

# Covenant with the Righteous One

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning, brothers and sisters. My name's Elizabeth, and I'm going to read the Bible now from Genesis chapter 18. O Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourself under the tree while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, 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 seers 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 cattle that had been 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 tent 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?

[ 1 : 50 ] 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 will have a son.

But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. And 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 on 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 altogether according to the outcry that has come to me, and if not, I will know.

[ 3 : 09 ] So the men turned from there and went down towards Sodom, but Abraham stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said, Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for fifty righteous who are in it? 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 it from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just? And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.

Abraham answered and said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking.

Will you destroy the whole city for the lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there. Again he spoke to them and said, Suppose forty are found there.

[ 4 : 19 ] He answered, For the sake of forty I will not do it. Then he said, O 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.

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.

Then he said, O let not the Lord be angry. I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there. He answered, For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.

And the Lord went on his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place. This is the word of the Lord. Good morning everyone.

Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Heavenly Father, I pray for your help to understand your word.

[ 5 : 29 ] Help us to see that every part of scripture is written for our benefit. Help us to be engaged and show us more of your son.

May we, at the end of this passage, may our hearts be singing as we just sang. Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer.

But may we know with all our heart that his wounds have paid our ransom. So please speak to each one of us through your word as we sit under it now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, when a couple gets married, I'm not the only one to observe this, but often, see if you agree with me, but often, at least one of them struggles to let go of thinking of themselves as an independent individual.

It can take some time and some people seem to never learn. They want the benefits of companionship, but they continue to think individualistically.

[ 6 : 36 ] Whether it's having separate bank accounts, even though legally, it's we. It doesn't matter if it's two accounts. I'll check with John later. I'm pretty sure that's right. Feeling entitled to go out with friends, not making commitments together.

Not letting go of career aspirations, no matter what damage it is that it's causing to your family. Speaking poorly about their spouse as if it's their own issue and not yours.

Now, in your relationship with God, are you struggling to let go of thinking of yourself independently, individualistically, with your walk with God?

I think there's some symptoms of this is like your awareness of being close with God, at peace with God, goes up and down on your performance. your feelings, whether they're positive or negative, your devotion or your sin, your hopes and fears for the future.

I need to make this plural. Our hopes, I'm speaking to myself too, our hopes and fears for the future rest on what we can imagine we can do.

[ 8 : 06 ] Our ability to be faithful to God as if it rests on our shoulders to carry that out on our own. We can think of prayer.

We can think, oh yeah, of course, I can just waltz into God Almighty El Shaddai's presence on my own. really? Or, we think, I'm too unworthy.

I don't know how to pray. Do you see the Bible as basically a spiritual handbook to help you do what is right and avoid what is wrong?

I think these are all symptoms. We're struggling to let go that being in a relationship with God. We're struggling to let go of thinking individualistically that our walk depends on us.

Now, in chapter 18, you're just going to have to trust me here, I think that'll help us as we come to chapter 18. To help us see what this heavenly visit to Abraham and Sarah is about, I want to start, well, please have your Bibles open.

[ 9 : 20 ] I want to start in the obvious place, not in verse 1, but in verse 16. Now, again, I'm hoping this will be a bit of a key that unlocks this chapter for us.

Here in 16 to 19, we have what seems to be a bit of a humorous scene. The Lord is talking to himself or to the other two.

I think it's like in a play where a character steps forward to the front of stage and gives a monologue. And like in a play, when a character does that, we get a deeper insight into their character, their inner thoughts.

Here we see the inner resolve and purposes of God. So, verse 17 and 18. The Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do to Sodom?

We'll come to that later. Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.

[ 10 : 32 ] He's totally committed to his covenant with Abraham. Surely, he will become a great nation. He doesn't have a son yet. Surely, he'll be the father of many nations as we saw last week.

He's going to be the source of blessing to the entire world and so God shares his plans for the future like with a friend. I've chosen him, this one out of all the earth, I've chosen Abraham to bless

the entire world.

There is no blessing, there is no hope for any of us outside of Abraham, outside of this covenant with him.

Genesis sets up the whole Bible. The Bible is not a random collection of spiritual insights, it's a question, how is God going to restore the whole world like we see in Eden?

The answer, by keeping his covenant with Abraham. Abraham, I have chosen this one, Abraham.

Verse 19, I've 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.

[12:06] The covenant depends on Abraham and his descendants righteousness. Doing righteousness, living faithfully before God, doing justice, not mistreating others in any way.

Notice that so that the Lord, for the Lord to keep his promise, Abraham must be righteous.

Righteous we saw this last week at the start of chapter 17 verse 1 with the covenant.

Walk before me and be blameless. Abraham must be righteous. The hope of the world depends on it.

So in chapter 18 here's what I believe we're going to see. Verses 1 to 8 we see the righteousness of this one.

He's one who serves. Then in verses 9 to 15 all the covenant promises of God depend on the son of Abraham but this son is born not by what man can do but by promise.

[13:30] Then verse 20 to 33 we see Abraham blessing the nations. He's interceding with God on behalf of sinners. So that's where we're headed.

So verses 1 to 8 we have what appeared to Abraham to be three men on their journey. Now who are these three men?

We're told from the outset verse 1 that the Lord appeared to Abraham but he sees three men. Later on verse 27 these men continue on to the city of Sodom and Abraham is left alone with the Lord and then by 19 verse 1 we've got the two angels came to Sodom.

This is the one journey. Now throughout history some commentators have latched on to three. This must be the triune God.

I think that's just jumping at the number three a bit too quick. The language between angels and the Lord can be interchangeable.

[14:39] It goes from plural to singular throughout these chapters. Perhaps it's best to picture two angels appearing as men and the Lord appearing as a man. Now that raises more questions than it answers.

What is the Lord doing here appearing as a man? I'll leave that one with you. Abraham does seem to sense that one of them is superior.

Verse three he addresses singular. But we've got another question. When was Abraham aware?

When was he aware he was in the presence of the Lord?

Some say straight away like verse three oh Lord that that Lord could be just a title of respect. I don't think it's absolutely conclusive.

Some see the urgency and extravagance that Abraham goes to as he knew it was God. But when I was at Bible college I lived with a Nepalese couple and a Pakistani couple and there was a cultural difference that struck me.

[15:54] As a Westerner I would try and fit five things or six things into my day and then have someone over for dinner. They would spend the entire day and waste a whole day preparing for the meal at night just to put various dishes on the table.

I was thinking what a waste of time. As a teenager we once went to Japan and mum got talking to this older Japanese man and he invited us to his home and it wasn't a huge house.

I think he put one of his relatives in a hotel so that we could stay there and then they served us meat which has to be imported in Japan. It wasn't cheap. Just met us on the plane.

What we see here, all I'm trying to say is it doesn't necessarily mean he knows God himself has turned up for dinner. His care for these strangers is a great example of what the Bible means by hospitality.

Hospitality is not just have your friends over so that they can have you over. Everyone does that. Hospitality is you see someone with a need, you go out of your way to meet their need, to help them on their way at great cost to yourself.

[17:24] And does Yahweh really need Abraham to refresh him? I don't know. You're hearing where I'm headed but I don't think it is conclusive but I'm persuaded two other things push me towards Abraham did not know.

Until verse nine. The first is Hebrews 13.2 which all us believers are urged to practice hospitality and thereby some have entertained angels.

Now that's bizarre. Really? If it's not referring to here and Lot, I'm not quite sure. I could be forgetting something somewhere else in Scripture.

You can tell me later. But I'm guessing Hebrews is talking about here. And the second reason which I've already tried to set up in the sermon is that the covenant depends on Abraham walking blamelessly and the very next story is focused on what Abraham does.

Like we're told a lot of detail here. He's running like he's just sitting in the heat of the day. This is inconvenient.

[18:36] This is inconvenient. They show up unannounced in the heat of the day and he doesn't just slip inside his tent and just hope they pass by.

He runs out to them. He's eager to serve. Now they're not beneath him. He's the chosen one. But no, he's on his face respecting them.

They're only passing through. They can't return the favour. There's no social, financial gain for him. Instead, he's going to great costs to serve their needs.

He's going above and beyond. Three seers of flour, it's way too much for the number of guests. And he chooses a calf to give meat, which was a delicacy.

He's giving his best and he doesn't even eat it. He's standing there, as a waiter, while they eat. But two of these same men reach Sodom, same journey, they reach Sodom, and their visit, we're told, is a test to see if the senior Sodom really is as great.

[19:52] And what is the test? Strangers coming. They don't even give them a cup of water. They are in danger. They want to take from these strangers, not give.

And they're going to take it violently. I think the contrast between Abraham and Sodom is stark. I think we're seeing here his righteousness.

this. So what should we today learn from Abraham's costly service?

Let's not be too quick to draw a straight line from Abraham to us. I think when I was preparing this section of the sermon, I was grumbling about doing something for someone else that was just inconvenient, but it took me ten minutes and I was whinging about it.

And it took me a while to realise the irony of what I was writing. I don't think this is just a lesson on hospitality.

[21:08] Out of all the people of the earth, God Almighty has chosen him and entered into covenant and you might expect a man like that who has been elevated so high to stand on his greatness.

Others serve him, demand respect. I think we see his greatness and his righteousness in that he's lowering his face to the dirt.

He's serving others at great cost to himself. God's It's a beautiful picture.

I wonder how your life would change if that's your picture of greatness. The son of Abraham, many years later, his disciples were grumbling amongst themselves, who's the greatest?

greatest. And I wonder if Jesus had this story in mind when he replies in Luke 22. Who is the greater? One who reclines at table or the one who serves, who's standing by and serving the one eating at table?

[22:26] It is not the one who reclines at table, but I am among you as the one who serves. He's come to be a waiter. I think here Abraham is pointing to Christ.

Not to be waited upon but goes to great personal cost and here's his promise, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.

You get to eat and drink and Jesus is serving you. That's the gospel. I think we see his righteousness and he's pointing to the truly righteous son.

So Abraham is righteous. In verse 9, I think Abraham would know for sure these are no ordinary men he's hosting.

These visitors know his wife's name, Sarah. It's a name recalling the covenant promise and not much time has elapsed. It's very similar timing to chapter 17.

[ 23 : 42 ] The promise in chapter 17, Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. Now we're told Sarah is 90 years old.

We're told the way of women has ceased. I think that's saying she's way past menopause. Her language may even reveal a negative view of herself.

I'm worn out. Can you imagine how many disappointments Sarah has had in her 90 years? Longing every single month to finally have the pleasure of just one child.

that's a lot of disappointment. They tried to take matters into their own hands with Hagar and that just resulted in more misery.

I think she dare not raise her hopes again. And she laughs, probably in self-protection, but it's, she's laughing, she's chuckling, it's just absurd.

[ 25 : 00 ] It is impossible, God's promise. She's heard this promise through Abraham and the Lord visits her to reaffirm this promise in her hearing and she laughs in God's face.

If God showed her up to you and promised you what your heart has been longing for your whole life, and she laughs in disbelief.

We can sympathise with her, can't we? It is absurd. When waves of disappointment hit you relentlessly, we can resonate with Sarah.

God's promises seem so far removed from reality, don't they? I think we see here the reassurance of being in covenant relationship with Yahweh.

I think it's a little odd here that the Lord doesn't speak directly to Sarah, not until the very end. It's through Abraham. Abraham. I wonder if that's more than just ancient culture.

[ 26 : 29 ] I wonder if that's to remind us that all the blessings are through Abraham. Whatever the case, the Lord doesn't punish her. He doesn't have a go at her for her unbelief.

He doesn't let her forget. She lies to cover up her unbelief. But her unbelief, laughing in God's face, doesn't slow down or sidetrack God's covenant promises one bit.

He reaffirms the promise with stronger language. As far as I'm concerned, Sarah, it's scheduled in my diary. At the appointed time next year, I'm coming back and there will be a son.

He takes her eyes off herself. Is anything too wonderful? Too hard? Too extraordinary for the Lord? He's reassuring her. Now Sarah and Abraham, they would have had such a more beautiful night sky to look at than we did. They could look and see the wonder of what God could do.

[ 27 : 43 ] In all our light pollution, we just get these few little they must have seen a beautiful night sky. But how much more can we answer that question looking at the word of God in our time in history?

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? God? The delay in Isaac being born only serves to answer that question.

No, nothing. Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. The delay in the Messiah coming, it takes a long time for him to be born. That serves to answer this question.

Nothing is too impossible. And Sarah will laugh again in chapter 21. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him and Sarah said, God has made laughter for me.

Everyone who hears will laugh over me. Her laughter is transformed. Bitter, cynical, self-protecting, can't believe, to a laughter of wonder.

[ 28 : 51 ] Wonder is filling her heart. She laughs with joy. She laughs with such joy that she doesn't care that others will laugh seeing a 90-year-old breastfeeding.

I don't care. I'm full of wonder. But wasn't the strength of Sarah's faith, please see that, she laughed in God's face.

It was all because the Lord has made a covenant with Abraham and he keeps his covenant.

Nothing is too wonderful. many years later, another young, not another, a young woman was told she would have a son.

This woman asked, how is that possible? Sarah was impossible with her age. That's tricky, that's hard, that's impossible. She doesn't even have a husband.

And the angel replies, nothing will be impossible with God. The point for us today is that we can be caught up in Abraham's story.

[ 30 : 16 ] Who'd have thought that all God's covenant promises are yes in his son, simply by faith alone. Our life, our story, can feel ordinary, dull, or overshadowed by darkness, but if we're caught up in this, in Jesus' story, our life is filled with wonder.

All God's promises are yours. You can laugh. not bitter laugh, but whatever you're going through, wonder can fill your heart.

Your future is bound up in this son. Verse, verse 20.

we come to Abraham praying to the Lord, and many take this passage as an example, a lesson on prayer.

And yes, okay, learn from this about prayer, but it's so much more than that. We really need to see that. Here we see Abraham as the source of blessing to the nations.

[ 31 : 45 ] nations. It depends on him blessing the nations. The central theme here is justice.

Abraham's bold question to God, shall not the judge of all the earth be just?

Do what is just. have you talked to God like that lately? This is a bold prayer. Are you going to be just, God?

Are you going to do what is right? Now, Abraham, I don't think he's claiming to know more about justice than the Lord, as lots of people claim. Abraham, I am dust and ashes.

He is humble here, at the same time as being bold. But Abraham, because of his unique covenant intimacy with the judge of all the earth, he's acting as a priest.

And the Lord is inviting him to. He didn't need Abraham's permission to go to Sodom, but he's inviting, you're my chosen one, come, be a friend, be my confidant.

[ 33 : 03 ] Verse 17, I don't know if I should tell Abraham this, really when you say that to someone, you've already decided, should I tell you this? You've already decided, I trust you enough. And then verse 21, he says, I'm not fully decided yet.

He's inviting Abraham in. The angels walk off and the Lord is alone, he's giving an opportunity, come. Verse 23, despite already standing before the Lord, he seems to approach like a defense lawyer.

He's like Moses, interceding for sinful people. Now, many have a problem with a God of judgment, fire and brimstone.

We're going to see fire next week. that Abraham is getting reassured that God will act justly, him coming down to check, I don't think coming down to see if the sin is as great as he's heard.

I don't think that's saying anything about his knowledge. I think it's just human language to say he's going to experience this evidence first hand.

[ 34 : 19 ] He won't act off hearsay. He's a righteous judge and by the end of this intercession, we know God will act justly. But notice what Abraham is praying.

He's not saying, God, I thought you could be merciful to anyone, no matter what they've done. It's your job to forgive. He's not saying that.

God hears the great outcry in Sodom. Whatever prayers have gone up, maybe it's just Lot praying. I doubt any of the others are praying.

Maybe it's strangers who have come through that city who have been praying. He sees and he hears the violence and the cruelty trampling the poor and needy, Ezekiel says about Sodom, using people regardless of the harm done to them, a merciful God who hears those cries, if he doesn't judge, he's not merciful.

If you have a God who doesn't judge in the end when he hears the cries, it could be the blood like Abel's crying out, it could be the screams. You don't have a merciful God.

[ 35 : 49 ] God's The wrath of God is coming one day, we're told, and the cries throughout history are great.

Now, Abraham isn't trying to twist God's arm to do what's right. He's appealing to God's character. father, far be it from you to do such a thing.

Do what? He's not just concerned about Lot and his immediate family, just take my family out and then just blow the rest to smithereen.

He's not saying that. He's saying don't let there be collateral damage. Don't let the righteous few be judged and taken out because of the sin of many.

But he's actually going a step further than that. He doesn't ask, let the 50 righteous escape and then go for it.

[ 37 : 03 ] He's, some people call this, he's going, this is a theological exploration, he's going into the character of God here. What kind of God are you?

He's pleading not just for his family, he's not pleading just for the righteous, he's actually pleading for all of Sodom and Gomorrah. Look at verse 24, he's asking for the entire place to be spared.

Suppose there are 50 righteous within the city, will you then sweep away the place? and not spare the place for the 50 who are in it.

This is a bold prayer. Yes, the evil is great, are you the kind of God who would much prefer, much rather save the many sinners because of the 50 righteous?

Yes, the yes, I am. It's the righteousness of the 50 would save the whole city.

[ 38 : 16 ] I'm that kind of God. Now, it may seem like humorous bargaining here, 50, 45, but this is deep. He's daring to go deeper and deeper.

how much do you value the righteous of the few, that it could save the many? Is it 45? Yes. Is it 40? Yeah, even just 40? I would spare the whole place. Is it 30? Yes. Is it 20? Yes. Just 20.

Is it, one more time, is it 10? Just 10 would you save all these sinners just for 10 righteous people? For the sake of 10, I will not destroy it. That's the kind of God he is. We're seeing Abraham, the chosen one, be the blessing for all the peoples of the earth because he's acting as a priest interceding for sinners.

[ 39 : 26 ] For Sodom and Gomorrah. But he didn't save Sodom and Gomorrah. Now perhaps Abraham lost his nerve.

Perhaps a moment's self-reflection. He knew himself, though righteous, as a servant, as we've seen. He is righteous, but he's also a mixed picture. And we're going to come to that in a couple chapters time.

He's still a mixed picture. He's got a lot of faith and obedience to learn. I don't know about you, but for whatever reason, I'm expecting him to ask, Lord, would you spare the many for the sake of just one?

just one? Who is righteous? Are you that kind of God? And the good news is, the rest of Scripture is of a greater high priest, and we have an answer, yes, I'm that kind of God.

Yahweh is such a God whose justice can be satisfied by the righteous one, the son born by promise, Isaiah 53, 12, the righteous one, my servant, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors.

[ 41 : 10 ] Let that fill you with wonder and laugh. brothers and sisters, we do not stand or fall on our independent faith, our walk with God.

We have a better Abraham, we have a greater high priest, a greater head of our family that we're caught up in. The son born by promise, the son of Abraham.

In Hebrews 7.25, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Where Abraham failed, the Lord Jesus Christ saved the many. in him we may approach the Lord with boldness.

Can I urge us not just to pray for our family or even just our church, pray boldly for our community, our world, other sinners like us to see this righteous one.

[ 42 : 38 ] But seeing our Lord Jesus on the cross as the one who serves so that you and I can eat and drink at his table in the kingdom forever and ever.

He teaches us to serve. But our walk with God is not as an independent individual, it's because we belong to this righteous one, this son of Abraham, in whom all the promises are yes and amen.

Let that wonder fill you so you can laugh. Let's pray. Lord, we praise you that you are such a God who would spare the many because of the righteousness of one and we thank you for his obedience that we could never live up to and we thank you that that obedience is ours simply by belonging to him by faith.

Thank you that all the promises, all the covenant promises are ours in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, teach us, fill us with hope and teach us to increasingly trust you and obey you in faith.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.