

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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A RIGHTEOUS MAN (*GENESIS 18*)

“One man among a thousand I found.” (Ecclesiastes 7:28) God is constantly examining the hearts of men and women around the world for the evidence of righteousness. He made us “in his image,” but because of sin we are all now immersed in our own lusts and desires, and care little about not only God but also other people around us. It’s a rare person who has awakened to his/her calling as a child of God, obligated to love both God and man not only in our hearts but also through our actions.

This story is an example of God searching for, and finding, a righteous man. The situation was set up in such a way as to bring out that righteousness, if it was really in him. And as a gift to the hostess, so to speak, the LORD leaves the promise of a son to his wife Sarah.

But as God judges Abraham, he is setting the stage to judge other men’s hearts. To the righteous man goes the gift of Life; and to the wicked, death.

The Trees of Mamre – Mamre was one of the Amorite kings of Canaan, and this particular spot was marked by great oak trees, a mountain top view, and a handy central location for many locals to gather for fairs and trading and worshipping their idols. It had a long history of being a gathering spot for local communities.



Mamre is also about 15 miles west of the Dead Sea, which will be important to

note when we read of the LORD and Abraham looking out over the Jordan Valley to discuss what must be done with Sodom and Gomorrah. The two cities would have been fairly easy to see from that height on the mountain, with its view over the entire Dead Sea from north to south.

Three men – All through this section the writer is deliberately mixing singular and plural. The chapter starts by saying that the LORD (Hebrew *Yahweh*) appeared to Abraham; then it states that *three* men showed up at his tent. In verse 3 Abraham says, “O Lord [Hebrew *adon*, אֲדֹנָי], if I have found favor in your sight.” Both the words “Lord” and “your” are singular. But even though they are in the singular, we are then told “So *they* said ...” in reply. The interplay of number continues through the rest of the story until the men actually leave to go to Sodom and then the LORD remains behind with Abraham (verse 22).

Later in the next chapter we are told that they were not ordinary men but “angels” (or in Hebrew, *messengers*) from God. There is some question as to

when exactly Abraham realized who he was dealing with. There's an intriguing passage in the New Testament that talks about this kind of situation: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2) Abraham certainly would have known the identity of his visitors by verse 10, when the LORD (note the specific name) told him his wife would have a son in a year's time.

This is the author's way of showing two things: *first*, even when angels are on the scene, Abraham is really dealing with the LORD himself. Angels are God's servants through whom God works among men, on earth – particularly in Old Testament times. "He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire." (Hebrews 1:7) God rarely came in his own essence, simply because the creation can't stand before such a reality. God is Spirit. Creation falls apart before his presence; mountains shake, elements melt down, things burst into flames at God's approach. To avoid such catastrophes, God used angels – creations in themselves, yet spiritual and capable of being his conduit – to do his work in the physical world. In the end, however, we have to consider it as God's work done through the angels; even the words that the angels speak are God's Word. There's a functional identity between angel and God that we have to accept – this *is* the hand of God, the voice of God, and must be treated as such or God takes personal insult.

Second, whether he considered them just men or whether he knew it was the LORD working through angels, Abraham treated them the same. He cared; he gave of himself; he humbled himself

before them. Which leads to the next point.

Hospitality – In our day we have all sorts of commercial accommodations available to us while we travel; hotels, restaurants, grocery stores, police stations, hospitals and ambulances, etc. In fact our culture is so saturated with entrepreneurs desperate to get our money that we are now convinced that this state of affairs is perfectly normal. If someone needs food or shelter or protection or health care, then let them find the nearest store and pay for it.

What it has done is to remove the responsibility for our neighbor from ourselves to businesses. Caring for someone is someone else's "business" – not ours. And people shouldn't expect it of us, either. It's not our problem if our neighbor is in need – let the government take care of him at the very least, if insurance won't.

In other words our culture has effectively negated the LORD's command to "love your neighbor as yourself." The way the 21st century has constructed itself, I don't believe that it's even possible anymore to follow this command with our technology, laws, commerce, industry, transportation, insurance, liability lawsuits – it's a modern juggernaut that can't be turned around.

In Abraham's day, however, the norm was defined by necessity: when people traveled there were no such amenities as we have. One actually *expected* the neighbors to be helpful; it was normal to ask for food and shelter along the way from whoever looked capable of providing it. Of course it worked both ways: if the people in a community were friendly to strangers, they would not only get the latest news from far-away

places but they also had the opportunity to trade, or sell goods, with the travelers. And they would get a good reputation as the traveler would recommend that town to other travelers they met. If the people proved inhospitable, however, that bad reputation would also get around – to the detriment of everyone in town.

People didn't always follow this rule, however, and certainly not everyone did it willingly – there were business opportunists in that day as well as in ours, as well as the miserly. But when travelers found not only a willing host, but someone who brought out the best for them out of the goodness of his heart, purely from altruistic motives, that was a good man. He didn't do it for money or reputation but out of sympathy for the traveler in his needs.

The Law talks about this issue of hospitality as a characteristic not only of a righteous man but also of God himself.

The LORD your God is God of gods and LORD of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)

In other words, being nice to people is *necessary*, it's not just an extra to life. People are in real need; sojourners in the Middle East ran out of food, water, they were in peril for their lives from marauding bandits, they needed food and water for their animals that would die otherwise. We all know that our neighbor needs help, it's just that we hope he will go somewhere else and not demand anything from us. The problem

was that, in that older culture, such an attitude would backfire: there was no other help to turn to, and (someday) the stingy man would himself need help.

In God's eyes, those who are in real need have to be taken care of – and his people are responsible to do it. He considers it a righteous act, a proof that a person is truly righteous in his/her heart. Jesus addresses the *righteous* in this way.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. (Matthew 25:35-36)

And he goes on to tell the *unrighteous* that they ignored him (or his people, he makes it clear that it's one and the same thing to him) in his need. For that response of their callous hearts, they went to Hell.

Righteousness, then, shows itself in *how we relate to others* – especially those who can't repay us. (Luke 14:12-14) We show our righteous character in what we do for others. No wonder, then, that the fruit of the Spirit enables a Christian to show “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) These are all relational acts toward other people as well as toward God.¹

Hurry to accommodate – Abraham showed his character by the way he

¹ There's a powerful New Testament example in Zacchaeus, whom Jesus called a “son of Abraham” because of his righteous acts. (Luke 19)

welcomed the three men. In humility (“If I have found favor in your eyes”) he offered them what he had to relieve their travel pains, and then he “hurried” and “ran” to get everything ready for them.

The story seems intent to show us the attitude of Abraham as he took care of his guests. *First*, he spared no pains, no expense, to provide for them. He immediately got his whole household involved, getting Sarah to make a lot of bread quickly, and then instructing his servant to pick out “a calf, tender and good” and prepare that quickly. He accesses all of his resources, and *gave out of his abundance*, for their needs.

Second, Abraham put his own comfort and rights aside to accommodate their agenda. Whatever they have come to do is important, and Abraham was determined to help them. This is *not* for Abraham’s advantage (as it is in our modern commercial atmosphere – “Have a nice day!”, the cashier says, as we buy what we need and give the store a tidy profit in return). He *works to his disadvantage* to help them.

Third, Abraham played the role of a servant, rushing and hurrying about to take care of them. Our neighbor will at least retain some semblance of self-respect in dealing with us, even when doing us a favor; he’s not going to lower himself in our eyes by jumping to our expectations. Yet here is Abraham doing just that. And not because he has to, but because he wants to. He *humbled himself* to honor them.

Where have we seen this attitude before?

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was

in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Abraham is showing the character of God’s Son – a Son who is pleasing to his Father. In great as in little things (honor to a prophet, or a cup of cold water – Matthew 10:40-42) he loves God and man. Not that he loves the wicked – we will see that later in the chapter – but he will do anything to help God’s people as they are about God’s business. There’s a humility here that puts most of us to shame.

A righteous man – So our concept of a “righteous man” is getting fleshed out here in Abraham’s actions. It’s not just a matter of keeping the Law, or being free of sin. It’s that extra measure to do good to others – to love God and to love man. He considers others better than himself (Philippians 2:3); he looks to the needs of others, not just his own needs. (Philippians 2:4) He doesn’t honor others because they are rich or powerful, but because they are God’s people and therefore precious in God’s sight. (James 2:1-7) He cares for the orphans and widows; that’s “true religion” to him. (James 1:27) He makes it a point to care for those in need, not just for his friends or equals. (Luke 14:12-14) He helps those whom others won’t touch. (Luke 10:25-37) In other words, the Father has made his son a source of life.

The Law of Moses had provisions for safeguarding the well-being of the poor and needy. There were laws protecting

the widows, the orphans, those who had to go into debt, the foreigners who were living with them, the poor. We also read in the Prophets that God condemns those who mistreat the oppressed, widows, orphans, etc.

In fact we could go on multiplying passages throughout the Bible about the marks of a righteous man. It isn't a doctrinal issue as much as a character issue: our faith is proved, as the Apostle tells us, by our works.

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (James 2:26)

This idea of a righteous man *being* righteous toward others is going to be the standard that God will use to judge other men. For example, we who are in the Church show our faith if we love our brothers (not just God), and provide for their needs accordingly. (Acts 4:32-35; 6:1-6; Galatians 6:10) But not only is the Church responsible to look to people's physical needs, there is a deeper need that, particularly in our generation, is going begging: the spiritual needs of the soul. Right now the prophecy of Isaiah is all too true of the modern Church's superficial, consumer-driven ministry. Someone is going to pay for this state of affairs.

The poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst. (Isaiah 41:17)

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes? (Jeremiah 5:30-31)

What is needed now is for the spiritual heirs of Abraham to get hold of, and pour out upon God's people, the rich treasures of Heaven.

If we, by the way we've constructed our modern society and our churches, have insulated ourselves from those in need, then we can hardly expect to measure up to God's expectations of "righteous" on Judgment Day, in light of the Scripture's strong teaching on this subject, so clearly illustrated here with the Father of the faithful.

Sarah laughs – While the men were eating, they asked Abraham where Sarah was. Evidently part of their mission was to put themselves within range of Abraham's wife so that she could hear the Word of the LORD directly for herself.

In fact we are told that what they said was nothing less than the Word of God, not from the angels themselves. The passage says that "the LORD said ..." – and it's significant that he said it to Abraham, not directly to Sarah. The Promises were always to Abraham, and to others only by their association with him. But God deliberately said it in Sarah's hearing this time.

Abraham had been struggling with this idea of having a son through a miracle, and now it's Sarah's turn to struggle with it. She, as was her husband, is now forced to deal with God's Word to her – and that requires faith, not unbelief. Faith must get hold of the impossible nature of what God is promising. But she also laughs at the idea, and the LORD catches her in her unbelief and reproves her. "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" Sarah tried lying to God, but found out that nobody lies to God. He knew her heart.

Now that everyone understands one another, Sarah must now deal with this new concept of a miracle. Faith, remember, shows itself by its works; that's a sign of a righteous person. In Sarah's case, in order to understand how she would have to act in faith, we must open the door a bit into their private life. *A ninety-year-old woman must now go back to bed with her husband and try this again.* It would be a deliberate act of humility on her part, in light of her public disbelief that their coming together would produce issue, and particularly in light of the fact that this time God is watching her. No wonder God told them to call their son "he laughs." God has the last laugh this time.

Confiding in Abraham – There is a very revealing passage concerning Abraham in one of the Prophets:

But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen, the
offspring of Abraham, my friend.
(Isaiah 41:8)

What we see here concerning Abraham is what Jesus talks about later concerning his own disciples.

No longer 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.
(John 15:15)

A servant is only told what his master wants him to do; he isn't included in on his master's personal thoughts or plans. But a *friend* – here is someone you can confide in, who can help you with your plans, who can share the work and the responsibilities and the success.

So when God calls Abraham his friend, we see a deeper aspect to this Covenant. This is no small matter in God's eyes. This is a project he has been working on since before time; it involves the total resources of Heaven; it will mean the judgment of the whole earth, and millions destined either for Hell or for Heaven. It involves no less than the glory of God – the one thing closest to God's heart. And Abraham is being brought into God's closest confidence – he is the Covenant receiver, the Heir, the son on earth, to whom God pours out his very heart and holds nothing back.

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? (vss. 17-18)

In other words, God is planning on giving Abraham and his descendents *life* – the life of Heaven – in their Family and their land. Here is the answer for all mankind's woes. God is giving Abraham the Answer; so it's appropriate that Abraham learn all about the issues the way God sees them. No servitude here – he is God's son and one of his "fellow workers." (2 Corinthians 6:1)

Now when someone is in this deep in God's Program, he starts discussing great matters of the Kingdom with God in prayer, not just "please heal Aunt Matilda's toe, Lord!" Matters of state include what sin and wickedness is doing in God's creation – ruining souls, stressing the righteous, impeding the progress of the Kingdom of God on earth. They include the glory of the King in the lives of God's people, of the will of the King done on earth. They include training the children, and getting

hold of the resources of Heaven for those children. Heirs of the Covenant start getting these kinds of orders from their Father in Heaven:

I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6-7)

Abraham is already proving that he is a righteous man, so the LORD finds it appropriate to talk to him about “righteousness and justice.” In fact, while God takes care of the unrighteous in Sodom with one hand, he is preparing Abraham’s family with the other to be what the wicked are certainly not: “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.” (vs. 19) This is God’s great Project on earth – punishing the wicked, and rewarding the righteous. And now it becomes Abraham’s Mission as well; the two are working together.

Investigating Sodom – Life in this world is complicated. Everyone is a sinner, and yet the wicked perpetrate their sins against each other, which means that other sinners become victims. Thieves steal from thieves, adulterers are unfaithful to adulterous partners, liars deceive other liars. How does one get to the bottom of this mess and judge correctly what has to be done? How can “justice” be meted out to a “perverse and wicked generation?”

No doubt the “outcry” that went up to God from Sodom and Gomorrah were

the anguished cries of the wicked who were themselves victims of their violent neighbors.

Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. (James 5:1-4)

We already saw an example of the Sodomites being overcome and taken hostage by neighboring kings, so that Abraham had to go rescue them and his nephew Lot from their captivity. But sin is sin, no matter who does it to whom. God is able to discern the true nature of every crime.

But there’s someone else who was in distress over the sins of the Sodomites, and his “outcry” reached Heaven as well – Lot, Abraham’s nephew. His point of view would have been more objective, being a righteous man (see 2 Peter 2) and therefore in line with God’s judgment of right and wrong. In fact, Lot’s outcry may have prompted God’s investigation, since he was there on the scene and praying about what he was seeing – a testimony that would have much more urgency in it than the wicked’s cry for help.

But Lot didn’t see everything. Something had to be done (one of God’s own was crying for help), but not every cry that came from Sodom could be trusted. When it comes to the sins of men and women, only God can make a fair judgment: he studies all hearts, all thoughts, all actions, and compares everything to his perfect standard of righteousness. So it was time for God to sort out the situation.

Sodom was notorious for its sexual immorality. But this wasn't their only crime; remember that a righteous man not only avoids sin, but goes out of his way to love God and man. Both are needed to be righteous in God's eyes. The prophet tells us that, in fact, Sodom was guilty of greater sins.

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it. (Ezekiel 16:49-50)

Keep this in mind when we read the story of the angels entering Sodom as strangers in the next chapter – they were *not* welcomed there.

One more point here: God says that “I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me.” In the original Hebrew, that phrase “done altogether” (מְלֵאֵם יִשְׁׁרָאֵל) has the idea of “filling up to completion.” In other words, they couldn't possibly have done any more to make themselves offensive to God and man; they have committed every crime in the book. There are two things to say about that: *first*, since it's the “point of no return” as far as God's impending judgment, God therefore will be the judge of that state of things. We all love to curse our neighbors for their crimes against us and “call down fire from Heaven” on their heads as punishment, but God may not be ready to do so. Remember that we ourselves were once on the other side of that fence, and God had mercy on us.

Second, this is in fact why God waits until, in his eyes, there truly is nothing left to hope for.

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the LORD God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezekiel 18:23)

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

The fact that man was made “in God's image” makes the Creator hesitant to impose summary judgment until such time as the image has been completely effaced. Plus there was, after all, a representative of the righteous among them and God would want to wait until such time as Lot's influence among them would no longer be useful. Abraham will exploit this inclination towards mercy in his prayer.

Abraham pleads for the righteous – After the two men leave and Abraham realizes that Sodom is doomed, he naturally thinks about his nephew Lot and his wife and two daughters. In other words, the Covenant heir took measures to protect his family. Lot himself wasn't going to be the heir of the Covenant Promises, but that doesn't take away from the power that Abraham had to care for whoever was related or associated with him. The LORD was

determined to bless Abraham and whoever found shelter under his protection.

Notice too that Abraham did not pray for the wicked (Jesus didn't either – see John 17:9). He left that matter up to the LORD. His pleas focused on the *righteous* who are in the city: “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!” In other words, by destroying the whole city, that would mean also killing the righteous who live in it – and that doesn't fit with the character of the God Abraham is learning about. God, Abraham has learned by personal experience, is so adamant about his people being righteous – about putting away the sins of the flesh, and about being a blessing to those in need in God's household – that he required circumcision, and he tested Abraham's righteousness. God brought Abraham from Ur to Canaan in his old age to start a new Family all for the purpose of creating a new kind of man. God has instructed Abraham to “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.” The Covenant hinges on righteousness. So if it's this important to God, surely he will honor his Promises when he sees it in a man.

As the LORD and Abraham go back and forth in their “deal,” we see more clearly the relationship between the two. They are partners, friends, who are working out the details of the plan. God values his friend's input. Abraham understands the issues here, and he aims for the same goals as God does. He is “a man after God's own heart” and can deal with this situation in a responsible way.

He is, in fact, *praying like a responsible spiritual adult*.

Here is the thrilling aspect of the prayers of the saints: God cares about his saints and what they think, particularly because they've been trained for this kind of Kingdom work. They have precious treasures of Heaven at their disposal and, through prayer, work with God about how and when and to whom to dispense these treasures.

But the real reason that God would even consider such a relationship with man is that his own Son is the original, the Pattern, from which all the rest of the children of God will be formed. Prayer reflects the relationship between Father and Son who work together as a team. The Son has everything that belongs to his Father, including his wisdom, and therefore prays for the benefit of the Father's Family.

I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours ... Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:9, 24)

Prayers like this move the heart of God.

Once the LORD and Abraham agreed on the final terms, Abraham went his way knowing that his nephew would be safe, and the LORD knew he had a righteous son in Abraham – someone who wanted the best for God's children.

The Point – God tested Abraham in this chapter, and Abraham passed the test. Here was a righteous man: he lived his faith. He loved (not through emotions,

but through actions) both God and man, doing whatever he could to assist in the purposes of God and in blessings to his family. He prayed for the righteous. He was doing what only he could do – acting as the executor of the estate and distributing his resources for the benefit of others, through his actions and his prayers. So God trusted him with the treasures of the Covenant.

No wonder, then, that God promised to give him descendants like him who would also be in touch with, and distribute, the Treasures of Heaven for the benefit of all the world. For God's

people to do that, they would have to have their forefather's faith – a faith in the reality of God's world, the value of the Promises, the responsibility that comes with being entrusted with the Covenant for the benefit of others. This wasn't just a blessing for themselves, but for "any who come to God in faith" – it goes out to the rest of the world through them. The world will come to Mt. Zion for the solution of their problems and the fulfillment of their spiritual needs; Israel needs to be ready when they come.

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