

Lesson13

Genesis 18 & 19

We have seen that waiting for God to act can prompt the kind of impatience that leads to imprudence. So it was in the case of Sarah, who urged Abraham to fulfill God's promise of a son by using Hagar, her maid. This was a solution that would create lasting difficulties, a pain that could have been avoided had Abraham and Sarah submitted their new plan to God for His approval. Nevertheless, God was merciful to Hagar and to the son born to her, Ishmael. When the boy was thirteen, God appeared to Abraham to renew, expand, and formalize the covenant He had made with him and his descendants. He asked Abraham to walk blamelessly before him, as He repeated the magnificent promise to make him the father of a multitude of nations. God changed Abram's and Sarai's names to indicate that He intended to use them as the foundation for the new thing He was doing on earth - creating an entire nation of people who would be His very own.

The sign of the covenant was circumcision. This act, performed in the flesh of Abraham and his household, would demonstrate their unique relationship with Him. Ishmael's circumcision at the age of thirteen would identify him as an Egyptian, not a Jew. Although he was Abraham's firstborn son, he would not be the one through whom the covenant promise was kept. Isaac would be that son, born through Sarah. God assured Abraham that the time for that birth was not far off.

Now that Abraham has formally entered a covenant with God, after twenty-five years of living with Him, will there be any changes in their relationship? What does it mean for a man to be drawn up so dramatically in the life of God? What will characterize his life? In this lesson, we will see Abraham at work as God's covenant keeper. These questions we have about Abraham's new role aren't academic. We know that through our faith and baptism, we have also entered into a covenant with God. Who are we becoming?

Sodom and Gomorah

Three Visitors

Questions on Genesis 18:1-15

How does Abraham respond to the presence of the three visitors? See Matt. 25:35; Heb. 13:2; Acts 16:14-15; 27-34. What example does he set for covenant-keeping people?

[Although Abraham possibly did not know at first who these visitors were, when One renews the promise God had made to him for the birth of a son within a year, he would have understood that this was a divine visit.]

Abraham is the picture of hospitality to the three visitors. He shows them respect and makes himself and his goods entirely available to them, holding nothing back. In the gospel passage, Jesus elevates this kind of behavior to that which is characteristic of those who will enter the kingdom of God. He identifies Himself with those in need of hospitality. The passages from Acts record for us the fact that one of the first fruits of conversion to Christ is hospitality, offered by Lydia and the jailer to Paul and Silas. Hospitality to strangers is a profoundly human expression of our love of God, which cannot be separated from our love of man. It is a gesture of the kind of generosity that is rooted in freedom and peace.

What prompted Sarah to laugh at the idea of having a son within a year? Was this laugh like Abraham's laugh in Gen. 17:17?

Sarah seems to be amused by the idea that after years of barrenness (and possibly a cessation in the act of conjugal love), she and Abraham could enjoy "pleasure" again. It may have been a laugh mixed with incredulity and delight, much like Abraham's laugh in Gen. 17. The Lord assures Sarah that nothing is too hard for Him. Sarah then denies that she laughed, out of fear. Contrast this reaction to that of Mary, when she was also visited by an angel who spoke of a miraculous birth (Luke 1:26-38). The angel, Gabriel, reaffirmed that with God, nothing shall be impossible. Whereas Sarah has to be rebuked for lying when good news is announced to her, Mary submits in humility and faith.

Abraham Prays for Deliverance

Read Genesis 18:16-33

Why does the Lord decide to confide His plan to judge Sodom to Abraham (vss. 17-19)?

God wants Abraham to know Him very well, to be deeply acquainted with what He is doing in the world. Abraham will have the role of teacher, example, and mediator of God's blessing to his descendants and all the earth. He has this role as a result of his calling or "election" ("I have chosen him," vs. 19). He is to teach his descendants how "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (vs. 19) This will be important because it will mean that Abraham will be able to receive the covenant promises.

All of this puts us on alert about what comes next. We understand that whatever is about to transpire between God and Abraham is meant to do several things: (1) it will teach Abraham something about justice and righteousness (2) it will make him an example of how the elect (or "chosen") are to live and (3) it will enable God to fulfill His promises to Abraham.

What is it that God intends to do by visiting Sodom and Gomorrah? What has provoked it (vss. 20-21)?

God intends to test the people of Sodom by visiting them (that is what "I will go down to see" means, vs. 21). He makes reference to an "outcry" that has come to Him (vs. 21). Who has made this outcry? Was it Lot? Was it some of the inhabitants of the city? We don't know. However God received the outcry, He planned to visit the city to verify the gravity of their sin.

What concern does Abraham have when he hears this plan? Why?

Interestingly, as Abraham considers what God has told him, his primary concern is about God's character. He does not want to believe that God would allow those who live righteously (and surely he is thinking of Lot and his family) to suffer the same fate as those who live wickedly. This kind of treatment of men by God would suggest that He is not just ("Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" vs. 25). Abraham seems to comprehend in a flash that if the Creator of the world is not just, men are in very serious trouble ("Far be it from Thee to do such a thing...Far be that from Thee!" vs. 25). Why? Because if the Creator is not just, then there is no difference between right and wrong. If God does not reward righteousness and punish wickedness, men can and will do whatever they want. The alternative to justice is chaos.

This protest from Abraham reveals him to be a man who believes that God is just and that He can be expected to deal justly with men. In effect, what he is saying is, "God, You are not really like that!" It is his confidence in God's true character that makes him bold to make his appeal.

Abraham doesn't want the righteous to suffer the same fate as the wicked, but he asks God to allow the presence of fifty righteous to spare the wicked ("Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?"). Is that justice?

To allow the presence of righteous people in a city to spare judgment of the wicked in that same city is an example of how justice and mercy meet. What a powerful moment this is in redemption history! We should get down on our knees when we read it. It is from human lips that the outline of our salvation is first established in Scripture. Father Abraham, God's covenant-keeper, raises the possibility that righteousness can be so powerful that it spares judgment on those who deserve it. This is not a violation of justice. Rather, it is a statement of the superabundant merit of righteousness. Abraham acknowledges that the wicked deserve to be punished, but he opens the door to the possibility that the righteous can fill up what is lacking in the wicked, thereby saving them. And God accepts it!

Why do you suppose Abraham keeps working the numbers down? What is Abraham's demeanor throughout this exchange?

Abraham perhaps realizes that the number of righteous people in Sodom may be very small. He is probably thinking of Lot's family and maybe a few others. He carefully works the numbers down to see how merciful God is and how powerful righteousness is. He stops at ten. The reality is, of course, that ultimately it is the perfect righteousness of one Man, God's own Son, who saves the whole world! As St. Paul writes, "Then, as one man's [Adam] trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." (Rom. 5:18-19)

Abraham is a combination of boldness and humility, tenacity and deference, fearlessness and reverence. His urgency, confidence, and level of intimacy with the Lord do not lead to presumption, grasping, or impropriety. He is fully engaged in this great moment with God, but he does not think of himself as the center of it. This makes him an effective and persuasive mediator.

If we are looking at Abraham's life for examples of what covenant-keeping people can expect in their lives with God, what can we conclude from this chapter?

If Abraham serves as an example of how a man lives as a covenant-keeper with God, he presents several lessons to us:

- a. Covenant-keepers should occasionally expect to be visited by God in "disguise." Energetic hospitality is the proper response to these visits. Sometimes He may come to us "hidden" in a family member, a coworker, or a stranger in need. Abraham's respect for and self-donation on behalf of his three visitors show us the way to receive Him
- b. Covenant-keepers can expect that sometimes God will ordain circumstances in our lives that are meant to be occasions for Him to reveal His nature to us. These circumstances will cause us to examine what we believe about God - Who He is and how He acts in the world. Covenant-keepers will defend God's character against accusations or doubts (even when they come from within), just as Abraham did.
- c. Covenant-keepers should see themselves as God's co-workers, just as God described Abraham as one through whom the whole earth will be blessed. We should be prepared to pray as intercessors for those who are in need of God's mercy. Abraham's prayer for Lot meant that already God was keeping His covenant promise to him of making him a "blessing" (19:29). Our prayers for others fulfill God's promise to us to make us a "royal priesthood." As St. Peter writes: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy." (1 Pet. 2:9-10)
- d. Covenant-keepers should be as bold and as humble as Abraham was before God.

**Angels Visit Lot
Read Genesis 19:1-14**

[Note: "The 'street' was an open space within the city, and if a traveler were unsuccessful in finding hospitality, it would be quite the customary thing for him to settle down for the night within the protection of the city walls, but in the open air of this broad square." (The New Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1960; p. 92)]

Although Lot probably doesn't know the identity of the visitors right away, what does his response to them suggest about the kind of man he was?

[Note: The sin of the men of Sodom was homosexuality ("know" is the word Scripture uses for sexual intercourse); in fact, we use the term derived from the name of this city to refer to the sex act of homosexuals, which is "sodomy." Cultures given over to homosexuality are ones that are far advanced in rebellion against God and in rejection of His will for men (see Rom. 1:26-27).]

Lot offers the visitors the same kind of hospitality that Abraham did. Although he may not know who they are, perhaps there is something in their appearance that makes Lot recognize that the streets of Sodom would not be a good place for them to spend the night. He seems to want them to be on their way quickly out of the city ("you may rise up early and go on your way," vs. 2). This behavior is an indication that Lot, was not only aware of the wickedness of Sodom, he also resisted it. He seems to want to protect the visitors from experiencing it, which is noble.

What resistance does Lot give the men at his door? Why do you think he makes the offer he does?

Lot begs the men of Sodom not to act so wickedly, as they surround his house, demanding the appearance of the visitors. Instead, he offers his virgin daughters to the men. It isn't clear whether Lot knows the identity of the visitors yet. Still, his offer leaves us disturbed. Is it cowardice that makes him do it? He did at least try to send the men away, but he doesn't rise to heroic heights in his resistance.

What reaction do the men at the door have to Lot's offer? What does this reveal about them?

The men at the door resent his judgment on their behavior. Their anger is directed towards him not for denying them what they want but for daring to "play the judge" among them, even though he is an outsider. This reveals the pride that lies at the heart of their wickedness. Pride is a greater sin than lust. Lust is a disordered appetite; pride strikes at God's authority over us. "...hatred of God comes from pride. It is contrary to love of God, whose goodness it denies, and whom it presumes to curse as the one who forbids sin and inflicts punishments." (CCC 2094) If the visit of the angels was intended to test the city of Sodom, they have failed most miserably.

When Lot warns his sons-in-law about the impending judgment in the city, they think he's joking. What does this suggest to you about them?

Responses will vary. The image of the sniggering sons-in-law becomes a picture of the moral climate of Sodom. Such indifference to the just judgment of God on wickedness grows out of advanced moral laxity. Grave sin causes spiritual blindness; the description of the men of Sodom struck blind by the angels makes that clear. That the sons-in-law see in Lot's visit to them, in which he urges them to flee destruction, a man in some sort of charade can mean only one thing - they see without seeing. Theirs is the "sight" of the spiritually blind.

Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed Read Genesis 19:15-38

As you read through this account of the destruction of Sodom and the deliverance of Lot, what is your opinion of Lot? Remember the account of the day Lot chose to live in the valley that included Sodom (see Gen. 13:10-13). Did we see anything there that might have prepared us for what we see in this chapter?

Responses will vary. In this account of Lot's deliverance from Sodom and destruction, it is hard to avoid feeling a certain distaste for him. He does not fall into the category of "wicked," since he does try to protect the visitors from any contact with the Sodomites. He is willing to rebuke them for their behavior. He listens to the angels' warning to flee, but in the last moment, he hesitates. He is dragged out of the city, by God's mercy (see 19:16).

Once out of the city, Lot seems to cave in to fear. He will not go to the mountains, as the angels instruct him, but he requests instead to be allowed to go to Zoar, a small city in the valley. He dreads that in the mountains, he might be overtaken by some "disaster." But even in Zoar, he still lives in fear, so he flees to a cave with his two daughters. After the incestuous incidents with his daughters, we don't hear about Lot again in Genesis. He leaves us shaking our heads.

When we recall our first real introduction to Lot, we remember that Abraham offered him the first choice of land in order to settle a family dispute. Lot picked for himself what looked like the best land, well-watered and lush. Had the experience of famine in the land of Canaan, which forced the entourage to sojourn in Egypt, frightened him? Did his fear prohibit him from making even a simple gesture of deference to Abraham, his elder?

Lot spent many years living in a place of renowned wickedness. Presumably he married a woman from Sodom. Did he have much contact with Abraham? Probably not, although his uncle valiantly rescued him when he got into trouble. When we meet him again in this chapter, he seems to be a man whose righteousness is weak and tenuous. The New Testament describes him as one who was righteously indignant over the wickedness of Sodom (see 2 Pet. 2:4-10), and we have seen evidence of that. Yet his cowardice shows him to be somewhat stunted in virtue. We have to wonder what effect living in Sodom had on him. In a culture given over to sensuality, as that one certainly was, does it become harder to exercise self-denial? It seems that the fear that may have prompted Lot to take the best land for himself when he was younger was one that came to rule his life. Apart from God's mercy, at work through the intercession of Abraham, that fear might have cost him his life.

Lot appears to be the kind of man St. Paul described once in a letter to the Corinthians: "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble - each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." (1 Cor. 3:12-15)

Points to Ponder

Our first exposure to Abraham after his circumcision, when he formally accepted God's covenant with him, is impressive. It is clear that God intends to work with him because he has been called to such an important role - teacher, example, and source of blessing to the whole earth. It is worth taking note of something that might slip by us as we are absorbed in the dramatic story of Abraham's prayer and Lot's deliverance. There is something exquisitely beautiful going on here. And it's only the beginning.

Remember that in Eden, the serpent had a conversation with Eve in which he attacked the character of God. The serpent accused God of being untrustworthy, bad instead of good, and not really caring about the humans. Adam did not defend God's character. There was only silence from him.

In Genesis 18, God initiates a conversation with Abraham which gives the appearance that He is not just. What happens? Abraham vigorously and boldly defends God's character. How? He passionately engages with God to request that He act in keeping with Who He is - the just Creator and Judge of all the earth. What a reversal!

Beginning with Abraham, God will use covenant-keepers to declare the goodness of His character. It will be human voices that cry out in testimony to the greatness of God and His love for His people. Because of God's covenant with men, never again will there be silence in the face of accusations against His character. After Abraham, it will be Moses, David, and the prophets who extol the majestic perfection of God. In the Incarnation, God Himself will take on human flesh to reveal His trustworthiness, goodness, and love. That testimony lives on in the Church, the Body of Christ. Someday all creation, with one voice, will proclaim it: "Great and wonderful are Thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are Thy ways, O King of the ages! Who shall not fear and glorify Thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship Thee, for Thy judgments have been revealed." (Rev. 15:3-4)