



Session 1 - Abraham

Genesis 18:16-18:33

Brief Notes

Introduction

Tim Chester, in his excellent book on prayer, makes a helpful comment on how we should approach a passage like this

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob experienced prayer, if indeed that is the right word for it, in a way very different from our experience as new covenant believers. They appeared to engage in direct dialogues with God. We could look back on such experiences with envy or claim an echo of them in our own experience. But we would be mistaken to do so....We should not expect imitations of their experience. But, seen in the light of Christ, their experience informs our experience of prayer.

For the context of this episode, see vv.1-15, which describes the coming of the three visitors, one of whom it becomes clear is the LORD, the other two being angelic beings.

Verses 16-19

The divine soliloquy is in many ways the key to the dialogue that follows. Notice, verse 17 suggests that God's purpose was fixed – he knew what he was about to do. His question is rather whether to tell Abraham his plans. Verses 18,19 then reveal why he chooses to share them with Abraham – because of Abraham's role of being the channel of blessing to the nations, and his responsibility to teach his family what is "right and just". It would seem that one way he is to fulfil his responsibility to the nations is through praying for them (as we too in part are to fulfil our calling to be a holy nation and royal priesthood through praying for the world). And the dialogue that

follows is also to deepen Abraham's understanding of what is right and just – what God's justice looks like.

Verses 20,21

Interestingly God doesn't quite tell Abraham what he is about to do, but rather speaks as though the outcome is not yet certain (even if the threat is clear). In so doing God invites Abraham to intercede for them – that it seems is what God is wanting Abraham to do.

God does not need to “go down and see”, as if he didn't already know nor his mind made up, but God chooses to accomplish his sovereign will in answer to the prayers of his people, graciously making us his co-workers.

Verses 22-25

The fate of the people of Sodom is not the only concern that drives Abraham's prayer, even more it seems it is his understanding of the character of God. Chester writes

The issue at the heart of this conversation is whether God is just.

And one might add – what his justice looks like; and we'll see it is a justice shot through with mercy and patience.

Verses 26-33

Notice the wonderful combination of Abraham's genuine humility before God and his bold persistence in approaching God. It might appear like the haggling in a middle eastern market, but it is better to see it as Abraham exploring the depths of God's mercy and righteousness. His justice is not something we can ignore, yet his mercy and patience is something we can count on.

Why should Abraham stop at ten? It maybe that ten was thought a minimum number of righteous people to have a leavening effect – as though with a remnant of ten or more there might be hope that their influence could yet bring about repentance, anything less and that hope would seem vain. Time for the city would have run out, even if (as happens in ch.19) righteous individuals within the city might be spared.

In any case, verse 33 suggests that Abraham stopped at ten not through any failure of faith on his part, but rather because “the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham” – this dialogue was his initiative.

The passage, then, should goad us to think more about the justice of God and his purposes for the world, which are to bring blessing through his people (or through Christ in the first place.) Both should inform and shape our prayers as they did Abraham's.

There's one fairly big clue in the passage that this event was of great significance to God's People in the Old Testament. What is it?

Some possible questions

Should we expect our experience of prayer to be like Abraham's? Why not? [*Heb. 1:1,2 might help*]

Should we expect to be able to learn lessons about prayer from Abraham? Why?

Verses 16-21

Has God decided already what he is going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah? [*See Ezekiel 16:49,50 to understand why*]

God doesn't hide his plans from Abraham, and yet when he tells them to Abraham (vv.20,21) the outcome appears open. Why might God have chosen to speak so? What does that imply about the place of prayer in God's sovereign plans?

How do vv. 18,19 help us understand why God tells Abraham what he does?

What does that teach about the plan that undergirds, and in a sense provokes, Abraham's prayer?

How should that plan and purpose inspire our prayers?

Verses 22-25

What is the concern that drives Abraham's prayer? In what ways should that concern drive and shape our prayers?

Verses 26-33

What could we learn from the way Abraham prays here?

Why do you think he stopped at ten?

What do we learn about the justice of God?

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