

God's Friend Pleads for Sodom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 August 2014

Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Let's turn back now to Genesis chapter 18, we're going to look at this passage from verse 16 right through to the end of the chapter following our study in the life of Abraham and these incidents in his life that we find are so varied and yet so important for our own understanding too of God and of his workings.

And Eleanor Roosevelt too was the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in America said one time, many people will walk in and out of your life but only true friends will leave their footprints in your heart.

And that's very true. Many people walk in and out of our lives leave no footprints or traces, don't make any impact. But true friends leave their footprints in our hearts.

Friendship, true friendship, and if it's not true friendship it's not really friendship at all. Friendship is one of our most valuable commodities and experiences.

Friendship is something that the Bible itself commends in different places and different ways. And we all need that friendship that we value so much and especially when we have times of crisis and difficulty in our lives.

[1 : 25] Friends, friends stick by each other. Friends see each other through. Friends don't turn their backs on each other. That's the nature of true friendship.

But it's especially important, whatever friends we have or don't have in this life, that we have the friendship of God. That we have come into friendship with Him.

And that's really essentially what this passage is telling us about Abraham and God in the relationship that was between them. In fact, Abraham in the Bible is called the friend of God. He's specifically given that title, that name in Isaiah chapter 41 and verse 8.

And again in the New Testament, James refers to Abraham as the friend of God. What a great title that is. To be a friend of God. Everything that Abraham did, as recorded in this passage, has to do with being in friendship with God.

It's being a friend of God that led him, that constrained him to pray for a place like Sodom. Who would pray for a place as wicked as the city of Sodom was?

[2 : 44] The friend of God, that's who. Because the friend of God, as we'll see, has an understanding of the workings of God. And in fact, that's really the first thing we want to look at. This matter of friendship with God.

And in verse 17, these words, first of all, shall I hide, the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Friends don't hide things from each other because they trust one another.

And the friendship that Abraham has with God is of such a remarkable level that God Himself says, I'm going to share this with you. I'm going to take you into my workings and my reasons for doing things.

Because I have put you in a position that you can actually know these things for yourself. And I trust you that you will do what is proper with them.

That's something similar to what you have in Psalm 25. The ESV puts it, the secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him.

[3 : 55] That's those who genuinely love Him and respect Him. The ESV puts it this way, the friendship of the Lord belongs to those who fear Him. He will show to them His covenant.

In other words, God takes us into a relationship with Himself when He makes us His friends. And He brings us into sharing the things that He Himself is involved with in the working of His covenant.

In the working of that relationship with His people that leads them step by step onwards until they know God bit by bit better and better. And finally they're brought by Him into that glorious inheritance which He has promised.

It's not that you head towards heaven without really knowing much about what God is doing and why He's doing it. God, when He takes you into friendship with Himself, He shows you His covenant.

He takes you into an understanding of the things that He is doing. Even though, of course, we won't understand it all or all the details. And sometimes not much of it in some of His dealings with us.

[5 : 01] But you remember in John chapter 15 that Jesus, when He was speaking there to the disciples, as they were gathered with Him shortly before He went out and gave Himself to His trial and to His death.

You remember there in John 15 how He said to them 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, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You see, Jesus is saying, you're my friends, I have made you my friends.

You have come to accept me for who I am, and therefore I am sharing with you the things which my Father has given me to give to you. When you know Jesus as your Savior, when you know Him as your friend, then you know Him with the kind of closeness by which the things of God, as they are channeled to us through Him, are made known to us, they're explained to us, they're understandable in Him.

But only in Him, and only within the parameters of that friendship. When you go to some of these large mansions or castles or even Buckingham Palace, there are parts of these houses open to the public and parts that are not.

[6 : 27] Then you can go through all the various rooms that are open to the public and admire all the things that are on show there. But every so often you'll come across a passageway or a doorway or something or other over which there's a rope or a barrier of some kind with a notice saying, Private, please do not enter.

That's for the family only. You can't go in there. You can admire the rest of the house, but you can't get through to these places where the family actually live, the rooms that they themselves use personally.

But if one of the family comes along, he's not a tourist. He's not just a sightseer. They just lift the rope and through they go. And it's that way with God and his friends.

We can admire much of the gospel and go through the various rooms of the gospel, if you like, of the Bible, of the things that God tells us there. We can admire so much of the work of Jesus, so much of the work of God.

We can see that it's set out there for us. We can follow what it's saying. But only his friends have access to that intimacy of fellowship and communion, and access to his covenant and to an understanding of his ways.

[7 : 46] That's one of the great privileges today that Christians have, that they are the friends of God. And that's then further expanded on by what God is saying.

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? For I have chosen him, in verse 19, that he may command his children and his household after him. Now there's a lot in that.

And the word chosen is not the best translation, I think, for what's in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. It's better than the old A.B. I know him. Because that word know, as it's used there, is a word that's full of intimacy.

It's a word that's used within the marriage relationship, or relations between husband and wife, that which leads to the production of children. That word know, I know him.

Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore a son. There's that element of knowing, which there really at the heart of a friendship, is that intimacy of friendship, that knowledge between those two who are through friends.

[8 : 57] And God is saying, I know Abraham. I have entered into such an intimacy of relationship with him that I have made him my friend, which is really the same, pretty much the same as what this means.

Now there's a corresponding part on Abraham's side of the relationship. It's not just a matter of being one-sided, where God comes into a relationship with us, where God takes us and by his spirit brings us to know himself, and unites us to himself, and enables us to accept his word, and to believe and to trust in him.

There's Abraham's side as well. Abraham has to accept God as his friend. Abraham has to receive and to embrace God as his friend, and that's what he's done.

Long before this passage, we saw that Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Abraham, in accepting God's word, and accepting the God of his word, has entered into, from his side of the issue, into a relationship with God.

There's, from our side, a willingness and an act of will, a commitment on our part, to accept God as our friend. Have you done that?

[10 : 15] Is that your own privilege today? Do you know God as your friend? It's very different to asking, do you believe God exists? Do you believe there is a God?

And the devils believe that. We're told in the Bible, they don't have a problem believing that God exists. They know he exists. But they tremble. They tremble because there's a coming judgment of them.

And, the friendship of God, that intimacy of relationship, let's put it this way, is there anyone else in this life, that you are more intimate with than God?

The answer to that, for me and for you, should be no. Nobody, not even your nearest and dearest, should be more intimate with you than God.

Because coming to be friends with God, brings you above everything else. That's what Abraham is setting out before us. That's what God is telling us about, this relationship between himself and Abraham.

[11 : 23] He's not going to hide from Abraham, what he's about to do. And that's involving Sodom as well, as we'll see. And he says, I know him, that he may command his children and his household after him.

Now there's something else very interesting there. Because what God is saying is, I know him. That's already in place. God has entered into that intimate relationship of friendship with Abraham.

And what he's now saying, and this is the result of it. You see, you have to translate that, I know him so that he may command. Because that's literally what it means.

Coming into friendship with God has results, has consequences. And the consequence that's mentioned here is that Abraham is actually going to bring his own household, his children, all his household, under the provision that God has made for him as his friend.

He's going to bring them to participate in and to benefit from that relationship. I know him so that he will command his children and his household after him.

[12 : 29] In other words, the blessing that comes to Abraham's house, to his children, to his descendants, to his servants, it's all stemming from and flowing from the fact that he is a friend of God.

And there's something else in that too that's very important for us to notice. And it's this, that by God's grace, that's what the Bible calls grace, is our undeserved favor, the favor God gives to us that we do not deserve, but still it comes freely to us from God.

God himself initiates, he begins this process of entering into friendship. We don't create it ourselves. It comes to us through his grace in Christ.

He takes the first steps. But you see then that saying, grace leads to the discipline of law.

I know him, that's grace, that's God and grace coming to him. I know him, so that he may command his children and his household after him.

[13 : 41] In other words, you don't just throw out the commandments of God, the moral law, the ten commandments. You don't throw out that as a standard once you become a friend of God.

In fact, it's then that they become particularly important and precious to us. Now let's get it right. We don't become friends of God by keeping God's law or because we keep God's law or by our obedience to his commandments.

That's the works of the law which Paul in the New Testament says is not the way by which we come to be righteous. We are friends with God through faith in Christ. At that point, the law does not come into it.

But having become friends of God, having been made friends with God by himself in his grace, through faith in Christ, it's then that we have a concern to live as we should live.

And how do we know what the standard is by which we should live? It's not enough to say, oh, well, you just love your fellow Christians and in fact you love your enemies.

[14 : 50] That's the standard. Well, yes, but there's a lot more needed than that because just using the word love can be far too elastic and far too comprehensive in a sense.

You need something that gives substance to that love, which is where the word, the law of God comes in.

It is a standard by which our life is measured. You shall have no other gods before me. Honor your father and mother.

You shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet. These are the things that we know our life should be framed by.

We don't come to be friends with God through our obedience and keeping them. But after becoming friends of God through faith in Christ, these are the things that God turns our mind to because they are the things which set out the standard of a Christian life.

[15 : 57] None of us is perfect. But God has given us his word, his law, his commands, so that they will frame our thinking as to what a Christian life should be like.

Because after all, the law of God is a reflection of what he is like. And that's our concern as his friends to be like him.

Isn't it true that when you value the friendship of someone above anyone else, you very often say, when you see their qualities, you very often say, I really wish I was more like them.

I really wish that I had more of the qualities that my friend has. And I really value these qualities. That's why it's so precious that I've got this person as my friend because they have all of these qualities that I lack.

And how much more is that true of God? When you are in friendship with God, you really are committing yourself to being as like him as you possibly can be in this life.

[17 : 04] And you are aiming to be like him perfectly in heaven. So he's going to command his children, the training of his family. And of course, there is a lot of that, a lot for us in that itself.

For those of us who have family responsibilities, for those of us who have children or grandchildren, that's God is saying to us, you arrange your family, you look after your family, but you do it primarily, you do it above all things, through my friendship, through friendship with me.

That's what gives you access into this mind of God and the things that God himself are and are not good. We don't actually make up what's good for ourselves or our families through what we think is best.

We keep, if we want to have Abraham's standard and God's standard, this is what he's saying to us, I know him so that he will command his children and his household after him.

So there's friendship with God. Friendship with God where God shares with Abraham what he's about to do. Friendship that brings us into a measure of understanding where God shares with us how he works and why he works and what is, what the ministry of Christ and what the gospel is all about and where you also find that it gives us, it brings us into a framework of life where we find a pattern given us as to what sort of life that should be.

[18 : 41] Secondly, look at Abraham pleading for Sodom. These men turned from there, they went towards Sodom. Abraham stood still before the Lord. Now we've said that everything in the chapter really stems from Abraham's friendship with God and you can actually see that right there where you can actually find something quite remarkable and it's that God is waiting for Abraham.

God is not going to act towards Sodom until Abraham has entered into prayer and conversation. You see what it's saying there, Abraham still stood or stood still before the Lord and you could put that the other way about it but just as true, the Lord stood before Abraham because if Abraham is standing before the Lord it means that the Lord is standing there waiting for Abraham as well and he's waiting for Abraham to enter into this great plea, into this pleading, into this prayer, into this intercession for Sodom.

God is actually waiting for him. He begins the process. He brings Abraham to talk with himself. He says, as we've seen, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do?

He waits and then he concludes the issue in verse 33. It is the Lord who breaks off the prayer that Abraham has begun after he's reached the point of saying for the sake of ten I will not destroy it and then that's it.

The Lord went his way. That's the end of the conversation for this moment. And Abraham went to his place. That's God bringing people to pray, bringing people to wait upon them and he's waiting upon them.

[20 : 26] Now there's a question, there's an issue. We very often think about waiting on God when we pray. We pray and we wait upon God. We wait for his answer.

We look to his word for guidance as to how he's going to answer and is he going to give us in accordance with our prayer or will it be something else? But how often do we think about God waiting for us?

And yet it's true. God waits for us to pray. God waits for us to plead with him for other people as well as ourselves.

That's what's happening remarkably here that God is waiting for Abraham. You see, God in his actions is actually bound up with the prayers of his people.

You might say that God hardly does anything without taking account of the prayers of his people. Not that he isn't free to do that. But there's a remarkable thing and a privilege for us as well that not only does God take us into a sharing of his covenant and what's in his covenant and what he's about to do and why he works the way he does and the principles of his government.

[21 : 41] He also brings us into friendship so that he will say to us now I'm waiting to hear from you. And isn't that something again that enters into a relationship between friends if there's not been conversation between them for some time one or other will say where have you been I haven't heard from you for a long time.

Have you been unwell? And doesn't God have to say that to you and to me sometimes maybe often times where have you been I haven't heard from you for a long time I thought you were my friend why haven't you spoken to me where have your prayers gone God is waiting for Abraham to speak to him and as he begins to speak to him he enters into this great intercession then Abraham drew near and said will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked supposing there are fifty righteous within the city and so on now it's important that we notice God is going to judge Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness we've already seen in chapter 13 when Lot went to live in the vicinity of Sodom to begin with it emphasized in that chapter chapter 13 13 and verse 13 that Sodom was an exceedingly wicked place it wasn't wise of Lot to have chosen that as its residence and it had consequences and in chapter 19 this we'll see God willing next time it again tells us something gives us an insight into the grossness the debauchery the wickedness of

Sodom but you see what Abraham is being told by God is that God is not going to destroy Sodom just arbitrarily you see there in verse 20 the Lord said because the outcry against Sodom this great noise of sin in Sodom that has actually rolled its way upwards to God and God has heard the noise and knows most perfectly the noise of this sinful wicked place but he's saying I'm coming down to see whether they have done all together according to the outcry that has come to me and if not I will know now that's not God saying I don't already know that's not God saying I need to come down and investigate to see if it's true he knows it's true but what he's saying is I don't act in judgment in a way that's not studied in a way that's not consistent with my own being every judgment of God is a judgment that is studied that is well informed he doesn't act inconsistently nobody who will be judged and condemned by

God will have any accusation against God that says but you didn't really get to know my position properly and if you had you wouldn't have judged me every judgment of God is studied perfectly informed consistent with himself the wicked will not be able to see at that great day of judgment that their condemnation was not deserved there will be no arguments against God's way of doing things because God is always consistent with himself he never acts against himself he never acts against truth against justice against righteousness it's always consistent I will go down to see he studies and knows and then acts things and

Abraham enters into this pleading now there are difficulties with this passage as to why Abraham went about praying the way he did Sodom obviously had not learned from Abraham's intervention in chapter 14 Abraham had intervened to rescue many of the people of Sodom when they had been taken captive by these kings that had come against them and overtaken them and taken many of the people away captive Abraham went to war for them Abraham actually went to rescue them by defeating these kings in battle but it didn't change Sodom in fact it seems they grew worse and here is Abraham now coming to pray for them what a great point that is he's already acted on their behalf he knows that it hasn't made any difference in fact they're worse now than they ever were they've just kept on headlong in the misery of their sinfulness and in this constant lifestyle that they know is apparent to

[26 : 58] God that Abraham knows is apparent to God and yet Abraham prays for them Sodom deserves God's judgment that's absolutely that's absolutely and yet Abraham prays and Abraham prays for them not just because his nephew Lot is there he's not just praying for Lot he's praying for Sodom he's praying for that whole city of Sodom he's praying for that whole population of Sodom and that's how it must be with you and with me too you see terrible things happening in the world there may be things done against yourself that you know are from enmity from spite from a hatred of what you stand for as a Christian what does Jesus tell us we need to do we need to pray for our enemies that's what

Jesus himself did as we saw last Sunday evening as they were nailing him to the cross father forgive them for they know not what they do it's one of the great marks of being a Christian that you don't take vengeance to yourself that belongs to the Lord it's that you pray in the way that Abraham prays even for those he knows are grossly wicked yet he prays that somehow if God were to see his way to it that they would be spared and that's why he goes through these various steps it's not Lot actually it's not Abraham bargaining with God it's rather his faith and the boldness he has as a friend of God the boldness that he has he's if you like he's feeling his way onwards step by step through these various proposals that he puts to God but he knows that at the end of the day everything is left with

God and his own commitment to justice shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just do what is right that is Abraham's bottom line that is what he cannot depart from that's what he knows is going to be the case anyway God will always do what is just whether it's saving or condemnation it's always justly on the part of God and here is Abraham beginning and saying supposing there are 50 righteous and he works his way down finally to 10 what he's really saying is that if there are 10 of your people Lord in such a wicked place if there perhaps are even 10 there will you destroy it and God is saying for the sake of 10 I will not destroy it in other words Abraham saying if there are 10 righteous people 10 believers in that place who knows but that their influence might yet be blessed by God to the benefit of

Sodom will you not spade it just in case it may be that the witness of these people whether they're 50 or 30 or even 10 might yet be blessed and might be to the benefit and the spading of Sodom Lord will you supposing there are 10 found there the Lord said I will not destroy it for 10 sake see the mercy of the Lord why does he not completely destroy dens of iniquity cities of gross evil why does he not come in judgment upon parts of our own land or indeed other lands as well where obviously there is so much that is done openly and flagrantly against the will of God against the standard of God why does he not just come and sweep that away well not because they don't deserve it but because God is saying I still have people there I'm hearing people pray to me from there there are people there who are salt in that society and they are lights to my truth and their witness is spreading out

God is just but God is patient God is kind God is considerate and God is merciful and that's why Sodom is prayed over by Abraham the way he is because he knows his God because he is in such friendship with God he knows that this is what God is like that he is merciful and considerate and hears prayer and so we must take that on board ourselves maybe you feel your life is very ineffective maybe you feel that in this country of ours that has departed so much from the standards of God from the highest level right through society maybe you feel what's the point of going on nothing's really changing and things just seem to be getting worse look at it from God's side use the patience of

[32 : 31] God to go on praying make maximum use of the mercy of God plead with God that he would exercise and continue to exercise his mercy and his forbearance and who knows but that if there be ten found there the place may yet be blessed but then Abraham leaves it with God when he comes to the point of ten the Lord comes and goes his way the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place he had done what he ought to have done he had finished his intercession he had cleared his conscience he had done what was right he prayed for Sodom he took it down to the minimum of ten and then the Lord went his way and Abraham left it there and that's what you and I must do you mustn't try and force

God's hand that's not what prayer is prayer is setting things before the Lord feeling your way like Abraham is being as bold and fervent as Abraham is but then you leave it with God and you say well your part is the sovereign part and I'm happy to leave things now in your hands give me grace to accept whatever your response is the response of God for Sodom well it's obvious he said if there are ten found it I will not destroy it but God did destroy it so obviously there were fewer than ten righteous people in Sodom and in the next chapter we find the Lord's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah and his sparing of Lot and it's very interesting when you go to chapter 19 and the destruction of

Sodom that when he was about to destroy Sodom Sodom with Lot as one of his wayward people still there Lot and his family Lot was going to be rescued by God he wasn't going to leave him to be overthrown in the deluge but what you read is the Lord remembered Abraham not just his covenant with him but I believe also the prayer that Abraham had made why was Lot rescued from Sodom he was rescued in answer to his uncle's prayers Lord the Lord remembered Abraham he never forgets any of your prayers let's pray Lord our God we thank you for not only the fact that we have access to you in prayer but that we are assured that you hear and that you answer that you are the

God who is pleased to hear our prayers we pray Lord as we come to close our service of worship that you would enable us to continue in that exercise of prayer through this day and that we will especially be concerned to pray for those who are not yet your friends hear us we pray for Jesus sake Amen