

Genesis 18
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In many different ways, and many places, long ago — God spoke to the fathers.

These words from the opening of the book of Hebrews always come to mind when I open the Scriptures and read of Abraham's dealings with the Lord. The Lord appears to Abram in visions, sometimes he just "appears." He causes a deep sleep to fall upon him, and he appears in the form of a smoking oven and a flaming torch out of the darkness. There is much mystery, and much ambiguity. But one thing is clear. When he appears, promises tumble forth from his mouth:

"I will make you a great nation; I will bless your name and all the families of the earth will be blessed. ... look at the stars. So shall your descendants be."

"To your descendants I will give this land. ... Look north, and south, and east, and west, all that you see I will give to you and to your descendants."

"Kings shall come forth from you. And Isaac, the one who will come from your very own wife, I will establish my covenant for him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."

"I will establish an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations."

A jumble of promises, overlapping, confirming, expanding. Genesis 12, 13, 15, 17, 18. So many visitations, so many promises, yet still, so many doubts. Abraham still asks, "Lord, how may I know that I may possess it?" And the covenant is sealed with blood, a sure sign that all these words would come to pass. First the blood of the ceremonial beasts split in two, and then the blood of circumcision, shed by Abraham and Ishmael and all the men born or bought into that house, all in a single day. The blood of the eternal covenant.

Our text today begins in the same season of this great and bloody day, this day when Abraham kept the covenant and received the sign in his flesh. Again the Lord appears to Abraham, this time in the form of three men traveling the desert. More mystery, more ambiguity. The text doesn't tell us who these men are, they are simply "The Lord." Yet Abraham serves them and honors them. He feeds them and washes them, everything that would be expected of a good and decent nomadic host.

As the tender and choice calf is set before the guests of honor, The Lord, for the first time in Genesis, asks directly after Abraham's wife: "Where is Sarah, your wife?" I don't believe one should introduce our 21st century gender politics into an ancient text, but we should pause, and note, where others have incorrectly taken the text to be an offense to justice. The covenant which has been promised and sealed to Abraham, the covenant of male circumcision, which has been sealed with the ritual cutting of all the men of the household, this covenant is for Sarah as well, and for all her daughters. The daughters of Eve are all heirs of the promise, as much as the sons of Abraham. Abraham's own blood had scarcely stopped flowing, yet Sarah was past the age of childbearing, her womb was full of deadness, she was past the proper time of giving life. Until now, Sarah had heard about it all secondhand, she had heard about the promises, she had no doubt seen the blood. But now from the door of the tent she hears this very solid and sure promise: "When I return this time next year, Sarah will have a son." This promise spoken to the old woman Sarah was too much to be believed.

Abraham had laughed with joy, disbelieving joy, in the last chapter, when the Lord had said that the promise would come through a child born to Sarah; Sarah's laugh has a bit more harshness to it. Pleasure for an old woman? Both Sarah and Abraham had offered the Lord a way out of his foolish pledge, "fulfill your promise through Hagar and Ishmael," they suggested. But it was not Abraham's promise alone. Not just Abraham was promised a son, but the woman also would have her very own son. The child of promise would come through *this woman's* seed.

We make of Grace too small a thing. The New Testament looks back at Sarah and Abraham and sees in this episode a picture of faith and grace, a picture of the weakness and

emptiness and deadness of the recipient, the power and strength and mercy of the giver. Abraham, as good as dead, his wife, past the age of giving life. Lifeless. They are like the dry bones in the valley, and the word of promise comes to these bones and brings forth from them life, not just a son, but a nation, a world-blessing nation born of the womb filled with death of sin. Their laughter rings through the ages; in the name of their son Isaac grace bears the fruit of laughter of an old man that can scarcely believe the goodness of god, and an old woman struggling to do so. In Isaac's very name God commands them, and us, to recall this laughter, to recall the unbelievable magnitude of grace, the majesty of life's victory over death. And to recall that no thing is too difficult for the Lord.

We likewise make of sin too small a thing, and God's judgment on sin is often just an afterthought, no more real or believable to us than the impending birth was to the aged Sarah. As the men rise up to leave, Moses gives us a glimpse of the remarkable deliberations of the Lord with his counselors. "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?"

Earlier in Genesis, at Babel, we had seen a similar deliberation of the Lord, "Come, let us go down there and confuse their language." Here we have a similar moment of judgment, the Lord has discerned the wickedness of men, he has heard their cry, and he is coming down to confirm his judgment and punish the offense. But covenant grace makes a division among men. A new question arises: What shall I reveal to Abraham—the one who will receive and be a source of great blessing—about the dispensing of the curse? What does the blessing have to do with the curse?

More to the point: What do the blessed, have to do with the cursed?

Summary of the Gospel

What follows is a remarkable summary statement of God's grace in the Gospel, not in the form of a promise made to Abraham, but in the form of divine deliberation. This is not God's speech to man, but God's speech to himself.

It begins with divine initiative: “For I have chosen him.” This is not an abstract choosing, but a divine knowing, a divine knowing that is purposeful in its goal.

Namely, that Abraham may command his household to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. The Gospel here for Abraham is not a command, it is not in the imperative voice, “you must do this,” but the purpose of the Gospel is that Abraham might have this command as a rule of life, that he and his household might do righteousness and practice justice. Paul echoes this sentiment when he writes to the Romans that “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son.” Holiness is the endpoint of redemption.

“...*in order that* the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” The rectitude and justice of Abraham’s seed is a means of bringing about the Lord’s blessing, yet this remains a blessing which the Lord alone brings upon Abraham.

There is no difficulty, no conundrum from the standpoint of the text about divine initiative and Abraham’s response. Just as there is no doubt whether Abraham and Sarah conceived Isaac from the natural powers within their aged bodies, so there is no doubt that the fruits of righteousness and justice in the household of Abraham flow not from their dead and lifeless hearts, but from the author of life who is above. That the lives of the redeemed are lived in partnership with their redeemer, yet utterly dependent upon their Lord for whom nothing is impossible, is no mystery. The blessing is sure; all conditions are to be fulfilled by the Lord. Abraham SURELY WILL BECOME a great and mighty nation. His offspring will surely bless all the nations of the earth. And Abraham will be conformed unto his image.

Knowing Judgment

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? This is a rhetorical question if ever there was one, the answer obvious in the asking. Shall I hide from my chosen vessel of righteousness what he has been delivered from, what he has been liberated from? Keeping the way of the Lord means not standing in the path of sinners, or sitting in the seat of scoffers. The blessed man of Psalm 1 who delights in the law of God and meditates on it knows that the

wicked are driven away like chaff and will not stand in the judgment. The judgment brings division, and the wicked will not stand, nor will the sinners enter the assembly of the righteous.

Knowing and reflecting on God's judgment, then, has this salutary effect, in that it helps direct our steps onto the pathway of righteousness. In this vein, Peter writes often of the flood in his epistles. Mockers in the last days will reject the return of Christ in judgment (2 Pet 3), but don't they know that the world has already been destroyed once, and are waiting their future day of judgment and the destruction of ungodly men? The waters of the flood he compares to baptism... our salvation is like the salvation of Noah, we too are spared the judgment of the Lord. Thus for Peter, Sodom and Gomorrah also are an example to those who would live ungodly lives, and example of what the judgment holds for them. But they are also an example of the judgment which the faithful pass through and are delivered from, shielded by the cleansing blood of the lamb.

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Should we, huddled here in the ark, bearing the baptismal mark of the covenant in our bodies, should we not consider the judgment of God? Have we really considered our blessedness, if we have not considered what this blessedness has delivered us from? Have we really considered our baptism, if we have not beheld the watery grave that swallowed Pharaoh's armies?

Pilgrim Justice

So Abraham, the Believer, possesses by faith the fruit of the covenant, righteousness and peace with his God. Even friendship with God, as he now shares in his counsel. Indeed, the nature of the coming day of judgment is only fully clear to those who have had the law written on their hearts.

It's hard to say for sure how this would have sounded to Moses' first readers, but to our ears the closing scene of this chapter presents a tremendous irony, and even a sense of comedy. Abraham has been welcomed into the divine counsel, and this man of faith, this man of fits and starts, speaks with a jarring boldness to his covenant Lord: "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" It is ironic, is it not, that Abraham appeals to the Lord's

righteousness, that the righteous and the wicked might be treated alike... of course, he is asking that they all alike be spared—that the wicked receive what they do not deserve. The back and forth with first 50 then 45 and 40 and 30 and 20 and 10 righteous ingots in the scales of justice thus is an ironic image of a God supremely merciful and supremely just, yet somehow open to the persuasive banter of a marketplace merchant.

God's justice demands the judgment of the wicked, their evil deeds cry out to him, and the righteous men living in their midst are tormented—even threatened—by their lawless deeds (as Peter writes). Furthermore, Abraham is a doer of righteousness. He is one who, having believed, having been reckoned righteous, can for the first time in all sincerity command his household in the keeping of the way of the Lord.

Abraham should affirm the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. What is going on here? He should cheer the Lord—He should, himself, call down fire.

And what of our author, Moses? Isn't he writing this book to prepare his people—an army in training—for the military conquest of these same wicked men? Isn't he preparing them for holy war?

Perhaps we must recall that Abraham has some connections in these towns. He entered military alliances with them, and Lot was living in their midst. Clearly, the negotiation reflects some degree of sympathy for the wicked men of those cities based on blood and commerce. But there is more. Abraham's boldness reflects a new calling.

There is something deeper going on as well. Abraham, the doer of righteousness, is unwilling that the Lord might perform this act of righteous judgment on the cities of the plain. How different is he than James and John in Luke's Gospel, standing by the ready to be latter day Elijah's, calling down fire to consume the Lord's enemies.

How different he is than some of us, who so deeply desire that the Lord might judge those evildoers in our midst.

Abraham had been reckoned righteous by faith...he was himself a sinner, trusting in the mercy of His Lord. Where does he think he might find these righteous men, even 10? Does he not know the sinfulness of man? The covenant, and the circumcision—without which no man could stand in the way of the Lord—was a matter of days old.

Or, rather than righteousness, does Abraham see his own wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah. Grasping the magnitude of grace, grasping that no thing is too difficult for the Lord, does he hope that more believing ones might be in their midst? Does he still feel the smart of the blade, and have compassion on those for whom its full force is about to fall?

The Book of Hebrews helps us out. Abraham is a pilgrim, not building a holy city with foundations on earth, but desiring a better country prepared by God.

Abraham the believer, Abraham the doer of righteousness, is the dispenser of justice, yes, but it is a pilgrim's justice. The land is his by right, and by promise, but he does not claim it or purify it with the terrible swift sword. So different than the armies of Israel, so much more like Christ. Armed with Gospel, he is full of hope—and compassion—for the wicked in his midst.

Abraham knows he is a doer of justice only because he is a believer. And he knows intimately that nothing is too difficult for the Lord. He to whom righteousness has been reckoned by faith, who DOES because he BELIEVES, dispenses the justice by faith even in the face of the Lord's impending judgment—especially and particularly in the face of this judgment he cries out for mercy, he cries out for the mercy of the living God who must deal justly with his people, and who alone promises mercy and forgiveness on the basis of his justice. On the basis of HIS justice, and not our own.

May our hearts be thus filled with the right love of a dying world, when we behold its fate.