

Genesis 18:16-33

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: 09 July 2017

Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 0 0] Just so I can say it, if you get really hot and sleepy, please feel free to get up, get a drink of water at the water fountain or the pitchers back there.

If you need to move, get up and move to feel the fan, do it now. Might as well make yourself comfortable. We'll be here for a while. No, I'm kidding. I'm kidding. We're, um, tonight we're going to continue in our series in the book of Genesis.

If you want to look there, we're in Genesis 18. Um, so before we look at the passage, I want to ask you a question.

Have you ever run into a situation where you've wondered if God is doing the right thing? If you wonder if God is right in what he does?

I will share with you the place in my own life where I have wrestled with that the most. Uh, 16 years ago, uh, 16 years ago, my father, who was a good father, a good provider, and a, uh, church-going man, but one who never professed any faith in Christ or in God at all.

[1 : 3 1] Uh, my father was at home and, uh, my father was at home and, uh, my father was at home and had a heart attack and went into a coma and, uh, died a number of days later. Um, and I remember sitting by him while he was off any life support.

His body was still, still, still beating. I remember pleading with God, asking God to revive him and to save him, uh, his life, uh, because I didn't know what God would do with his soul.

There was no hope or no profession of faith for him. And these questions rose, God, is this right? God, is this good? Are you going to be good?

Will you be just? Will you be, do right by my father? Maybe you all have, um, wrestled with those questions for various reasons in your own life.

Today, we read in Genesis 18 about a story where God invites us into his inner counsel. Invites us in as covenant partners with him to understand his inner working a little bit more.

[2 : 4 6] And, uh, remember the context we've seen. This whole series has been partly about, uh, God establishing his covenant with his people so that he might, um, so that he might call a people to be his own people.

He called Abraham. You see it in chapter 12. You see it again in chapter 15. You see it again in chapter 17. This affirmation of, I will be your God. And I will, will come and I will bless you.

This man, Abraham, I will make you the father of a great nation. Of many nations, in fact. And I will bless you so that you can be a blessing to the earth, to the world. Um, I'm going to give you a land for you to live so that you can display my glory in how you live.

Um, and, uh, as we heard last week from Pastor Nick, as we get to chapter 18, God comes and visits, uh, Abraham and Sarah after waiting 25 years from the initial encounter with God.

25 years without hearing, without seeing the fruit of a child, which seems pretty inherent to the, if I'm going to be the father of many nations, I need to start with one.

[3 : 56] And so they've been waiting for 25 years and God finally comes and says, okay, now I'm going to do this. Now that you're old and no one, and everyone can see that this had to be miraculous.

That this had to be from God because it wouldn't be natural. Now I'm going to give you this child so that you'll know that it is I who am doing this. Um, and it's in the context of this that then we come to our passage.

Um, Genesis chapter 18. And as we look at, at this, we'll see, um, they're still waiting for the coming child. That doesn't come till chapter 21, but they've now heard this promise.

It's going to happen. You're not, you're going to be pregnant now here. Here, it's going to really happen. Um, so Genesis 18, we're going to start in verse 16. This is one of those places where we didn't quite agree with the ESV about how to split up our sections and that's okay.

So, cause they're not inspired. Um, so Genesis 18, 16, we're going to read to the end of the chapter. So let's read together and then pray.

[5 : 02] Then the Lord, then the men, these men had come to visit Abraham and bring this message. And there were actually three of them. And they came and they visited, uh, they visited Abraham and Sarah and came and brought this message of, I'm going to fulfill this promise and you're going to be pregnant and have the child you've been waiting for.

Uh, then the men set out from there and they looked towards Sodom and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. And the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham?

What am I about, 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'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 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 what, whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me.

[6 : 09] And if not, I will know. So the men turned from there and went to Sodom. But Abraham stood still, still stood before the Lord.

Then Abraham drew near and said, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are 50 righteous within the city.

Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the 50 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 that from you shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just. And the Lord said, if I find at Sodom 50 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 50 righteous are lacking.

[7 : 16] Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it if I find 45 there. Again, he spoke to him and said, suppose 40 are found there.

He answered, for the sake of 40, I will not do it. Then he said, oh, let not the Lord be angry and I will speak. Suppose 30 are found there.

He answered, I will not do it if I find 30 there. He said, behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose 20 are found there.

And he answered, for the sake of 20, I will not destroy it. Then he said, oh, let not the Lord be angry and I will speak again. But this once, suppose 10 are found there.

And he answered, for the sake of 10, I will not destroy it. And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place.

[8 : 14] Let's pray. Ask the Lord for help as we understand this together. Lord, we ask for you now by your spirit, Lord, to help us understand this passage rightly. Lord, help us understand what it is that we are to know about you and ourselves and what it means to be your covenant people.

Lord, help us, we pray, Lord, to learn not only with our heads, but with our hearts and with our hands and feet. For your glory, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. As we look at this story, I'm going to break it down into two very simple questions. The first half is, what is God up to?

Which is what we see in the first section. Then the second half is, what is Abraham up to? We just want to know, what are they doing? In this covenant relationship, what are they doing in each of these things? So the first section, verses 16 through 22, God comes.

And it's fascinating, right? Because it begins with God talking to himself. And this is one of the very few places in scripture where we actually see this. God seems to be thinking, hmm, what do you think, yourself?

[9 : 25] You know, he's a trinity, so we can have this conversation. God, what do we think about this? Should we let Abraham in or not? Shall I include him? And he goes on to rehearse some of the reasons why he might or might not.

He's saying, this is the man who I have chosen. This is the man who I have called to play this essential role. He is the beginning of my great redemptive work, whereby through my blessing to him, he will be a blessing to the whole world.

And I've called him to come out from the world, to be set apart, to live for me in a covenant relationship with me that's going to be different from those people around me.

Because he knows me. These are the basic things that he's saying. Saying, because this man that I have covenanted with is so essential.

Then it seems God is asking himself the question, should I let him in on what I'm about to do? And it's very clear as you keep going, Abraham knows exactly what God is going to do.

[10 : 28] God knows exactly what God is going to do. And that is, he is planning to bring judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sinfulness. Okay? And so, but it's not clear at this point if Abraham has all this.

These visitors have just come and they've promised this blessing. And so, so it seems then that God is saying, should I let him in on my counsel or should I not?

And I think the reason why the answer to that question is yes, is because God wants Abraham to be fully confident that the God that he is covenanted with will be just.

That is, what he will do is the right thing in every circumstance. I believe that as God ponders with himself here and then says, should I let him in on what I'm going to do or not?

The purpose is so that Abraham's faith will be deepened and his confidence will be established that God is a just God.

[11 : 36] He's saying, I'm going to demonstrate my justice in judgment against Sodom. But I want Abraham to know what I'm doing.

And he even says, so I'm going to go and see in person. It's not like God doesn't know what's going on in Sodom already. But he's going to send his representatives. He's going to make sure that what he knows was actually true.

He's going to doubly make sure by actually seeing what's going on in Sodom. And so that's part of what these men who are with him go and do.

And it's very clear that the outcry is very great, right? There's a public reputation. We've already seen it. If you went back to chapter 13, when Lot chose to go that way, it said, and Sodom was a very wicked city.

We knew that already. But the outcry, just like as we live in our world today and we hear these stories, we hear stories of famine in East Africa.

[12 : 38] We hear stories of genocide in other parts of the world. We hear stories of totalitarian governments. And we hear this outcry of the public against that which is wrong in the world.

So similarly, in Sodom, there was that kind of outcry, it seems. It was publicly known what a wicked place it was. And God says, Abraham, I want you to know that what I'm doing is right.

He invites him in to be a part of this covenant people and to say, because you're the father of this, I want you to understand what I'm doing.

I want you to be a part of it. And so what we see is God having deliberated then in the verses 20 through 22. He goes and explains to Abraham, this is what I'm going to do.

I'm going to go down and I'm going to do this, right? And so this is what God is up to, trying to build Abraham's confidence. All right?

[13 : 45] So it's an interesting question for us. How do we build confidence in God's character? How do we know that God is truly good?

How do we, in circumstances like what I described in the beginning, how do we begin to wrap our minds around, will God do right in this circumstance?

You know, it's not always an easy thing to do. And God doesn't always let us in on all the specifics of what we're facing.

But there are some very clear places where we see that God, as he invites us in to be his covenant people, he wants us to know his character.

So you go to places like Ephesians 2, 1 through 8, where if you've been here all year, you remember when we preached through this. Ephesians 2, 1 through 8, it talks about all of us being under sin, that we are dead in our sins and transgressions, that all of us deserve, are actually enemies of God, and deserving of his wrath.

[14 : 55] Then it goes on and it says, But God, who is rich in mercy, with the great love with which he has loved us, raised us up and made us alive with Christ, and seated us with him.

And so Paul, in Ephesians 2, 1 through 8, reminds us that this is the kind of God we have, that when we deserve judgment, when we deserved something terrible, what God brought to us was mercy and grace through the work of Jesus Christ.

And he reminds us this is the kind of God that we serve, that at the cross we see it is a place where sinners like us are pardoned and redeemed at the very same time that our sin is judged and taken away and bears our wrath.

And this is the thing about it, right? That we think God who is rich in mercy, who loved us with this great love, and yet did he do that by overlooking our sin? No, he did that by bearing our sin.

And so if we want to know whether God is just, we look at the cross. And if we want to know whether God is merciful, we look at the cross, and we see both of them married together in this one amazing act that only God could imagine and only God could carry out for us.

[16 : 28] The other thing that Abraham learns and that we can learn about this is that we recognize, it's fascinating, when you look in verses, verse 19 in particular, part of what you see is that as God is calling Abraham into this covenant relationship, he's saying, I want you to live differently, right?

What are the words he says? To keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice so that the Lord may bring the covenant promises. And friends, is this not true for us as well?

Again, in the book of Ephesians, there's this beautiful move where the first three chapters talk about what God has done for us to save us, and then he starts with chapter four. Do you remember the words in chapter four?

He says, brothers and sisters, I urge you by the mercies to live a life worthy of the calling that you have received.

Now that I have called you to be in this covenant relationship where you have received salvation for me, now I call you to live that out, live a life worthy of what you have received for me.

[17 : 36] And then he spends the next three chapters living that out. That has to be with unity. It has to do with worship. It has to do with love. It has to do with humility. It has to do with words that don't hurt, but that build up.

It has to do with anger that doesn't consume us. It has to do with not being lazy, but working hard. It has to do with all sorts of ways that we live lives that are in the way of the Lord.

Lord, it's not self-righteous living so that God will be pleased with us and think greatly of us, but it's God-centered living that we would live for him so that he would be pleased with us, not for our favor, but because we so desire to bless him with a life that is worthy of the calling that we have received from him.

So what God is up to is reminding Abraham and bringing him in and helping him to begin to wrestle with this question of can you trust me as my covenant partner?

And as we on this side of the cross have even more greater confidence to be brought into that relationship and to see the confidence we can have, then we come to the second half of the passage, starting in verse 21.

[18 : 55] 21, right? 22 is a, or 22. It's a fascinating, in case you wondered this, and Nick mentioned this last time, but these three men showed up at Abraham's tent at the beginning of chapter 18, right?

And he just, and somehow Abraham knew from the very start these were not normal men, right? He ran out to them, he like rushed into the kitchen and said, pull out the best food, we've got to honor these very special gifts.

He knew that they were from God in a very unique way. But here we see in verse 22 something fascinating. There were three of them, two of the men, then went down to the city of Sodom, went on to do the exploration, and next week we'll see what happens to them, right?

And in their exploration of the wickedness of the city. But the third person, who was it? Well, interestingly, it was the Lord himself, right? Because suddenly, the two men go off and Abraham's there, and who does he have next to him?

The Lord himself. And he has this conversation with them, right? The men depart, and God, in 23 through 25, he asks the question that I think is at the heart of this passage.

[20 : 05] Verse 25 is this, shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just? And he's basically saying, you've called me to be your covenant partner and to be a blessing to this world, right?

And by the way, my cousin, no, my nephew, my nephew Lot, he lives there. He lives in that city. And there's got to be some other people in that city.

Can it really be that wicked? What if there are some righteous there? Can you really punish the righteous with the wicked? Is that really what you're going to do?

And remember that Abraham was already invested. Abraham had already blessed Lot by giving him the preference of the land. And Abraham had already rescued Lot in chapter 14 when other kings had come and tried to take over the land.

So he was, so Abraham was already positioned to be a channel of blessing and in particular with Lot and with his family although it was a greater scope of the question. And so he comes with this question, God, are you really going to do this?

[21 : 15] But I want you to see the tone that he asks because I think it's very important because we often come to God in these moments of questioning and moments of doubting and we come to him and say, I don't agree with you, God.

I think I know better than you. How could you do this? That's not how Abraham comes. Do you see how he comes? Look at the words that he uses.

verse 25. Far be it from you to do such a thing to put the righteous to death with the wicked so that the righteous fare as the wicked.

It's basically saying, God, you're the one who said justice is so important. You're the one who defines what justice is. How could you? So on the basis of what you say you are, don't do this.

How could you do this? What if there are 50? Right? And then he bargains and it's a fascinating back and forth and again, you see Abraham's humility.

[22 : 21] Far be it from me, Lord. Please don't be angry with me but can I press you just a little bit more on this? How many righteous people will it take for you to withhold your judgment from the city?

And he gets all the way down to 10 and then the conversation's over. Right? Right? This appeal is based in God's character.

It's not based on what we think is right, what we think is good but it's based on what God has already said about himself. And fascinatingly, we see this throughout scripture.

This is exactly what Moses did in Exodus 32 is after the golden calf incident, God says, all right, I'm done with you. You obviously didn't get this.

I'm up on the mountain giving you my law and you're down at the bottom worshipping an idol? Forget it. I'm going to wipe you all out. I'm going to start again. Moses, I'm going to give you a new wife and we're going to start over.

[23 : 20] And Moses says, Lord, how can you do this to your people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

Why should the Egyptians say with evil intent did he, that is God, bring them out to kill them on the mountain and consume them in the face of the earth? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

And then listen to this. Remember Abraham and Isaac and Israel, your servants to whom you swore by your own self and said to them, I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and all this land I've promised I will give to your offspring and they shall inherit it forever.

Moses appealed to God on the basis of what God had already said and what God had already done. And we see it all over. If you read the Psalms, this spring, my small group did a section, did book three of the Psalms, which kind of takes you through like the 70s to the 90s, something like that.

I can't remember exactly the scope. But it's fascinating how many times we saw this. It was in the midst of, God, your hand of judgment is heavy on your people. But here's Psalm 79, 8.

[24 : 37] Do not remember against, do not remember against us our former iniquities. Let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low.

Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name. Deliver us and atone for our sins. For your name's sake, why should the nation say, where is their God?

Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes. So the Psalmist is saying, God, redeem us, not because we deserve it, we know we've sinned, but do this for your name's sake.

Do this for your glory. So we see this appeal and God agrees. God relents. He says, yes, if there are only 10, I will save them.

Now, you've got to come back next week to find out what happens. Spoiler alert. Sodom and Gomorrah, well, everyone knows what happened to it, right? God brought judgment on it.

[25 : 40] You know why? There are only three. There are only three who were saved. Only three who came out of the city. And it's not good. So what do we make of this?

What does this have to teach us? Do we get to bargain with God about who gets to be saved and who doesn't or that sort of thing? No, I don't think so. Don't think that's the point. I think instead it's the point that Abraham is pushing God so that he would have greater confidence that God would be unjust, that God would not do wrong in his act of judgment against sin.

Abraham isn't questioning whether God would really do something unjust, but he's pressing, he's exploring what is the extent, what is the commitment that you have, God, to your justice.

And the commitment is great. It's so amazing. So what are some of the things we see from one of the things that we do see is that it seems that the presence of righteous people are a blessing to a fallen world.

Because here in this passage the presence of ten righteous people would have withhold at least for a time the judgment. And we see this as a greater theme throughout scripture that the presence of righteous people brings good even in evil circumstances.

[27 : 09] There's a great, great story, a guy named Ernest Gordon who was, who was a World War II Brit who was captured and was in a internment camp in Southeast Asia, one of the Japanese-run internment camps.

And he knew the Lord. And when he showed up he was praying, God, will you help me in the midst of this completely, unbelievably horrific situation?

Will you help me to bring light and life to this? And you know what? He did. By his kindness, by his faithfulness, and not him alone, there were others that he found, other followers of Jesus in this camp that he found and by their faith in God and by their clinging to him, they practiced basic Christian character of kindness and goodness and not selfishness.

And it transformed first the prisoners and then some of the guards and the whole way the camp, the camp was known by the end of the war as one of the least violent camps.

Now, don't get me wrong, it was still horrific. It was still terrible. But there was an impact that happened because of that. And I think that God can do that. And I think we need to see that this is part of what, this is part of why even when God sends his people into exile, in Jeremiah 29, 7, he says, go and live in the place that I'm planting you and seek the welfare of the city that you're living in.

[28 : 46] Because I have an intention for my covenant people to be a blessing where they are. And where they are, they will bring good into it. not in a righteousness that lords it over and looks down on all those terrible people and thinks, gosh, if we only could get rid of all those sinful people in the world, we'd be doing so much better.

No, that's not the attitude at all. But it truly to be a blessing. God has blessed me and I want to bless you with the blessing that God has given me. The second thing that we see in application is that Abraham does, in a sense, intercede for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He is standing between them and as God invited him into the council, he's saying, God, would you be clear? Will you rescue the righteous ones who are amongst them?

Will you do this? And God said, yes, I will. Even if that means I withhold my judgment, I will rescue the righteous ones. Now, we know as we look into the New Testament that there is no one righteous, not one.

And so, we can't plead for God's, on the behalf of sinners that God would simply treat them as righteous people.

[30 : 08] But what we can do is we can plead that God would save them, that God would be merciful to them in the same way that he has been merciful to us. And so, we are called to a life of prayer, not only to a life of doing good and blessing to others, but a life of prayer that God might do his saving work in the life of others as well.

But friends, I tell you this, we will only live these lives if we have worked through the question that Abraham had to work through in this, which is, God, can I really trust you?

Can I trust your justice? One of the commentators that I read on this said one of the, one of the greatest dangers in the human soul and in the sinful spirit is the, the thought process that we have when we say, well, if I were God, dot, dot, dot, if I were God, this is how it should work.

If I were God, this is how it should be. If I were God, I would do it this way. Because when it comes down to it, we don't tend to trust God's rightness in judging people.

We tend to think well of people that we don't know. There are people far away that we've never met and we think, well, they can't be that bad. We think of unborn babies and we think, well, God, you couldn't ever think about judging them.

[31 : 39] That's a complicated theological question. Don't get hung up on that. But it's a question. We just think, there are people we don't know and we think well of them and we think, well, God, they don't deserve judgment.

And then we think about our neighbors and we think, well, they don't deserve judgment either. I mean, they're not, they're not the, they're not the perfect people but they're pretty good.

Like, we want to see this. We have this instinct to see the good in others. And in fact, it's the same instinct that we tend to have with ourselves. I know I'm bad but I'm not that bad, am I?

Like, do I really deserve judgment? Do I really deserve condemnation? Is my sin really worth? So the cross comes to us and it says, yes, it is.

Romans 3 says this, there is no distinction for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But then it goes on to say, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus who God put forward as a propitiation.

[32 : 54] A propitiation is something that is given to satisfy or to appease the wrath, the right wrath of an authority. the propitiation by His blood to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

I'd love to preach a whole other sermon on that verse but it's really cool. what He's saying is in the divine courtroom in some way God withheld His judgment on any sins for people who had lived before Christ that God would redeem because those sins would be judged on the cross in the person of Christ.

Just like all the sins of all of us who have lived after Christ and have trusted in Him and have put our faith in Him and are brought to new life in Him that is where our sins deserve their just justice.

We don't deserve anything better than Sodom and Gomorrah do because of our sinfulness and yet God who is rich in mercy because of the great love with which He has loved us has saved us because of what God because He has offered Jesus in our place.

[34 : 27] Jesus takes the sin and He then gives us the forgiveness of that sin so that God is both just in punishing sin and just in forgiving us our sin.

And it's one of the most amazing things about the gospel and it gives us confidence and this is where I want to end because as I wrestled with God sitting by the bedside of my father as He died I came to the end of myself and I said God I don't know how this is going to work out I don't know my father's heart I don't you are the one who is the judge of the earth but I will trust you I will trust you that you will not do wrong by my father but that you will do right that you will do you will do the right thing by Him and I'm going to leave Him at your feet and trust that you who know everything will judge better than I who don't.

And that hasn't always been easy to hold on to but I believe that because of what God has done in Christ I have seen the foundation and I have been able to have that confidence this is the God of the Bible who has done such an amazing work to save me and I can trust Him.

Let's pray together. Lord we we are humbled by this text but Lord we are ultimately captivated by your glory.

Lord that you are God who is so committed to righteousness and justice and love and mercy that you at the cross would do this incredible work of saving us in a way that you have not just overrun your justice Lord but you have satisfied your justice and saved unworthy people like us.

[36 : 30] What an amazing God you are. What an amazing Savior we have in Jesus. Lord we pray that we might be those who live trusting in you and that out of that trust in you we would live righteous lives that would seek to bless others around us and Lord that we would be men and women of prayer who would plead for your gracious work in the lives of both ourselves and those around us for your glory.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.