

Today we are continuing in our study of Genesis. We are primarily tracking with Abraham. We understand the continual theme is Abraham learning to walk to by faith. I suspect that is true for most of us in this that we are learning to walk by faith. If you have begun on that journey, you know that at the center is prayer. Prayer is the center of that contact that we are supposed to have between our God and our selves. The comment earlier was quite right. How many of us spend an hour in prayer? We are a hasty people, we are a people who are continually rushing from one thing to the next. Probably the most common complaint I hear from the saints is, “[There is] not enough time!” The oddity about that, of course, is that everybody has the same amount of time. Therefore if there is a problem with a sufficiency it lies not with the supplier of the hours but with those who manage what we do inside of those hours. It is our choices, our priorities. Yesterday the leadership of the church had a time to spend together and we spent most of our time just thinking about priorities. What do we concentrate on, where do we think God wants us to go and devote our resources of time, resources and personnel. That is a good question. Each of us when we rise up in the morning ask that question implicitly of God: “What am I going to do with this day God is just giving me now? Eight, ten or twelve hours, and there it lies; what am I going to do with this day? Am I going to do with this day what God wants me to do? Will I make it my business to be in tune with Him?” “Prayer and the will of God.” Genesis 18:16-33. If you are not familiar with it you will probably enjoy having some contact with this portion of the Word [of God]. It is probably one of the outstanding sections that teach about prayer. Normally if you are familiar with the eighteenth chapter you would like to go almost at once to the dramatic account of Abraham negotiating with God with whether or not He is going to wipe out the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. If you know the story of Abraham you know that someplace down inside of his heart he is saying, “My nephew Lot is living in Sodom, and I don’t want him to fall under God’s judgment on those wicked cities.”

It is, however, essential if you going to really understand not just the interchange between Abraham and God, but if you are going to understand prayer, that you take the time to look at verse 16-21. That is what we are going to do first on this morning. If you haven’t already I encourage you to open your scriptures and be at Genesis 18:16-21.

*“Then the men—[the men in this case, we met them last week, they are the three angels, the central of which is the angel of the Lord and we understand that to actually be the Son of God – the three men set out from Abraham’s camp 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.’”*

To begin with you have to deal with God. I have been in lots of prayer meetings; I suspect that many of us have. So often we don’t begin with God. We begin with a long list of things we think need to be attended to. That is an error. We need to begin with God. God does many things at the same time. I suspect we know that. In reality if you think about God, in reality God potentially does an infinite number of things at the same time, for He is unlimited. As you think about this opening paragraph there are a number of oddities that will strike you if you think seriously about God and then look at the words. God is incomprehensible and incalculable in Himself. This is brought home to us by the Apostle Paul when at the end of a long discussion about the relationship between God and Israel and the fact that Israel was rejecting the gospel Paul cries out and says, “*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How*

*unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”* Now there is a full focus on God! You say, “Whoa, this is the God with Whom I am dealing. It is into this God’s presence that I come. It is to this God that I will lift up my prayers and petitions.”

In this passage Paul refocuses his reader on the necessary framework or the preconditions for every attempt to understand the ways of God. It is important for us to keep in mind that we are not free to approach God immediately, that is, by way of direct apprehension. God as He is in Himself is simply beyond the reach of our minds. For instance, we necessarily think of God as a being. There is nothing we can do about that. If you are going to think of something, you are going to think of it as being a some thing. Of course you are! But the problem is that God is not just a being. He is not one being amongst many. He is not just the greatest beings. What He is, is the source of all beings. He Himself is not a being; he is something you and I cannot define. If every I get uppity in my thoughts about this I try and imagine the relationship between the universe and God. How large is the universe? We don’t know, for as far as our telescopes are able to penetrate we continually encounter new, not stars, but galaxies. But the entire thing is just a creation of God, who preexists it, calls it into being, and in some sense that you and I cannot possibly comprehend, holds the entirety of it within His power. So we read in Hebrews 1 in reference to the Son of God that He upholds all things by the power of His arm.

The Hebrew word that we read as “Lord” which was revealed to Moses in Exodus 4 is a form of the [Hebrew] verb “to be”. It is often translated as “I am that I am”. I am simply the one that is. That is all we can say. What we know of God and His ways, what we comprehend, we know only through what He has made and through what He has specifically revealed. Christians are persuaded that what God has revealed for us to know about Him and His ways is contained primarily in the Bible. All human knowledge and understanding is the knowledge of limits, distinctions and contrasts. Consequently any revelation of a limitless God will be limited. Has to be. You and I cannot know an unlimited God. It is impossible. So we are going to know God within limits, and it is very important for us to understand that if we are going to know God at all we must know God within limits, and that He has given the limits within which we know Him. To what does all this tend? It tends to submission. “You know what, I cannot fully comprehend You, I cannot anticipate ahead of time what You are going to do; I recognize that I am entirely unequal to who You are, and therefore I am totally dependent upon what You tell me. Therefore Father, give me the humility and the wisdom to be submissive to what You have told me.” And how is that submission played out? By spending time in learning what He has told us so that our prayers are a reflection of His truth and not merely the expression of our discontents and desires. Now you are beginning to walk a little distance down the way to prayer and its true form. You might recall that Jesus made this comment about Himself: “I do nothing and say nothing other than what I have heard and seen My Father do.” That is another way of saying my entire prayer life, all that I long for, all that I articulate in my relationship with God is a reflection of His truth. I do not pray for things that are contrary to the word of God. I strive to not desire things that are contrary to the Word of God. I desire to bring my life into conformity to the character and purposes of God so that my prayers in fact are a reflection of His truth and are a channel for that truth to be flowing out and enlightening the world around me. Oh how different that kind of praying is than what we so often do.

All of this is leading us to listen to the conversation between Abraham and the Lord. Returning therefore to Genesis 18 come with me to verse 17 and consider the oddity, the oddness, the strangeness of what we are told in this verse: *“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?”* The question that rightly arises is why would God bother, He[being] all-knowing and all-powerful, what does He expect to gain by engaging with Abraham, a mere creature? Going on to verses 20-21, can it really be that God has to personally investigate Sodom and Gomorrah to know what is going on? Come on, He knows all things, nothing is hidden from Him. He knows the heart state of every single individual in those cities. We realize, of course that Moses is writing us a way that lets us understand what is happening. Moses puts the events into a human frame so that you and I are able now to engage in it; this is part of the limits within which we know God. This is true not merely for the sake of our understanding, but it is true according to the nature of creation. The creation has a certain order. It is comprised of all manner of limits or what we might call the laws of nature, the laws of cause and effect, the laws of life or living things. In order for something to be something it cannot be all things at the same time. In the case before us, if God is going to engage His creatures in cooperative action, He will have to do so on the plain of their creatureliness. “Good morning. How are you today?” says the Eternal to the transient. If the Eternal simply came to the transient in the fullness of His eternal being and blew open his mind and said, “Look upon the infinite” what would happen to that mind? It would go insane. So God doesn’t do that. By the same token our prayers, the prayers of creatures can only be formulated in creaturely terms. These thoughts rightly take us back to Genesis 1 and 2, a knowledge of the creature that is now going to talk to God. What do we find there? In Genesis 1 and 2, we find some things that God says about the purposes for which He created the creature called man. Why did God create the creature called man? We can read it in Genesis 1:28. I will read a large portion of it but you can capture and pull out some of the specifics.

*“Let us make man in our image and likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”*

If you follow through and read Genesis 2 you know that Moses will go on to tell us that God assigned to Adam to work in the garden, to name the animals, to mate with Eve so as to multiply and to fill the earth, and to walk with God in the cool of the day. What did He make him for? [It was] to walk with God.

There is no point in trying to figure out why God set things up the way He did. It is wisdom to study the way they are, but it is folly to second guess and say why didn’t He do it in some other way. Doing so is the same as questioning why gravity pulls, why atoms have nuclei, why other than with living things the natural progression of the complex is to the less complex over time. We can and we should discover the realities over time, but it makes no sense why the reality is the way it is; it just is. That is part of our submission.

Returning again to Genesis 18:16, I hope that we can see that the statement in verse 17 is directly in line with what we have just reminded ourselves about the creature named man in Genesis 1 and 2. In dealing with us, with humanity, God’s intentions remain exactly what they were in the beginning. God tells us on many occasions, “I do not change my mind, I do not change my purposes, I do not change my direction. I will accomplish in the end exactly what I set out to do in the beginning.” So God deals with fallen humanity exactly in the way that He made them in the beginning. Now the intention of God is focused on Abraham, the man of faith. That is where the narrative has brought us to, to this particular individual, necessarily on a vastly lessened scale, because now Abraham is a sinner in a fallen world, different from Adam, perfect in a world not fallen. So under these conditions, the same purposes of God continue, but altered by the circumstances. Under these [original] conditions, Adam is to rule, Adam is to have dominion

and he is to be God’s companion. So under these [new] conditions Abraham is to rule, Abraham is to have dominion, and Abraham is to be a companion with God. Now, beloved, we are getting ready for prayer.

We are trying to get ourselves in the right position internally to enter into the presence and engage in the purpose of God. I bet it will take an hour.

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?”* [This is] rule and dominion. *“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...”* Walking with God. Righteousness and justice were not issues in the days of Adam, for there was no sin in the world in the days of Adam. In the days of Abraham, as in our day, those are major issues, issues which are inextricably, inseparably bound up with keeping the way of the Lord. The way of the Lord refers first to how the creature man fulfills what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. God is a god of righteousness and justice. God is a god of faithfulness and mercy and compassion and lovingkindness. Abraham’s children and his household are to keep the way of the Lord. As Moses writes in Genesis 18:19, this is the way – remember I said to underline this – this is the way the Lord may bring Abraham what He has promised him. When we pray, most often we want things, don’t we. We hope we will receive from God. But what are the conditions under which we receive from Him?

The promise relative to Abraham in this case is not limited to the child – you will have a child: that has been at the core of the relationship between God and Abraham all the way through – but rather in this case the promise is that every family on earth will be blessed through the child who is eventually going to come. You and I both know what he is talking about. He is talking about this [gesturing towards the Lord’s Supper set out on the Communion Table]. He is talking about the household of Abraham will persist in following the ways of God until finally He who is the perfect fulfillment and embodiment of the ways of God will come, and through that One all families upon the face of the earth will be blessed. We know that that is what He is talking about. So what He is talking about when He talks about those who keep the way of the Lord, is He is talking about the remnant, the remnant that will in fact remain faithful and carry the truth of God from the beginning all the way to the end in Jesus Christ, and then Jesus Christ Himself pours out that blessing upon the face of the earth.

These are the ones who have the faith of Abraham. These are the people of faith and righteousness and justice down through the ages until at last the Promised Child is born. The Promised Child, the Anointed One can only come through true keepers of the covenant of God’s truth and grace. Ah, we see now, don’t we, we begin to see that what the Lord says in Genesis 18:20 – again you might want to glance at that verse – is a direct application of the need for Abraham to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice as a man of faith. The Lord tells Abraham of His concerns regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, concerns which if true will necessarily lead to judgment. Why will judgment fall? Because He says the outcry, the unrighteousness and injustice, the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah are crying to the heavens. Their sin is very grave. We know that Abraham already knows this. Surely this is why after Abraham saves Lot and all the people of Sodom and Gomorrah [whom he rescued] from the five kings and he returns and he meets up with Melchizedek the king of Salem he refuses to take a single thing from the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He want to have no entanglement with the people of that city. He knows they are wicked. And of course Abraham knows that Lot lives in Sodom.

At this point you might wonder that Abraham doesn’t just say straight out, “Lord, what about Lot? I mean, he is the guy, I’m worried about Lot. Oh Lord, save Lot”? I am sure that Lot is on [Abraham’s] mind, but

isn't it odd that he doesn't mention him. Not once does he mention him. He talks instead about something else. Abraham, it is important for us to grasp, is not engaged in special pleading to the effect that God should spare Lot simply because he is Abraham's nephew and Abraham has asked for mercy. Not once [does Abraham say this]. If that is the way things worked, if in fact we have purchase and power with God simply because we are chosen and we ask, what should we do? I will tell you what we should do: somebody bring me the telephone book for Oroville, Chico, Gridley, and let's just start praying for them, because if God will answer our prayers based on the special relationship we have with Him. . . This has been done, hasn't it? Have you ever read in I Corinthians 15:29 where we are told that they were baptized for the dead? Hey, I will go in the water a few times for people who are already dead but we would like to see saved. How about you? There is a profound problem here. This runs directly contrary to the teaching of God's word. For how are we saved? [We are saved] by faith through grace. Whose faith? [It is] the faith of the person who is saved, not the faith of the servant who prays or who is baptized.

At this point we at least begin to grasp the importance of the real character of what Abraham presents as the basis for his intercessory prayer. Upon what basis does Abraham build his prayer conversation with the Lord? Look again at verses 23-25, *“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?’”* Don't misunderstand; I am certain that Abraham is moved by compassion for his nephew [Lot] and for his nephew's family. But the basis of his prayer is not just feeling sorry for someone in a dangerous place. Instead the basis is the righteousness and justice of God. I don't know about you, but I don't find that this occupation with the righteousness and justice of God occupies a prominent position in most of our prayer lives, and yet it is dead center right here.

The Lord's words reinforce the centrality of righteousness and justice for the conversation He will have with Abraham and thus for prayer will Abraham will set before the Lord, the prayer which it is apparent the Lord has carefully arranged for Abraham to make: notice verses 17-19 of Genesis 18,

*“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 Abraham what he has promised him.’”*

Beloved, you and I are spiritually members of the family of Abraham. Further, we like Abraham are friends of God. How many of us consider ourselves to be friends of God? Remember what Jesus said to His disciples. What Jesus said to His disciples was, *“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”* Ah! *“No longer,”* Jesus says, *“do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* We are right back to where we were earlier. Do we know the word of God? Are our prayers built upon the word of God? Do they reflect the purposes of God? Do they reflect the standards of God? Do they desire in fact to glorify God, not according to our wishes but according to what He has revealed to us.

We have a tendency to confuse two different kinds of love. We are saved by the unconditional love of God. I would just ask that if you want to work this out take a moment, ignore what I have to say and write down a short list, maybe a long list of all the people you know who are worthy of being saved. All right, that was enough time for that! Nobody is saved because they are worthy of being saved. So we know that if we are saved at all we are saved by the free gift of God who reaches out of the perfections of heaven and

into the mess of the earth and says, “This one, this one, this one I will save in order that they might be saved.” Ah, but that is only part of the story. There is the unconditional love of God which is the condition for our salvation by grace through faith, and then there is the kind of love that relates to our being friends. Now the question is, are we friends with the God who has saved us? Reflecting upon what Jesus says about His relationship between Himself and the Father and the relationship which He was obviously trying to develop with His disciples, friendship obviously manifests unity of mind, harmony of purpose, agreement in values, shared interests and even delights. Is this me and God? Do my prayers tend towards the manifestation and the development, the perfecting of this unity of mind with my Father, with this harmony of purpose with my Father, with an agreement of values so that my life reflect Who He is and others would say, “You’re different.” Writing to the Corinthians Paul gives a picture of friendship when questioning how it could be that believers would relate to unbelievers. This is 2 Corinthians 6:14-17.

*“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them,’ says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”*

Are we friends with God?

Prayer is a conversation that we have with God. We come submissively into His presence. We desire to receive His blessings. Are we friends?

Paul’s concern in second Corinthians has to do with the fellowship of believers in a local church. In Genesis 18 God’s concern is with Abraham for as He has just said, He has chosen Abraham to keep the way of the Lord. This is what desires, that Abraham and his family after him are going to be God’s representatives in the world. They are the ones who are going to walk around showing God’s presence. They will be the people of God. God wants Abraham to be His friend. Why? Because God wants Abraham to be a true representative of His own character as he fulfills His purposes in the world. Abraham and his family will become a great and mighty nation. You all know the story of that don’t you. If you have read your Bibles you know that Israel was a disaster. And what about the church? More pertinently, what about us? We are told in Hebrews 1:3 regarding Jesus the Anointed One who was born of the family of Abraham that *“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. He upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification of sins he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High.”*

Now let’s go look at the dramatic dialogue between Abraham and God. Understandably we are taken up with the drama of the dialogue. Abraham seemingly persuades God to keep lowering the threshold of mercy all the way from fifty righteous to only ten. But if we look closer, I think that we will see that the basis of Abraham’s prayer, the basis of his appeal is not to God’s mercy or loving kindness. Rather it is to his justice. *“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?”*

Now we begin to approach a dilemma on the part of God. To be just to the righteous, it appears He will have to be merciful to the wicked, at least to leave them alone. It appears that justice to the few takes precedence over justice to the many. This is instructive as regards what we actually experience day by day,

isn't it? Peter gives us a final picture in 2 Peter 2:4-9. I suggest you turn there to flag if not to read now to read later. This is what Peter writes,

*“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment, if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah a herald of righteousness with seven others from the flood which he brought upon the world of the ungodly, if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”*

Peter mentions only Lot as righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah. God of course knew that was the case from the outset. I suspect Abraham knew it too, or at least feared it was the case. God cuts off negotiations at ten. God knows He will save Lot and his two daughters. The cities will fall. Meanwhile Abraham has prayed for God's justice, not for mercy. Abraham has not engaged in special pleading for Lot, arguing that he is really not to blame, it was Abraham who brought him from Haran, that Lot was not up to living the rough life of the countryside, that he was really a good guy at heart. He makes none of those arguments. We do. Abraham prayed for the justice of God. Abraham's prayer acknowledges the sovereignty and rule of God. Abraham speaks as the spokesman for God. Abraham is consciously and deliberately representing God's interests in the world. Do we?

Why is the cross central to our prayers? [It is] because the cross of Jesus Christ is a demonstration of the perfect justice of God and it is the fulfillment of His righteousness. No one is saved because God gives them a pass. We are only saved through the wrath of God poured out upon the sins of men and women, poured out to His death. Every appeal that you and I make for the saving grace of God to touch with kindness and to relieve the sufferings of men and women is made only through the cross of Jesus Christ. For without that cross we only have judgment forever, but through the cross we have an eternal salvation in fellowship with God. Hallelujah, beloved.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father grant by Your grace that our prayers will not be the swift and easy expression of our preferences and desires, but teach us our Father to have our prayers grounded in Your truth, in Your righteousness, in Your justice. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.