his unbelieving neighbors. This morning, I want to return and look at this same passage from a different angle, by considering, not the personal characteristics Abraham exhibited, but the privileges he enjoyed, as God's friend. To be a friend of God brings with it the enjoyment of certain privileges, four of which we see illustrated in this chapter--the privileges of visitation by God, communion with God, communication with God, and collaboration with God. It is these privileges I want us to consider this morning.

1) The privilege of visitation by God-- The first privilege I want us to consider this morning is the privilege of visitation by God. This is the first blessing that God grants to Abraham in this chapter-- He visits him, by coming to him in a special way-- in visible manifestation-- in order to pour out on him extraordinary blessings.

The idea of divine visitation is one that is found throughout the Word of God. Various passages in the Old Testament speak of God "visiting" people, and the idea always has to do with God manifesting the reality of His presence and power in the life

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of a community or an individual. God may visit a people in grace, to pour out on them extraordinary blessing; or He may visit a people in wrath, by executing on them extraordinary judgment. Thus, when God blesses Sarah by causing her to conceive a child, the Bible describes this as God "visiting" Sarah (Gen. 21:1), that is, visiting her in blessing. But on the other hand, when God threatens to punish the children of Israel for their sins in Jeremiah 2:9, this, too, is spoken of as God visiting them: "Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord. Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?" (The word punish here literally means visit-- "Shall I not visit them for these things?")

I should point out, moreover, that the biblical words for "visit," in both the Hebrew and the Greek, has to do with the idea of "oversight" or "inspection." The basic idea is that of looking into a situation, taking note of something, even numbering or counting something. It is related to the New Testament word for "overseers" in a church, whose duty it is to inspect, look into, and take note of affairs in the life of a church and in the lives of those who are members of a church. Now that is the idea behind God visiting His people. He comes to them in order to inspect their lives-- to see what is going on, and to act on that basis to bless them, or if necessary, to chasten them.

That is the first thing we see God doing in this chapter with respect to Abraham. He visits Abraham with a view to pouring out on him extraordinary divine blessing. He comes down to inspect Abraham's circumstances and to respond to them in grace. Not that God was ignorant of his situation, but he 'shows himself attentive' to Abraham's needs. This is the essence of what it means for God to visit us. He sees our circumstances, and acts in response to our need.

So what was Abraham's need at this time? I believe that both he and Sarah needed to be reassured of the Lord's promises and reminded of His divine attributes. Why so? Well, think of the situation that confronted this couple at this time. After Abraham received the news in Genesis 17 that Sarah was going to conceive a child, he probably went home right away to tell her. No doubt, he expected her to be thrilled about the news, as he was; but imagine his disappointment when Sarah's reaction was one of skepticism and doubt. She couldn't bring herself to believe that she, a ninety-nine year old woman who was well past menopause, could suddenly find herself with child. She found the idea outlandish, even laughable. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more ridiculous it seemed. To think that she, an old woman might soon be nursing a newborn infant at her breast! She chuckled at the silliness of that image. Surely, she probably thought, my husband must have misunderstood the word of the Lord.

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There was not much Abraham could do in response to Sarah's skepticism but wait on the Lord to act. After all, he couldn't make her believe-- he could only communicate to her God's Word, and exhort to believe. But if she didn't believe, how would the promise be fulfilled? How would Sarah be strengthened to conceive a child, if she lacked faith in the Lord's ability to make her fertile? I assuming, of course, that Abraham told Sarah God's promise concerning Isaac; but that seems a reasonable assumption to make. Surely Abraham did not hide from Sarah what the Lord had said. The problem was, she didn't believe it. She stumbled at the promise of God. That is one reason, I believe, why God showed up at Abraham's tent; so that Sarah would hear the promise concerning Isaac from the mouth of God Himself.

That is what takes place in verses 9 and following. As the Lord was eating the sumptuous meal that Abraham had prepared for him, we read, "Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" Now let's stop right there and consider how startling that question was. Here were three strangers who had never been there before, but they asked about Sarah by name. If Abraham had any doubt about the heavenly nature of these visitors before this moment, he could not doubt it now-- for their question exhibited supernatural knowledge. It must have been a shocking moment-- especially for Sarah herself, whom we are told in verse 10, was eavesdropping on the conversation from inside the tent. As she listened to their conversation through the door of the tent, you can imagine how her heart skipped a beat when she heard these men refer to her by name. The fact they inquired about her told her several things: 1) first, it told her that these were men with authority, for in the nomadic culture of that day, no casual visitor would ask about a man's wife unless he was there on some sort of official business; 2) second, this question let Abraham and Sarah know that their visit was not a matter of coincidence; it was deliberate. They had planned to go there on purpose, and that purpose concerned Sarah; 3) third, the fact that they called her Sarah showed that they must be from heaven-- for they did not call her Sarai, which was the name she had been called all her life; rather, but Sarah, which is the name the Lord Himself had just given recently in Genesis 17.

The next word spoken was even more shocking, for one of the three men then said to Abraham, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." This was the very thing Abraham had told Sarah earlier, but now it was coming from the mouth of one who said He would bring this to pass. The fact that Isaac's conception would take place when this Visitor "returned" was a way of saying that He would cause Sarah to conceive; which indicated that this was the Lord Himself speaking. He would return to Sarah, not visibly, but in a spiritual sense, to cause her to conceive; and that is just what took place, as we read later in the

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first verse chapter 21, "And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him."

On hearing these words, you would think Sarah would immediately believe, but she was so entrenched in her attitude of skepticism toward the possibility of ever becoming pregnant, even hearing these words from the mouth of God did not automatically remove her doubts. In fact, we read that when she heard these words, she "laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'" (v.12). Abraham had also laughed when God announced to Him the birth of Isaac in chapter 17; but he laughed out of sheer delight and pleasure at what God would do, whereas Sarah laughed out of skepticism and doubt, because she found it impossible to take seriously what the Lord had said. That's why God responded differently to her than He did to Abraham in chapter 17. We read that when Sarah laughed, the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surly bear a child, since I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord?'" (v.13).

The amazing thing about this statement is that Sarah had not laughed out loud. The text says that she laughed "within herself," that is, she chuckled inwardly, without making a sound. Moreover, she was seated out of the Lord's view, in the tent behind his back. Nevertheless, even though Sarah made no audible sound, nor were her facial expressions visible to anyone, the Lord knew her inner thoughts and responded to them. That brought a sense of fear on Sarah, for she realized that her inmost thoughts were completely exposed to this Visitor outside the tent. As a response to her fear, she immediately began to deny that she had laughed, but the Lord refused to let her brush off His rebuke so easily-- "No," He said, "but you did laugh!" The Lord wanted Sarah to respond rightly to His rebuke by repenting of her unbelief and confessing it to the Lord.

At the same time, the Lord wanted to encourage Abraham's believing heart by hearing the promise about Isaac confirmed to him once again. Abraham had held fast to that promise and had communicated it faithful to others; now, his own faith needed to be refreshed by hearing that promise once again from God's own mouth.

This was the first goal God had in visiting Abraham on this occasion, therefore-- to confirm his covenant with Abraham, in order to rebuke the unbelief of Sarah, and to refresh the faith of Abraham. Divine visitations always seem to have in view this twofold aim-- to refresh the faith of some, and to rebuke the unbelief of others. And if God is pleased to visit our land in these days of great trial and distress for the church, this will be the twofold effect of God's visitation-- to refresh the faith of His people,

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and to rebuke the unbelief of a society that has forgotten who God is-- a society that desperately needs to be reminded of the truth expressed by the question, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Let us pray for such a visitation in our day, that God's people may be revived in their spirits, and unbelievers may be soundly rebuked and converted.

II. The privilege of communion with God-- The second privilege that we see Abraham enjoying in this passage is the privilege of communion with God. The word communion in Greek is *koinonia*, which means "to have in common" or to "share." Believers hold in common all the spiritual blessings that are found in Christ, so they are said to have communion with each other. They are sharers in the same spiritual inheritance.

In the passage before us, Abraham's communion with the Lord is pictured outwardly by the act of Abraham taking of all the good things that God had given him and offering them to the Lord in the form of a sumptuous meal, which the Lord is then pleased to eat. This is a lovely picture of communion with God-- Abraham sharing of the good things which the Lord had given him, and the Lord receiving them and partaking of them.

This is a scene that foreshadows that wondrous day two thousand years later when the Son of God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, would come in the flesh to sit down at the same table with men to sup with them. We may sometimes envy those first disciples by thinking, "What an awesome privilege they enjoyed, to sit at the same table with Jesus day after day, to eat and drink with Him and carry on conversation with Him. The beautiful thing, however, is that such a privilege is offered to all who repent of their sins and trust Christ as their Lord and Savior. In Revelation 3:20, Christ gives this wonderful invitation to people who were holding Him at arm's length, despite their religious profession: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come to him and dine with him, and he with Me." Hendricksen points out that this picture of Jesus coming to us and dining with us, is a beautiful picture of fellowship, for the main meal of the day in Eastern homes was a blessed time of companionship for family members. It was eaten "near the end of the day, after working hours, in an atmosphere of leisure and close fellowship. This was a time of conversation during which wholesome topics were discussed, laughter was heard, and counsel was given for solving problems. The passage speaks of union with Christ in a day-by-day walk with him." This is the blessed privilege of everyone whom Jesus calls His friend. He promises to draw us into the experience of daily communion with Himself, a relationship of fellowship as potentially intimate as the warm fellowship that takes place between loved ones at the dinner table. Let us ask Him to draw us closer, that we might enjoy this blessing.

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III. The privilege of communication with God-- The third privilege of friendship with God that we see Abraham enjoying in this passage is that of communication with God. This grows out of our communion with God. To enjoy communion with God is to share with Him in the blessing of intimate companionship and mutual blessedness in each other's' presence. Communication flows out of that, for communion results in God communicating with us-- that is, imparting knowledge to us, to which we respond in ways that glorify God. Communication involves two way dialogue between the believing soul and God: God in His grace and mercy condescends to speak to us, and we in turn are privileged to speak to God.

That is what we see occurring in the latter part of this chapter: God imparts knowledge to Abraham, and Abraham in turn responds appropriately by speaking to God. We read in verses 16 and following how this took place. After the three visitors had finished their meal, they arose and went on their way in the direction of the city of Sodom. According to the custom of the day, Abraham walked with them part of the way to see them off. What Abraham did not realize is that the Lord was about to make him privy to his plans concerning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In verses 17-19, we read of God's solemn deliberations over this matter, and why He wanted to let Abraham know what was going to happen to these two cities. He wanted to share His thoughts with Abraham because He considered Abraham an intimate friend, and intimate friends share their thoughts with each other. There are three reasons God here gives for revealing His thought to Abraham on this most solemn subject:

1) First, such sharing was consistent with the destiny to which God had appointed Abraham-- God considered the fact that in the future, He would elevate Abraham to a position of great honor as the patriarch of a great nation. "Shall I hide what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?" If God was going to bestow such honor on him in the future, therefore, surely it was consistent with that destiny to make him a confidante of His divine plans in the present.

2) Second, such sharing of knowledge was consistent with God's having already chosen Abraham to be the object of His special affection-- Notice what God says of Abraham in verse 19, "For I have known him. . ." For God to know someone is to set His special affection on that person. God had taken Abraham into His intimate embrace; so it was not only in the future He would honor him; He had honored him by singling him out from the human race to be the recipient of extraordinary blessings. So it was only consistent with this favored status that God impart to him special knowledge.

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3) Third, it was important for Abraham to possess this knowledge to instruct others-- The third reason that God wanted to reveal His plans regarding Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham is because of his role as a teacher. Notice what God says in verse 19, "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him." What God is saying is this, as the spiritual leader of his household, it was important for Abraham to be able to declare to his wife, his children, and his servants the whole counsel of God. He had to instruct them concerning God's character and attributes, exhorting them to walk in the fear of God, and to glorify and praise God for His mighty works-- not only His works of creation and providence, but also His works of salvation and judgment.

In the future, when Abraham's wife and children and servants would ask him what became Sodom and Gomorrah-- why there was only a blackened ruin where thriving cities used to be, it would be important for Abraham to be able to give them an answer. It would be important for him to speak to them of God's character as a Judge, and how the inhabitants of those cities had been so wicked, God had to judge them for the gross wickedness of their lives. For this reason, God resolved to speak to Abraham about His plans- so that he could later teach his family the truth of God's judgment, and instill in their heart the fear of the Lord.

How we need to take to heart what God is saying here. The only way we can be effective leaders of our households is by declaring to our families the whole counsel of God concerning God's character and works. One of the saddest things about the state of the church in America today is the way that God's character has been denied in so many churches, so that many children never hear the whole truth about God. They hear Him described as a God of love, but they never hear a word about His holiness, or His righteousness, His burning wrath against sin, or His judgment of unrepentant sinners. When we omit all references to God's wrath and judgment in teaching our children about God, we betray their souls. We are not being honest with them about God; and thereby, we are pointing them to the path of apostasy from God. Is that not what we are seeing taking place in our land right now? Multitudes of people are turning from the faith because they were never instructed properly about the character of God. James Dixon says, "The Genesis narrative enforces the importance of . . . remembering the way of God in all of life. It is a reality that must be taught from generation to generation, or it will be lost. Humans cannot come to the way of God without the continual preaching and teaching of successive generations."

God wanted Abraham well-equipped to instruct His family in the truth. So He spoke to him of Sodom and Gomorrah.

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The interesting thing is to note Abraham's response to this divine revelation. He did not simply say, "Whatever seems best to you, God. You know better than I do what is called for in this situation." We might think that would have been the most humble response possible to the news that God was about to destroy two cities full of people-- passive acceptance of God's plan and nothing more. That is not how Abraham responded, however. The news of this terrible judgment that was about to occur moved him to intercede for those cities, and no doubt, this was a second purpose God had in revealing His thoughts to Abraham. He wanted to provoke Abraham to prayer, and in this we see a further privilege enjoyed by God's friends-- the privilege of collaboration with God.

IV. The privilege of collaboration with God-- To collaborate with God is to work with Him in the advancement of His purposes. It is a tremendous privilege to be used as tools in God's hands for the outworking of His divine plan on earth. That is a privilege enjoyed by God's friends; to be God's partners in the work of the kingdom, collaborating with Him as co-laborers.

For all their wickedness, Abraham had a neighborly feeling toward the citizens of Sodom. After all, his own nephew Lot lived among them. He had rescued a number of them from the hands of a foreign enemy in Exodus 14. Therefore, although he could not identify with them at all on a spiritual level, and though he abominated the gross wickedness of their lives, he could not help but pity them, when he heard of the terrible judgment that was about to befall them. So in response to God's words, he felt that God was inviting him to speak. With great humility, he approached God and began to plead for these two cities-- but notice that he did so, not simply appeal to God's mercy, but to His righteousness. In verse 23, we read that "Abraham came near and said, 'Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within that city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'"

Abraham's prayer to God was really surprising because of its boldness. We see here a boldness born out of confidence in the character of God. It is clear that Abraham was praying, not to an unknown God, but to a God whom he knew personally. He was convinced that God's character was that of a righteous God who was incapable of doing anything wrong. That confidence is what enabled him to approach God with what might seem to us at first like a measure of presumption. He is said to God, in essence, "Lord, I know who you are; and because of that, I know that there are certain things you would not do. You would not treat the righteous like the wicked. The very thought that God

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might treat everyone in those cities alike, even those who might be in those cities who loved God, was deeply painful to Abraham. He could not believe God would do that.

So He pleaded with God to act in accordance with His revealed nature. His pleading was humble, for he repeatedly said throughout his prayer, "Lord, please don't think me presumptuous for making another request of you." Moreover, his pleading was unselfish; for he asked nothing for himself, but thought only of the plight of his neighbors. It was persistent, for He kept coming to God again and again, each time "raising the stakes higher" with a more audacious request. Lord, will you spare these cities if there are fifty righteous people within their walls? Will you spare them if there are forty-five? Will you spare them if there are forty? Will you spare them if there are thirty? Will you spare them if there are twenty? Will you spare them if there are ten?

What motivated Abraham to 'bargain with God' in this way? Two things--passion and compassion. He felt a passionate desire to see God's righteous character magnified in His dealing with these cities, and that meant, He wanted to know that God, in this midst of His wrath, would remember mercy. He knew that God is slow to wrath, that He does not willingly judge the wicked, and that He may even spare the wicked at times for the sake of the righteous. So Abraham was passionate to see God magnify all His attributes in His dealings with these cities- His mercy, and not just His wrath. In addition to passion for God's character, Abraham felt compassion for the inhabitants of these cities. It grieved him terribly to think of these cities being destroyed, if there was any way they could be spared. In that, we see a Christ like spirit in Abraham, for Jesus wept to foresee the judgment that fall on Jerusalem; and he rebuked his own disciples for being all too eager to call down the fire of judgment on a wicked and inhospitable city that refused to receive Him. "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of," He told those disciples, "For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them" (Luke 9:55-56). We see that same compassionate spirit in Abraham as he plead for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I wonder if the same spirit that was in Abraham is in us as well? When we see how our own nation is given over to the same sins that brought judgment upon those cities, how does that affect us? Does it move us to cry out to God on our nation's behalf? Do we have the same confidence in God's character, so as to plead boldly with Him as did our father Abraham? God wants us to be bold in our prayers. He wants us to appeal to His divine character by saying, "Lord if You are who you reveal yourself to be in Scripture, then will You not act, O Lord, to magnify your name? Will you not act so as to reveal your character as the righteous Judge of all the earth? Act, oh Lord; and if possible, please spare this nation for the sake of your people who are in it. In wrath,

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remember mercy. Save your people, and turn this nation back to you, for the sake of the righteous who are in it, and who cry out to you day and night on its behalf.

God wants us to plead like this with boldness, humility, unselfishness, and persistence. When we do that, we enjoy this wonderful privilege of collaborating with God in the advancement of His purposes.

Now you will notice that Abraham stopped pleading at ten person. Why so? Well, I think he felt that after so many petitions, he really felt he needed to leave matters in God's hands. He could have prayed, "Will you spare the city for one righteous person," for he knew that his nephew Lot was there. But he must have also thought like this: If Lot's witness to this people has made so little impact, that after years and years, there is only one righteous man in that city, my nephew-- well then, I suppose nothing can be done to save the city. So he left off praying at the number ten. He did not feel that he could go beyond that, for he knew that there are some cities that are so ripe for judgment, so beyond remedy, judgment must fall on them. So Abraham prayed no further. He left matters in God's hands and accepted the will of God.

CONCLUSION

Here then are four wonderful privileges enjoyed by those who are friends with God. If we are God's friends, we are privileged to have Him visit us, commune with us, communicate with us, so that we may collaborate with Him in the advancement of His kingdom purposes. Do we understand these privileges that are ours in Christ? Do we seek them? When we find ourselves spiritually cold or lacking in zeal or a sense of closeness to God, do we plead with God to visit us in His grace to refresh our faith? Do we seek out daily communion with God, and count it our chief delight to enjoy the warmth of His closeness and the manifestations of His love to our soul? Do we ask God to communicate with us His truth by revealing to us through His Word all that we need to instruct other concerning His character and will, His plans and purposes? Do we collaborate with Him in response to the truth He imparts to us by translating truth into intercessory prayer? These are the privileges of God's friends, and they belong to all who love the Lord and who follow in the footsteps of Abraham, the friend of God. Amen.