

Ministry of Grace

Lesson 8 – Negotiating with God?

Genesis 18:1-33

¹And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

⁶And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." ⁷And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?"

And he said, "She is in the tent."

¹⁰The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"

¹³The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

¹⁵But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.

He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

¹⁶Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹For 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."

²⁰Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, ²¹I 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."

²²So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" ²⁴Suppose 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? ²⁵Far 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?"

²⁶And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

²⁷Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose 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."

So He said, "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy *it*."

²⁹Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it."

³⁰Then 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."

So He said, "I will not do *it* if I find thirty there."

³¹He 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."

So He said, "I will not destroy *it* for the sake of twenty."

³²Then 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."

³³And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

Synopsis

It has only been a few months since Yahweh confirmed his covenant with Abraham, gave him and Sarah new names, and instructed him to circumcise every male in his household. Now we see Abraham sitting by the door of his tent at the Oak Grove of Mamre when three travelers approach him. Immediately, Abraham approaches and bows to them, washes their feet, and prepares a feast for them. One of the travelers then asked Abraham where his wife, Sarah, was. Because it has only been a short while since his previous encounter with Yahweh, and because he referred to Sarah by her new name, Abraham knew that it was Yahweh who was speaking to him. He then informs Abraham (and Sarah who was listening in the tent) that Sarah is about to give him a son. As a result, Sarah laughs to herself in disbelief. When Yahweh asks Abraham why Sarah laughed at the fact that she was going to have a child, Sarah denied it because she was afraid.

The three travelers (Yahweh and two angels) then head on their way toward Sodom and Abraham goes with them for part of the way. As they traveled, Yahweh determined that he would tell Abraham what was about to happen to Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities of the plain. Abraham, knowing that his nephew Lot is in Sodom, questioned God as to whether he would indeed destroy the righteous along with the wicked. After a surprisingly gutsy negotiation by Abraham, Yahweh agrees to spare the cities if only 10 righteous people are found there.

Genesis 18:1-3

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

“appeared” – Based on the following narrative, God appeared to Abraham in human form.

“oaks of Mamre” – Or “Terebinth trees of Mamre.” This was the grove of trees near present day Hebron where Abraham spent a large part of his time while he was in Canaan.

“sat at the door of his tent” – That is, Abraham was sitting under the shade of the awning in front of the door of the tent. This location provided shade and enabled whatever breeze there might have been to provide some comfort in the heat of the day.

“three men” – We know from verse one and verses thirteen and fourteen that one of the three was Yahweh. Based on [Genesis 19:1](#), the other two were angels.

There are some who suppose that these are the three persons of the Trinity; however, the Father and the Holy Spirit are nowhere else in scripture described as having ordinary human form. In the Talmud these are said to be the three angels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, but none of these three are ever referred to as *yhvh*.

“standing in front of him” – Based on the text, we are led to believe that these three simply appeared rather than having walked up to him. The Hebrew word translated “in front of” is *al*, which simply represents a physical relationship. It could be translated as “by, against, near,

above, on, in front of, with respect to, etc.” It’s most likely that these three walked up the path and Abraham noticed them as they drew near.

“ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed” – Out of pure humble hospitality, Abraham quickly approached the three men (for so he thought them to be) and bowed before them as a peaceful sign of respect.

“Lord” – Hebrew *adonai*, meaning “lord, master, or sir.” It was obvious to Abraham that one of the three was the most important and it was he that Abraham addressed. It does not appear that Abraham recognized Him as Yahweh; otherwise, he would have addressed him as Yahweh. It seems odd that Abraham did not recognize Yahweh since he had interacted with him only a few months before. However, in his human form (preincarnate Christ) he would have been able to make himself unrecognizable just as Jesus did to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke chapter 24).

“if I have found favor in your sight” – This is not an indication that Abraham recognized Yahweh. It is, rather, an indication of humble hospitality, which Abraham would have offered to any strangers passing by.

“do not pass by your servant” – Again, this is an indication that Abraham’s motive was simply to provide for the needs of strangers. It was his strong desire to serve them and to provide for them. Abraham had much, but he was humble in heart, especially to those who had a perceived need.

Genesis 18:4, 5

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said."

“let a little water ... wash your feet” – Abraham’s first courtesy toward the strangers was that he might be allowed to provide them with a foot washing. Since they wore sandals (or were barefoot), their feet would have become dirty from the travel. Foot washing was a pleasurable courtesy offered to the travelers by Abraham. This job was typically assigned to the lowest household servant.

“rest yourselves under the tree” – The second courtesy Abraham offered the travelers was a place to sit in the shade of one of the trees.

“while I bring a morsel of bread” – The third courtesy offered to the strangers was some food. The word “bread” is the Hebrew word *lechem*, which generically refers to food of any kind.

“after that you may pass on” – Abraham’s intent was not to detain the travelers for a long time, but to temporarily provide for their needs so they could continue on their journey.

“They said” – Even though one of the three was Yahweh, the narrative indicates that all three responded to Abraham’s request. Or, it could be that this is a generic “they,” meaning that one of them spoke for all three of them.

Genesis 18:6-8

And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender

and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

“Abraham went quickly ...Quick! Abraham ran ... who prepared it quickly” – There was obvious urgency in preparing the meal for these travelers. Abraham did not want to detain them any longer than necessary, yet he wanted to provide the highest quality meal possible.

“three seahs” – Or “three measures.” Three tenth’s of a seah was considered sufficient for one person for an entire day. Thus, we see that the amount set before these three was sufficient for about ten people.

“cakes” – Hebrew *uggah*, meaning flat, round, unleavened bread. This type of bread was typically cooked on top of rocks which had been around the fire. Mixing and cooking these would have only taken Sarah about five minutes. This would have provided an appetizer for the travelers while the meat was being prepared.

“took a calf, tender and good” – According to the customs of the time, animal food was seldom provided except for visitors of high position. Normally, it would have been a kid or lamb from the flock of sheep. Only for the most important of visitors would a calf have been provided. After slaughter, it was probably cut into small pieces and roasted on skewers. This would have provided a cooked meal in the shortest amount of time.

“calf” – the Hebrew words are *ben bakar*, which literally means “son of a cow.” In other words, this was not just steak, but veal, the most tender and succulent meat.

“curds” – Most likely the cream of the milk which rises to the top. This would be the sweetest portion of the milk.

“milk” – Most likely camel’s milk, which even today is served as a kind of desert at the end of a meal.

“Then he took ... and set it before them” – It appears that Abraham took an active part in serving the three travelers, even though he was the master of a large household. The same custom is followed even today where the local sheikh will himself take an active part in serving guests, even in the menial tasks.

“and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.” – Continuing with his position of servant for the three guests, Abraham stood nearby so that he could continue to meet the needs of his guests. As a sign of respect, he did not eat with them and did not sit in their presence.

“while they ate” – Some question whether spirit beings can consume food. Apparently, all three of the visitors had a fully functioning human body. By way of example, our Lord had a human body and was able to eat with his disciples after His resurrection:

And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. (Luke 24:41-43)

Likewise, in His pre-incarnate body the Son of God (Yahweh) was able to eat real food. Notice that the angels were also able to eat food. The bodies that they possessed seemed to have all the physical attributes of our human bodies.

Genesis 18:9, 10

They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

“they said to him” – The implication here is that one of the angels asked the initial question. Perhaps both angels posed the query. Or, as we said regarding verse 5, it could be that this is a generic “they,” meaning that one of them spoke for all three of them.

“Where is Sarah your wife?” – The purpose of the question appears to be twofold. The first purpose was to get Sarah’s attention. She was within earshot inside the tent and hearing her name would have caused her to pay close attention to what was being said about her. In addition, the mention of his wife’s name by the strangers would have alerted Abraham to the fact that these were not ordinary strangers. It might not have been so unusual for them to refer to her as Sarai, for this is what everyone knew her as. It has only been a few months since Yahweh gave her a new name and it is likely that only their closest acquaintances knew to call her Sarah.

“this time next year” – Literally “the time of living.” This is an apparent reference to the time from conception to birth. In **Genesis 17:21** Abraham was told that Sarah would give birth to Isaac in one year. The current events, therefore, take place about three months after Abraham and his household were circumcised.

“Sarah was listening” – Having heard her name mentioned, she was now listening attentively.

Genesis 18:11 - 15

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

“Abraham and Sarah were old” – From **Genesis 17:1** and **Genesis 17:17** we know that Abraham was ninety-nine years old and Sarah was eighty-nine years old.

“The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” – This could either be a reference to the fact that women of that time did not typically give birth at the age of eighty-nine or that she had already gone through menopause. (From **Genesis 23:1** we know that Sarah lived until she was one hundred twenty-seven years old.) Also, remember that throughout Sarah’s child bearing years, she had been unable to conceive.

“So Sarah laughed to herself” – As a result of the facts just presented (Sarah had been barren and was now eighty-nine years old), Sarah laughed within herself. Apparently, this was not vocalized in any way. If you will recall, Abraham also laughed when told that he was about to be a father.

Notice that the facts cited for both Abraham’s laugh and Sarah’s laugh were nearly the same:

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (**Genesis 17:17**)

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Genesis 18:12)

Both laughed at the fact that Abraham was old and Sarah was also old. Unlike Abraham's laughter of belief and joy, however, Sarah's laughter was apparently from unbelief and was scornful.

"Why did Sarah laugh?" – God knows even the thoughts and intent of our heart.

"Is anything too hard for the LORD?" – This is the crux of the matter. Abraham believed that God could, and would, perform a miracle. Sarah, on the other hand, apparently did not believe that God could, or would, perform a miracle, even though He had already promised that Abraham would have a son by her! (See Genesis 17:16)

"But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid" – We are told that it was out of fear that Sarah denied having laughed. What was the cause of her fear?

Genesis 18:16-21

Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 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." Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 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."

"Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way" – Having finished their business with Abraham and Sarah, Yahweh and His two angels departed. Abraham, in a further act of submission and courtesy, began to accompany them part way on the next leg of their journey. According to Jewish tradition, he went as far as a place from which they could see the Dead Sea through a ravine.

"the LORD said" – The context here makes it very clear that it was Yahweh in human form; that is, the person of Jesus Christ pre-incarnate.

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do" – This is a fascinating commentary of how God operates. He discussed with Himself (perhaps with the other two persons of the Trinity) whether or not to reveal His plans to Abraham.

"For I have chosen him" – Literally, "for I have known him." The Hebrew word for "to know" is *yada*. When used with regard to people, this word means "to know someone personally, relationally, and experientially." In other words, it expresses an intimate knowledge. It is the word used of Adam when he *knew* Eve and she bore him a son. It is this same sense of relational, experiential, intimate knowledge with which God foreknew those of us whom He chose:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Romans 8:29)

“the LORD said” – Because Abraham was his chosen one whom he knew, Yahweh revealed his plan for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave” – The well-known reputation of these cities was one of grave sin, which was condemned by all who were decent. This reputation had reached the ears of God.

“I will go down to see” – Since God is omniscient, He already knew the condition of sinfulness of Sodom and Gomorrah. But, to more easily communicate ideas to mankind, God often expresses Himself in humanly understandable terms. We learn from the next chapter that God did not physically go to Sodom and Gomorrah. He simply sent His angels to destroy them.

Genesis 18:22-25

So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 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? 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?"

“So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom” – That is, the angels headed toward the condemned cities while Abraham remained behind with Yahweh.

“Abraham still stood before the LORD” – According to the Targum of Onkelos (an Aramaic translation & interpretation of the Torah), “he ministered in prayer before the Lord.”

“Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Far be it from you to do such a thing” – Abraham, speaking directly to Yahweh, appeals to His righteousness in negotiating for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Note that Abraham does not plead with God or try to persuade Him based on his own desires. His arguments are based solely on his knowledge of the holy, righteous God.

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” – Again, Abram appeals to God’s righteousness (He always does what is right). His knowledge of God included the fact that He is the Judge of all the earth.

Genesis 18:26-31

And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 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." Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 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." 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."

“If I find at Sodom fifty righteous ... I will spare the whole place” – If only fifty righteous people were found to be in Sodom, God agreed to spare all the wicked for the sake of the fifty righteous.

“I who am but dust and ashes” – This is a reference to the fact that the human race was created from the dust of the ground and after death we become nothing but ashes. Abraham not only recognized God’s position but his own as well. This is an indication of Abraham’s boldness in approaching a holy, righteous God, even though he recognized himself to be nothing more than dust and ashes in His presence.

“I will not destroy it if I find forty-five ... forty ... thirty ... twenty” – Abraham’s persistence is exceeded only by God’s patience.

Genesis 18:32, 33

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." And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

“I will speak again but this once” – Abraham knew that he was pushing hard in his negotiation with God and recognized that God’s patience might end soon. He appealed to the God of mercy one final time.

“Suppose ten are found there?” – We don’t know how many people lived in Sodom, but there could have been thousands. Surely ten righteous people could be found, thought Abraham.

“And the LORD went His way” – Having finished the negotiation, God departed and Abraham returned to his tent.

So What?

A Meal for Honored Guests

Here we have Abraham, a very wealthy sheikh with more than 100 servants and large flocks and herds of animals. On this occasion he appears to have been relaxing and enjoying the sights and sounds (and maybe even smells) around him. Perhaps he could hear birds singing, cattle lowing, and sheep bleating as he felt the breeze cool his face while he sat in the shade of his tent. He may have even drifted off to sleep in the peace and contentment of the moment.

Suddenly, he was aware of three men approaching. He did not seem to recognize any of them, but out of a deep sense of hospitality and a humble heart, he immediately rose and quickly approached them, bowing to the ground before them.

He could have just greeted them, “Howdy, strangers. Beautiful day to be traveling, isn’t it? Where are you from and what’s your destination?” That, however, would have been presumptuous on his part and would have demonstrated a superior attitude. Instead, Abraham demonstrated an attitude of humility and concern for the needs of others. He offered them a shady spot to sit and offered to wash their feet for them.

He didn't stop with just washing their feet either. He offered to fix a meal for them, to which they agreed. Notice the urgency with which he performed these courtesies. He did not simply turn to Sarah and his servants and say, "Fix these men some food!" Abraham hurried into the tent, instructing his wife to prepare some freshly baked bread, and not just a little; he told her to prepare enough bread to last them for several days. Then he ran out to the herd, not the flock of sheep, but to the herd of cattle. It would have been sufficient to slaughter one of the sheep. This was the meat usually prepared for family and friends. Instead, he determined to offer them a beef steak. And, not just any beef steak, but tender, succulent veal. This was the meat that was normally reserved for the most honored guests.

Well, of course, you might say. God always deserves the best of what we have. However, up to this point in the narrative there is no evidence that Abraham recognized the strangers as Yahweh and two angels. He proceeded to serve them a banquet complete with some sweet curds and milk. Then, after personally serving his guests, Abraham stood back, not presuming to be their equal by eating with them. In short, he treated these strangers as most honored guests.

Have you ever been asked to prepare a meal for a church family that has just moved into the area, or for someone you don't know who has fallen on difficult times? What did you prepare? Was it a pot of spaghetti and a loaf of store-bought sourdough bread? Perhaps you fixed a casserole that was easy to make and easy to transport. Of course, that would have been gracious of you and they would have no doubt been grateful for such a meal. I suppose Abraham would have fixed them the best steak he could get, savory vegetables, and a loaf of freshly baked bread with crême brulée for desert. He would have brought it freshly cooked and personally served it to them using the finest china. When they were finished, Abraham would have taken all the dirty dishes with him so that no one else would have to do the dishes. In short, he would have treated them like royalty.

Laughter and Fear

When the meal was done, the appetites of the guests were fully satisfied, and the dishes were taken away, the angels spoke to Abraham, saying, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" Now, perhaps they overheard Abraham giving his wife instructions for making the bread, calling her by name, but I doubt it. Surely they knew that Sarah was in the tent. Nonetheless, when they inquired, Abraham responded that his wife was there behind him in the tent. It was then that Yahweh revealed Himself to his humble servant.

"Your wife, Sarah, is about to conceive and will have a son according to the normal order of life."

That must have set Abraham back on his heels. He knew that God had promised him a son and he had been faithfully waiting for the fulfillment of that promise. Only Yahweh Himself would have known about the promise. Three months earlier He had told Abraham that he only had one more year to wait. A renewed sense of joy must have filled his heart as he thought about the fulfillment of a promised Messiah. But this time Sarah heard the news as well. She knew that her time of having children had already passed by. She was too old to have children and her husband was too old as well. Silently, within herself, Sarah said, "Yeah, right! This old woman is going to get pregnant? Hah!"

"Why does Sarah mock me, Abraham? Is anything too hard for Yahweh?"

With that, Sarah also realized that the person speaking to her husband was none other than Yahweh. Then it hit her. She had just ridiculed the God of all creation, the Judge of all the earth. She was afraid!

“I did not laugh,” she called out from the tent.

“Yes, you did, Sarah!” Then there was silence as the chosen couple realized that God had spoken the truth.

Compare this verbal interchange with what Adam said in the Garden of Eden after he and Eve had disobeyed god:

And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." (Genesis 3:10)

They were afraid! They weren't afraid because of disobedience, but of disbelief. Adam and Eve had not believed that they would die as a result of eating the forbidden fruit, so they ate. Sarah did not believe that God could give her a child in her old age, so she laughed at Him. That lack of faith then led to an awareness of her sin, which produced fear in the presence of a Holy, Almighty God.

Have you ever been afraid of God? Solomon, at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes, proclaimed:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13) [NIV]

It is good and right for sinners to fear God. It is an indication that we recognize God's holiness, His righteousness, and His power. It is also an indication that we recognize our own sinfulness and the penalty that we deserve as a result. Do you fear God?

Negotiating with God

As the honored guests rose to leave, Abraham joined them while they headed down the path. What followed, in my opinion, is one of the most amazing conversations in the entire Bible.

Having decided to reveal His plans to Abraham, Yahweh informed his friend what He was going to do to the cities of the plain. Abraham, you will remember, had just demonstrated his humility and concern for the welfare of others by being a willing servant for strangers. But, also remember that some fifteen years earlier he had put his own life and the lives of his household servants at risk when he attacked Chedorlaomer and his armies in order to rescue Lot and the people of Sodom. Now, he has just been informed that the very people for whom he risked his life were about to be destroyed. As a result, Abraham and God had this amazing conversation.

There are two things about this discussion that cause wonder for me. The first, and most obvious, is that Abraham negotiated with God. I don't know about you, but I have never had a successful negotiation with God. That is to say that I have never achieved what I set out to achieve in negotiating with the Almighty. The second amazing thing about their verbal interchange is that Abraham understands the nature of God. He knows that God is holy and that He must judge sin. But, he also knows that God is righteous; that is, God always does what is right. Abraham uses this knowledge to craft an amazing negotiating session. Also take note that Abraham was no more successful in his negotiation with God than I have ever been!

He starts out with a rhetorical question regarding God's righteousness. But – before we get into the discussion, let me say something about righteousness. God's righteousness means that He always does what is right. He can't sin, He has to do right. You will notice, however, that Abraham is negotiating for a few righteous people. How many righteous people do you know? I know of only one righteous person who ever lived, Jesus Christ. Because He was conceived in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit, he did not have a sin nature like you and I do. That sin nature is passed down from generation to generation by the father, not the mother. (Not something we men can be proud of, is it?) Since Jesus was fathered by the Holy Spirit, He did not have a sin nature. Because He is God, He cannot sin. But for us, the result of our having a sin nature is that we sin; we don't always do what is right; therefore, we are not righteous, we are sinners. God cannot allow unrighteous sinners in His presence. So, in order to have fellowship with us sinners, God developed a plan whereby we can legally be made righteous. When Abraham first believed God about the promise of a son, God declared him to be righteous. When we believe God's truth about His Son, He also declares us to be righteous. In effect, when we accept the payment of Jesus' blood for the penalty of our sins, God writes the word "RIGHTEOUS" in His record book next to our name.

Now to the negotiation: When Abraham heard that God was going to destroy Sodom, and by association, all the five cities of the plain, he said, "Would you destroy the righteous with the wicked? You can't do such a thing. Doesn't the judge of all the earth always do what is right?"

Then, based on this presupposition, Abraham proceeds to negotiate on behalf of the righteous people in Sodom. He starts off by pleading for clemency if there are but fifty righteous people there. God agrees that for fifty righteous people He will not destroy all the wicked ones. He then pleads for forty-five righteous, then for forty, thirty, and twenty. As his final position, Abraham pleads for all the people if only ten righteous people are found there.

As it turns out, there were not even ten righteous people in the cities of the plain. But, in a final demonstration of His own righteousness, God rescued the four righteous people in the city of Sodom by leading them out before His judgment fell on the rest. We'll see this when we study the next chapter of Genesis.

Lessons Learned

Here's what we learned from the example that Abraham gives to us in this chapter:

1. It is always proper for us to humble ourselves, and to treat others with the same respect that we would show to those who are most honored. Remember what we learned in lesson 4?

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

How are you doing with this one? Has anything changed since you went over lesson 4? If so, that's great! If not, don't give up, keep trying.

2. It is always good to fear God, but it is never good to ridicule God or to lie to Him.

Remember what Solomon said in Ecclesiastes? *Fear God, and keep His commandments.* Keep in mind that God loves you but He also knows when you're not telling Him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

3. When negotiating with God, know from the beginning that God always comes out on top.
4. If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, as far as God is concerned you are as righteous as Jesus.

Since we have a sin nature, we are sinners and we know we are sinners. God also knows we are sinners but because of the blood of Jesus Christ, He sees us as sinless as Christ.

What God wants now is a closer relationship and a closer walk with Him. Are you ready?