

Chapter 11: The Confidence of Abraham

Genesis 18:16–33

We struggle to trust God. Sometimes, we grow bitter that God does not take away some kind of suffering in our lives. Other times, even when the circumstances of our lives go fairly well, we grow suspicious that God may be keeping us from something even better. Or, we come across someone else's story of sorrow and injustice, and we wonder whether God may be setting us up for a similar downfall. At every turn, the indwelling sin of our hearts causes us to look upon God with distrust. This is not new, of course. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, only rebelled against their Creator after the serpent slanderously questioned God's goodness toward them: "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (Gen. 3:1). All human beings descended from Adam and Eve have inherited their original suspicion that we have a truer sense of justice than God does.

Is this true? Should we trust God at all? How well do we actually know him? How well *can* we actually know him? If God has no accountability beyond himself, how do we know that he will not abuse his power and authority? In fact, we find part of the answer to these questions in Genesis 18:16–33, where God reveals that he has an "open book" policy, similar to the "open door" policy implemented in some organizations. In companies with an open door policy, anyone from any part of the company the right has the right to meet with top leadership to ask any hard, critical questions they may have. To an even greater degree, God graciously gives us his word to open up the thoughts, motivations, and desires behind his actions. Then, he invites us to ask hard questions that probe his goodness and justice. God does not owe us an explanation for his actions, but he has nothing to hide. More than that, he wants to draw us closer to himself in trust by personally addressing the questions we may have. Remarkably, God is transcendent, but he also strives for transparency: *God reveals his righteous character by word and prayer.*

Revelation by God's Word (Gen. 18:16–21)

After the abrupt affirmation that Sarah did, indeed, laugh, the men arise from the meal to leave Abraham's tent: "Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way" (Gen. 18:16). Up to this point, the thrust of the entire conversation has been about Sarah and the forthcoming birth of Isaac when the men return the following year (Gen. 18:9, 14). Now, however, the narrative transitions toward a very different direction as the men look down toward Sodom.¹ The shifting focus of the men signals the shifting focus of the conversation.

Bringing Abraham into Yahweh's Confidence

As in the previous scene in Genesis 18:1–15, the text here associates Yahweh's presence with these three men.² As the men focus their attention on Sodom, Yahweh deliberates with himself about

unfolding his plans about Sodom to Abraham:

[17] The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, [18] seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? [19] 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, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.” (Gen. 18:17–19)

This is the third time in Genesis 17–18 where we have seen inward dialogue. First, Abraham fell on his face, laughed, and expressed astonishment in his heart over the promise that he and Sarah will have a child: “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gen. 17:17). Then, when Sarah overhears the same promise, she laughs to herself and states the same kind of surprise: “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” (Gen. 18:12). Now, however, the inward dialogue we overhear is not from a human, but from Yahweh. Yahweh always hears his people, so it is not surprising that Yahweh overheard both Abraham and Sarah. It is astonishing, though, that Yahweh allows Abraham to overhear his own thoughts. Here, Yahweh opens the door for Abraham’s later intercession on behalf of Sodom (Gen. 18:22–33).³

The Privilege of Revelation

It is a special privilege to receive insight into God’s secret counsels and decrees, and yet God chooses to reveal his decrees to his prophets and his servants (cf. Amos 3:7).⁴ God continues to reveal himself in this way, but not through new revelations; rather, he reveals himself as the Holy Spirit illuminates God’s word by giving us faith as we hear it, read it, and study it. Therefore, Yahweh deliberates whether to hide from Abraham what he is about to do. Responding to his own question, Yahweh identifies two reasons for revealing his secret decrees to Abraham. First, Yahweh observes that “Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (Gen. 18:18). In this verse, Yahweh only slightly modifies the language of the original promises that he declared to Abraham in Genesis 12:2–3.⁵ By framing these promises in the form of a soliloquy, however, reinforces the truthfulness of those promises:

The significance of this form is that it reinforces that the earlier divine disclosure to Abraham is authentic, unadulterated, and truthful. The soliloquy underscores the word of God as infallible, for will God, when speaking to himself, attempt to deceive himself? What God says is what he is thinking.⁶

In a general sense, reiterating these promises identifies Abraham’s great privileges as a reason for bringing Abraham further into Yahweh’s confidence. In a more practical sense, Yahweh may feel that he owes Abraham this explanation, since his forthcoming actions will directly affect the promises to Abraham: “Abraham was going to be a blessing to the nations, so an account should be given to him when one nation was to be removed from that opportunity.”⁷ Furthermore, restating these promises here helpfully frames the topic of God’s justice that arises in this passage: “Abraham is concerned with the judge of all the earth, but God is concerned with the nations of the earth.”⁸ We

must consider God’s judgment of this *one* nation in light of his gracious promises to bless *all* the nations of the earth through Abraham’s offspring.

The Purpose of Revelation

Second, Yahweh points to the purposes behind his election of Abraham: “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, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19). Literally, the phrase “I have chosen him” is “I have *known* him.” This word describes more than acquaintance or passing familiarity or even the knowledge of facts about the person; much more, this word reflects the intimate covenantal bond between Yahweh and Abraham.⁹ In this sense, the word *know* is the equivalent of “choose, elect” (cf. Amos 3:2; Ex. 33:12, 17; Deut. 34:10; 2 Sam. 7:20).¹⁰ We will find a wicked parody of this intimate, covenantal knowledge in the next chapter when the men of Sodom demand to “know” the men who have come into Lot’s house (Gen. 19:5).¹¹

Now, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah must happen because of their great wickedness (Gen. 18:20–21); however, God also intends to use this judgment for the benefit of his people. By bringing Abraham into his secret counsels, God wants Abraham to teach God’s ways to his children and his household with more clarity and urgency.¹² Abraham will not only witness the event of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Additionally, Abraham will gain revelation to help him interpret the event in light of the righteousness of God so that he can pass on that revelation to his children and household.¹³ The way of the LORD in doing righteousness and justice will be a tremendous emphasis throughout the Old Testament: the Law will define the duties, the Psalms will exhort God’s people to do righteousness and justice, and the Prophets will convict God’s people for their shortfalls in these areas.¹⁴ The best summary of righteousness and justice is in the Second Table of the Law, which addresses how to love our neighbors as ourselves (Ex. 20:12–17; cf. Lev. 19:18).¹⁵ The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah will be a significant case study, demonstrating the wickedness of the city and the righteousness of God in destroying them. Therefore, God insists that Abraham pass this new wisdom to his children and to his household. The *purpose* of revealing this knowledge to Abraham is for the sake of God’s mission in the world to make disciples of his people.

From this, we see more of the implications of what it means for Abraham to *keep* God’s covenant (Gen. 17:9, 10): “In 17:11 the future obligation placed on Abraham’s descendants appeared to be limited to the duty of circumcision. But here he is told to command his sons to do righteousness.”¹⁶ That is, the grace that God extends to his people through covenantal knowledge has a goal: walking blamelessly before Yahweh (cf. Gen. 17:1). This is not a goal only for Abraham, but a goal that God commands Abraham to pass down to his children and his household. Furthermore, this is not only the responsibility of Abraham, but of all parents: “it is the duty of parents to apply themselves diligently to the work of communicating what they have learned from the Lord to their children.”¹⁷ What God says to Abraham here, he repeats more generally to all covenant parents: “The obligation of instructing children is constantly reiterated in the law (Exod 12:25–27; Deut 6:1–3, 6–7, 20–25) and in the wisdom literature (Prov 1:7; 13:1).”¹⁸ As parents, our first priority is to pass down God’s word to our children, teaching them to understand his grace and his righteousness in light of his works in the world and his word by which he interprets those works for us.

Also, we should notice carefully that God’s grace comes first in this arrangement, with

righteousness and justice following afterward. That is, grace comes *before* “the firm discipline of law.”¹⁹ God does not give his people a standard of righteousness as a prerequisite *condition* to earning his grace. Rather, God extends grace to his people, and then he establishes his law to guide their lives as they walk before him. Therefore, the law guides us as a subsequent *consequence* that follows after God’s free grace. Furthermore, we should notice here that God is not describing merely an outward, mechanical keeping of the law, but an “internalized obedience” where God’s instruction translates into robust righteousness and justice in the lives of Abraham’s children and household.²⁰ God wants his people to resemble him in his righteous character.

We see the same pattern of how grace precedes law in the Mosaic covenant, since the law rests on the redemptive historical reality of God’s grace in previously bringing his people out of Egypt (Ex. 20:1–17). The same pattern also characterizes the new covenant, since we are saved by grace through faith as the gift of God, and not by works (Eph. 2:8–9). Even so, the grace of the new covenant has a purpose in view: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). We do not perform good works to earn God’s favor, since he justifies us freely by imputing the righteousness of Jesus Christ to us through faith. Nevertheless, God’s grace extends beyond justification into *sanctification*, where God gradually makes us holy by teaching us his ways of righteousness and justice. That is, he makes us disciples, increasingly conformed to his glorious image. Then, he calls us to make disciples of our covenant children and also of the covenant strangers whom God leads into the household of faith. In this process of discipleship, God calls us to teach them everything Jesus has commanded us in his word (Matt. 28:18–20).

Ultimately, the goal for Abraham, Abraham’s children, and Abraham’s household (which includes us today who look to Jesus Christ, the offspring of Abraham, in faith) is “that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19). In this, God reveals a pattern of promise-obedience-fulfillment that appears not only here, but throughout the Scriptures.²¹ So, God gives this revelation by free grace (“I have chosen him”), with a view toward leading Abraham’s household toward obedience (“to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice), in order to fulfill everything that God promised for Abraham.²² In this arrangement, faith is the glue that holds all those pieces together: because faith believes the promises, faith works itself out in love as faith anticipates the fulfillment of those promises in eternity. Since we are still longing to receive the fullness of what the Lord promised to Abraham (cf. Heb. 11:13–16), we continue pursuing the fulfillment of God’s mission in the world by making disciples of our covenant children and of the covenant strangers whom he calls into the household of faith.

The Outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah

Yahweh’s deliberations with himself, therefore, have ended. Yahweh has chosen to reveal to Abraham his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in judgment:

[20] Then the LORD said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, [21] I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.” (Gen. 18:20–21)

In many ways, God’s “reflections resemble those that precede the flood (cf. 6:5–13).”²³ There,

Yahweh *saw* that the wickedness of man was great in the earth. Here, Yahweh speaks of his knowledge of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as something that he has *heard*. So, Yahweh now intends to “go down to see” firsthand on a mission to verify whether this outcry is true.²⁴ This does not mean that Yahweh’s knowledge is somehow limited. Instead, Yahweh is already building his case that he is a just judge (cf. Gen. 18:25) by demonstrating his commitment to evaluate the evidence personally.²⁵ Just as Yahweh did not need to eat and drink with Abraham in order to convey his promise about Sarah, so Yahweh does not need to walk the streets of Sodom and Gomorrah to know its wickedness.²⁶ Nevertheless, as the covenant meal enhanced Yahweh’s intimacy with Abraham and Sarah, so the attempted rape of the men who signify Yahweh’s presence will enhance the justice of the judgment. Notably, Yahweh also *went down* to investigate the wickedness of the builders at Babel (Gen. 11:5, 7).²⁷ The similarities of this description to the judgments against the world during the Flood and against Babel alerts us to the severity of what God intends to do against Sodom and Gomorrah.

The two words that the ESV translates as “outcry” in Genesis 18:20 and 18:21 are actually different words, but they are used interchangeably, with only slightly different spellings and nearly identical pronunciations.²⁸ Most significantly, the second word for outcry (Gen. 18:21) is the same root word to describe the Abel’s blood as “crying to” Yahweh from the ground (Gen. 4:10).²⁹ It is also used, however, to describe the outcry of the Egyptians after the death of their firstborn sons (Ex. 11:6; 12:30), so that the word may describe the outcry “of those who receive, illegitimately or legitimately, brutal punishment.”³⁰ In this case, the great *outcry* arises to protest the illegitimately brutal sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, like Cain’s illegitimately brutal violence against Abel. Therefore, the outcry that will arise from Yahweh’s punishment will be legitimately just, like the legitimately brutal punishment against Egypt.

More precisely, Yahweh intends to investigate whether the people of Sodom and Gomorrah have done “altogether” (or, “completely”) according to the outcry that Yahweh has heard. The same idea came up in Genesis 15:16, to describe how long Abraham’s offspring must wait before taking possession of the land of Canaan: “And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, *for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.*”³¹ Two different words for “complete” are used in these two passages, but the idea is the same: God extends forbearance for a time in order to give sinners an opportunity to repent (cf. Rom. 2:1–5). Then, when sin reaches a certain level of *completeness*, God must judge the wicked if he is to remain righteous. If, after investigation, Yahweh discovers that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah have not yet reached this level, then God “will know” (Gen. 18:21)—that is, Yahweh will relent from his judgment for the time being. God, however, is not mistaken. God knows all things, so he will personally visit these cities not to learn whether they are wicked, but to confirm what he already knows. God demonstrates his righteousness both in the way that he is *responding* to the outcry and in the way that he will *investigate* the outcry before issuing his judgment.

Still, this “final ‘if not’ gives a chink of hope, and on this slender hope Abraham bases his plea.”³² Again, notice that it is God who is opening the door to Abraham’s intercession for Sodom. God has initiated this conversation, and God identifies the possible gap between justice and mercy that Abraham enters into. From this, we should already recognize that “God does not need to be urged to do justice by Abraham; the discussion takes place so that Abraham can consider the issues of justice, not so that God can be admonished to do the right thing.”³³ God identifies these issues so that

Abraham, Abraham’s children, and Abraham’s household can learn to do righteousness and justice. God does not need to be brought back on track; God’s people, however, need further instruction, and we can learn much from story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Response in Prayer (Gen. 18:22–26)

At this point, Yahweh carries out his stated intention of going down to Sodom and Gomorrah to investigate the cities: “So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD” (Gen. 18:22). Here again, we see the close identification of the men with Yahweh, and we come to more questions about the identity of these men in comparison to Yahweh. As we compare this verse to Genesis 19:1, where only two angels arrive in Sodom to meet Lot, we might come to the conclusion that Yahweh is the third man who apparently stays behind: “but Abraham still stood before the LORD.”³⁴ There are two major problems with this view, though. First, if Yahweh stays behind, so that only two angels enter Sodom, then Yahweh has not, in fact, personally gone down to investigate the cities as he promised to do (Gen. 18:21). This personal investigation is a critical component to the argument about Yahweh’s justice in destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, so if Yahweh does not go, then his case for being considered the just Judge of all the earth diminishes (Gen. 18:25). Second, if Yahweh stays behind and sends two men to Sodom, then this means that neither Yahweh nor his emissaries visit Gomorrah at all. How can God be a just judge when he does not personally evaluate Gomorrah before destroying it?

Instead, I again think that Sailhamer makes a better case by recognizing the men as *representatives* of Yahweh’s presence, but not actually Yahweh himself. If we read the texts this way, then Yahweh *does* visit Sodom when the two men arrive in the city; the men “represent the Lord’s appearance but are not actually identified as the Lord.”³⁵ This is important, since if we say that the two men are *not* Yahweh in any sense (as though only the third man is Yahweh), then we never explicitly read “that the LORD entered Sodom,” despite his statement contrary.³⁶ Instead, we should see all three men as representing the presence of Yahweh, but not personally Yahweh. If so, we can understand that when “the men turned from there and went toward Sodom” (Gen. 18:22), all *three* men leave toward Sodom (so that *Yahweh* goes toward Sodom), while Yahweh *also* remains behind with Abraham in some other way. Furthermore, this third man is important, since presumably he is the one who investigates the city of Gomorrah while the other two investigate Sodom: “By specifying the number of men who visited Sodom, the author has left the reader with an answer to the question of the Lord’s righteous and just treatment of Gomorrah—the third man visited Gomorrah, and thus ‘the judge of all the land’ has ‘dealt justly’ (18:25).”³⁷ Yahweh does go down to Sodom and Gomorrah, and he personally discovers that the people of that city have done “altogether” as the outcry that has come to him. God cannot extend forbearance any longer. The cities must be destroyed.

Abraham’s Intercession

Abraham takes advantage of Yahweh’s continuing presence with him:

[23] Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? [24] Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? [25] 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! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" [26] And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." (Gen. 18:23–26)

In Genesis 18:22, Abraham "stood before the LORD." To stand before Yahweh is related to what it means to "walk before" Yahweh (Gen. 17:1), although to "stand before" Yahweh includes a wide variety of meanings. Victor Hamilton writes:

To stand before God may mean to worship him (Jer. 7:10), to enter his presence (Deut. 19:17; 29:14), or to serve him (1 K. 17:1; 18:15; 2 K. 3:14; 5:16). A special use of this phrase is to designate the intercessory ministry of the prophet. Thus, Yahweh says to Jeremiah, "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people" (Jer. 15:1). Later in the same chapter, after one of the prophet's outbursts, Yahweh says to Jeremiah, "If you return I will restore you that you may stand before me" (v. 10). In the light of Abraham's importunity before God that follows (Gen. 19:23–33), it should be apparent that when Abraham stands before God he is a precursor of the mediating prophet.³⁸

Now, in Genesis 18:23, Abraham "draws near" as he begins speaking to Yahweh. Since Abraham was already standing before Yahweh, this *drawing near* may refer to some kind of "internal approach," but "elsewhere in the Pentateuch the words 'approached and say' mark the beginning of a request in which the speaker has a special interest (cf. 43:19; 44:18)."³⁹ Indeed, Abraham has already interceded once for Sodom (cf. Gen. 14:14), so perhaps he feels a special concern for the city.⁴⁰ Regardless, Abraham boldly makes his request known to the Lord. Where Yahweh asked questions to Abraham in Genesis 18:1–15, now Abraham asks questions to Yahweh—and, like Sarah's denial about laughing (Gen. 18:15), Yahweh will issue denials to Abraham's questions: "I will not destroy it" (e.g., Gen. 18:28).⁴¹

Abraham expresses his main concern in Genesis 18:23: "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" He is not really asking God to overlook the sins of the wicked; instead, he is asking God not to punish the righteous *with* the wicked.⁴² So, Abraham is pleading for God to spare the righteous, without putting up any argument against the justice of judging the wicked.⁴³ This may be the reason that Abraham ultimately stops his questioning after asking whether God would spare the city for the sake of ten righteous people: Abraham "was interested only in the salvation of the righteous amid the unrighteous, not the broader question of the destruction of the wicked."⁴⁴ Therefore, Abraham is raising questions about God's *justice*. It would not be just, Abraham argues, to judge the righteous along with the wicked, since justice must differentiate between good and evil.⁴⁵ Abraham, therefore, takes the posture of an intercessor, which sets a pattern for later intercessors who similarly plead for God's mercy: "Samuel (1 Sam. 7:5–9; 12:19–25), Elijah (1 K. 17:17–23), Elisha (2 K. 4:33; 6:15–20), Job (Job 42:7–9), Amos (Amos 7:1–6), and especially Moses (Exod. 32:11–13, 31–34; 33:12–15; 34:9; Num. 12:11–13; 14:13–19; Deut. 9:16–29)."⁴⁶

The Judge of all the Earth

Abraham grounds the argument of his intercession in the character of God: "Shall not the Judge

of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25). Later, God will insist that judges in Israel must “acquit the righteous and condemn the wicked (Deut 25:1; cf. Exod 23:6–7; Prov 17:15),” so why should God himself behave any differently?⁴⁷ It is not that Abraham believes that God is *not* just; rather, Abraham is pleading his case from the confidence that God *is* just, so that God will not ultimately sweep away the righteous along with the wicked.⁴⁸ Even the fact that Abraham, his children, and his household will only receive the fullness of God’s promises if they walk in righteousness and justice (Gen. 18:19) proves that God cares deeply about justice. The way in which Abraham promotes righteousness and justice here, then, is by pleading for God’s justice to spare any righteous who might be in the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁴⁹ Therefore, Abraham’s intercession is built upon God’s righteousness and justice, as he explores the limits of God’s righteousness and justice for the sake of doing righteousness and justice.

In response to Abraham’s initial question of whether fifty righteous people would be enough for God to spare the city, God responds in the affirmative: “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake” (Gen. 18:26). This first affirmation must be encouraging for Abraham, even if it is not ultimately satisfying.

Submitting Abraham’s Story for Review

It is helpful to recognize a distinction between the *facts* that Yahweh has revealed to Abraham and the *story* that Abraham tells to fill in the gaps of Yahweh’s revelation. The *facts* are that Yahweh is responding to the outcry of the cities by investigating those cities. Implied in this investigation is Yahweh’s intent to destroy these cities if “they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me” (Gen. 18:21). The *story* Abraham has created to fill in the rest of the details of this revelation is that Yahweh has declared an intention to sweep away the righteous with the wicked. Yahweh has not actually said this, but Abraham knows at least one righteous man who lives in Sodom: his nephew Lot. Does Yahweh intend to sweep away Lot and any other righteous people, right along with the wicked?

Now, this story is false. Indeed, we tell ourselves all kinds of stories to interpret life around us, and many of our stories are false as well. This is not a bad thing, in itself, since God created us in his image to be story-telling people. The problem is not *when* we tell stories, but *what* we do with those stories. We must check our stories to see whether they are true. When we fail to verify negative, harmful stories about God or about other people, and then we pass along those stories to other people, then we are engaged in the sin of gossip. Abraham here demonstrates the right thing to do instead: we should submit our stories for review to the people who can verify, clarify, or refute the stories we have told. Abraham, therefore, does not return to his wife Sarah to vent about God’s great injustice against Sodom and Gomorrah. Rather, he lingers with God as the men leave (Gen. 18:22), and then draws near to submit his story to God for review. He is concerned that God will sweep away the righteous with the wicked, so he gives God the opportunity to verify, clarify, or refute that story.

The way that we do submit our stories to God for review is not all that different from what Abraham does here. We too must bring our stories to God for review in prayer. So, when we struggle with events in our own lives or the lives of people we love, we should take our stories *about* those events to him: *Does this mean you do not love me? Does this mean you are unjust? Does this mean you have abandoned me? Does this mean that loving, trusting, and obeying you isn’t really worth it?* As we

pour out our hearts to the Lord in prayer, our Father will guide us back into the Bible, where God has already answered those questions. But, as we search the Scriptures in our despair, pain, and confusion, God's Holy Spirit will shed light on promises that we have possibly read hundreds of times, to see that promise in a new way to soothe our new doubts. God's word is still where God verifies, clarifies, or refutes the stories we tell about him, although we have the privilege of having the full revelation in a way that even Abraham did not.

Reaffirmation of God's Righteous Character (Gen. 18:27–33)

We should keep in mind, however, that we may have to take our same questions to God and to his word many, many times before we find satisfying answers. Abraham, therefore, continues his line of questioning:

[27] Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. [28] Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." [29] Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." [30] Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." [31] He said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." [32] Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." (Gen. 18:27–32)

Ultimately, Abraham will ask six times whether God would spare a city for a certain number of people, reducing his number with each iteration. Not only does Abraham put his questions with threefold repetition, but he uses threefold repetition *twice*: "the doubling of the [threefold] pattern here is significant and gives Abraham's intercession solemnity and weight."⁵⁰ To continue pressing into God's word requires some level of faith in God's character on its own, since if we did not believe God to be righteous, we would not bother ourselves to question him so deeply. Abraham's persistent intercession reflects his deep faith that God is indeed a righteous Judge.

The pattern of Abraham's questions and Yahweh's answers remains fairly similar throughout this passage. Usually, Abraham expresses some kind of humble hesitation (Gen. 18:27, 30, 31, 32) before then reducing the number by five (Gen. 18:28), and then by ten (Gen. 18:29, 30, 31, 32). Each time, Yahweh responds that he will not destroy the city if as few as ten righteous people remain in the city. The deeper into the conversation Abraham goes, "the more fully sensible does he become of the miserable and abject condition of men."⁵¹ With each new phrase, Abraham becomes more hesitant and apologetic as he probes deeper into the mysteries of God's justice and mercy. We should probably also note, however, that Yahweh's language becomes darker over the course of the conversation: first, Yahweh uses fairly positive language to say he will "spare the whole place" for fifty righteous (Gen. 18:26), but then that he will "not destroy" (Gen. 18:28), that he will "not do" (Gen. 18:29, 30), and finally, again, that he will "not destroy" (Gen. 18:31, 32).⁵²

Why, then, does Abraham stop at the number ten? As we mentioned earlier, Abraham does not

seem interested in sparing Sodom if there are *no* righteous people, but only that the righteous not be swept away with the wicked (cf. Gen. 18:23). In the next chapter we will see that not even one righteous person (Lot) is enough to spare the city. Instead, “The city was destroyed and Lot was taken out of the city—a scenario not anticipated in Abraham’s line of questions in Genesis 18.”⁵³ But what about even five? Commentators have offered many suggestions about why Abraham does not ask any more questions, but Kenneth Mathews probably offers the best explanation: “It may be that Abraham has learned that the number is unimportant, for God is merciful and will discriminate between the wicked and the righteous.”⁵⁴ God has graciously permitted Abraham to ask many questions about how many righteous people would be enough to spare the city. God’s goal was never to define righteousness according to a formula, but according to his *character*. After interacting with God, Abraham now recognizes that God truly is the just Judge of all the earth. Once this purpose is accomplished, God went on his way, and Abraham returned home (Gen. 18:33).

Eventually, God will satisfy us in himself; however, this does not mean that he will answer every question, or give us everything we want. Instead, God uses these questions to draw us closer to himself. The more we ask and the more we listen to God’s answers in his word, the more we see God’s righteous character reaffirmed so that we can trust him even without all the answers. Then, God begins to shift our attention away from our own needs to start recognizing the needs of those around us. What we have learned in our dialogue with God we must then turn around and teach to others (Gen. 18:19). Discipleship is not just for our own, personal, private improvement. Discipleship requires us to learn so that we can then lead others in what God has given us. By this ongoing process of growth for the sake of others, God accomplishes his mission of making disciples of every nation for the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:18–20). By this, God will fulfill his promises to Abraham in full by blessing all the nations of the earth in Abraham’s offspring, Jesus Christ, for all eternity.

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you struggled to trust authority in general? Where have your suspicions been accurate? Where have your suspicions been misguided? More specifically, where have you struggled to trust God’s authority? What questions of justice and righteousness stood behind your concerns? What parts of God’s word helped you to trust God’s righteous character?
2. What missional purpose does God have for revealing his word to us (Gen. 18:19)? Beyond teaching us, how does God want us to use his word to teach others? Why does God put a unique emphasis on teaching our children? Why does God also emphasize teaching the whole household of faith? What is the ultimate goal of teaching God’s righteousness and justice?
3. Is God’s wrath righteous? Does God’s wrath qualify as justice? Why might someone argue that God’s wrath is neither righteous nor just? What does the Bible teach about God’s wrath? What would be lost if God never revealed his wrath against evil in the world? How does God’s wrath fit into his being the Judge of all the earth who does what is just?
4. How does God invite Abraham into intercessory prayer for justice in this passage? Why does God do this? What does this intercessory prayer accomplish? What would be lost if God did not invite

Abraham to intercede? Why doesn't God simply reveal his purposes and then close the discussion? How do you take advantage of God's open invitation to intercession?

Notes

1. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 49.
2. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 167.
3. Kidner, *Genesis*, 143.
4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 17.
5. “The addition of the adjective ‘powerful’ (cf. Num 14:12; Deut 9:14; 26:5) and the substitution of ‘nations’ for ‘families’ and ‘clans’ seems to enhance the original promise.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.)
6. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 17.
7. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 350.
8. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 18.
9. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 18.
10. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
11. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 18.
12. Calvin, *Genesis*, 480–81. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>
13. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 350.
14. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
15. Calvin, *Genesis*, 482. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>
16. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
17. Calvin, *Genesis*, 481. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>
18. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
19. Kidner, *Genesis*, 143.
20. “The notion of an internalized obedience found in this verse is remarkably close to the terms of the new covenant found in the prophetic literature: ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it in their heart’ (Jer 31:33) and is deeply rooted in the theology of Deuteronomy (‘The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart...in order that you might live,’ Dt 30:6).” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 168.)
21. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
22. Kidner, *Genesis*, 143.
23. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 49–50.
24. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 20.
25. Walton, *Genesis*, 475.
26. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 20.
27. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
28. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 20.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.
30. “Both narrative and legal sections of the OT provide evidence that the basic nuance in this word is the cry of the oppressed because of harsh treatment. For legal evidence we may turn to Exod. 22:22–23, the cry of the widow or the orphan who have been oppressed; Deut. 14:25 [*sic*; Deut. 24:15?], the cry of the oppressed hired servant. The root occurs in narratives such as the Cain–Abel story, with the voice of the blood of murdered Abel crying to God (Gen. 4:10), and in the story describing the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt

(Exod. 2:23; 3:7, 9); it is also the cry that results from the divine judgment on Egypt (Exod. 11:6; 12:30). Similar to these references is the use of the root in Jeremiah to refer to the scream of terror that is heard when an individual or city is attacked and ravaged (Jer. 18:22; 20:16; 25:36; 48:3–5, 34; 49:21; 50:46; 51:54. In summary, the *clamor* or *cry* in Scripture is the cry of those who receive, illegitimately or legitimately, brutal punishment.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 20–21.)

31. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 351.

32. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 50.

33. Walton, *Genesis*, 475.

34. This is the view of Gordon Wenham: “Here at last the identity of the visitors is clarified: one is or represents the LORD; the other two are angelic companions. When they arrive in Sodom, they are called angels (19:1). It is never explicitly said that the LORD entered Sodom; the underlying assumption is no doubt that he could not endure the presence of such sin. Even the angels are most reluctant to stay a night (19:2).” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 51.)

35. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 168.

36. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 51.

37. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 168.

38. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 23.

39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 52.

40. Kidner, *Genesis*, 144.

41. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 24.

42. Calvin, *Genesis*, 487. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>

43. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 24–25.

44. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 170.

45. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 52.

46. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 24–25.

47. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 52.

48. Calvin, *Genesis*, 489. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>

49. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 351–52.

50. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 51.

51. Calvin, *Genesis*, 490. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxiv.i.html>>

52. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 53.

53. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 170.

54. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 230.