

Following the Biblical Stream:

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Part LXXXIV

In our last segment, we talked about the ending of the conversation Abraham had with God about Isaac's birth and the command that all the males in Abraham's house were to be circumcised. In this, we discussed how God's presence may have appeared to Abraham during that conversation, and we ended by talking about Abraham obeying God without hesitation in circumcising every male of his house. This brought us to the end of Genesis chapter 17, and we are ready to begin our look at chapter 18.

The beginning of the story told to us in chapter 18 is something I have taught on and referenced to so many times it seems as if we have already covered it. In fact, I could not help but talk about it in just our last segment. However, we have now come to that point where we will go verse by verse over this chapter, and I'm sure, due to what I just said, there will be those of you who will feel we have done much of this before. That being said, it is always good to take a look at these verses in the actual step by step context of the story they take place in, and what we have discussed before is mostly about the fact these verses show us God Himself was one of the three men who came by Abraham's tent that day. This truth is made clear by the very first verse where we are told The Lord appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre as Abraham sat in the door of his tent. The important note in this verse beyond that is the fact it was the heat of the day. Why is this important? Because of exactly what we have talked about before concerning this story.

The three men who came by Abraham's tent that day were not figments of Abraham's imagination. I know many would say they never really thought they were, but the words here leave nothing to chance. It's good to stop and understand, this is not some point at dusk, the middle of the night, or just as the sun was beginning to rise. This leaves no doubt about Abraham actually seeing nothing more than a vision or spirits, what some might describe as ghosts. No, this was in the midday heat of the sun beating down, and it doesn't get much brighter than that. What this means is these men were clearly visible as any physical object would be, and there was nothing supernatural about their appearance. This is crucial to verse 2 because that is where we get the description that Abraham saw three men. Now, the words say they were standing by him, but this does not

mean they literally were next to him, as in close or suddenly appeared. Abraham lifted up his eyes to see the men who were still a distance off so that he had to get up and go to them. The description of saying they were by him is a weakness of translation, but still carries with it a meaning we don't want to lose, and that is the fact they were in his territory - so to speak.

Abraham did not live in a city, a community of shepherds, or the like. As we have talked about before, his possessions were very great; and so much so that he and his nephew Lot had stopped occupying the same area long before this just so they would both have enough room for everything they owned. Thus, when Abraham sees these men standing what might have been some distance off from his tent, they were still closer than anyone except someone of his household or a traveler passing through would be. Now, it would seem from putting all the information together, they were actually passing through. This is another way in which it is emphasized they did not just appear in front of Abraham. Due to this, Abraham gets up and wastes no time getting to them and bows himself before them. Some will pass this part off as being the custom of the day, but I would not. When a person or persons comes to see someone as great as Abraham was and entered his territory, it would be customary for the visitor to be the one to bow and ask permission to pass by or come before them. Only someone of great importance, such as a king or the like, would be greeted by a resident such as Abraham, with this kind of reverence.

What makes this so interesting is that these three men were not kings or men of earthly royalty whom Abraham would have recognized as such in order to pay this kind of great respect to. Depending on how they were dressed exactly, Abraham had no reason to believe these were anything from common men to some kind of wealthy strangers. Yet there is no hesitation in Abraham's reaction! This indicates that Abraham knew full well who they were; and, again, this being the heat of the day means it was not because they appeared to glow or have some angelic appearance. If they did it truly would have had to be blinding, and there is no indication of that in these verses. There can only be two reasonable explanations for why Abraham immediately recognized them as important, much less for who they really were. One, he was led of the Spirit to recognize them; or two, he was so familiar with God appearing to him in a form Abraham could physically recognize, he

immediately did so!

In the end, I would suspect there is a little of both involved here. God had appeared to Abraham many times, and while those times might not always have been in a physical appearance of a man, Abraham was so familiar with God's presence, there was a literal spiritual recognition of God no matter how He appeared to Abraham. For lack of a better way of saying it, this is such an "unbelievable" truth and something only a few men seemed to ever experience. Adam, of course, recognized God, Noah seemed to have this kind of relationship by all indications, and the other prominent example would be Job. What is sad is that all you have to do is get down to Abraham's grandson Jacob before you see a man, still greatly used of God, who clearly did not have this kind of relationship. Jacob's first very personal encounter with God and His angels was at Bethel as he was fleeing to Mesopotamia to escape his brother's wrath. It is at this time we get the story of what we often call Jacob's ladder, because Jacob sees a ladder going from the earth and up into heaven. This is a vision, a very real tangible vision mind you, but a vision still; and when Jacob awakes from seeing it, he is clearly shaken by the event. He understands that this place where he had stopped for the night was truly the habitation of God. This is why he calls it "House of God," which is what Bethel means. (Gen. 28:10-22) Considering who his grandfather and father were, it's surprising he did not already clearly understand this!

In contrast, Abraham, while being careful to take nothing from his great respect for God, was not surprised that God would pass by his tent on this day. He was very grateful for the opportunity, and that is why he runs to the three men bowing to them and asking that they not simply pass by. This is a move that it would appear if Jacob had such a thing happen to him would not have known to do, at least until much later in his life, which shows us how much each of us have a very personal relationship with God that we must seek for ourselves. As we are given the information in verse 3 of Abraham asking these men to stay, we find Abraham clearly understands they are not necessarily in the area to spend time with him at all. Thus, Abraham asks that if he had found favor in God's eyes they might grant him the time to do so. This is great humility and respect on the part of Abraham. Abraham knew that any time spent in the direct presence of God and/or His servants was nothing to let pass by! While saying that might seem to some a bit cliché, we should stop to think about how important it is to us to invite, even beg, God's presence

into our lives and homes!

Abraham goes on to show his true desire to be of service to God in that even knowing he was talking to no ordinary physical men, he offers them the amenities one would offer an honored guest. He desires to get them some water to wash their feet, some bread to enjoy in eating, and to sit under the shade of a tree for a time of rest. These are all things heavenly beings do not need, but they are physical hospitalities we can offer as physical men. This connects back to what we talked about last time in how God has always found value in coming down among us in spite of the fact He already knows everything. We read in the New Testament how He is not a God Who is untouched by the feeling of our infirmities, but we so often think only of this in referring to the fact Jesus came to live as a man. (Heb. 4:14-16) While Jesus is the proof, the more correct mindset, which stories such as this one show us, is that God did not create us in a manner that until Jesus walked this earth was something that eluded Him or was so far below Him He did/does not relate.

I know most would say they understand this, but I have to doubt whether we really do. It seems people want to go to one extreme or the other. Far too many people think of God, or at least want God to be, like some Greek portrayal of a god that is so like us we might find fault in Him or even be able to destroy Him someday. In truth, there are those who believe we already have! Others want to go to the other side and believe God is so big He just can't relate to what we go through or even hardly be aware of us as humans, much less as individuals. We just don't soak in how much God is so great it is beyond our comprehension, while at the same time He created us not as the animals, but in His image. God created us to be a being with whom He can literally commune, and God greatly desires to do so. It may seem to us that Abraham offering simple physical amenities would mean nothing to God or His angels, and coming from those who do so without respect for Who God is, it would be. However, from a man such as Abraham who understood how small he was, yet offered what he had, it was truly an example of what God wants of us. (Matt. 12:34-44) This is why right from the start God walked with man in the garden He had planted in order to do such a thing on a regular basis; and even after the fall, He came to Cain and Abel when they brought the fruits of their labor to offer to Him. God loves us and wants to be near us. This is why Jesus said He was going to leave so that where He is there we may be also, for eternity, in a place where sin can never

inhibit this kind of communion again! (John 14:1-3)

Verse 5 shows us just how much Abraham understood they were passing by on a mission that did not necessarily include coming to him; for Abraham acknowledges that after they had allowed him to serve them, they could pass on to whatever it was they were there to do. Abraham was never so arrogant as to believe he was all God cared about, or in anyway offended by the idea God might not take the time. It was Abraham's great honor that the men agreed to do so! Thus, Abraham runs back to his wife Sarah, not a servant but his wife, and instructs her to make fresh bread for the men. He then runs to the field, and he himself picks out the very best calf - what we might call veal - and instructs a servant to prepare it for eating, who did so with haste. Abraham then does the job of a servant, as he does not sit down and simply wait for the others to serve them all. Abraham continues to oversee the preparation and gathering of what would go along with the meal. Abraham brings the food to them, and he stands beside them as they eat. This is the kind of thing a servant would do so as to be ready at a moments notice to run and get anything more they might request.

All this is also interesting in that Abraham had only asked that they stay for some rest and bread, but what he sets before them is a feast literally fit for a king! Abraham does this not in a way to obligate them to stay. It was no doubt with the hope they would, but more importantly he does it because, if they wanted it, they were worthy in his eyes to have the very best he could offer. It would be up to them whether to partake of it or not, and Abraham would not consider it a waste in either case! As they eat, we see another example of how God is willing to interact with us on our level. In verse 9 God asks where Sarah is. Now, of course, God knew where Sarah was, just as God knew where Adam and Eve were when He was calling to them in the garden that day. This is not to suggest that Sarah was hiding, but God wants it to be clear as to whom He is about to refer to, and thus asks this direct question about Sarah. He is also catching Sarah's attention which caused her to pay specific mind to what He was about to say, because God knew she was able to hear this conversation. To the question, Abraham simply says that Sarah is in the tent, and with that, God confirms to Abraham what He had already said about returning her to the ability of childbearing and they would have a son together. The fact Sarah heard this is confirmed in verse 10, and verse 11 goes on to confirm Sarah was past the age of bearing children in that she had gone through what we today call menopause.

This is specifically why God had said He would return the time of life to Sarah in order to make this possible! Not only had Sarah been unable to conceive a child all the years of their marriage, but now she was truly of the age where it was no longer physically possible. However, with God all things are possible, and that is why this conversation is taking place. God wants Sarah to hear this information for herself. Upon hearing it, Sarah's immediate reaction was to laugh at the thought because she was only thinking in human terms. She even remarks to herself that she is too old, and on top of that Abraham is no spring chicken himself. Now, we have talked about a lot of aspects to this, but that is why it is so important we talk about how God manifests Himself at different times. As God appears later to Moses and the children of Israel it is always in a very powerful way, and it was to show them they served a powerful God Whom they should never doubt could bring them through the impossible. God left no logical room for Israel to do anything but fearfully obey because He knew they would have a hard time obeying even under those circumstances.

However, that is not the situation here as God comes to Abraham and Sarah. God comes in the form of a man along with two angels who also appear to be men. God talks to Abraham as one man would talk to another, even asking questions He knows the answers to. This is the nature of God. This was not a time of just showing forth His power and having either Abraham or Sarah obey out of fear in any way. This was about God bringing good news to them of a blessing that was beyond their wildest dreams. Abraham had already been given this information and no doubt told Sarah. We do not know what conversations this spurred between the two of them, but here God was clearly speaking to them both about what He would do. Once Sarah had the reaction she did to hearing this verbalized by someone other than Abraham, we see that God knows everything, and to Sarah's surprise, God asks Abraham why Sarah laughs at this. It is here God becomes more forceful about the fact that to doubt is to believe anything is too hard for God, and that is wrong. No matter how impossible such a thing might seem to them, it was going to happen, not by their will or ability, but only because they were willing instruments and God would bring it to pass!

This seems to be the point where Sarah begins to really think about who it is she is doubting, and this leads her to deny that she laughed, out of fear for what she had done. We are not told specifically if she comes

out of the tent or not, but one must think she was compelled to come forward and make this plea more directly than just in her heart, because it seems to bring her physically into the conversation. This is clear in that God then speaks directly to her, not just in reference to her while talking to Abraham. God tells her He already knew she had laughed, which was just further confirmation they should not doubt God knows all and can do all. In the end, it would seem this entire incident's main focus was for the purpose of God Himself coming to Sarah and letting her know directly, not just through Abraham, that what Abraham had told her about concerning God's plan for her to bear a son was, in fact, true! This is a moment that emphasizes the partnership of Abraham and Sarah as a couple, living in the one man with one woman way God created humans to live if individuals choose to be married, which is the proper relationship for bearing and raising children.

Now, this is where the conversation ends. There was no point in belaboring the moment. What needed to be said had been said and the point for which the angels in particular had come for was the order of business from then forward. This is why the next verse tells us the men rose up and headed for Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, desiring to be in their company for as long as possible, as well as continue to show them the utmost respect as honored guests to whom he was their servant, goes with them. Verse 17 is where we see the same point we talked about last time in discussing how God came down to see the city and tower man was building, before He confounded man's language, just after the flood. The incident here with Sodom and Gomorrah is very similar. While it would appear from the words that the decision had already been made, God still comes to see the city from our level - so to speak - before it was truly solidified. It is here we see one of the best examples one will ever see in the Word of God of how much it is a truth, "...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." James 5:16

God determines it would not be right to hide from Abraham what it is He is about to do to the cities. Why? Because Abraham was being set up as a great instrument of God in this world, and the reason God chose Abraham for this task is because God knew Abraham would instruct his children, not just in that he would raise Isaac to be a man who feared The Lord, but also be the father of the chosen nation who would never stop looking back to him as an example! You see, God intended to give this land to that chosen nation He would build through Abraham and the son He once

again confirmed to them would be born through Sarah. The parts of the land that the chosen nation did not inhabit would be held mostly by other related people who came from Ishmael, Lot's two sons, and Jacob's brother Esau. God would give this land to this family not just because it was the best geographical place to position the chosen nation, but also because the people living on the land would one day come to be justifiably judged by God worthy of being driven off the land. This would make room for God to give it to Abraham's descendants. The issue here was similar to that of the Tower of Babel as all this needed to be in God's timing. It would be a while before God was ready to give this land to the chosen nation as obviously even Isaac had not yet been born, but the problem was that Sodom and Gomorrah were ahead of the curve when it came to sinful corruption.

Now, when God came down and confounded man's language at the tower, He did so because all men were on a path to be corrupted in one lump. If this was allowed to happen, God would very quickly be right back to needing to destroy the world as He had done with the flood just before the tower. God had said He would not continue to destroy creation for man's sake, and the time to end the world as a whole had not come. Thus, God puts in place a measure that would give individuals a chance to escape this overall corruption. This was the righteous and just thing to do on so many levels we don't have the space to even begin to mention them all. However, when it came to Sodom and Gomorrah, we see a smaller version of this type of action. In this case it was not that these people were a threat to necessarily taking all humanity down, but they certainly were a threat to corrupting the people of Canaan long before the time it would have happened to the region overall in a more natural course of events devoid of Sodom and Gomorrah's influence. The other difference here is that Sodom and Gomorrah had already went way beyond the point people had come to at the tower. It was not just that they had come up with a corrupting theology, they had come to such utter sinfulness, especially in comparison to the world at large, their sin demanded immediate judgment!

God shows us this decision was not made lightly. This is not to say God does anything lightly, but God wants us to know He does not sit in heaven making judgments from there which in our minds might seem to be disconnected or out of touch with the truth on the ground. This, again, is because we are humans and think as humans. Those who are not wise enough to see the

truth just never will, but those who consider right and wrong clearly see how many mistakes we as humans make when we make decisions without clear understanding of - to use an old expression - walking a mile in the other person's shoes. Parents can have this trouble with their children when they forget what it was like to be their children's age and think as one does at that age. They can also do this when they don't understand their children may face different challenges than they did at that same age because society has changed. If we can see clearly how this can be true in relationships as close as parents to children, we should be able to see why central government is a bad idea. The more decisions that are made from a governing authority that is far away from our day by day lives, the more mistakes are going to be made. This is being human, and while we should understand God does not have this problem, even God wants to show us we do not have to take that as a fact without evidence!

That's why we see this clear example of how God deals with Sodom and Gomorrah. God knew what was going on and how bad the people had become, but He still says He wanted to come down and see if what had reached to heaven was really true when one comes and walks in and among the situation directly. If that is not one of the most amazing things in the Bible, I'm not sure what it will take to impress upon you how much God is a God Who is attempting to do everything He can to convince us He desires to have a relationship with us, that He cares about each of us, even to the point of what we think of Him and how He judges us. As I mentioned before, it was not just at the time of Jesus God became a God Who did such things or came to grasp what it would mean to us. The God of the Old Testament is truly the God of The New Testament, and what we see in these verses is an often overlooked point in the story of what many see as an angry God destroying sinful men. God is guided by His righteousness and mercy. Always has been, always will be!

In the midst of this story we also see God being perfectly righteous and Holy does limit how much He can come among us, and this is why He later did come in true human flesh to overcome this limitation. God would not go directly into Sodom and Gomorrah. If He had, there would have been nothing to stop His righteousness from consuming the cities in a moment. That would defeat what God was trying to show us here, and that is why the two angels came with God. Verse 22 tells us only the two angels went on to the cities.

Abraham would stay with God where He had stopped and began to talk to God, giving yet another opportunity for us to see how much we do not serve an untouchable God. Even as much as Abraham knew God, he was moved by the fact the cities were going to be destroyed. Abraham knew these people, he had even saved them once from an invasion of foreign kings. Abraham knowing God was/is righteous was still compelled to ask if God was willing to destroy both the sinner and those who might still have hope of being saved all in one lump? This is where we see Abraham begin to reason this situation out and show us what a God of mercy He is concerning every last individual for whom there is hope of salvation!

Abraham would begin with asking if there turned out to be just fifty righteous people in the cities was that not reason to spare them? God confirms to Abraham that he is correct, and yes God would spare the cities if there were fifty righteous. Abraham acknowledging he is pushing it in asking, proceeds to ask if it turned out that number fell short by just five leaving only forty-five would that be enough to save the cities. God tells him yes He would spare them even if this was true. Abraham lowers the number by another five, and God agrees again it would be enough. Abraham starts to drop by ten at this point and asks about thirty, and God says yes. Abraham again acknowledges he has no right to ask further, but at this point it is as if Abraham is simply seeking the depths of God's forgiveness. Knowing the people of the cities were exceedingly sinful, Abraham asks if twenty would be enough, and God again says yes. One more time Abraham lowers the number by ten and this brings the number to just ten. To this, God once more confirms even ten would be enough to spare all the people, but this is where all reason ended. Abraham knew full well there were not ten righteous people in that place, but what Abraham gets, as well as all who read this story through the ages, is direct confirmation from God about how much His mercy and salvation is extended to all people if they are only willing to call upon Him!

Until next time, Shalom!

