

Genesis 18B (2011)

- As we began this chapter last week, I made mention of two outstanding issues in Abraham's relationship that God must resolve before the promised child is born
 - First was the issue of Sarah
 - More specifically, the issue is Sarah's faith or lack thereof
 - We have been watching Abraham grow in his faith and reliance on God, but until Chapter 18, we heard little about Sarah and her relationship with God
 - We know she has been following Abraham obediently and patiently
 - And we heard last week from 1 Peter that Sarah is an example of how a woman's beauty is best exhibited in her willingness to show respect for her husband
 - Nevertheless, her obedience to Abraham is not a substitute for faith in God's word
 - And when she personally heard God's word – probably for the first time – her initial response was unbelief
 - But the Lord in her presence revealed her unbelief and brought conviction
 - Though Sarah initially lied to cover up her sin, Hebrews tells us that this encounter led her to faith
 - And by that faith, she gained the ability to conceive
 - So now Abraham's faith is matched by a woman of faith, and into that family of believers the child of promise will be born
 - The second issue God will resolve in Chapter 18 is Abraham's lack of appreciation for God's full nature and character
 - Up to this point, God has revealed only one side of His character and nature

- Abraham has experienced God's mercy when He called Abraham out of Ur
- Abraham has experienced God's grace when He pronounced Abraham righteous by faith
- He has experienced God's faithfulness when God kept His word to rescue Abraham out of Egypt and bless him, though Abraham sinned
- He has experienced God's goodness as he received assurances of an inheritance and a son
- Yet if Abraham is to fully understand the God he worships and serves, Abraham must appreciate the full nature of God's character
 - That means Abraham must understand that God is also a God of justice, and judgment and wrath against sin
 - Without a healthy perspective of God, Abraham and his family would fail to appreciate and understand the seriousness of God's word
 - And the high expectations that holiness requires
- So as we pick up again in this chapter, the Lord unfolds a plan to show Abraham another side to His character and nature
 - And the Lord gives Abraham an opportunity to participate with the Lord in this plan so that Abraham might learn through his relationship

Gen. 18:16 Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off.

Gen. 18:17 The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

Gen. 18:18 since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?

Gen. 18:19 "For I have chosen him, so 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 upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

- After the meal, the Lord and the two angels (which Moses continues to call "men") prepare to move toward Sodom
 - Abraham, we're told, moves with the men to send them off

- This was to be expected, much like we walk a guest to the door of our home today
- In that day Abraham would have accompanied the men to the limits of his encampment, probably to the point of where his livestock were grazing
- As they walk, Moses records the words of the Lord
 - Curiously these words are not spoken to Abraham, as far as we can tell
 - By the Spirit, God revealed this detail to Moses
 - That's no different than the way Moses received all the details of these stories
 - It's no less remarkable that Moses knew about Sarah in the tent or any other detail of Abraham's life
 - In all cases, Moses must have received these details from the Lord
 - As students of Scripture our responsibility is to ask, why did the Lord want us to know these thoughts, thoughts the Lord didn't even reveal to Abraham himself?
 - The thought is phrased in the form of a question
 - Shall I hide...?
 - But since the question is never asked to anyone (and because we know the Lord already has the answer), then we recognize this is really a statement
 - I want to show Abraham...
 - God is going to invite Abraham into the next series of events
- And what exactly is God trying to show Abraham?
 - God gives us the answer in vs.18-19
 - We need to rephrase the Lord's words from a question to a statement to understand it

- God begins:
 - “Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and through that nation, I will bless all the nations of the earth”
 - “I have chosen him to raise up this nation, and by his experiences and example, I will train up his household and all those who will follow”
 - “Together, they must understand that the way of the Lord is both righteousness and justice so they may receive all that I have promised”
- The key to understanding the Lord’s thoughts is in the two halves that define the “way of the Lord”
 - Righteousness and justice
 - God is a God of righteousness: perfect in nature and thought and deed, always doing what is good
 - Perfect in mercy and love and blessing
 - But He is also a God of justice: perfect in judgment, always bringing wrath for sin and never overlooking injustice
 - God’s perfection and righteousness compel Him to bring a just penalty against every sin in His creation
 - God’s people must understand and appreciate both sides of God’s character if we are to truly know Him, serve Him and be blessed
 - The Gospel at its core is a message of both judgment and mercy
 - We have sinned against God
 - He is a God of righteousness, so He must judge all sin and there must be a payment for our debt
 - But because He is also merciful and loving, He has made a payment available on our behalf in Christ Jesus
 - Christ lived a perfectly righteous life that pleased a righteous God, and then paid our debt on the cross to satisfy the wrath of God against sin

- That's the full Gospel message
- But increasingly, churches preach only one half of the Gospel
 - Some are preaching God's love without justice
 - They talk of God's mercy without acknowledging his wrath for sin
 - Conveniently, they never draw attention to the depravity of our hearts, the holiness of God and the terrible price He requires for sin: eternal death
 - They give no attention to the cross of Christ, nor the atonement of His blood sacrifice, nor God's expectations that His people have been bought with a price and must now put aside sin and live a life that is holy and pleasing
 - Instead, they preach God loves everyone regardless of the condition of their heart, that He wants us to be rich and that "our best life is now" rather than in the glory of His presence
 - On the other side, some preach of God's justice and wrath for sin without the grace of God's forgiveness and mercy
 - This message works to expose and condemn our sin, always emphasizing we are sinners and in debt to God
 - They overlook that our righteousness before God is not obtained by our works but by faith alone in Christ's work
 - Typically, this view emphasizes God's judgment so much that they aspire to the role of judge themselves, judging and condemning others for sin
 - In place of God's mercy and grace they teach legalism, because they confuse following human rules with pleasing God by faith
- These unbalanced messages are not the gospel and they do not yield true disciples
 - Those who preach only love without justice will attract unbelievers who seek approval for their sinful lifestyles and the desires of the flesh, and want God's acceptance without repentance of sin

- Those who preach only God's wrath without grace will appeal to unbelievers who seek to be saved by their works rather than by humbling their hearts and relying upon Christ's work alone
 - God wants Abraham to be a man who can teach a household and a nation about the full nature of God so that the Gospel might be truly understood
- How does God accomplish this plan for Abraham?
 - Simply put: through prayer in action
 - God will reveal His intentions to Abraham's heart so that Abraham may act to intercede through prayer
 - And by those prayers, God will do a work in Abraham as well

Gen. 18:20 And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave.

Gen. 18:21 "I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know."

Gen. 18:22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD.

- In Abraham's presence, the Lord announces His next stopping place
 - He and His messengers had visited Abraham, where they had been refreshed
 - And now the Lord announces He will make Sodom His next stop
 - Sodom and Gomorrah were two sister towns located in the fertile valley at the southern end of the Dead Sea
 - There is virtually no archeological evidence of their existence today, for reasons that will become apparent later in this story
 - But they were renown in their day – and still today – for their depravity, in particular, unnatural sexual practices
 - Of course, the word sodomy comes from these practices
 - We also remember this is the place Lot decided to settle when he separated from Abraham

- As Abraham offered Lot the opportunity to select any place in the land, Lot saw the well watered land of Sodom and pitched his tents outside the city
- Later, we discovered that Lot had moved into the city
- So when the kings of the north invaded and captured the city, they took Lot and his family as well
- The Lord announced to Abraham that the sin of this city is exceedingly great and grave and He must visit the city to inspect the situation
 - The Hebrew words in v.20 carry important meaning
 - The word “great” in Hebrew means numerous, as in quantity
 - The word “grave” means abounding in honor or respected
 - Taken together, the Lord says the perversions of Sodom have become commonplace (everyone is doing it) and honored and respected (everyone says it’s OK)
 - We should take note that any time a culture begins to practice and accept sinful perversions, they are ripe for God’s intervention
 - How He chooses to respond is a matter of His timing and purposes, but even if He delays for a time, that shouldn’t offer comfort for the sinner
 - Judgment will come eventually for everyone, whether in death or at the Lord’s coming
 - In this case, God decided to bring earthly judgment today to train Abraham, so He says He will visit this city to learn if the reports are true
 - Like the question in vs.17-18, we know God doesn’t lack for understanding or knowledge of the situation
 - He knows how sinful these cities are already
 - So the Lord’s statement was given for a purpose, to accomplish a work in Abraham
 - And we can see that in the way the Lord sends messengers to investigate, yet He Himself stays with Abraham

- It's clear to us as we read this description that the Lord is waiting with Abraham for a reason
 - And that reason is so that Abraham will engage with the Lord in the conversation that follows
- Before we look at the exchange, take a moment to notice how much the Lord loves His children and desires a relationship with them
 - Do you see how the Lord is working all things here for Abraham's benefit?
 - He has planned his visit from the beginning to expose Abraham to God's work on earth
 - He visited with Abraham, ate with him, walked with him
 - And now reveals His heart for justice and His plans to inspect the city
 - Obviously, the Lord need not do any of these things
 - The Lord could have brought judgment upon the cities without so much as a word to Abraham
 - But the Lord longs to make Himself known to His children, and He does that by inviting us into His work
 - And Abraham for his part received the Lord, ate with the Lord, walked with the Lord and listened to the voice of the Lord
 - As Christians we are given instruction in the New Testament to adopt all of these same practices
 - To receive the Lord and fellowship with Him through the Spirit in our hearts and through baptism
 - To eat with the Lord in remembrance of His sacrifice on the cross
 - To walk with the Lord in seeking the counsel of His word and obeying it
 - To listen to the voice of the Lord speaking through the Spirit in prayer and study

- Having taken those steps, we will be in a position for the Lord to invite us into His work so that we may be trained up through it
- But if these disciplines are lacking in our life, the work of the Lord goes on with or without us
- He is dependent on no one, but He goes out of His way to include His children in His work
 - Because that is the heart of a father
- You may have heard me tell the story of father who has a young son
 - And the father intends to complete a project in his garage
 - He has an old car that needs some engine repair
 - And through a lifetime of experience working on engines, the father has learned many valuable lessons
 - He learned patience to practice the right techniques
 - He learned attention to detail
 - He learned how to organize his work and how to care for his tools
 - He learned how to overcome set backs and persevere when his first attempts fail
 - And now the father wants to share those learnings with his young son
 - So the father puts on his work clothes and announces loudly so as to make sure his son will hear him, "I'm going to spend some time in the garage, and I sure could use some help..."
 - What does the father hope to see happen next?
 - He hopes his son will jump at the chance to be included in his work
 - He wants the son to recognize the signs of his father at work (i.e., the clothes, the tools in his hands, the announcement)

- And he wants the son to accept the invitation
- The son could choose to ignore the signs
- Or the son could recognize there was work going on yet simply decline to join in
- In either case, the father's work will be done anyway
 - But what a shame that the son would lose an opportunity to join his father
 - He never receives the lessons the father was prepared to teach
 - He forgoes the maturing opportunity that these experiences will produce
 - Most of all, what a shame that the son would forfeit an opportunity to build a closer relationship with his father
- That's what's at stake for us as sons (and daughters) of our Father in Heaven
 - If we're willing to be honest with ourselves, we know how to recognize the Father at work
 - We see the telltale signs all around us
 - God steps into our day with an announcement that His work is at hand and He invites us to participate with Him
 - Sometimes He speaks through a church announcement or mission trip or volunteer request where we have opportunity to serve
 - Sometimes it's a job change or personal tragedy
 - Sometimes it's a coworker or a friend who asks us for advice
 - Sometimes it's a prayer request
 - Sometimes it's a knock at the door, literally
 - And when we see these opportunities, we can stay silent or we can jump in
 - The choice is ours, as are the blessings