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Abraham, the Friend of God (Genesis 18:1-22)

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As you know, today is Father's Day; and while the passage before us this morning may not seem to have any obvious application to fathers, I believe it does, for this reason: in this eighteenth chapter of Genesis, we observe in Abraham certain character qualities that shed light on why the Bible later refers to him as "the friend of God." This special title is given to him in several passages of Scripture. For example, in 2 Chronicles 20:7, Jehoshaphat stands in the assembly of God's people and says to the Lord, "Are You not our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and gave it to the descendants of Abraham, Your friend, forever?" The prophet Isaiah likewise refers to Abraham as God's friend. In Isaiah 41:8, God says to His chosen people through Isaiah, "But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend." Then in the New Testament, James in his epistle also calls Abraham as God's friend. After affirming that Abraham's works demonstrated his faith, James says "and he was called the friend of God" (James 2:23).

Now, the main point I want to drive home this morning is that there is no greater legacy that any father can bequeath to his children than to model for them all that is involved in being God's friend. That is the great privilege of the Christian life-- not only to be justified through faith in Christ and adopted into God's family, but also to enter into a relationship of communion with God that is best described by the term "friendship." Faithful believers are viewed by God and treated by Him as His intimate friends. That is not only true of Abraham; it is true of every Christian who walks in obedience to the Lord's commands and earnestly seeks His fellowship. To all such believers, Jesus says, "I regard you as My friends." Is that not the term He used in John 15 to describe His relationship to the disciples? "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends, if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father, I have made known to you."

What are the distinguishing marks of a friend of God? That is what I want us to consider this morning, and next week, as well, as we study this chapter. If there is one thing that distinguishes a true friend from all fair weather friends, it is his devoted

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

service to others. Jesus showed Himself to be our friend by laying down His life for us; in that way, He served us in a self-sacrificial manner. In the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, Abraham shows himself to be God's friend by his devoted service to the Lord, to those of his own household, and even to his unbelieving neighbors.

I. Abraham's Service to the Lord-- Let us begin by considering Abraham's service to the Lord. Just prior to this chapter, Abraham has shown himself to be a devoted servant to the Lord by his prompt obedience to God's command concerning circumcision. God had told Abraham that, in response to His covenant promises, he should immediately circumcise himself, his son Ishmael, and all the males in his household as an expression of his faith in the Lord. Abraham wasted no time in obeying God's command. We read in verses 26 of Genesis 17, "That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him." In this way, by obeying without hesitation the command of God, he showed that he really did trust the promise of God.

Now, there is a wonderful principle revealed in Scripture concerning the relationship between obedience to God's commands, and intimacy of communion with God. The latter reality depends on the former. That is to say, it is only as we prove faithful to the Lord by keeping His commandments, that He reveals more of His glory to us, and draws into more intimate communion with Himself.

We see that principle expressed by Jesus to His disciples in the Upper Room. In John 14, Jesus had been speaking to His disciples about the way in which He would manifest himself to His disciples in the future. He said to them, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." In response to that promise of Jesus, one of Jesus' disciples said to Him, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered by saying, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23-24). With these words, Jesus expressed a general principle of communion with God; and the principle that, when we show ourselves to be God's devoted servants by keeping diligently His commandments, God draws us into intimate communion with Himself by revealing more of Himself and His plans to us. This principle is one that we see operating throughout the whole of Scripture, and Genesis 18 is an illustration of that principle. Just prior to this chapter, Abraham had shown himself to be the Lord's devoted servant by his prompt obedience to God's command concerning circumcision. Though it must have been a painful experience for a ninety-nine year old man to undergo such a rite, he was willing to do so, out of devotion to God; and he was willing to insist that all the males in his

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

household follow suit. They were all to be circumcised as an outward sign of their consecration to God and their separation from the world. It was in response to this act of obedience, I believe, that God then blessed Abraham with a further revelation of His glory and of His divine purposes, which Genesis 18 records.

We read in verse 1 that it was while Abraham was sitting in the door of his tent in the heat of the day that the Lord suddenly appeared to him. This verse reflects the custom of Abraham's day which is still observed in our day in many countries that have a hot climate and no air conditioning-- and that is the custom of a taking rest or "siesta" during the midday hours when the sun is at its zenith in the heavens. That is what we see Abraham doing here-- not working, but resting, sitting in the doorway of his tent. Perhaps he had dozed off under the oppressive heat of the noonday sun, or perhaps he was deep in thought, when suddenly, upon lifting his eyes, he was startled to see three men standing very near to where he was. Apparently, he had neither seen nor heard them approaching; they were simply there, standing a few yards away from him. This was a most unusual sight, for few people in the Middle East would ever travel when the sun was hot. But these were no ordinary visitors; they emissaries of heaven, sent to bring a message to Abraham. We later learn that these three men were in fact the Lord Jesus Christ and two of His angels. I say 'the Lord Jesus Christ,' because although He is not identified by name, the central figure in this trio was clearly God Himself, and whenever God appeared to men in the Old Testament in visible form, He always did so in the Person of His Son, who is called in the Old Testament "the Angel of the Lord." This was therefore a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

Abraham's response to these three visitors may strike us as unusual, for he did not simply greet them, or invite them to draw near. No; we read that he "ran from the door of his tent to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground," as one might prostrate himself before a king; then, instead of addressing all three visitors at once, he addressed himself to one in particular, whom he called "my Lord." Something about that one visitor made him stand out from the other two as a person of special dignity and exalted status. Abraham's reverent attitude toward that visitor was further demonstrated by the way he addressed Him, in words of deepest humility: "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass by Your servant." Then, Abraham addressed all three visitors using the plural 'you,' and invited them all to wash their feet, sit and rest under the shade of a tree, and enjoy a meal that he would prepare for them.

What are we to make of this extremely reverent, humble, and extravagantly gracious response of Abraham to these uninvited guests, who showed up suddenly at his tent in the middle of the day without warning? Why did he respond to them with

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

such wildly exaggerated generosity? A number of Bible scholars point out that Abraham's response was not unusual in terms of the way that nomadic peoples often treat unexpected guests. Nomadic peoples are known for their extravagant hospitality to strangers, since hospitality is considered one of the most important virtues in the Middle East. One scholar who lived among the Bedouins wrote, "The virtue of hospitality is one of the great redeeming virtues in the character of the Bedouins." Another scholar who spent time in the Middle East gave a similar testimony: "Whenever our path led us near an encampment, as was frequently the case, we always found some active sheikh or venerable patriarch sitting 'in his tent door,' and as soon as we were within hail we heard the earnest words of welcome and invitation which the Old Testament Scriptures had rendered long ago familiar to us: 'Stay, my lord, stay. Pass not on till thou hast eaten bread, and rested under thy servant's tent. Alight and remain until thy servant kills a kid and prepares a feast.'" So these scholars assure us that Abraham's actions do not suggest that he yet recognized anything unusual about these three visitors. He did not yet realize they were supernatural beings.

Many point to Hebrews 13:2 as further confirmation that Abraham was unaware at first of the heavenly nature of his guests. That verse read, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some have unwittingly entertained angels." Many assume this verse is an allusion to Abraham's experience of entertaining angels. I should point out, however, that Hebrews 13:2 could be an allusion to the experience of Lot in Genesis 19, for in that chapter, the two angels who appear with Christ in this chapter visit Lot by night in the city of Sodom, and Lot was certainly not aware at first that they were angels.

I personally believe that Abraham may well have been aware of the supernatural character of these visitors from the outset; for notice that he distinguished one of the visitors as different from the other two. That is why Abraham prostrated himself before that one visitor and addressed him and him only as "My Lord"-- because he saw a difference between Him and the two men who stood with him. Could it be that Abraham recognized this visitor, because it was the same visitor who appeared to him in Genesis 17? You will remember that the Lord's appearance to Abraham in Genesis 17 was a visible appearance, for after speaking to him, we read that "God went up from Abraham." Now if God went up, that suggests that He had come down to Abraham in visible form. This is what theologians call "a theophany," a visible appearance of God. If the Lord came to Abraham in human form in Genesis 17, then it makes sense that Abraham would recognize Him when reappeared to him in Genesis 18. That would explain the extreme reverence he showed him, as well as the extravagant generosity he

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

lavished on his guests. He went out of his way to show the Lord how grateful he was for this wonderful surprise visit.

How did Abraham express his gratitude? Well, he undertook to serve his guests from the heart with unfeigned zeal and devotion.

A. Personal-- His service to them was first of all personal. Keep in mind that Abraham was ninety-nine years old, so he could easily have used his advanced age as an excuse to delegate all the tasks involved in entertaining his guests to someone else. He had at least three hundred servants in his household, so he could have appointed one of them-- perhaps his chief servant, Eliezer-- to take charge of the situation and provide a meal for his guests. But out of gratitude for their visit, Abraham undertook to honor his guests by personally attending to their needs. He personally selected a fine young calf to be slaughtered for the feast. He personally directed the activities of Sarah and his household servants as they prepared the feast. He personally set before his guests the food that had been prepared. And he personally stood by them as they ate, which was an Oriental custom. To stand by one's guests was a sign of respect; it showed a readiness to wait upon them at their pleasure.

B. Prompt-- Second, Abraham's service to them was prompt. He acted swiftly to make sure that everything they needed was provided. First, he ran to meet his visitors when he looked and saw them standing near his tent. Then he hurried into the tent to tell Sarah to make bread quickly. Then he ran to the herd to pick out a tender calf for the feast. Then he urged a young man to hasten in preparing the calf. Even though he was an old man, Abraham ran-- he did not hobble-- to get from place to place. He acted speedily in the heat of the day to do everything necessary to make his guests feel at home.

C. Princely-- Abraham's service to his guests was also princely. By that mean, he treated them like royalty, sparing no expense on their entertainment. As I have already said, it is very possible that Abraham recognized that one of the guests was none other than the Lord himself. So, not surprisingly, the meal he set before them was a meal fit for a king. It included a fine bull-calf from his herd; an ample supply of bread cakes, which were flat round cakes similar to pit bread, made from no less than three seahs (six gallons) of fine flour, fresh milk, and butter (which wasn't what we think of as butter, but a substance more like cottage cheese). There was no skimping on the amount of the food served to his guests, or its quality-- only generous portions of the choicest food made from the finest ingredients were fitting for such honored visitors.

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

Abraham's attitude stands in marked contrast to that of the Jewish priests in Malachi's day, who took the service of the Lord very lightly, and offered up second-rate sacrifices to God. The prophet Malachi chided these priests for their dead religiosity, which was a disgrace to the God of redemption. "You offer defiled food on My altar," He told them. "But [you] say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the Lord is contemptible. 'And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Off it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably? says the Lord of hosts.'" (Malachi 1:7-8). Malachi's words call each of us to examine the quality of the sacrifices that we offer to the Lord. When we come to worship God, are we coming with our whole hearts, or are we simply going through the motions, in order to assuage our consciences with some feeble efforts at being religious, or in order to keep our family, our friends, the elders, or God Himself, off our backs? If so, then we are not coming with the right attitude. We need to repent of our loveless, cold formalistic worship. We need to give ourselves with joyful abandon to the service of the Lord, presenting to Him the very best we have to offer, as Abraham did.

D. Unpretentious-- One other thing about Abraham's service of the Lord is that it was unpretentious. By that I mean, his gifts were not offered out of a proud or arrogant heart. He didn't pat himself on the back for his grandiose gesture of generosity, but felt that it was the very least he could do for such honored guests. So humble was Abraham in his heart that he even referred to the sumptuous feast he had prepared for his guests as a mere "morsel." Even though he was in a wealthy sheik with hundreds of servants, Abraham referred to himself as a "servant;" and he took the posture of a servant at the feast, standing near his guests while they ate his food.

Abraham's example here shows us one of the chief marks of those whom the Bible calls God's friends-- they love to serve the Lord, and they do so with all their heart. Their service is not cold and half-hearted; it is marked by a spirit of diligence and zeal. Now, to serve the Lord in that way is not easy, for even those born of the Spirit struggle with carnal desires. We have a fleshly tendency to be lazy, self-centered and self-serving; that's why Jesus says that to serve the Lord, we must put to death our fleshly lusts. It would have been so easy for Abraham on that sultry day to pretend to be asleep when he noticed out of the corner of his eye three strangers standing nearby. He could have told them that he was feeling poorly, and instead of attending on them personally, he could have called on a servant to act on his behalf. But he did not do that. He roused himself from his siesta, stood to his feet, and gave himself fully to the service of his honored guests. That is the attitude that God loves to see in all Christians-- an attitude of devoted service to the Lord.

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

So ask yourself these questions: how do you respond when you find yourself called on to serve your fellow church members in some way? When word goes out, 'We need someone to volunteer for such and such a task,' what is your characteristic response? Do you sigh and say in your heart, "Oh, please, get someone else to do that! Do you say, "I have no heart to give my time and energy to such things, for I am too busy pursuing my own interests, my own hobbies, my own pleasures, to invest my life in the lives of other people. I have no desire to pursue the interests of God's kingdom, or to exert myself in works of love and service. I have no longing to use my spiritual gifts to bless the body of Christ. I simply want to coast through life, snoozing at the door of my tent, and pretending to be asleep whenever strangers approach." If that is your attitude, know this-- you can hardly expect to be recognized by God as His 'friend' when such paltry fruits of friendship with God are visible in you. Abraham's friendship with God was made visible by the way he showed himself to be a friend to others. He was willing to serve others sacrificially; and it is through such sacrificial service that we show ourselves to be servants of God and friends of God, like Abraham.

Now, as I said earlier, I strongly suspect that Abraham knew from the outset that one of his visitors was the Lord Himself. But here it the interesting thing. In the gospels, Jesus tells us that whenever we serve our brethren out of love to Christ, we are actually serving Christ. That is true for all Christians, as we learn in Matthew 25, when Jesus tells us what He will say to His sheep on the last day. On that day, Jesus will say to those who are His sheep, "I was thirsty and you gave Me food; I was hungry and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." And when those astonished sheep ask Jesus, "Lord, when was it they we saw You hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and a stranger and in prison, and ministered to Your needs, He will answer them in this way: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:37-40). So here is an amazing truth we need to understand: when we serve our brethren in Christ, and show ourselves to be a friend to those in need, we are actually serving Christ, and showing ourselves to be His friend-- and one day, He will recognize us as such, and He will openly declare us to be His friends, just as He called Abraham His friend.

II. Abraham's Service to His household-- But Abraham showed himself to be God's friend in another way, and that is by the way he served his own household. On the one hand, he served God by ministering to the three strangers who showed up on his doorstep, but on the other, he served his own household, by ministering to wife and son, and to the servants of his household.

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

How did Abraham show himself to be a servant to those of his household? Well, later in this chapter, when God reveals to Abraham His plans concerning Sodom and Gomorrah, He explains why He is letting Abraham know about these plans. In verse 17ff we read, "And the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

This is an amazing statement describing God's relationship to Abraham, and next week, Lord willing, we will consider its meaning in depth. But for now, I just want to consider briefly what God says in verse 19 about His reason for having "known" Abraham. Why has God known Abraham? The answer is, "in order that he may command his children and his household after him." When God speaks of knowing Abraham, He is not speaking of being personally acquainted with him; rather, the verb "know" here speaks of God's electing love. God has known Abraham in the sense that He has set His heart's affections on him. He has chosen Abraham to be His heir through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Why God chose Abraham is never explained in Scripture, but the purpose of his being chosen is explained, and that is so that Abraham could become a conduit of grace to others-- in the first place, to those of his own household. How so? By 'commanding' them. This word 'command' has in view the idea of instructing the members of his household in everything that God had revealed to him about His divine will and purposes. This 'commanding' involved two things: first, explaining to those of His household the promises of God and calling them to faith in those promises; second, explaining to them the commandments of God and call them to obedience. In the words of verse 19, Abraham was to command both his children and his household (that is, his wife and his servants) to "keep the way of the Lord"-- that is, the way of faith and obedience. He was to exhort those under his roof to "do righteousness and justice," not as a way of earning salvation by their works, but as a way of expressing their trust in God, the God of sovereign grace who had called Abraham out of pagan darkness and who had made a covenant with him to bless freely Abraham and his seed forever, and all the families of the earth through them. So Abraham has been chosen by God and called by God so that he might take an active role in calling those of his own household to faith and obedience to God.

Now, I ask you, did Abraham do that? Yes, most certainly he did. We saw how he commanded his own household at the very beginning to obey God's command to leave Haran in Mesopotamia and to sojourn in the land of promise. We saw how he

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

commanded his own household to worship God alone by building altars to the Lord in Canaan, and leading his wife, his child, and his servants in worship of the Lord. We saw how he commanded his male servants in the last chapter to obey God's command concerning circumcision. So Abraham had proven to be obedient to God in commanding his children and his household after him.

Does that mean that all those in Abraham's household were willing to receive his teaching, believe the promises of God which he proclaimed, and obey the commands of God which exhorted them to keep? No, but their failure to believe and obey did not represent a failure on Abraham's part to instruct and command his household in God's truth and will.

As we will see next week, even Abraham's wife Sarah stumbled at the promise of God that she would conceive a son in her old age. Abraham had surely communicated that wonderful promise to her after his amazing encounter with God in Genesis 17, but she could not bring herself to believe that promise. In fact, it seemed ridiculous to her, the more she thought about it, that a woman her age, who had been through menopause, could suddenly find herself pregnant again. "That's impossible," she said in her heart. "Things like that just don't happen." But she was about to receive a powerful rebuke from the mouth of God Himself, who would reprove her for her unbelief by saying to her, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

CONCLUSION

So we have seen this morning these two ways in which Abraham showed himself to be a friend of God-- by his devoted service to the Lord, and by his devoted service to those of his household-- his wife, his children, and his household servants. Next week, we will see that Abraham also showed himself to be God's friend by His devoted service to his lost neighbors, in interceding for their welfare. When Abraham learned of the terrible fate about to befall Sodom and Gomorrah, he could not ignore the terrible plight of the inhabitants of those cities, but immediately began to plead for them and to ask the Lord if He might be willing to spare those cities for the sake of any righteous people who might be found dwelling within their gates.

In closing, I want to ask you fathers to examine your hearts and to ask yourselves this sobering question-- Am I seeking to demonstrate to my children by my own life what it means to be a "friend of God"? There is no greater legacy you could ever leave to your children than that. It is worth more than any money or lands you could bequeath to them, or any educational privileges you could provide for them. To model for your children the character and lifestyle of one who is truly "God's friend" is the

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

most precious gift you could ever give to your children. If on the other hand, you give them the whole world, but deprive them of the spiritual blessing of your godly example, what have you given them of eternal value? Nothing at all. Would you betray your children in that way? Would you have them go down to the grave with this damning accusation on their lips-- my dad gave me many things, clothes, food, a roof over my head, etc., but he deprived me of the knowledge of God by never providing for the needs of my soul. He never modeled for me a life of friendship with God. He never commanded me to keep the way of the Lord, to trust His Word, to do righteousness and justice.

So if you are here this morning and realize that your life is moving in the wrong direction, away from friendship with God, I urge you to humble yourself before the Lord, repent of your unbelief, and earnestly plead with Christ to save you from your sins, that you might become a friend of God like Abraham. Ask Him to pardon your iniquities by the blood He shed on the cross. Ask Him to reckon you righteous through the perfect obedience that He rendered to the Law of God on behalf of sinners like yourself. Come to the Lord Jesus and embrace Him by faith, then having come to Him, ask Him to show you how to live in such a manner that it is obvious to all that you are truly a friend of God, and that you cherish God's favor and fellowship above all the material riches this world has to offer. Amen.