

Incredible Forbearance

Genesis 18:16-33

I really don't like haggling, bartering with people over the price of an item. For that reason, I intensely dislike buying and selling cars. The whole situation of haggling with a salesman just irritates me. I'm glad that we don't normally have to shop that way, though I find myself doing just that when buying and selling things on Facebook Marketplace or local yard sales.

In that context, if you read our text this morning quickly, you might come away with the idea that Abraham is actually bartering with God, trying to make his best deal. If you look carelessly, Abraham almost appears to be an auctioneer. "Give me fifty. Fifty righteous men. Give me forty. Now thirty. Thirty, now twenty. Twenty, now ten. Ten, SOLD. Sold, for ten righteous men.

But to speak in such a way risks being irreverent, even blasphemous, and I will do nothing of the kind, for Abraham is not bartering with God to get a bargain. He is pleading with Almighty God on behalf of the five cities of the plain, represented by Sodom and Gomorrah. Far from irreverent bartering, this is an incredibly profound prayer, which one commentator calls "the most remarkable example of intercessory prayer in the Bible."

Another commentator writes that "before our astounded eyes are unfolded the details of a plea that stands without parallel in the annals of history. Never [has a] mortal prayed as this mortal. At the same time the writer relates the story with consummate skill, letting the tension grow with each successive plea. Never does Abraham wax presumptuous. Well aware of his unworthiness, he pleads his case carefully."

But the context for this great prayer of intercession is still a revelation from God, an inspired revelation. Like the passage we studied last week, this is still infallible prophecy. That is, the Lord is speaking. With authority and omniscience. The Lord is still accompanied by the two angels, and what he so clearly reveals is the distinction made so obvious between the righteous and the wicked. Abraham represents the righteous, and so,

I. THE LORD MAKES KNOWN THE DISTINCTIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF ABRAHAM.

What we see, actually, is a very personal and quite intimate conversation initiated by God with a man considered a trusted friend, a man initiated into the very counsels of God. We read in Isaiah 41:8 that Abraham was a friend of God, a title confirmed in the NT by James 2:23. "And he was called the friend of God." Since Abraham was a friend of God, God speaks to him personally, revealing to him the impending judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plains.

v.16-17

And what is made clear and obvious is that,

A. Abraham's position was secure on the basis of God's sovereign election.

Abraham was friend of God because God chose him. God promised to bless him because God chose him. God reveals his will to Abraham because he chose him to be the channel of his blessing not only to the nation of Israel, but to all the nations of the world.

We see that in,
v.18-19a

The whole foundation of this is God's election, God's sovereign choice. God chose Abraham. Verse 19 says that God

“knew” Abraham, and it is sometimes translated “chosen.” That Hebrew word is so personal, so intimate, so precious. And, therefore, Abraham’s position was secure. That’s a good thing, for we’ve already seen a couple times when Abraham stumbled. Entering Egypt, he lied about the identity of his wife Sarah. And when she suggested that he lie with her servant Hagar to produce a son, he went cheerfully along with the whole misguided plan.

But his human folly notwithstanding, his position was secure, which should be a great encouragement to us. He would be the father of many nations. All the nations would be blessed through him. For God had promised. God had chosen him, from the chosen line of Shem, from Noah. And ultimately back to Seth and then Adam. That’s what it means for God to say “I have known him.”

But notice how grace and law fit together.
v.19

“I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice.” More simply, “I have chosen him so that he might obey the law.”

B. God chose Abraham in order to live a life of righteousness.

Notice this crucial difference. God didn’t chose Abraham because he was righteous. He chose him in order to make him righteous. He didn’t choose him because he obeyed the law. He chose him in order that he might obey the law.

Or, in other words, he didn’t choose him because of his good works. He chose him in order that he might do good works. In perfect harmony with the words which James so forcefully says

with direct reference to Abraham, “faith without works is dead.”

So Abraham represents all of God’s true children, all those saved by faith, all those chosen in Christ are chosen in order to do good works. I can prove the truthfulness of that by the clear words of,

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

And for Abraham, also as our example, those good works, that righteousness and obedience, is part and parcel with the exhortation to teach the next generation. The righteousness of God is not only how you should live, but it is what you should teach your children. That, of course, goes along with the promise of the covenant which we studied last week ago in chapter 17, the promise which is for you and for your children. The sign of the covenant is also for you and for your children.

With that promise comes responsibility.

v.19b “...that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”

And God is so gracious to reward the good works which he has worked in us! You see, it begins with grace. God chooses us. Such grace produces obedience and good works. And God’s goal in grace is to bring his promised reward, “that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.”

So Abraham continues to shine forth as a righteous man, a man who was saved by faith and who lived by faith. Indeed, Abraham is a friend of God.

I believe that there a nearly universal desire among men to have friends. We have an instinctive need to be loved, and when that need goes un-met, all sorts of horrible psychological problems can result. But this text drives us to the deepest psychological issue within us all, the desire to be accepted by God and acceptable to God. It is the desire to be God's friend. Friendship is a mature relationship, more intimate than merely father and son. And that position of friendship with God is made secure on the basis of God's sovereign election. God has elected us to be his friends. And our friendship is demonstrated and held together by our life of righteousness.

We have so much to learn from this great man of faith! We have so much to learn from his relationship with God. May we grow and mature so fully that God could say of us, "He is my friend." "She is my friend."

Next, let's look at a contrast. The contrast of Abraham with Sodom and Gomorrah.
v.20-22

Here,

II. THE LORD MAKES KNOWN THE DISTINCTIVE WICKEDNESS OF EVIL MEN.

It is a nearly absolute contrast. The righteousness of Abraham. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. We'll study more of the specifics of the sinfulness of those cities next week in chapter 19, but let's begin looking at that sin by noting that,

A. God views all sin personally. v.20-21

The sin has become an outcry to God. Speaking entirely from a human perspective in order to communicate with us more

effectively, God goes personally to inspect the cities and to investigate the reports he has heard. These words don't deny the omnipotence of God. God knows everything perfectly, and he knew the sin of those cities perfectly. But the point is that he consciously, and, in the appearance of these three men, physically, views the situation himself.

Without a doubt, nothing is hidden from God. The point is also made very forcefully that God is a just judge, and carries out none of his judgment without a full and complete understanding of all the facts. God views all sin personally. Each of us should take that as a great warning as well, for nothing you do, nothing that you think or say, is hidden from God's personal view. Don't ever think that you could possibly hide anything from him!

However, we see something peculiar here. This sin is particularly bad. Or to use a big word that is very descriptive, this sin is particularly heinous. Heinous means grossly wicked or abominable. This is an abomination. The truth is that,

B. Sin is particularly heinous in some circumstances.

Now, I don't want to be confusing. All sin is sin. All sin, every sin, is worthy of death. One single sin, however small or insignificant it might be, justly brings upon the sinner the condemnation of eternal hell. We ought never to think that there are any little sins. But there are occasions when we view sin as particularly horrible. Heinous. This is one of them.

Our shorter catechism affirms that "every sin deserves God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come." But it also affirms that "some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others."

Our larger catechism lists some of those aggravations that make sin particularly heinous, things such as sins by those of greater age, greater experience or grace, those in positions of teaching and leadership whose example is likely to be followed by others. Also, sins directly against God, his attributes and his worship. And some sins in themselves are more offensive, sins which break forth into public words and actions, sins which don't allow for any reparation or restitution, and sins done willfully, boastfully, maliciously, frequently, with delight or continuance.

Actually, the list in the larger catechism goes on quite a bit more. The point is, some sins are particularly offensive to the Lord. Such was the case of Sodom and Gomorah. This sin of Sodom and Gomorah was notorious, as we read in,

Gen.13:13 "But the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD."

Their sin brought an outcry unto the Lord, described for us in, v.20-21

God says, "this sin is very grave." He says that it is grievous, so grievous that it cries out to God for justice. Literally, the word is heavy, exceedingly heavy. Exceedingly grave. Elsewhere, that word heavy is the word often translated "glory." To be "heavy" is to be important, to be significant, to be weighty. And usually the word has positive connotations, meaning glorious. But here, the connotations are all negative. This is the exact opposite of glory. It is grievous sin, heinous sin.

And,

C. Particularly heinous sin cries out to God for judgment.

The whole context here declares that God must bring judgment, and bring it quickly, so horrible is the wickedness of the land.

v.20-22

Indeed, the message God has for Abraham is a warning of that very judgment, a warning given in advance to that righteous man.

v.17

The focus of this passage, however, is upon Abraham's response to this warning. Abraham enters into a dialogue with God, pleading with him on behalf of the cities, pleading for mercy and protection for the righteous. Through this pleading of Abraham, however, I want to keep our focus on God. And so what is revealed here is not simply a praiseworthy demonstration of faithful prayer, but rather a full understanding of God's justice.

Through this prayer of Abraham,

III. THE LORD MAKES KNOWN HIS DISTINCTIVE JUSTICE.

Let me read the entire conversation,

v.23-33

There is so much in here, let me try to explain it to you. Abraham understood the principles of God's justice. And he understood God's grace. So, with no contradiction between those two of God's attributes, he engages God in a very deliberate and logical petition. Actually, it is a plea for mercy, a plea for protection and salvation to any who would be found to be godly.

Abraham prays for such mercy upon the godly because he understands that,

A. God's justice means that the wicked will be completely destroyed.

If Abraham didn't believe in God's perfect justice and in his condemning wrath upon sin and unbelief, then he wouldn't have senses any obligation to pray as he did. But he understood the end of the wicked. They will perish. They will be destroyed, for their sin.

Notice how Abraham describes that justice.
v.23 "Will you destroy..."

That word for "destroy" means to destroy, to consume. Sometimes translated "sweeping away." It is a word of hostile judgment. Condemnation. God's wrath would be severe and it would be certain. The wicked will be completely destroyed. Again,

v.24

Same word used. The righteous will survive only if God spares them.

v.25

There the word is to "kill," to slay, to put to death. God's vengeance in response to sin is final. Even as he explained to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, "In the day you eat of that one tree you shall surely die." But as an essential part of glory, his justice allows for some to be spared.

B. God's justice includes provisions for the righteous to be spared.

It is clear that Abraham understands this, he understands the nature of God. And his appeal to God is not the least bit selfish nor improper, for he properly appeals to God's own character.

v.25

There is an obvious answer to that question. "Of course the Judge of all the earth will do right." By definition. By absolute

necessity. Abraham appeals to God's own definition of righteousness and fairness. It would not be right to treat the wicked and the righteous alike. Far be it from God to be unjust. Abraham is confident that God will do right. He has absolute confidence in God's fairness.

Yet, Abraham's question is not inappropriate. It is not disrespectful nor irreverent. It does not accuse God of wrongdoing, but rather calls upon him to act according to his own glory. Therefore, God grants Abraham's request.

v.26

The word "spare" literally means to lift up, and it carries the distinct idea of lifting up our sins, that is, lifting them off of us. Removing them from us. The word is used in several other significant descriptions of God, consistently translated "forgive." Listen to how God is described and defined. First,

Exod. 34:6 "And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, 7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

Micah 7:18. "Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy."

God lifts up our sin away from us. He spares us. He forgives us. God granted Abraham's request.

v.26

Let's evaluate exactly what Abraham prays for. First, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, he selects the number 50. He asks God, "Will you spare the city for the sake of 50 righteous men?" Fifty is

quite a few, and the apparent injustice of their deaths would seem to suggest that maybe with so many, God would be merciful.

But then Abraham doesn't stop. He continues on, with consistent logic. He thinks to himself, "Since God will spare the city on account of fifty righteous men, what is the limit of his mercy? What is the cut-off point?" Abraham asks a very astute question.

v.28a

Will five fewer people make the difference? Will the absence of just five people determine that God will inflict his vengeance instead of demonstrating his forbearance? Just five men? The question could be, "Just one." And the answer is clear.

v.28b. "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it."

God is not bound by government quotas. Those five people are not merely statistics. Five fewer righteous men, leaving just 45, would not be sufficient cause to discontinue his forbearance. God doesn't draw arbitrary lines separating his justice and his mercy. Instead,

C. God's justice is joined with incredible forbearance.

This prayer is focused on that forbearance. Because of the presence of righteous men, God is willing to leave the wicked unpunished, for a time. And Abraham is addressing God so honorably, understanding his own sinfulness even before God.

v.27

So he continues, and doesn't stop with the question of 45.

v.29a

The answer,

v.29b

Again, with great humility, he continues,

v.30a

And the answer,

v.30b

Again,

v.31

And one more time,

v.32

Here Abraham ended, probably because the point was established. Incredible forbearance. Abraham doesn't go below ten, because then the impression would be that he was simply looking out for his own family with his own selfish interests. Actually, we're told, that the Lord finished speaking with Abraham.

v.33

We could well apply this conversation to the whole sense of God leaving the wicked unpunished in our age, for it does often seem that the wicked prosper and succeed with punishment. It seems that the Lord's final judgment is hindered, or slow in coming.

Peter certainly answers that objection,

2Pet. 3:3. "...knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, 4 and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." 5 For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, 6 by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. 7 But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. 8 But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The

Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Incredible forbearance. Incredible patience. God is still calling men to repentance and salvation, so the world has not yet been destroyed. But Peter gives us a fitting conclusion, a warning. This incredible forbearance of God is not unlimited. It will come to an end, in the fullness of time, when “the sin of Amorite has been made full.” And so we read,

2Pet. 3:10 “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”

The truth of the matter is this. As Peter would continue,
2 Peter 3:15. “...consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation.”

So today is still the day of salvation, because the Lord is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” With incredible forbearance, he is withholding his final act of eternal justice.

Yet, with that judgment impending, the message proclaimed by the church must be a call to repentance and faith. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, I end with this gospel invitation, an invitation I give to you, and one which you ought to give to others,

Isa. 55:6 “Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.”