

### Genesis 18:16-33

Back in 1993, when we were at our previous church plant, we had determined that year that we were going to have a weekend retreat, up in the Snowy Mountain Range, in Victoria. In preparation for that camp, we had planned out this great menu and so the day before we left for the camp, I ended up going to a local farmer's and butcher's market with one of our elders, Ken Hanna, to help him do some of the shopping for the food.

And it was a real treat because Ken was a *master* shopper, not just because he knew all the right places for the best prices but because he was great at *bargaining*. And bargaining was the standard practice at this particular market place. Over here, that sort of thing doesn't happen very much but at the markets there, the price listed was NOT the price you ended up paying.

And so all morning long, I just sort of tagged along behind him as he went from one booth to the next and he was just an *artist* at this sort of thing. He would stand there and laugh and argue and haggle and sometimes threaten to walk away - it was awesome to watch. And on most occasions - not all of them - but on most of them he got his price. And we got all the food we needed, and saved a lot of money. If you've never been a part of one of those events, its great to watch, especially when you're with someone who knows what they are doing.

And here's the thing about bargaining - it works because, as a writer named Cole says, "both people have something that the other person wants." You're standing there with money and across from you is a guy with 300 potatoes - or apples - or lamb chops - or whatever. And so because you both have something that is valuable to the other person, there is a basis for the bargaining process to take place.

But it's a different situation to try and bargain when you don't really have anything to offer, when you're not really in any *position* to bargain. And yet, that's precisely the situation described in the verses before us this morning. God lets Abraham in on what is about to take place in some nearby cities and Abraham sets about petitioning and bargaining with God out of concern for what is about to take place. What happened there and what that story is all about will be the subject of our time together this morning. Before we look at that, however, let's pray together.....

*Father in Heaven, please help us now as we come together around your Word. Fill us with your Spirit, who is the Spirit of Wisdom so that we can understand the things we see and hear and so that we can prove that understanding by our application. It sounds almost crazy, but we actually believe and expect that you can and do shape and change people with **truth**. Please meet us in that expectation - and more. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen..... ( read passage)*

Following directly on from the encounter with Abraham and Sarah, and the meal in their camp, and the reaffirmation of Sarah's imminent pregnancy, the Lord and his two angels get up from their meal and begin moving in the direction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, being the good host that he is, walks along with them for a certain distance.

And as He is walking along, the Lord thinks to Himself and asks whether he should let Abraham in on what is about to take place in the nearby cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And, of course, the language used here is *anthropomorphic* - which simply means it is written with humankind in mind and with a view to helping mere people, like you and me, relate in some way to the internal thought processes of a divine-being. And so Moses describes for us here - in what is surely an overly simplified manner - this event in which God is walking along thinking about whether he will give Abraham an “inside” angle on this specific part of his plans and purposes.

And God decides that he *will* share some of what is going on with his servant, Abraham. Why? Well, for one thing, Abraham has a special relationship with God. He is “God’s friend” - as the NT writer James confirms for us. Further, Abraham has been set apart by God to be the father of many nations and to teach his descendants to walk before God in a *righteous* and *holy* fashion. What is about to take place in Sodom and Gomorrah will be - among other things - an eternal object lesson as to the wisdom of doing *just that*. But it *won’t* be an object lesson unless God makes it clear, before anything happens, that what is occurring is a direct consequence of God’s judgment.

You see, if God had not decided to let Abraham in on what was about to happen, it is very likely that Abraham would have just gone about his business and looked up one day and noticed that there was smoke coming from the direction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And he might have concluded any number of things - he might have thought that there was some sort of brush fire, or that raiding armies had set fire to the city, or that some natural disaster had struck - who knows? But God makes sure that the lesson potential of Sodom and Gomorrah is not lost on Abraham by letting him know - before anything happens - what is going through his mind and what he is doing.

And so God lets Abraham know that he is sending the angels on ahead to check things out. He has “heard” that there is great evil taking place in these cities and the angels are going as his representatives to confirm this report.

Now, again, you have to keep in mind the *anthropomorphic* nature of this language and, indeed, of this whole event. Clearly, God does not have to actually send anyone into a city in order to know what is going on there. God doesn’t have to explore things to find them out. He just knows them. That’s what it means to be God.

But God is concerned for Abraham, his servant and friend. God wants *Abraham* to know that His judgments are just and righteous. He wants Abraham to know that before He takes the extreme step of sending judgment upon entire cities He has carefully taken into account what is going on. He wants Abraham to know that his judgments are not capricious, fits of rage like what you might find among the so-called “gods” of some pagan religions but are, instead, the considered, measured, and justifiable response of a Holy God to real, *known*, evil.

And so, for *Abraham’s* sake, God sends the angels on ahead. And, not just for Abraham’s

sake but for the sake of Lot and his family - as we will see soon enough. But for now, the focus is on Abraham, and his need to see and believe that the judgments of God - even when they are terrible and severe - are righteous and just.

But there's still more that God has in mind for Abraham. And that becomes evident by the fact that, after he explains to Abraham what is going on, *God sticks around*. Whenever God hangs around, it's always for a reason. There's always something going on. In this story, he sends the angels on ahead, but he stays behind with Abraham. Almost as if he is waiting for something.

He doesn't have to wait long.

At the announcement of the investigation of Sodom and Gomorrah, and with the strong implication of impending judgment, Abraham becomes immediately concerned, for at least two reasons. He knows about the reputation of these cities and so is sure that the investigation will not turn out well for them. But he is also concerned because among the people of the city are Abraham's relatives - Lot and his family - and possibly others that might be regarded as righteous and therefore, in Abraham's view, un-deserving of being included in the judgment of God.

Now it probably needs to be said at this point that when the word "righteous" is used here it is important not to read a full systematic theological definition of that word into this text. What do I mean by that? Simply this: In the language of our own day, whenever you and I talk about doctrine and theology and the word "righteous" is used, we typically use this word to mean something like "sinless" or "pure", or something like that. And we think of verses like Romans 3:10 which, quoting Psalm 14, says that "no one is righteous". And when we read such a thing, we understand what Paul is talking about - that before God, there is no one who stands unaffected and un-tainted by sin. We are all victims of Adam's fall and are guilty "in him". In that sense, no one is righteous. No one can stand before God and say that He owes them salvation or blessing or anything because of their own inherent goodness. Nobody can say that.

But that sense of "righteous" is not the only one that appears in the Bible. There are other places which use the very same word to describe people who *are* regarded as righteous - not in an absolute sense but in another very real sense. Sometimes the Bible uses the word righteous to refer to people who are rightly-related toward God. They are *his* people and have a basic Godward orientation toward their life and are characterized as those who consistently pursue Him and His ways, even if they do not do so perfectly. It is in this sense, for example, that the NT talks about the person of Lot, in 2 Peter, describing him as a "righteous man". It is this same sense that is used in Genesis 6, with regard to Noah, when it says,

**Genesis 6:9** *These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.*

Now, to be sure, we understand that in the grand design of God all of God's people -

from Adam onward - are covered and clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ and when God's work within them is complete they do and will have lives and hearts that are *congruent* with that righteousness.

But that ultimate reality is not what is in view in these particular verses - even though it is true. What is in view here is what we've already seen - people who have a basic and consistently God-ward orientation to their belief and practice, a God-ward *shape* to their life. So, when Abraham says "Lord, if there are fifty *righteous* in the city" when he says that he is saying, "Lord, if there are fifty of *your people* in the city, will you destroy them with the wicked.? If there are fifty people who worship you and honor you as the true Creator and God - will you destroy them along with the wicked?"

This question, I believe, is the thing that God has stuck around for. *He wants to give Abraham the opportunity to make an appeal for the sake of the righteous.* As has already been said, God wants Abraham to know not only that what is about to happen to Sodom and Gomorrah IS an act of divine judgment but that it is a *just and righteous* judgment. And in order for Abraham to know *that*, he has to be delivered of this notion that there are a number of righteous people still living in these cities.

And so God, just by sticking around, invites this dialogue - a dialogue that will serve an important role - *after the fact* - in helping Abraham to understand that there *aren't* these masses of righteous people roaming around these cities and that, therefore, God's judgment has been just.

So, Abraham approaches God, appealing to Him on the basis of His own justice and His own reputation. In other words, He appeals to God on the basis of *His own character*, asking Him not to destroy the righteous with the wicked. And he begins his appeal by asking if the Lord will destroy the city if there are 50 righteous people there.

Now why he picks the number 50 is anybody's guess. Most likely Abraham probably felt that this was a "safe" number - that surely there were at *least* 50 righteous people to be found in this massive population. So he asks if God would be willing to spare the city for the sake of 50 righteous people. And the question *behind* this question seems to be something like this: *What is the minimum number of righteous people for whom you would be willing to spare this city?*

Now, the one thing you can never determine with great certainty in Bible reading is *tone*. An awful lot is communicated between people by the *tone* of their voice. Like when one of your kids comes and asks if they can have a cookie and you say, "yes". Ten minutes later they are back and they ask again and, you hesitate a bit, and say, "Okay". And then ten minutes later they are back and ask yet again. And this time you respond, with a slight growl in your voice that says, "Yes, but if you ask me one more time, there's gonna be trouble". And your kids - usually - pick up on this and they don't ask anymore. But a lot gets communicated just by *tone*. And tone is one thing that we can only guess at when we read passages in the Bible.

*Tone* is something that I think about in this dialogue between Abraham and God. Here Abraham is, asking God if he will spare the city for the sake of fifty righteous people, and God responds that He will. And I do wonder what the *tone* was and how it changed throughout this

conversation and if, perhaps, as things went along, it became increasingly clear to Abraham that there was a limit to how much he could ask for.

So Abraham asks for 50 and, when God responds to that, he ventures forward cautiously, asking if God will spare the city for the sake of 45 righteous. Again God says that he will. And this continues in systematic fashion until finally Abraham asks if God will spare the city for the sake of 10 righteous people. And God says that he will. And at the number 10, Abraham stops asking.

Now he may have stopped because He realized from the *way* that God responded that He had reached the limit. Maybe there was something in the *tone* of God's voice that made it clear. Or he may have stopped because he felt sure that the city would be spared now that all was required was finding 10 righteous people - surely that would be easy enough to do? Surely there were that many in the city, right? Or perhaps it was both of these things, or something entirely different altogether.

But it is worth noting, in this regard, that the text says, *the Lord went his way when He was finished speaking with Abraham*. In other words, the impression is given that the bargaining stopped at 10, not so much because Abraham was finished asking - although he may have been - but because God had decided that the conversation was over. And now that the conversation is finished, God no longer sticks around, and they both go their separate ways. If there are ten righteous men in the city, it will be spared. And if the city is not spared, then Abraham will understand that God was *right* to send judgment since *not even ten righteous people could be found* in the entire place! And that is where the story finishes.

Now, one of the significances of this story is its *exemplary* value. It is a story that illustrates God's concern for righteousness and shows him taking steps to respond to wickedness with judgment. This certainly would have been important for the original readers of this story. They were soon to be entering into the Promised Land and would be God's instrument of judgment on the wickedness to be found among the people there. In seeing the careful way in which God proceeded back in Abraham's day - investigating these cities through His angels - they would know that God would have exercised the *same* discretion with regard to the people who were about to be removed from the land before *them*. And they would know that God's judgment upon these people would be just as accurate and equally deserved and that, therefore, their role in this whole matter was justifiable. In other words, they would know the *rightness* of what they were doing, and that would give them courage and conviction to carry out the tasks set before them.

And let's face it, if you have been set the task of destroying nations and driving families from their homes - you need to believe that what you are doing is *right* and that it is serving the cause of *justice*. This story would help God's people to see that when the time came.

At the same time, seeing God's concern for righteousness would serve as a warning for them as they took their own place and settled their own cities in the Promised Land. Their God was a Holy God and would be just as concerned to see righteousness upheld and wickedness suppressed, even and especially among a people called by His name. The sorts of things that

went on in places like Sodom and Gomorrah were not to take place among the people of God.

These same realities are significant for us as latter day recipients of these same texts. We too need to know that the judgments of our God are just and right and are not the actions of a capricious, calloused, or insensible God but are, as we've already seen, the measured, carefully investigated, *just* responses of a Holy God to real evil. He does not just fly off the handle in a fit of rage, but takes His steps and makes His decisions on the basis of what is accurate and true and right. God is just - even when that justice is terrible to behold.

Having said that, we need to be careful here. It would be one thing for Abraham to say to someone - after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed - that it was the judgment of God that brought this about. He could say that sort of thing with great certainty because he had a direct word from the Lord on that.

It is quite another for you and I to make such absolute declarations *without* a similar word from the Lord. To be sure, it may be that some of what happens in our world IS a direct, intentional act of judgment on God's part. I do not doubt that such things happen. But it also may be that what we are witnessing on a given occasion is not so much an intentional, focused act of judgment as much as it is the general outworking of the broken-ness and fallen-ness that came into the world because of sin, and that will continue until Jesus returns. So, we need to be very leery of making pronouncements of judgment.

Well, in addition to this, we can also learn from this passage some things about *prayer* since this is precisely what is going on here, right? We typically define prayer as "talking with God" - which is exactly what is going on here with Abraham. He is talking - that is, "praying" to God. This is a "conversational prayer" if ever there was one. Abraham is acting as a mediator for the sake of the righteous. He is pleading with God, interceding on behalf of other people. And, remarkably, God responds to Abraham's prayers. He hears and responds to them.

And you and I have the same role/responsibility as Abraham in our own day. We have the opportunity and obligation to plead with God for the sake of the righteous. We live in a world that is full of wickedness. We live in a country and in a world that has institutionalized and legislated evil into the very fabric of our culture. Surely, if Sodom and Gomorrah by its wickedness merited God's attention then our own cultures would deserve the same.

Even further, like Abraham, we have been given privileged access to the counsels of God by means of the Scriptures. We look at them and we know, for *certain*, that a day is coming when the Lord will return in judgment. We have been given "inside information". And *knowing* what we know, we of all people should pray for God's mercy upon this place, for the sake of the righteous. We should pray that evil would be exposed and addressed. We should pray for justice. We should pray for mercy.

And when we DO pray, we can learn again from the example of Abraham. We see here that Abraham's manner of talking to God was very bold - making a case, appealing to God on the basis of his own attributes and person. We too can be confident to approach God in a *similar* manner in our own prayers. WE can pray to Him, reminding Him of His goodness, His power, His glory as we intercede on behalf of others. It is not arrogant to do this. We are not insulting

God by reminding him of His own character. We are not telling God what to do. We are not forcing God to do *anything* when we pray this way - we are simply appealing to Him by the strongest means possible - which is to pray on the basis of His own character and person. We are simply making the strongest case we can for our prayers to be answered - always, of course, in His good time and for His good purposes and for His ultimate glory.

Ultimately, however, Abraham's role as a mediator for the Righteous is not just a model for you and I to imitate - although it IS that - but it is more importantly a signpost pointing us to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has been *our mediator*. Jesus is the one who has - by his life and death, and in his priestly role - It is his blood that *pleads* for God to be merciful on our behalf. And the basis for his plea for mercy is not the relative righteousness of a fallen people but *the infinite and perfect righteousness of a just Savior*.

And we can thank God that, ultimately, when he looks upon US, when He "investigates" our circumstances what He finds is *perfect righteousness* - everywhere he looks - the perfect righteousness of his Son, transferred to us. And the reason He sees that in us is because 2000 years ago, when he looked upon his Son, beaten and bloodied on a cross, He found our sin and wickedness, transferred to him. And so Jesus received the judgment of God, while we receive the blessing of God. *That* two-way transaction - that was what the cross was about.

And here's the thing you need to know. It's an *open* transaction. There is room for more. There is still time for those who *will* come, to come to the Lord Jesus Christ *now* - to lay your burden of sin upon Him, and lean upon His perfect righteousness to reconcile you to God.

You know, when Abraham was asking God what was the *minimum* number of righteous men for whose sake He would be willing to spare the wicked - when Abraham asked that question, he stopped at ten.

But ten isn't the ultimate answer. The answer is One. For one righteous man, God will be willing to spare the wicked.

That righteous man is Jesus.