

## **Will Not the Judge of all the Earth do Right?**

Genesis 18:16 – 33

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

June 5, 2016

### **Why Pray? – Genesis 18:17**

<sup>17</sup>The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...?”

Why do we pray? Prayer is talking to God. Why do we do that? Certainly, if we examined carefully the content of our prayers, we might conclude that one reason people pray is to present to God’s attention a laundry list of needs, wants and desires. In these cases it seems that we pray because we want God to do something. I have noticed, in recent years, the use of email as a means to transmit prayer requests. Sometimes it seems from the style and content of the prayer requests I have seen that some believe that the greater the number of individuals praying in the same way and for the same end may increase the likelihood that God will act as we see fit. In this sense prayer is seen as a celestial form of contacting your senator or congressman. We think that the more people we have praying the more likely it is that we will somehow convince God of our viewpoint and that he will answer our prayer in the manner we wish.

Another reason that is closer to the truth, I believe, is that we pray when we run out of other options. Think of the sailors with Jonah as he flees from God’s command. The storm they face exceeds their resources and capabilities as sailors. The captain gives the instruction that each man is to pray to his god. They pray because they have run out of things to do in their own efforts. This reason for praying is not particularly flattering to us as people, but I think we must acknowledge its truth. We pray when we reach the end of our rope. We pray when we run out of things to do by our own efforts. We pray when we realize *that we haven’t got a prayer.*

I would argue that there are still greater, more meaningful reasons, for our prayers. Our passage today explores one that is not often articulated, but, nonetheless is a very important reason for our

prayers. We pray, not to change God, but to permit God to change us.

***Prayer changes me, not God – Genesis 18:17 – 19a***

<sup>17</sup>The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup>seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup>For I have chosen him,

The movie **Shadow Lands** is about the life of C. S. Lewis. Lewis was an English Christian. He was an academic, having taught at both Oxford and Cambridge. Though he was not trained as a theologian, he had a great gift of writing theology in a manner that was clear and accessible to the average lay Christian. There is a scene in the movie in which several of Lewis’ colleagues are talking together. One of them, a skeptic, makes a somewhat barbed comment about Lewis’ prayer life and his desire to “*change God’s mind.*” Lewis replies, ‘*I do not pray to change God. I pray because prayer changes me.*’ We pray in order to know God better. And we find that as we know God better, we are changed and transformed in the process.

We see this dynamic at work in the story of Abraham from Genesis 18.

**The Basis of Prayer – God’s revelation of himself.**

***God reveals his plan and purpose to Abraham***

<sup>17</sup> Then the LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”

In Genesis 18 Abraham is visited in a mysterious way by God himself. It is mysterious because it is clearly stated that it is the Lord who appears to Abraham. Yet his appearance is through three messengers, angels. In the initial part of the chapter the promise that had been given to Abraham, that he would have a son and heir, is reiterated to him. That promise is about to find its fulfillment – after twenty-five years of waiting! Then, beginning with v. 16, these mysterious visitors are about to depart. Abraham, being hospitable, walks with them a ways as they leave his campsite. As they walk, the Lord asks himself in soliloquy, “*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?*” He determines that he will not hide his intent from Abraham, and, accordingly, informs Abraham that he is about to bring judgment and destruction upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is

this revelation that prompts Abraham's subsequent prayers. It is a great privilege and a sign of God's love for Abraham that he reveals himself to him in this way. God does not have to condescend in this manner. God is not answerable to Abraham. He is not answerable to you or me. Yet he chooses to do so. He informs Abraham of his planned course of action.

But God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. God reveals himself to us and we discover that he is not what we expected or his purposes are not what we planned and prepared. Often, when we see some new aspect of God's character, or we learn some new insight from the Bible, we are prompted to pray because what we discover about God may not be what we expected. This new understanding and insight may disturb and, at least initially, lead us into greater perplexity. I have mentioned before about the time the English preacher, Stuart Briscoe, was about to have dinner in the home of a German evangelical pastor. Gathering around the table, every place setting included a large mug of beer. Briscoe did not wish to cause offence, but he had to tell the pastor that "English Christians do not drink beer."

"English Christians do not drink beer?" the German pastor replied, shocked. "Come, we must pray." The German pastor led Briscoe into his study, they got down on their knees, and the German pastor prayed, "God, I thank you that we are German Christians, and not English Christians."

One healthy result of a crisis of new insight or understanding is that it leads us to get on our knees and pray. This is exactly what happens to Abraham. Abraham is about to learn something new about God: and that knowledge will provoke a crisis of faith.

***Abraham's deepened grasp of God's character leads him to a crisis of faith.***

<sup>23</sup> Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

The towns of Sodom and Gomorrah were well known to

Abraham. Abraham's nephew, Lot, now lived in Sodom, together with his family. Abraham knew the people of Sodom and its leaders. He had blood relations living within the city. For these reasons he had a stake in its future. It is easy to see why God's self-revelation provoked within Abraham a crisis of faith.

Any person who walks with God will, at one time or another, have a crisis of faith. We want to learn more of God. And sometimes, what we learn shocks and surprises us. This coming summer I will be preaching on several of the surprising passages in Genesis. Next week we will explore the binding of Isaac. We will look at Jacob and his mother, Rebekah. And, at the end of the summer, we will read the story of Judah and Tamar, asking "Why is this story in the Bible?"

One of my favorite scenes in the movie '**The Apostle**' occurs when Sonny, the preacher in the movie, is up late at night praying. He stands in a t-shirt and shorts, Bible in hand, talking loudly and in an animated fashion to God. The phone rings and Sonny's mother answers it. It is a neighbor asking what is all the noise and commotion going on at her home? She explains to her neighbor that it is her son, the preacher, and that '*sometimes he talks to God, other times he yells at God. Tonight he's yelling.*' I think it is important that we be honest in recognizing that there are times when we want to yell. Martin Luther was once asked about his love for God. "Love God?" Luther replied, "*Sometimes I hate him.*"

Abraham prays because he does not understand, but wishes to understand.

***Abraham prays because he does not understand and wishes to understand.***

What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?

At the same time, we must remember that the problem is not with God: the problem is with us. God is righteous and holy. He is just. We are not. Yet nonetheless we expect God to be like us. We want to measure him by our standards. We are surprised when he does not '*measure-up*'. This in turn leads us to a crisis of understanding. In the

crisis, our understanding must be reshaped, based upon what God has revealed. Part of the reshaping process takes place through prayer and by tuning our heart and will toward God's word. R.C. Sproul keeps a plaque on his desk that reads, "Your job is to preach what the Bible says, and not what you think it ought to say."

Chapter two of the book of Proverbs speaks about finding the knowledge of God. As the first five verses of chapter two makes clear, there are several stages in the process of growing in our knowledge of God. One stage in that process, from v. 3, is to '*cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding.*' We raise our voice. We cry out for understanding. Does that sound like yelling at God to you? In the movie 'The Apostle,' Sonny raises his voice to God. In the passage before us, Abraham prays because he does not understand. He raises his voice for insight. The passage says that Abraham 'stood before the Lord.' He got in God's way. He interrupted God in his intended task because Abraham needed an explanation. He needed understanding. Like him, we pray to learn, to have our eyes opened, our minds deepened and our understanding of God increased. Prayer in this sense is not a natural process. It is a struggle. It is work. It must be pursued doggedly. But the expectation is that by our prayer, as we are remade, reshaped, and changed, that the sand of irritation will become the pearl of insight.

***Like Abraham, in prayer, we appeal to God to vindicate his righteousness and give to us a greater understanding.***

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Make careful note of what motivated Abraham's prayer. He faced a crisis in his faith. The God he had known, loved and followed all through the years had proven himself to be good and just. Yet Abraham struggles because the information now given to him raises the possibility that God may act in a manner that is unjust. And if God is unjust then the foundations of life are shaken. Abraham's prayer is essentially a request that God vindicate the reality of his justice by giving to Abraham a greater understanding of it.

This is why Abraham asks God the questions regarding how

many righteous will need to be found in the city? Abraham is probing God's character. What will it take to turn aside God's wrath? Will it take 50? Or 45? 40? 30? 20? 10? Why does he stop at ten? Probably because he understands that if the number is fewer than ten, it is simply a matter of performing a rescue operation, removing them from the city and then leaving it to its fate. That, of course, is exactly what transpires, as the mysterious angels rescue Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his family from the city prior to its destruction.

In this process of clarification Abraham satisfies himself that God remains just. God will not destroy the righteous with the wicked. His judgments are not arbitrary or unpredictable. Abraham's understanding of God deepens and grows.

While Abraham's crisis of faith is a model for us in many respects there is one sense in which it is not: that is, in the relative quickness in which it is resolved. Abraham is given this revelation from God and he immediately intercedes. How long did his prayer and discussion with God occur? We are not told explicitly. We assume that this is a somewhat distilled version of the dialog. We do not know how long they talked. But we can be sure that the crisis of Abraham's understanding was resolved in a short period of time: no more than an afternoon.

What do we do if an answer is not immediately forthcoming? The basic principle under which we should operate is this: when we come across a bone while eating fish, we take the bone from our mouth and put it aside. We do not try and swallow it immediately, or we might choke. In my life there have been many questions I have had about the Bible and Christian belief and theology. The ones that are not answered immediately I file away and wait. It has been my experience that over time God often gets around to answering or clarifying them sufficiently to my satisfaction and always to his glory!

We must realize that sometimes God cannot answer the questions we ask, not because he can't answer them, but because we are not mature or ready to comprehend them. How does a jumbo jet

get off the ground? I have no understanding of the concepts of aerodynamics. (The only reason the word is even spelled right is due to my spell checker!) I know so little about these things that were someone to attempt to answer this question for me they would have to commit to embarking upon a learning curve with me over time. The fact that it would take time is a reflection of my ignorance, not a judgment against the aerodynamic engineer who might attempt to make it plain to me. There is a natural (and necessary) sequence to life and knowledge. You do not invent canon making until after you have invented gunpowder. We must realize that sometimes we ask questions of God that cannot be answered at present because we have not yet learned the vocabulary of truth that will enable us to understand.

**What aspects of God's character are you struggling against today?**

**We should follow Abraham's example and take it to God in prayer.**

God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. It is challenging when we find ourselves confronted with facets of the reality of God's nature and character that challenge our assumptions. What we can learn from Abraham is how we should respond when we find ourselves facing some element of God's revelation that is a stumbling block for us. Abraham models for us three things.

***Be honest – turn to it.***

<sup>27</sup> Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes,

First, he models for us that we should be honest toward God and be willing to turn to the thing that offends us. Offence is an interesting emotion. When we are offended, our natural inclination is to turn away. We do not want to look at that which offends.

But when it comes to the Bible and the God whom we serve, we must learn to train ourselves to turn to the offense, and not to turn away. When it comes to God, we are offended in the same way that we shield our eyes when someone turns on the lights in darkened

room. The brightness hurts and offends, but it is by that very brightness that we are enabled to see. When some aspect of revealed truth confronts and offends us then this is the very area of faith and study we should focus upon. The action is where the offense is. Do you struggle with the fact that God is sovereign over the universe? Don't dismiss it and turn away. Turn to it in faith. Do you struggle with the exclusivity of the claims of Jesus Christ? Does it seem unfair to you that Jesus Christ is the only way into the presence of God the Father? Ask God to reveal to you a deepened grasp of Christ's greatness. Are you annoyed by the restrictions the Bible teaches and lays upon sexual expression and sexual freedoms? Turn to God in prayer. Ask him to reveal to you the wisdom that lies behind God's teaching that sexual expression is rightly and best reserved for the marriage bond. We live in an age in which identity politics rule. Do you want to assert yourself? Demand your rights? Lay claim to what the world declares you are entitled to claim? Hear the words of Jesus spoken to you my friend, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup>For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. Our prayer and study should be focused where our spiritual struggles are the fiercest.

The first thing is to turn to the offense and to see what new thing God is shining his light of revelation upon. The second is to turn respectfully to God and raise our question.

***Be respectful – turn to God.***

<sup>30</sup> *Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak.*

On one level, Abraham is acting in an awesomely bold manner. He is frank and bold before God. He is challenging the appropriateness of the revelation he has received from the Lord. God has revealed his intent to Abraham, and Abraham is questioning God's purposes and methodology.

And yet, while there is tremendous courage and boldness to what he says, he says it in a manner that preserves the reality that God is God, nothing less, and Abraham is Abraham, nothing more. Abraham speaks in a very respectful manner. He knows the boldness



of his words. He sets his words in a framework of respect. There is a built in respect to his words.

This teaches us to remember that, no matter what the level of the perplexity we may feel as we seek to understand the revelation God has given to us in the Scriptures, we must always remember that our questions are addressed to God Almighty. He is not obligated to give us an answer. He is the creator. We are the creatures. There is a great difference between skeptics and doubters. A skeptic is not truly engaged with God. A skeptic's lack of sincere engagement is revealed in his attitude of scorn and dismissal. A doubter remains respectful. He struggles, but he does not dismiss. The presence of respect is a sign, however deep and dark the doubts, that a pathway through the labyrinth of faith may yet be revealed.

Abraham models for us that we must turn to the thing that offends us. He models for us our obligation to do so respectfully, remembering that it is God whom we are addressing. Thirdly, he teaches us that what we are asking is for God to reveal himself more fully to us.

***Ask God to reveal himself more fully.***

<sup>33</sup> *When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.*

Abraham's appeal to God is that he, Abraham, would understand God's ways more completely. Abraham wanted to understand, to comprehend. Every now and again I meet people who have some vehement vocal objection to Christian teaching. Interestingly, they often are people who at one time in the past had been quite religious themselves. These folk wish to object but they do not wish to observe. They have a complaint to lodge, but are not interested in hearing any explanation or contemplating the possibility of a meaningful response. They show the true inclination of their heart by the dismissive attitude of their lips. They are like Pontius Pilate asking, '*what is truth?*' while not possessing the patience to stick around for an answer. In contrast, Abraham asks, and waits, and listens patiently to the answers God gives.

This is the third attitude Abraham teaches us. He was possessed of a willing and submissive heart. He wanted to learn and grow. In praying to God, he was given opportunity to have his grasp of the nature and justice of God deepened and enriched.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion what we learn from this story is the important truth that prayer changes us, not God. Abraham provides an important model of how we must allow our discovery of new aspects of God's nature and purpose to draw us to him in prayer. As we turn to God, respectfully, we ask God to reveal himself more fully to us. As he answers this prayer and reveals himself more fully, we are reshaped and remodeled and we begin to comprehend him and his ways more fully.

It is helpful to remember that the Bible teaches the idea of progressive revelation. Revelation is what we know about God that God has chosen to reveal about himself over time. And, we are blessed to live in the New Testament era. In this story we see Abraham, the Father of Faith, learning new truths regarding God. You and I are farther along the road of understanding than Abraham. We have his witness, and the witness of Moses, the prophets, the New Testament and, finally, of Jesus Christ himself. The message that began with Abraham finds its fulfillment and completion in the person and work of Christ. We know more, not because we are smarter, but simply because we are blessed to live in the New Testament age.

That said, Abraham's message to us this morning is to follow his example when we find ourselves confronted with facets of God's witness, character and person that may trouble or puzzle us. In the modern world, people raise all sorts of objections. They say: the Bible is sexist, elitist, and full of violence; the Bible supports capitalism and slavery; it is full of fables and old wives tales; the Bible tells me to deny myself – and not to affirm myself; Biblical sexual morality is so binding and too limiting; if God is just and moral, why is there so much injustice

in our world? And so on. Whatever may bug you about the faith, or the Bible, or the church: take some time to look at it.

This past January, twenty-three year old Jake Strotman was at a hockey game in Cincinnati with some friends. It was *dollar beer* night. After the game, leaving the stadium, Strotman and his friends approached several Baptist street preachers proclaiming the word of God to passersby. There were some words and there was an altercation. Strotman did not mean to hurt anyone. Nonetheless, one of the preachers had his glasses broken and some cuts. Strotman is a window salesman, self-employed. This past week Strotman's case found its way into court. He was looking at ninety days in jail. The possibility of community service was raised. Strotman, who is Roman Catholic, told the judge "Your honor, if I may, I would be more than happy to serve a church of your choosing." That seemed like a good suggestion. The judge ordered Strotman to attend worship services at a Baptist Church for twelve consecutive Sundays. After worship each Sunday he must get Sunday program signed by the local pastor. Asked what he thought about his sentence, Strotman replied, "I'm going to listen with both my ears and keep my mouth shut," he said, "Then, maybe I'll try to sell them some windows." 😊 Strotman will pay \$2800 in lawyer bills; \$480 in court fees and he will listen to eighteen hours of Baptist preaching.

What is your issue my friend? Are you willing to turn towards it? Are you willing to ask God to be at work in helping you to deepen your understanding?

Whatever the issue – follow Abraham's example and take it to the Lord in prayer. I want to challenge you. Even if you doubt, or are not sure that you believe: what issue angers you about God or the Christian faith? What gets under your skin? What annoys you about your believing friend, or Christian spouse, or believing parents? Take that issue, lift it to God. Ask him to give you some insight, some understanding. Challenge God. Throw down the gauntlet.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

## Genesis 18:16 – 33

<sup>16</sup>Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. <sup>17</sup>The Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup>seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup>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.” <sup>20</sup>Then the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, <sup>21</sup>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.”

### **Abraham Intercedes for Sodom**

<sup>22</sup>So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord. <sup>23</sup>Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup>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? <sup>25</sup>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?” <sup>26</sup>And the Lord said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

<sup>27</sup>Abraham answered and said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. <sup>28</sup>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.” <sup>29</sup>Again he spoke to him and said, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” <sup>30</sup>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.” <sup>31</sup>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.” <sup>32</sup>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.” <sup>33</sup>And the Lord went his way, when he had

finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.