

Genesis 18, The Beginning of Hope in the Promises of God: A Life of Abraham, Preached by Caleb Mayberry @ Harambee Church on March 9th, 2008

Introduction:

In this chapter we have an amazing interaction between Abraham and God that reveals important things about both Abraham's and God's character. What you'll see is Abraham maturing significantly in his faith and God revealing to Abraham and to us his justice and grace. From this passage we'll extract five characteristics and discuss their application for us today.

Five Characteristics:

1. Hospitality

Abraham looks up and sees three men outside his tent door. (verse 2) There is no indication that Abraham knows he is meeting with God at this point. Abraham likely understands them to be just mere men. And so Abraham is demonstrating a great deal of love to these "strangers" out of a character that is being shaped by God. Abraham likely sees that the men are visitors who looked tired and need refreshing and so offers to wash their feet, give them food and drink, and provide them shade. And it is not just Abraham who is hospitable; this is done with cooperation with his whole household. That Abraham did not know these were Jesus and two angels is an important point as God could very likely have been testing the character of Abraham to see what kind of love he had for fellow man. Hebrews 13:2 states "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares". In fact some commentators hold that Hebrews 13:2 refers specifically to Abraham and Lot entertaining angels unawares.

Questions: Are we hospitable to strangers? How often do we demonstrate in real quantifiable terms our love for people we don't know? How does Christ's example model our love for others?

Other verses: Matthew 25:31-46

2. Confidentiality

God has already told Abraham several times of the covenant that He is making with him. But God chooses to do so again in Genesis 18, this time making sure that Sarah hears (verse 9), and also providing more specifics. (verse 10) We see throughout scripture that God, out of love for us, chooses to reveal himself and his plans to us. We also see that clearly in verse 17 where one of the reasons God lists to inform Abraham of his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah is that He has chosen Abraham. God's special love for his elect entails certain privileges of confidentiality that the whole world is not privy to. Though his Word be available for all to see, we are blind to it, except by the power of the Holy Spirit to see. (1 Cor 2:13-14) This does not mean that God regularly speaks to us audibly or comes to us in the flesh. Even with Abraham we are not given any indication that God spoke to him audibly on a daily, monthly, or even yearly basis. In fact, before chapter 17, there was a 13 year gap between any recorded conversations between himself and God. It seems that God has chosen certain points in Abraham's life where he chooses to speak to him in a very plain way that often span many years apart. It's also worth noting that Abraham did not have scripture to

reference, so in real way, God speaks to us more frequently than he did Abraham. God's audible words and written words are no different in power and authority.

Questions: Do you feel like God has confided in you? How has God spoken to you personally?

Other verses: 2 Tim 3:16-17, 1 Cor 2:13-14

3. Unbelief

Unfortunately, in the midst of some very positive characteristics, there remains the reality of our sinful unbelieving nature. In verse 12, after Sarah hears the promise, she laughs at God's Word in unbelief. Scripture points out the context behind her unbelief, namely that she is past the age for bearing children. Certainly this is not possible outside of supernatural intervention. However, since Sarah laughs, it seems that she doesn't fully believe that God is able to overcome that obstacle. She doesn't trust in God because she doesn't know him well enough. She appears to be blinded by her circumstances. Just like Sarah, we all too suffer from periods of unbelief. The root of this problem is our heart. It seems that God purposely puts obstacles in our life to test our faith. For if Sarah and Abraham were 23 years old then it would not be far-fetched to believe that they would have a child. But God in desiring to show them their dependence upon him chose to do this in a way where it was clear that God had brought this about and not them. Therefore an easy comfortable life that makes sense is not necessarily the best thing for our hearts, since this will tend to lure us into thinking that we depend only on ourselves.

Questions: Why do we desire easy, comfortable lives that make sense? Do obstacles and challenges in life draw you closer to God or drive you further from him?

Other Verses: 1 Cor 1:26-31

4. Justice

In verse 17, God reasons with himself as to whether he should tell Abraham that he is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. What's interesting is that one of the reasons that God gives for doing so is that Abraham has chosen him to do righteousness and justice. And so here we are in Chapter 18 on the brink of seeing God execute judgment for injustice and wickedness. And God has commanded and expects Abraham to do right. And so this begs the question, does Abraham understand the justice of God? I believe that God through this interaction intended to test Abraham's understanding of justice and at the same time reveal to Abraham more fully God's heart concerning justice. Notice as Abraham questions God, he does so reverently. He also assumes that it is right to judge the wicked. He affirms, by implication of his questioning, that sin does deserve judgment. Otherwise his line of questioning would look entirely different, for he could not appeal to the justice of God. Abraham understands that there is a clear right and wrong and believes that God is the judge. This is interesting given that Abraham is surely aware of his own sinfulness. That means that Abraham likely could not have held to any moralistic gospel, because he would be condemned under such a law. But before the law and before the incarnation of Jesus, he must have

somehow understood righteousness to be from God and that only those who are followers of God can be considered righteous, though their deeds, like his be not perfectly blameless.

Excursus – Open Theism Refuted

As an excursus, this passage is also a favorite among open theists who deny that God knows everything and hold that he can literally change his mind about things. However, God clearly demonstrates even in this Chapter his absolute sovereignty and his ability to know all. In verse 10 God tells Abraham when exactly he would have a son. And later in verse 17, he indicates that he had already determined what he was going to do with Sodom and Gomorrah. In light of that, I believe that what we are seeing in verse 21 and following is a series of anthropomorphisms (language that uses human terms to relate a non-human thing or being, esp deity) to display the heart of God, namely that God executes justice thoroughly and has the capacity for mercy.

Questions: How do you view your sin in light of God's justice? Do you see God's justice as loving?

Other verses: 2 Peter 2:4-10

5. Grace/Love

In the midst of God's impending judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah, I hope you don't miss mercy and grace evident in Chapter 18. Firstly, when Sarah laughed and she lied about it, God offered a relatively tame rebuke, only calling out her laughter and pointing out that he was God. We've seen stronger rebukes in other places throughout scripture. (See Luke 1:18-20 for Zechariah for circumstance) Moreover, in Abraham's pleading and interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah, God displays in his character a willingness to spare the whole on behalf of the few. This is certainly a theme that has an important place in Scripture as this parallels the work of Jesus, that through one man's obedience, many are saved. (Romans 5:18-19). I do not however, take the view that some take that Abraham's countdown (50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10) implies a continuation down to 1, so that if one righteous man were found, he would spare the whole city. In light of 2 Peter 2:7, which refer to Lot as righteous, I believe we can conclude that Lot did fit the definition of righteousness upon which Abraham was interceding for the city. Perhaps if Abraham would have continued the countdown in his prayer/intercession, then God would spared the whole city because of Abraham's intercession. If this is so, then this serves to highlight the importance of prayer, that in God's mysterious ways, our prayer has real impact on the events of this world, such that if we don't pray for certain things they will not happen. (i.e the sparing of the entire cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of Lot's righteousness)

Questions: What motivated Abraham to intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah? Should Abraham have continued his countdown to 1? Who are you boldly praying for right now?