

## **Abraham: Passion For People**

**Genesis 18:1-8, 16-33**

*Bryn MacPhail / May 1, 2011*

Our passage of study this morning teaches us a great deal about prayer, and yet it must be admitted that—strictly speaking—Abraham is not praying here.

This is one of those special instances within Scripture where the Lord makes an appearance in human form. Strictly speaking, what we have here is a personal conversation between Abraham and the Lord.

It is unlikely that any of us will have an encounter with the Lord like the one Abraham had, but we probably recognize that the call to prayer is, in a manner, a call to converse with God.

Accordingly, we look to this passage for principles to help our own conversations with God. We look to Abraham as someone who can help our approach in prayer.

The context underlying this conversation has two prevailing themes: Friendship and judgment.

Abraham's conversation with God is made possible because of an existing friendship and is occasioned by the pending judgment upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The reason we can safely describe Abraham's relationship with God as 'a friendship' is a biblical one. Abraham is referred to as the "**friend**" of God three times in Scripture.

The first occurrence of such a reference is found in 2Chronicles 20, within the prayer of Jehoshaphat. There we read, "**God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before Thy people Israel, and give it to the descendents of Abraham your friend?**" (2Chr. 20:7). Similarly, in the New Testament, James notes that Abraham "**was called the friend of God**" (Jas. 2:23).

Perhaps the most significant reference to the relationship between God and Abraham is found in Isaiah 41, where the Lord Himself is speaking, "**Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendent of Abraham My friend**" (Isa. 41:8).

Now, some may wonder why I labour this point of friendship. The reason is this: It seems to me that the unique and personal nature of this exchange between Abraham and the Lord is, in large measure, a function of their very special relationship.

The scene is extraordinary—the Lord appears in human likeness, along with two angels in human likeness, for the purpose of keeping Abraham up-to-date with the Divine agenda! The scene is indeed rare, and the scene is occasioned by *friendship*.

It is also worth noting that nowhere else in the Old Testament do we have the Lord referring to someone as His 'friend'.

Among a host of godly men and women in the Old Testament, *only Abraham is referred to in this manner*. And while we know that God had close dealings with Moses, and others, we are therefore compelled to regard the Lord's relationship with Abraham as a particularly special one.

Once we understand this, we gain insight into why the Lord says to His angels in Genesis 18, verse 17, concerning Sodom and Gomorrah, **“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”**

It seems to me that the Lord has every right to hide from Abraham what He intends for Sodom and Gomorrah! The Lord God is the ruler of the Universe and as such, He need not answer to anyone.

As the apostle Paul has noted, **“How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?”** (Rom. 11:33, 34).

If God chooses to reveal His particular will, that is terrific—but He is, by no means, obligated to do so.

In our own dealings with people, we too are inclined to keep certain things to ourselves. There are certain things about us—certain things that have happened to us, which we do not want the rest of the world to know. And yet, what we often do is we share sensitive things with trusted friends.

Beloved, this is what we find in Genesis 18. The sharing of delicate information is occasioned by a close friendship, **“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”**

Now, in our text, God does not say specifically to Abraham that He is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, but He does say, **“The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry”** (18:20, 21).

No doubt, such an announcement alarmed Abraham, causing him to reply in a way that appears as if he is negotiating with God. But, of course, friends can do this—friends collaborate on important matters. Friends speak frankly to one another.

And lest we lose site of the nature of their relationship, we read in verse 23 that **“Abraham came near”** to the Lord when making his reply.

First, as we look to Abraham’s reply, we see that it is marked by *audacity*. It is a bold prayer—Abraham pleads by appealing to the Lord’s character, **“Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?”** (18:23-25).

I don't know how this intercessory prayer strikes you, but instinctively I want to flash a warning sign that reads, 'Danger! Do not attempt this kind prayer at home!'

You see, an audacious prayer can be a dangerous prayer unless there first be an existing friendship with the Almighty. Just as there is a particular way to approach an earthly king, and a manner in which one speaks to an earthly dignitary, there is a manner which is appropriate for addressing the Lord of the Universe.

And the reason, Abraham can be so daring with the Lord is because he has a developed friendship with the Lord. This principle of boldness coming from familiarity likely resonates with our experience in dealing with other people.

Few of us would feel comfortable challenging a stranger, or someone we barely knew, in the same manner we would challenge a close friend or close relative.

The principle of praying with audacity then, is a relative principle. As such, I submit to you that *the audacity of our prayers should be proportionate to our proximity to God.*

To speak to the Lord the way Abraham spoke, without the existing friendship, goes beyond presumption—it is outright dangerous.

Not only was Abraham's prayer bold, but it was a prayer marked by *tenacity.*

Abraham, through his persistence is able to extend the length of this dialogue. In response to Abraham's initial challenge, the Lord replies favourably, **"If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account"** (18:26).

Again, my instinctive response to that would be: 'Super! Thanks so much Lord! Great spending this time with You, I'll now be on my way.' But Abraham keeps going, pushing the envelope, so to speak, **"Suppose there are only forty-five? ... Suppose forty? ... Suppose thirty? ... Suppose twenty?"** (18:28-31). Abraham's persistence persuades the Lord to say that He would not destroy the city if ten righteous persons were to be found (18:32).

As with most dialogues and prayers recorded in Scripture, we are not provided with a verbatim account here. And admittedly, we can read Abraham's prayer in just a few seconds. But this prayer is written in such a way as to suggest a very lengthy conversation between Abraham and the Lord took place that day. Abraham intercedes no less than six times for Sodom. Abraham's prayer is *tenacious*.

And lest we think that Abraham's relationship with the Lord has made him unduly cavalier in his prayer, we should also note that Abraham's approach to God is marked by *humility*.

While Abraham must have recognized, in some sense, his privileged position as God's friend, this is not something that Abraham presumed upon.

There is no indication in Abraham's intercession that he felt God was obligated to accommodate him. Quite the contrary, Abraham recognizes that this is not a relationship of equals, and so he prays in verse 27, **"Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes."**

To have humility before God comes from apprehending our standing before Him. Abraham understands this and it causes him to intercede for his own well-being even as he intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah. It is recorded that, at least twice, Abraham pleaded for himself, **"Oh may the Lord not be angry, and shall I speak"** (18:30, 32).

Yes, Abraham's prayer was marked by *audacity*; yes, his prayer was marked by an unyielding *tenacity*, but Abraham's prayer was also marked by *genuine humility*.

So these traits should mark our own prayers. Relative to our proximity to the Lord—in proportion to the depth of our friendship with God, we are to *pray boldly* for that which we regard to be consistent with God's character.

Secondly, we note that God often draws on us when we pray. That is, the Lord is no celestial genie compelled to grant wishes upon the first request, but rather, the Lord often engages us in such a way that requires us to *be persistent in prayer*.

And thirdly, understanding that the Creator is not obligated to His creation in anyway, we should not presume to be owed anything from God. As such, we should come before God with *genuine humility*.

Now, isn't it curious to read on and to see that in spite of repeated intercessory prayer by Abraham—prayer marked by audacity, tenacity and humility—Sodom and Gomorrah are nonetheless destroyed?

Here we have, in one sense, a model prayer; we have from Abraham an exemplary prayer to help us as we pattern our own prayers. And yet, in another sense, we note that something is fundamentally missing—we note that Abraham's prayer is an unanswered prayer in that one of Abraham's chief aims was to have Sodom and Gomorrah spared from destruction.

This negative result teaches us something vitally important about prayer. This negative result teaches me that even though I may be appropriately motivated in my prayer, even though I may say accurate things and present arguments in a reasonable manner, and even though I may have an existing relationship with God, this is no guarantee that God will respond in accordance to my personal preferences.

We are reminded in this account, with Abraham conversing with the Lord, that prayer is not magic.



What then do we find here then? Abraham's prayer may not have changed anything for Sodom and Gomorrah, but there can be little doubt that Abraham's prayer helped to change Abraham.

That's because *at the heart of prayer is a relationship*. At the heart of prayer is a relationship, and not a list of wants.

Because Genesis 18 describes a two-way conversation between Abraham and the Lord, we also have the opportunity to observe some things about the Lord.

The first, and I think most obvious thing, is that *God desires to have relationships with His creation*. We see this in His friendship with Abraham. The fact that the Lord sought Abraham out, that He received hospitality from Abraham, and that He was unwilling to shield Abraham from His plans for Sodom and Gomorrah teaches us this.

Secondly, we are also reminded in a most sobering way that *a Holy God cannot overlook sin*. We see this in the eventual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, bring these two aspects together, and what do you have?

Beloved, these are *two key ingredients of the Gospel*.

*The God who wants to be in relationship with His creation is a God who cannot overlook sin.*

The God who appears on the scene as *Abraham's friend*, also appears on the scene as *Sodom's judge*.

And, no doubt, this kind of pattern—this mixture of friendship and judgment could have repeated itself indefinitely throughout history. But thankfully, this pattern was interrupted when the second member of the Trinity came in the person of Jesus Christ—and on this occasion He came not to judge sin, but to overcome it on the cross!

Because of the cross of Christ, all who possess faith like Abraham can possess a relationship with the Lord like Abraham. And, prayer is the way we get on in this relationship.

In other words, prayer is the means by which we draw near to God.

And, at the end of the day, if we have been able to draw near to God, surely we have gained the most precious thing in the Universe. Amen.