

Abraham's Visitors

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[0 : 00] I would like you to open up your Bibles to Genesis chapter 18.

! We're not going to be covering the entire chapter this morning, but we're going to be covering a little more than half of it.

And so we're going to begin in verse 1 and read all the way down through verse 21. And I know that you just got seated, but as you find your place there, I'd like you to stand to your feet and honor the Word of God as we read together.

Moses writes in Genesis 18, 1, And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.

When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree while I bring a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves.

[1 : 22] And after that, you may pass on since you have come to your servant. So they said, Do as you have said. And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, Quick, three saas of fine flour, knead it and make cakes.

And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf tender and good and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them.

And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, Where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, She's in the tent. The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, shall have a son.

And Sarah was listening at the door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure?

The Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time, I will return to you about this time next year and Sarah shall have a son.

[2 : 33] But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. He said, No, but you did laugh. Then the men set out from there and they looked down towards Sodom.

And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, 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.

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.

Then the Lord said, Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave. I will go down to see whether they have done all together according to the outcry that has come to me.

And if not, I will know. Father, we thank you for this word. We thank you that your spirit inspired Moses to record this day in the life of Abraham so that we might be taught and so that we might come to better understand who you are and what you require of us.

[3 : 42] So teach us, we ask through your word, we pray in Christ's name. Amen. You guys take a seat. Moses was the prophet with whom God spoke face to face.

Jesus, unlike any other prophet, unlike anyone else in the history of Israel, we are told that God spoke with Moses face to face. And then fast forward several centuries where you find King David. King David, we are told, was a man after God's own heart so that he was unique in his affections for God and in the magnitude of his affections for God.

And both of these men, both of their names have been sort of tossed about as contenders for the greatest figure in the Old Testament. Who is the greatest person in the story of the Old Testament? Of course, if you ask the question, who's the greatest person in the Bible? Obviously, you come to the answer of Jesus Christ. But who is the greatest man? Who is the greatest human being in the Old Testament? Both of these men have been set forward.

[4 : 43] And yet, as we've been walking through the life of Abraham, we've been given reason to believe that maybe that title should go to Abraham. I mean, after all, he is known as Father Abraham.

He is the father of the Jewish people, the father of the Israelite nation. But even more than that, I think he could be thrown out as a contender.

His name could be put forward because Abraham, unlike these other men, is actually called in the Old Testament the friend of God. In fact, if you hold your place in Genesis and turn near to the back of your Old Testament to Isaiah chapter 41, you find these words in Isaiah 41 verse 8.

God says, But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend. God himself, speaking through the prophet to the nation of Israel, looks back to their founding father, and he describes him as my friend.

The New Testament writers pick up on this. James refers to Abraham as God's friend. In James chapter 2 verse 23, we read that the scripture was fulfilled that says, and now we get a quote from Genesis 15.

[5 : 57] Abraham believed God and was counted to him as righteousness. And then this note by James. And he was called a friend of God. So while Moses speaks to God face to face, while David is a man after God's own heart, Abraham is uniquely the friend of God.

And yet nowhere in the book of Genesis do we find Abraham described by that terminology.

Nowhere in these chapters is Abraham actually called the friend of God. So why does God looking back refer to Abraham as his friend?

Why does James looking back upon the Old Testament say that it was because of Abraham's faith credited as righteous that he was called a friend? Why do they come to this terminology? Well, I think it's largely due to the contents of this particular chapter and the way that Abraham interacts with God, the way that Abraham responds to God's appearance before him.

But I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself. Because if you notice, the text tells us in verse 1 that the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the tent, but that he looks up and he sees three men.

Abraham actually sees three men. We are told that the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah himself, appears to Abraham. But what Abraham actually sees are three men.

[7 : 21] And there's been a lot of speculation, obviously. Anytime you have statements like these, people tend to go rampant with their speculation. There's been a lot of speculation about who are the three men? How do they relate to the Lord?

And does Abraham recognize as he realize who he's dealing with? Some have suggested perhaps the three men or the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I don't think that that's necessarily the case.

I don't think that's the case because as you read further on in Genesis, you're led to believe something contrary to that. In fact, if you'll glance at Genesis chapter 19 verse 1, we are told this in reference to these three men.

It says that the two angels came to Sodom. That's after we've been told that two of the men have left. So that we know that at least two of these three men who have appeared to Abraham suddenly here as he sits under his tent in the heat of the day, two of these men are actually angels appearing as human beings.

And that's not uncommon at all. When you read through the resurrection accounts in the Gospels, some have been perplexed to find that some Gospels describe a man or men standing and others describe angels standing and there's been some confusion.

[8 : 28] But the reality is that angels frequently appear as men throughout the Scriptures. And that's the case here as well. Two of these men are actually angels.

But that doesn't account for the statement in verse 1 that the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre. Who is the third man? The Lord and these two angels appear. They didn't suddenly appear immediately in front of him.

They're off at a distance. But did they suddenly appear before his eyes? Or was it simply that that was the point in time at which Abraham was able to see them and make them out? We don't know. So we don't know immediately if Abraham knows that these are divine visitors.

But he certainly recognizes that they are special. That they are to be honored and revered. We know that first of all because he bows down to them. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed down to the earth.

And listen to how he addresses them. He says, Oh Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Now, I don't want you to confuse the word Lord here with the word Lord in verse 1.

[9 : 35] I've mentioned this numerous times. Every time we're in the Old Testament, I feel like I have to mention this. But anytime you see the word Lord or the word God in all capital letters, then that's God's personal name.

Yahweh or some say Jehovah. But if you see the word Lord in lowercase capital L and then lowercase O-R-D, most of the time it's a different word that simply recognizes that someone is supreme over you.

They are sovereign over you. They are a kind of ruler. They ought to be recognized as some sort of authority. And so Abraham addresses these men as some kind of authority.

One of them in particular, because it's in the singular, he addresses and recognizes that they are someone above him. And then the question that he asks them, If I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

This is actually a fairly frequent phrase in the Old Testament. If I have found favor in your sight. And some translations render it, if I have found grace in your sight.

[10 : 37] Because the word translated favor is also the word that's oftentimes translated grace. But when we have it in this particular type of a phrase, what we're looking at is a phrase that is always spoken by a subordinate to a superior.

That's what this phrase indicates. And I thought long and hard about what sort of English expression might we use to better capture the overall meaning of this phrase.

Because if we translate it literally, it sounds a bit strange. If I have found grace in your sight, we tend to think of grace merely simply as God's unmerited favor. And there's good reason for that from the New Testament.

But clearly the word is being used differently at times in the Old Testament. And so I think probably maybe a good way to conceive of this phrase is to say something like, if you take any pleasure in me, if you are delighted by me in any sort of a way, that might be a good way to render it.

Because Abraham is saying, if I have any standing before you, if you would be so kind as and pleased to stop and let me serve you, let me act and behave as your servant.

[11 : 53] That's Abraham's attitude toward them. So that we know that he recognizes that this is a superior. We know that he recognizes that he ought to behave in some sort of servant manner.

But we do not yet know if Abraham recognizes who specifically it is that he's dealing with here. We don't know at all if he knows just yet. And there's no moment of epiphany as we read through the story.

There's perhaps maybe a slow realization on the part of Abraham. Or maybe for Abraham it's a small leap from recognizing that these are special visitors to recognizing that this is the Lord himself.

But Abraham reacts in a way that Moses, the writer of this book, wants us to notice. Abraham responds to these guests by doing exactly what a person ought to do, regardless of whether or not you recognize who it is that you're dealing with.

Abraham responds with an incredible display of hospitality. And you might say, well, why are you highlighting that? Why does that stand out? I think that it stands out because throughout chapters 18 and 19, one of the things that Moses is doing as he records the events as they unfold is he's creating a contrast for us between Abraham in chapter 18 and Lot, Abraham's nephew, in chapter 19.

[13 : 19] We'll get to Lot in a few weeks, but what we're going to see with Lot is that Lot is not an altogether bad figure. He's in a bad situation. He's made some bad choices so that he finds himself

in an almost hopeless situation if it's not for the mercy and grace of God.

But Lot's reaction to the visitation of the two angels as they approach is not altogether dissimilar to Abraham's. Lot, as Abraham is sitting outside his tent, Lot is sitting outside at the city gates.

Just as Abraham prepares a meal, so also Lot prepares a meal. But in every way, what Lot is able to do falls short of what Abraham is able to do.

Lot is only able to prepare some unleavened bread, some unleavened cakes for these two angelic visitors. Whereas Abraham, he has Sarah get the finest of flour.

He goes and he slaughters one of his best calves that he has. Abraham prepares a real banquet, a genuine good meal for these men as they come and speak to him.

[14:26] Lot makes the feeble attempt, good-hearted most likely, and yet he falls short. So that Moses is creating for us this contrast.

Not so that we'll think Lot is so terrible, but so that we'll see how much Abraham rises above Lot in these instances. Abraham is the kind of host that God requires us to be at all times.

There is, running throughout the Scriptures, there is this theme of hospitality. The demand throughout the Scriptures that we treat strangers with a kind of kindness that can't be expected to be found in the world.

So there are numerous Old Testament passages addressed to the issue of, what do you do, Israelites, when you have foreigners in your midst? What do you do when you have those that are sojourners? How do you treat them? And there are laws dedicated to protecting and preserving the rights of non-Israelites when they find themselves in the land of Israel, instructing the Israelites how to be hospitable towards them, how to care for them, how to make sure that their needs are met and they don't find themselves among God's people being abused or being ignored.

Throughout the Scriptures, we find this strain as it runs. Be hospitable. Be kind. Look for ways to serve those around you, especially strangers, especially those who are from the outside and who don't quite have a place and don't quite yet fit.

[16:02] In fact, the writer of Hebrews, I believe, perhaps drawing upon the incidents of Genesis chapter 18, gives us this command. Hebrews chapter 13, verse 1.

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Who? Well, Abraham, for one, Abraham is entertaining angels. Abraham is showing hospitality to these men who, for all he knows, are simply strangers.

Again, he recognizes their superiority, but does he know who they are? We're given no indication so far in the text that he does. And yet, he treats them in the way that the Scriptures would have us to treat all strangers.

Abraham serves as an example for us in this passage as to how we are to conduct ourselves when we are dealing with others around us. He reaches out to them.

[17:06] He begs to serve them. And then he serves them not what he has left over. He doesn't just give them a little bit. He doesn't just kind of throw out the crumbs that he has.

He gives them the very best that he has. And I fear that we live such fast-paced lives that oftentimes that's not even an option for us.

Sometimes we're so busy that we don't even have the time to stop and consider what do I need to do to help people around me? What do I need to do to assist my new neighbor who's moved in down the street?

Or what do I need to do to assist this co-worker who's clearly struggling with something?

Sometimes we busy ourselves and we find ourselves unable or at least unwilling because of the choices that we've made to be hospitable to other people.

Abraham, though, is perfectly positioned. He's resting in the cool of the day. And his attitude is as it ought to be. Because he doesn't look and see the men coming from afar and grow exasperated that his time of rest that he desperately needs is about to be cut short.

[18:26] He doesn't grow frustrated that they're showing up in the heat of the day and now he's going to have to run out into the fields in the heat of the day, find a calf, slaughter the calf, bring it back, and help Sarah to prepare a meal.

He doesn't seem to be bothered by that at all. In fact, he considers it a great and incredible honor to be able to serve them in this way. But we don't react that way many times.

In fact, we're so far from Abraham that sometimes we get irritated when other people interrupt our schedule so that we're going to have to cut short our binge watching on Netflix in order to help somebody out or do something.

And yet, the example of Abraham would point us in another direction. The example of Abraham would point us toward a self-sacrificing hospitality that extends even to the strangers that surround us.

But that's not an attitude that I believe comes out of nowhere for Abraham. We've seen Abraham. He's not perfect and he's not going to be perfect.

[19 : 33] I mean, we're going to get to chapter 20 and you're just going to want to facepalm at what Abraham does in chapter 20. I mean, he's not a perfect individual. He's full of all sorts of problems and he's made a lot of mistakes.

And yet here, he's come to a point in his life where at least regarding this issue, there has been a great amount of what we would call sanctification in his life.

Abraham has, in fact, been changed and transformed by God's work within him. Why do I say that? I say that because as you move down through Genesis 18, you get a peek into God's sort of internal dialogue.

Look at verse 16. Then the men set out from there and they looked down toward Sodom and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm 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?

[20 : 34] 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. Why is Abraham doing righteousness and justice at this point?

And why does God expect him to command his children after him to do righteousness and justice? Because, he says, I have chosen him.

Literally, what the text says is for I have known him. God set his electing love upon Abraham in eternity past. He called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans.

He has been protecting him. He has been guiding him. He has been correcting him. He has been turning his course back in the right direction when it needs to be turned. God has been at work.

The reason that Abraham is at a place where he is prepared and ready to show extraordinary hospitality to these three men as they approach him is because God has chosen him.

[21 : 37] And God, because he has chosen him and set his love upon him and known him in eternity past, God has, in fact, been doing a work within Abraham's heart. Which means that the only hope that you and I have for us to actually become the kind of people that we know we ought to be is for God himself to be at work within us.

For God himself, for the grace of God to be changing us and moving us and motivating us. And so what we ought to be seeking on a daily basis is saying, God, I want the evidence of your having known me to show forth in my life.

I want more than simply to say, at some point in time, I made a decision for Christ or I made a commitment to Christ or I did some... I want more than that.

I want there to be actual evidence that you set your love upon me, that you set me apart, that you rescued me and delivered me from my sins, and that you are, in fact, by the power of your Spirit, transforming me and changing me.

This is what the friends of God look like. This is how the friends of God conduct themselves in the world.

[22 : 54] In fact, I want you to hold your place in Genesis and turn over one more time to the New Testament, to the Gospel of John. In John chapter 15, Jesus is speaking to His disciples.

He's already given them a commandment to love one another. And now He says in verse 15, No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends.

I have called you friends. For all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. Now listen to this. You'll see a connection with Genesis 18. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.

See a pattern here. God chose Abraham. He knew Abraham intimately from eternity past. He set His electing love upon him. He knew him.

And therefore, as Abraham matured and as God worked in his life, even despite Abraham's pitfalls, as God worked within him, Abraham eventually began to bear fruit.

[24 : 17] And Jesus says, You, my friends, I have chosen you and I have appointed you for a purpose so that you might go and bear fruit. And chief among the fruit that we ought to bear in context in John chapter 15 is love, but not merely love toward our brothers.

That should come first, but also by extension, love to others around us we ought to constantly be bearing the fruit of love which shows itself in many ways, but among them in hospitality towards strangers around us.

That's exactly what Abraham is doing as the Lord appears to him. And as the writer of Hebrews says, there are times when we entertain angels unaware.

prayer. There are times when God will send people into our lives, not angelic messengers necessarily, but there will be times when he sends people and circumstances into our lives to test us, to see how will they react.

Will they react as the people of God? Will they behave as those who actually know me and love me and can be called my friend? Will they behave as Abraham does here? Will they behave as Jesus instructs His disciples to behave?

[25 : 41] The Gospel is in fact the good news that God has made His enemies into His friends. That's what the Gospel is about.

The Gospel is about God coming into the world in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ, and actually bearing the penalty not for those who are already His friends, but for those who are currently His enemies, who are opposed to Him in every way, and yet He bears the penalty for their sins so that they might become His friends, so that their sins might be atoned for, so that the righteousness of His very own Son might be counted as theirs, so that those of us who were once His enemies might now become His friends.

And Jesus Himself says, these things, these things I'm doing, I have chosen you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.

And we live in a world that is just teeming with anger and frustration and all sorts of problems around us. You can turn on the news, you can read the paper, you can look through your Facebook feed or whatever it is that you check out and what you will see is you will see that we do in fact live in a world that is fueled much of the time by anger and frustration and the people of God are called to be those who are not fueled by anger and frustration, who don't have an axe to grind, who are not looking to get even all of the time, but who in fact are looking to sacrifice themselves and their time and their goods and whatever else they might have to sacrifice, not just on behalf of those that they know and care about, but on behalf even of strangers.

That's what makes the Christian church so different. In the early years of Christianity, in the early centuries, Christians were ridiculed because quite frankly we did things that looked to the outside to be strange things.

[27 : 58] The Romans thought that most Christians were atheists because they refused to bow down to any idols, refused to acknowledge Caesar or any other Roman deity. Refused.

So they labeled Christians as atheists. The Romans, in fact, many times, they spread rumors that Christians were actually cannibals because behind closed doors, what did we do? Apparently, we were drinking blood and eating flesh.

Apparently. they thought strange things about us and Christians were persecuted for some of those things. But what you will not find, you will not find frequent condemnations of Christians for failing to show kindness and hospitality to others.

In fact, there was a kind of incredulity that Christians would do strange things for other people. That Christians would actually take in abandoned infants from those who did not want them.

Christians would, they would go out of their way and sometimes even sacrifice their own health and their own livelihood to help other people. This is what has made the people of God stand out.

[29 : 02] And whenever we veer away from that and we begin to look like the world, we begin to react like the world, we begin to place our confidence in the things of the world around us, we begin to look less like what Christ has appointed us to look like.

we begin to look again like those who are His enemies. In all that we do, we will either at any given time look like the enemies of God or we will look like the friends of God.

Because the friends of God follow their Master's lead. Jesus says, no greater love, no greater love has anyone than this that He lay His life down for His friends.
Let's pray.