

ABRAHAM AND FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD
GENESIS 18:1-15

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Most of us who are parents have seen our children go through the traumatic experience at a certain stage of life, usually very young, of being left in someone else's care. Many children suddenly become afraid to be left with a baby sitter or a Sunday school teacher or a day care worker. They don't want to be separated from their parent. At least part of the reaction seems to come from fear that their parents won't come back--- or at least that they won't come back when they want them to come back. They feel alone in the cold, cruel world with these other people whom they don't know very well.

From our adult perspective this is an unnecessary fear. We love our children. We are not abandoning them. They are in good hands. Our return is certain. If any real need should arise, we would return quickly to them.

Sometimes in the Christian life, if we are honest, we may feel like those children do. We face a trial, or we claim a promise in the Bible, and it seems as though God has abandoned us. At least He doesn't show up when we want Him to show up. In the story I told three weeks ago about the Christian missionary in Columbia who was captured by Communist guerillas, Bruce Olson could have had the thought go through his mind as he was placed in front of a firing squad that God had abandoned him. We have had a lot of people in our congregation lose their life partners. At this season of the year that loss is keenly felt. In our sadder moments we may wonder if God has left us all alone.

Abraham, the ancestor of the Jewish people, also had such doubts. We have seen that God had promised to make of him a great nation. Almost 25 years went by and Abraham still did not have the child through which that promise would be fulfilled. He had become an old man. Sarah had become an old woman. The natural laws of biology said that it was not possible to have kids any more. Last time, three Sundays ago, we saw in Genesis #17 that God appeared to Abraham in some form and reassured Abraham that it would happen and that Sarah would be the mother.

That was well and good for Abraham. But Sarah had not been present. Abraham was 99 years old now. Maybe Sarah's husband was suffering from a touch of dementia. So in #18 God pays a visit to Abraham and Sarah, largely for the purpose of reestablishing her faith in the promise. The reassurance of God's faithfulness is likewise something that we need from time to time.

I.

In the first eight verses of Genesis #18 we learn that GOD DESIRES FELLOWSHIP WITH ABRAHAM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOD DESIRES FELLOWSHIP...) According to v. 1, "**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.” The setting for this encounter is near Hebron in the south central part of Canaan. (HEBRON MAP) Abraham was a shepherd and a goat herder who had no permanent dwelling place. But he frequently hung out around Hebron. (HEBRON TODAY) Hebron still exists today. It is a part of the Palestinian territory known as the West Bank. There is a small Jewish community in Hebron by the tomb of Abraham. It is protected by an Israeli army detachment.

In v. 2 Abraham is startled to look up and see three men standing near him. Normally in that geographical setting he, or one of his men, would spot approaching visitors when they were some distance away. That doesn't happen here. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Abraham hurries to meet these visitors. He bows down and invites them to eat with him. In #17 we are told that the Lord also appeared to Abraham. Verse 3 of that chapter says that Abraham fell on his face. I am inclined to think that it was more obvious by His glorious manifestation in #17 that this was God. Here in this divine manifestation in #18 all three of the visitors apparently have a similar appearance. They appear to be men. Hebrews #11 in the New Testament seems to refer to this incident in saying that some have entertained angelic visitors without understanding, or unaware.

So I am inclined to think that Abraham does not immediately recognize the true identity of these three visitors. His generous treatment of the visitors is consistent with the treatment of visitors in many parts of the Near East still today.

The visitors are invited to stay, and Abraham goes about making preparations for a meal. There is a genuineness and an intensity to his hospitality. He hurried. He ran. He provided quality food. Whether Abraham sensed something special about these visitors is uncertain. His behavior toward them is certainly a model of hospitality, and it is typical of what would be provided for visitors by shepherds in that culture.

Hospitality has traditionally been a key virtue in this part of the world. It has especially been retained among those most closely tied to agriculture. In Israel today in the southern part of the country there are estimated to be a little over 200,000 Bedouins. Most of them have settled into relatively small villages. Few are true nomads any more. But they manage herds of over 200,000 sheep. The Bedouin are ethnically Arab. But because of their traditionally nomadic way of life they have not identified themselves with the Palestinians, and they often have more closely aligned themselves with the Israelis.

When I visited Israel twenty years ago, our guide made a stop in the West Bank north of Jerusalem. It was not a typical tourist site. The guide had recently discovered interesting features of this place. He thought it was notable because it had a traditional sheep fold in a cave, and there was a nearby cistern that was still used for watering herds of sheep and goats. On a hillside near us there was a young shepherd tending a small flock of goats. (HOSPITALITY 1) Unnoticed by us, when we arrived, he sat down, took the kettle that he had with him, and brewed a pot of tea. He brought it over to us on his donkey and gave it to our guide along with the one cup which he had.

(HOSPITALITY 2) He offered us this cup and the tea to share among us. This guy may never have encountered a group of American visitors like this before. This was not a typical tourist spot. He was not wanting to get anything out of us. He was simply displaying genuine Middle Eastern hospitality, a pastoral tradition that extends all the way back to the time of Abraham. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The visitors in our story ate as Abraham stood by them under a tree. Only as events unfold does Abraham learn their identity. One of these visitors is God Himself--- apparently an appearance of the Son of God.

There are a number of similar stories in ancient literature, especially Greek literature. These stories speak of the gods visiting humans in the appearance of strangers. Some critics who say that the Old Testament was written much later than it was point to this story in Genesis 18 as evidence of the effect of other cultures on the Jews and their tradition. It seems more likely to me that either these Greek stories are independent developments or that they are reflections of what happened here in Genesis #18, 2000 years before the time of Christ.

Meals with important people had a special significance in the Ancient Near East. Often they were connected with the making of covenants, or agreements. At the end of Genesis #26, Abraham's son Isaac and a Philistine king have a dispute over water rights. In v. 28 the Philistine leader proposes a covenant, which is ratified as they share a meal together. Having a meal together in this tradition signifies peace and fellowship between two parties. Even today meals among diplomatic representatives are often associated with agreements between nations.

A few centuries after our story Abraham's descendant Moses and seventy of the elders go up to Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord. (PROJECTOR ON--- EXODUS 24:11) According to Exodus #24 v. 11, "**And he [the Lord] did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.**" The Lord desires to have fellowship with His people through the means of a meal. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In Genesis #18 the Angel of the Lord's meal with Abraham signifies God's presence and fellowship with Abraham. The Lord has not forgotten Abraham, and He has not forgotten His promises, especially the one about a special son. He is about to reassure Abraham, and Sarah, that His promises will be fulfilled. The Lord likewise does not forget His promises to us.

II.

So in vv. 9-15 we find that GOD DESIRES FAITH IN HIS POWER FROM ABRAHAM AND SARAH. (PROJECTOR ON--- GOD DESIRES FAITH IN HIS POWER...) They are going to have a son, in spite of seemingly impossible circumstances. In v. 9 one of the strangers asks, "**Where is Sarah your wife?**" The text implies that Abraham did not know or recognize these visitors who are described as "men." How would they know his wife's name? It was also not socially appropriate to ask this kind of question. But the

questioner was no ordinary stranger. He declares in v. 10, **“I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”**

I suspect that by this point Abraham has begun to recognize that this is no ordinary stranger. This is a messenger from God, or perhaps a manifestation of the Lord Himself.

Sarah is also listening to what this stranger is saying. It was customary for women in such a situation to remain out of sight in the tent. But it was also customary for them to try to listen in to the conversation of guests.

Verse 12 says that Sarah laughed within herself to hear the promise about bearing a son. She asked silently, apparently not speaking out loud, **“After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”**

Verse 13 identifies the visitor who is speaking as the Lord Himself. He asks why Sarah laughed. Yet he has neither seen nor heard Abraham’s wife. But this is the Lord who is omniscient, who knows and sees all.

In v. 14 the Lord follows up with a profound question: **“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”** The word for “too hard” is sometimes translated as “wonderful” or “marvelous.” It is used in the Old Testament usually of God’s cosmic wonders or historical achievements for Israel. These wonders are beyond the capability of people to produce. They awaken astonishment and awe in the people who witness them. They proclaim the power of an omnipotent God.

This is the same word which is used in Psalm 96 v. 3. (PSALM 96:3) The Psalmist there writes, **“Declare his glory among the nations,/ his marvelous works among all the peoples!”** The same word is used of the coming Messiah in Isaiah 9 v. 6, that famous verse which is quoted at Christmas time (ISAIAH 9:6): **“...and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God...”**

The Greek equivalent of this word is used in Luke #1 v. 37 (LUKE 1:37). The angel Gabriel informs Mary that she will bear the Messiah, and he assures her, **“For nothing will be impossible with God.”**

Is anything too difficult for the Lord? In v. 15 Sarah denies that she laughed. (PROJECTOR OFF) The text says that she was afraid. Confronted by the omniscient God, her immediate reaction was fear, and the response to the charge of lack of faith was denial.

That is a common reaction, or temptation, when we are confronted with wrongdoing. When President Biden was initially confronted about possible involvement with his son Hunter’s shady business dealings, he claimed that he never discussed business with his son. When it became clear that this wasn’t true, he claimed that he never had involvement with his son’s business associates. When it became clear that this wasn’t

true, he changed his tune that he never had financial involvement with his son's business associates.

In the presence of the all-knowing God, Sarah's denial is futile. This divine visitor's display of omniscience is also an assurance of His omnipotence--- of His power to fulfill His promise of a son for Abraham and Sarah. The God who can read minds can also produce children in a woman's old age. After Sarah's immediate fearful denial, the Lord's statement produces belief.

We know this from a verse in the New Testament--- Hebrews #11 v. 11. (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 11:11) The author says, **“By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.”** Apparently it was necessary in God's plan for Sarah to truly believe that she would bear a son in her old age. It was this visit by the Lord in #18 which produced this faith in Sarah.

III. A.

(III. THE APPLICATIONS) There are three applications which I find coming out of this passage. The first is simply the encouragement for believers to EXERCISE HOSPITALITY. (III. THE APPLICATIONS A. EXERCISE HOSPITALITY) We find this responsibility charged to Jesus followers also coming out of the New Testament Book of Hebrews. In #13 v. 2 (HEBREWS 13:2) the author says, **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”**

The general consensus of students of the Bible is that this is a reference to Abraham's encounter in Genesis #18 and Lot's experience which we learn about in #19. These visitors were strangers to Abraham and Lot when they first met them, but they proved to be angelic visitors.

It is good to show hospitality to our friends and acquaintances. But it is also good to be hospitable to strangers. The Greek word used in the New Testament for “hospitality” literally means “love of strangers.” The Law in the Old Testament required the Jews to do certain things to show love to strangers and foreigners. So the Lord is pleased with that kind of hospitality and sometimes unexpectedly happy things result from it.

I have heard several visitors over the course of my years in this church say that we are the friendliest church which they have ever visited. That is a good report to hear. But Biblical hospitality goes beyond friendliness. It requires us to get to know newer people to find out how we can be appropriately involved in their lives, to look for opportunities to serve them.

B.

The second application which I find coming out of this passage has to do with the need to TRUST THE POWER OF GOD. (III. APPLICATIONS A. B. TRUST THE POWER OF GOD) Sarah had been exposed to the promises of God. She had seen God's working in

her family. But she also lived day in and day out with the laws of biology. She knew of no precedent for a woman of her age to bear a child.

When we are in the midst of a seemingly impossible situation, it is easy for our faith to waver. We begin to wonder if our situation might be just a little too much for God to handle. Can He really meet my financial need, my family need, or my spiritual need? Can He really fulfill the promises in His word despite these difficult circumstances?

Ever before us looms the question posed in Genesis 18: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" With whom are we really dealing? What kind of God do we serve? The God who is there can do anything which is consistent with His character and His plan for the world. The real issue is not God's power or ability. The real issue is our obedience and faith and God's will.

The Lord promises us things in His Word that some of us have difficulty believing. Forgiveness for sins. Some of us have difficulty believing that God could really forgive us for the terrible things which we have done in the past. Maybe we haven't shared with anyone what terrible things we have done.

Then there is the challenge to believe that we can overcome a really tough situation--- maybe an addiction or a temptation which seems to be overwhelming. In 1 Corinthians # 10 v. 13 (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13) the Apostle Paul encourages us, saying, **"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."**

The Bible also contains many promises concerning the future. The hope of the people of God based upon the promises of the Bible is that Jesus is going to return to earth and that He will establish His kingdom upon the earth and that we will have a part in that. The Apostle Peter recognized the challenge that these promises present to our faith. (2 PETER 3:3) In 2 Peter #3 vv. 3 & 4 he wrote, **"... knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. (2 PETER 3:4) They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.'"** The real issue is not God's power. It is our faith. Will we believe God and His promises? Will we expect great things from Him; will we attempt great things for Him? (PROJECTOR OFF)

That was the motto of William Carey, the Father of Modern Missions, who went from England to India to bring the gospel there. We have been looking at incidents in his life which illustrate principles that God taught Abraham. Like Abraham, William Carey also had many lessons in learning about the power of God.

As a young person Carey developed a love for the outdoors. When his formal education ended at age twelve, he went to work on a farm. Carey soon developed an apparent allergy to the sun. Whenever it was sunny, he got a painful rash on his face and hands.

After two years of this he had to give up and get an inside job. So it was that he became a shoemaker.

In going to India, which is close to the equator, Carey faced greater exposure to the sun. Some of his missionary work would require travel by foot and boat under the sun. Also gardening would be required to provide for his family. Soon after his arrival he had to build a simple house for his family. As he began to work on it, he suddenly realized that he wasn't itching. The painful rash which he had in England never came back. He attributed this positive development as the work of a powerful and loving God.

C.

The third thing that I find coming out of this passage is that we should ENJOY FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. A . B. C. ENJOY FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD) The Lord wants to have a close relationship with us. This desire for fellowship is often expressed in the Bible in terms of a meal. In Genesis #18 we have seen that the Angel of the Lord--- the Son of God--- enjoyed a meal with Abraham. I also mentioned that in Exodus #24 Moses and the elders of Israel ate and drank in the presence of God at Mt. Sinai. The night before He was crucified Christ enjoyed a last meal together with His disciples. He instituted the Lord's Supper as a memorial to His death.

The terminology of a meal is also used to describe the final great fellowship of Christians with the Lord. In Revelation #19 Jesus tells John about His return to earth and His celebration with the church, described as the bride of Christ. (REVELATION 19:9) In v. 9 we read, **“And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God.’”**

There were three parts to the establishment of a marriage in Biblical days. (PROJECTOR OFF) First, there was the marriage contract. Normally the parents of two individuals would meet to determine the amount of the compensation that was to be made by the bride's family for the provision of the bride. The time and the circumstances of the rest of the wedding procedures were also established. The couple would make a commitment to each other in a formal ceremony. Then there would be an engagement period that would last at least a year.

In the second stage, after the year's engagement period, the groom would go to the home of his bride to claim her. There would be a short ceremony, and then the groom would take his bride to his house.

In the third stage of the wedding procedure there would be a big wedding feast that would follow the consummation of the marriage. All of the friends and family of the couple would gather at the home of the groom for a feast that might last for a week or more.

The Bible uses the terminology of these Jewish wedding customs to describe God's plan for the church. Our contract was established two thousand years ago. The price that was paid for us, the bride of Christ, was the blood of Jesus. We presently live in the betrothal period. We are legally bound to the Lord Jesus Christ, but our marriage has not yet actually begun.

(PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 5:25-26) In Ephesians #5 vv. 25-27 the Apostle Paul writes, **"...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, (EPHESIANS 5:27) so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."** In terms of God's timetable we live in the engagement, preparation period.

The time is coming when Christ will return to claim His bride. We refer to this as the rapture. Christ spoke about this in John #14 v. 3. (JOHN 14:3) There He is recorded as saying, **"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."**

Shortly after Christ shows up to claim His bride, the church, He begins what is called the marriage supper of the lamb. That is described in Revelation #19. In my interpretation the beginning of the Millennium--- Christ's thousand year reign on earth, described briefly in #20--- fulfills the symbolism of the wedding feast. (PROJECTOR OFF) What I want you to notice is that the final uniting of Christ with the church in a visible way is described in terms of a meal. More importantly, the culmination of human history involves a close and intimate and joyful fellowship between the people of God and the Heavenly Father who desires to have fellowship with us.

God earnestly desires our fellowship with Him. He wants our time. He wants our attention. He wants our service. He wants our commitment. The all-powerful God of the universe desires to have fellowship with us--- with you and with me. He wants us to have a close relationship with Him. He wants to be able to call us His friends, even as He called Abraham His friend.

In Revelation #3 v. 20 Christ spoke to the church at Laodicea (PROJECTOR ON--- REVELATION 3:20) and said, **"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."** The Lord desires our fellowship.

The starting point for this fellowship is becoming a child of God. Our responsibility is to trust in Jesus as our Savior. We must recognize that He is God who became a human being, that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, and that He rose from the dead. He offers us eternal life and forgiveness of sins if we will trust in Him. All that we need to do is to invite Him to come in. "Lord Jesus, I believe that I am a sinner. I believe that you are God who became a man. I believe that you died to pay the penalty for my sins. I believe that you rose from the dead. Come into my life.

For those of us who are Christians we need to keep in mind that the Lord is not primarily interested in what we can do for Him or what we can give to Him. He is interested first and foremost in having a relationship with us. He wants us to be thinking about Him. He wants us to be talking to Him. He wants us to be reading His Word. Our service and usefulness to Him will flow out of this relationship that we have with our Heavenly Father through faith in Jesus.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (PROJECTOR OFF)