

# Abraham and the Life of Faith

## “The Faithful Intercessor”

*“Then the LORD said,  
“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”  
Genesis 18:17*

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Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says of the passage upon which we are reflecting this morning: "...this text represents one of the most daring theological explorations in the entire narrative of Abraham."<sup>1</sup> Before we begin our reflection though it may be of help in reviewing how we arrive at Genesis 18:16-33.

Abram's story begins near the end Genesis 11 when we are introduced to his family, which appears to be a family going nowhere. Wives are barren, and a son has died prematurely. In Genesis 12 we are told that Abram had been called by God, while in Ur, to leave his country, his people, his father. Abram does leave, but his father also comes with him as does his nephew Lot. The family gets as far as Haran, not quite halfway to Canaan, and the journey stalls.

After the death of Terah, Abram once again heads out for Canaan, again bringing Lot along. Arriving in Canaan he builds an altar and calls upon the name of the Lord. Things are looking up. However, due to a famine, Abram follows a likely social custom, and without consulting the Lord, heads for Egypt. In doing so, he asks his wife to claim to only be his sister. That doesn't turn out very well, an Abram is eventually escorted out of Egypt, though exiting Egypt far richer than when he arrived.

In Genesis 13 his faith seems to expand as he defers to his nephew when they part ways, with Abram dwelling away from the cities of the plain, and once more building an altar to the Lord. In Genesis 14 Abram reacts to the news of the capture of Lot by an army of invading kings with extreme bravado, defeats the kings and rescues Lot and all the people taken captive; and then refuses to accept any earthly reward, giving glory to God Most High – a new name for God.

Then in Genesis 15 his faith is credited as righteousness, and he beats off the birds of prey while entering a formal covenant with God, who is described in a new way—Sovereign Lord. The guy is on fire as far as faith goes. But, this all comes crashing down in the next chapter as he and Sarai try to take the issue of an heir into their own hands, and predictably, the strategy blows up in their faces, though we are given a new name for God—the God who sees me, and a son is named Ishmael—God hears.

After thirteen years of silence, Genesis 17 records God appearing once more to reaffirm the covenant in greater detail, Abram and Sarai are given new names, and it is promised that Sarai will be a mom within a year. This brings us to Genesis 18. Twenty-four years have now passed in the span of seven chapters and what we read in verses 16-33 I think indicates the depth to which of Abrahams faith has grown. This man who couldn't abide a conflict with Sarah, and who laughed under his breath at the thought she would give birth, now stands before God with an incredible boldness, displayed for us in an unprecedented dialogue over the disposition of the city of Sodom.

We are treated to an incredible display of Abraham interceding on behalf of a sinful people—becoming the man God wanted him to be—the one through whom the world might be blessed. His intercession teaches us the value and vitality of prayer, as God is portrayed as being receptive too, and swayed by, the conversation with Abraham. I find it intriguing how Abraham is able to 'haggle' with God. The number starts at 50 and then is reduced to 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. AND God listens! He actually is willing to put up with what seems to be a bit of criticism from Abraham: *"Far be it from you to do such a*

*thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”<sup>a</sup>*

Indeed, the judge of the earth will do what is right. However, this chapter also reveals for us four important lessons. Sin is very serious. Judgement is very real. Repentance is always possible. Salvation for all is available.

## Sin Is Very Serious

The visit to Abraham that day was not just to enjoy an afternoon BBQ, there was a pressing issue that had to be dealt with – sin. The Lord had come with two angels to investigate the sin of Sodom. We are not told what the sin was – but that God has heard an outcry tells us this was a serious issue. It’s popular these days for some to claim that the central issue that was disturbing God was the neglect of hospitality, however; God said, *“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.”<sup>b</sup>*

The same word translated outcry here is also used of the blood of Abel crying out from the earth<sup>c</sup>, and for the cries of Israel in bondage in Egypt.<sup>d</sup> This was not someone complaining they didn’t get a napkin, or that they didn’t get an invitation to dinner—something was seriously wrong in Sodom. Sin. A quick tour of the Bible reveals just how wrong:

- Deut. 29:23, Moses describes God as overthrowing the city in ‘fierce anger’;
- Deut. 32 the fruit of Sodom described as poison, bitterness, venom of serpents, deadly poison of cobras;
- Isa 3:9 Jerusalem judged because they parade their sin like Sodom;
- Isa 13:19 it is said they are guilty of the sin of pride;
- Jer 23:14, the sin described as adultery, live lies, strengthen the hands of evil doers, wickedness;
- Ezekiel 16 the sins are detestable practices, depraved, arrogance, oppression;

In the New Testament:

- 2 Peter 2 – uses Sodom as an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;
- Jude 7 claims, “...Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.

They neglected hospitality? Please—the sin of Sodom was very serious, because all sin is serious. Here we are, in only the eighteenth chapter of the Bible and sin has already grieved the heart of God so much that He sent a flood. Sin raised its proud head only a few chapters later and God confused the languages. And here on the hills overlooking the plain of Jordan, once more an outcry has reached God. One wonders

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<sup>a</sup> Gen 18:25

<sup>b</sup> Genesis 18:20-21

<sup>c</sup> Genesis 4:10

<sup>d</sup> Exodus 2:24; 3:7

how much of an outcry is being raised I our time. It is foolishness on our part to ignore the serious nature of sin, and the fact of sin.

In the garden the night of His arrest, Jesus begged—pleaded—with the Father because the cup from which He was to drink was filled with bitterness. *“Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”*<sup>e</sup> Jesus had earlier reminded the disciples that everything was possible with God—but the only way to deal with sin was for Jesus to die on the cross. That alone should convince us of the terrible cost of sin;

Upon that cross of Jesus  
Mine eye at times can see  
The very dying form of one  
Who suffered there for me;  
And from my smitten heart, with tears,  
Two wonders I confess:  
The wonder of His glorious love,  
And my own worthlessness.

Your problem, and I pray your eyes are opened to see it and your ears opened to hear it, is not the color of your skin, nor the people group into which you were born, nor your status, nor your bank account (or lack thereof). Your problem and my problem is sin. That all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God tells us that we need to get serious about sin, because sin is very serious. And because sin is very serious, judgement is very real.

## Judgement is Very Real

“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham got this right. God is the judge of the earth. According to the Psalms He is a “righteous judge”<sup>f</sup> who “will judge the world in righteousness; [and] will govern the peoples with justice.”<sup>g</sup> Now before you claim that the Old Testament God is the “judgy” one, and Jesus is the loving God – remember that Jesus often told parables whose main message was that there *will* be a judgement on sin.

- Matthew 25 (sheep and goats)
- Matthew 13 (Parable of the weeds; parable of the net)
- Luke 14 (Parable of the wedding banquet)

Then in Isaiah, where Jesus is called the Branch of Jesse, it is said, “He will not judge by mere appearances, or make decisions on the basis of hearsay.” (Isa 11:3 NET)

It may not be a pleasant thought, but judgement is very real. Did you notice in the conversation between God and Abraham that God never actually said He was going to destroy Sodom? He just said the outcry was great and their sin grievous, that He

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<sup>e</sup> Mark 14:36

<sup>f</sup> Psalm 7:11

<sup>g</sup> Psalm 9:8

wanted to see if it was as bad as He heard. It was then Abraham who made the leap to connect great sin to the reality of judgement.

On July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1741., Jonathan Edwards selected as his text for the Sunday sermon, Deuteronomy 32:35; *“In due time their foot will slip.”* Edwards congregation that day would hear a message on just how real the judgement of God was. In fact, the selected passage was used to highlight the imminence of that judgement, that it wasn't something distant and remote, but that at that very moment those in the pews were on thin ice. He highlighted four aspects of their precarious position:

1. They were always exposed to destruction as one standing on slippery ground
2. That destruction would come unexpectedly as one is taken unaware on a slippery surface
3. That their own weight will cause them to fall and not another
4. That they have not fallen already simply because God has for the moment chosen to bear them up

We may bristle at the thought of fire and brimstone preaching—“No, no. Tell them how much God loves them. Tell them how He needs them. Don't tell them about judgement—you'll only scare them.” Years ago, I was preaching through the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible—and had come to those difficult verses that deal with judgement:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you.

Deuteronomy 21:18-21

I ask the rhetorical question, “If you were a rebellious son, how would this text make you feel?” From off to my left came the reply of a young boy, “I'd be afraid.” Yeah, he got it. You would likely try not to be rebellious. You would recognize that judgement was very real, and you would live accordingly—just as an electrician is careful when wiring a house; or a mechanic in working under a car; or a bomb disposal team defusing an explosive. There would be a healthy respect of not doing the wrong thing, knowing it could end badly.

There is, however, hope. There is a way out of judgement. For though sin is very serious, and judgement is very real, repentance is always possible.

## Repentance is Always Possible

God does not bring judgement without first giving those being judged an opportunity to repent. He tells Abraham what He is going to do. It's how God operates, for *“the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.”*<sup>h</sup>

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<sup>h</sup> Amos 3:7

Before the flood, tradition holds that Noah preached righteousness to his peers<sup>i</sup>, warning them of the impending judgement and offering them an opportunity for repentance. We see the same opportunity being given the citizens of Ninevah, who were warned by the prophet Jonah. All through the days of the kings, Israel and Judah were warned by both major and minor; named and unnamed prophets, and given opportunity for repentance. Sin is serious; judgement is real; but repentance is always possible. Just ask the thief who hung on a cross next to Jesus.

As bad as Sodom was, Jesus said, *“If the miracles that were performed in [Capernaum] had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day.”*<sup>j</sup> Jesus states that as bad as Sodom was, the grievousness of their sin notwithstanding, anyone in that city could have repented. Swindoll wonders if at the end of the conversation with God, Abraham had wandered off thinking he had saved the city, mentally counting the number of souls that he would have counted as righteous:<sup>2</sup> there was Lot (1), and his wife (2), then there were the two daughters (4), who likely had future husbands (6), and surely in all this time Lot would have acquired several righteous servants, along with those of his future sons-in-law, yes, more than ten for sure. Jesus would seem to agree, that destruction could have been averted if the number of righteous had crept above ten “it would have remained to this day”—but alas, though repentance was possible, no one thought themselves in need of repentance.

How would they know? When your doing what everyone else is doing, when you saying what everyone else is saying, and thinking what everyone else is thinking, when you are just like everybody else—how do you know you have a need for repentance? Paul reminds us in Romans: *“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”*<sup>k</sup>

Repentance is made available when prophets and preachers, speaking on behalf of the Lord, attempt to awaken people to the need of repentance. Being ‘woke’ does not count – one must become ‘awakened’, and *“blessed is he that stays awake...”*<sup>l</sup> for *“It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.”*<sup>m</sup>

Nobody likes to talk about sin, but if we don’t, how will they ever know about sin? If they or we never become aware of sinfulness, why would anyone even see a need for repentance? We simply cannot keep preaching peace, when there is no peace. We cannot become echo chambers for the rest of the world who speak with the wisdom of man—a wisdom that not only denies sin, but also denies God. How can I declare I stand with any group, organization, or movement, whose foundation is built on lies—and if built on lies then built on the foundation of the enemy.

Yes, by all means speak the truth in love—but make sure it is the truth you are preaching, and not the latest fad philosophy of godless professors and worldly hacks.

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<sup>i</sup> 2 Peter 2:5

<sup>j</sup> Matthew 11:23

<sup>k</sup> Romans 10:14

<sup>l</sup> Revelation 16:15

<sup>m</sup> Luke 12:38

Sin is serious, judgement is very real, but repentance is always possible for those who come to see sin as their problem—their *own* sinfulness as their problem. Stop apologizing for what you think my sin is, and take a look at your own heart—and repent. And once a person repents—makes that 180 degree turn and starts to walk before God—they will find that salvation is always available.

## Salvation for All is Available

A number of years ago I travelled to Lancaster, Pennsylvania with my parents on a bus tour to Sights and Sounds Theatre. Showing at the theatre was the story of Jonah. I won't get into the nitty-gritty of the whole performance, other than to say it was spectacular. However, the most moving scene for me took place after Jonah had delivered his prophecy, amid the catcalls and insults levelled on him by the residents. From the background one of the Assyrian soldiers walked to centre stage and began to sing (now, normally I hate musicals, just saying), and his song, delivered in a smooth baritone voice began to soar above the noise of the city. I can't recall the exact words, but the gist of the song was that he recognized his sinfulness and was crying out for mercy.

After a few lines, another singer joined in a beautiful duet, again the lyrics a plea for forgiveness and a recognition of sinfulness. The duet then became a trio, then a quartet, then an octet, then a choir and finally, a chorus. A whole stage of singers fell to their knees crying out to God to spare their lives and their city. A united refrain of repentance and sorrow. They confessed that their sin was serious, that impending judgement was real, cried out for the repentance that was possible and cried out for the salvation that was available. I still get goosebumps thinking about it.

The Bible promises that, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*<sup>n</sup> The Greek word translated here as everyone means any person in any place in any condition no matter what they have done or not done. We might even say the whosoever. Sin is very serious; judgement is very real; repentance is always possible; and salvation for all is now available.

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*<sup>o</sup>

God revealed His plans to Abraham, through whose family the world would be blessed. You and I are part of that family, and we can only be a blessing to the world when we take the message given us by God and share that message with the world. The message we have been given is not colonial propaganda; the message we have been given is not privileged; and the only thing critical about the message we have been given is that it is the only way to salvation. May God forgive us if we preach any other message than that which we have been given.

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<sup>n</sup> Romans 10:13

<sup>o</sup> John 3:16-17

Do you know how we can overcome the sin of racism? Jesus. Do you know how you solve the sin of greed? Jesus. Do you know how to solve the sin of oppression? Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”*<sup>p</sup>

Lord, Jesus, hear our plea to you this morning. We cry out on behalf of those who have no voice. We cry out to you on behalf of those who don't know any better. We cry out to you on behalf of husbands, wives, children, parents, neighbors. Lord, we cry out to you for we too Lord are sinners in desperate need of your grace, your forgiveness, and your salvation.

Lord, hear our prayers.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Abraham* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), 104.