

*Foundations: Desperate Conversations*

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*Psalm 14:1-3; John 16:23-24; Genesis 18:16-33*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 18:16-33. May God bless the reading of His flawless, holy, and inspired Word. “When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” Then the Lord said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.” Once again he spoke to him, “What if only forty are found there?” He said, “For the sake of forty, I will not do it.” Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” He said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.” Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.” When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.”

Eight young men have a conversation. Their boss is a brilliant scientist and a terrible boss. They want to quit but they really enjoy working together on electronic inventions. How could they continue doing what they love together? Out of that conversation came the birth of Silicon Valley and the start of venture capitalism. C.S. Lewis has a conversation with J.R.R. Tolkien, abandons his atheism, and eventually writes books that have a stunning impact for Christianity throughout the world. One conversation between diplomats, and the tyrants leading Germany and the USSR have a pact to split Poland between themselves at the start of WWII.

Conversations are important. We found during the pandemic just how important it is for us to be in contact with one another, how vital it is to our existence to have conversations, to exchange thoughts and feelings and ideas. We worry about people who don't need other people. From the opening chapter of Genesis, we learn that we are meant to be in relationship with one another, talking with one another, relating to each other.

Sometimes we have a difficult time having conversations with God, though. We wonder if God is listening; we wonder what we should say; we wonder if we are wasting God's time. We sometimes ask God for things we desire or hope for; we ask God to comfort those in grief and to heal those in pain. But we don't often think of having a conversation with God, a real discussion. We don't take time to listen because we're not sure what we'd hear back! And I fully admit that this is an area for growth for me, too. Conversation with God is something that is hard for us. It sometimes seems like there's a wall, a barrier, standing between us. It's an illusion because Scripture tells us that God does listen to and hear His children and answer our prayers. Sometimes what we can't see gets in the way of what we know to be true.

Thankfully, God condescends to us. He doesn't just condescend to hear us, but to meet with us, to listen to us, and to have conversation with us. Today's passage shows us a desperate conversation between Abraham and the LORD that speaks to us not only about our conversations with God, but how God is willing to be in relationship with Him and teaches us through His dealing with us.

Let's get a refresher on what happened in last week's passage. The LORD came to Abraham last week along with two angels. Abraham didn't know who they were at first, but he welcomed them graciously and prepared a feast for them. The LORD ultimately revealed Himself to Abraham and Sarah by speaking directly about how Sarah would have a son. Even though Sarah laughed at the thought, nothing is too hard for the LORD to accomplish.

So now the visitors are attending to important matters that lie ahead. God speaks to the angelic messengers in an interesting way – He talks to them in the form of a question. It seems that He not only condescends to listen to human beings, but He also is in personal relationship with the angels. We don't know much about angels, but by asking the question here, it's clear that God does not simply order the angels around. While being all-powerful and all-knowing He could do that, He doesn't. God speaks in relational ways, bringing them into the mystery of His dealings with humankind. It is not that God does not know what to do and is asking for advice; He is modeling even for the angels His thought process and sharing His plans with them.

The way the LORD talks in this passage also begins to foreshadow what we learn about the Triune nature of God in the New Testament. Our primary visitor is identified as the LORD, in the Hebrew YHWH. Since He is addressing the angels, we would not be terribly surprised if God spoke in the second person – “Should we discuss this Abraham?” But in the same sentence, the tense switches from first person to third person. “I have chosen Abraham,” God says. But when He continues, when He speaks about Abraham teaches his people to be righteous and receiving the promises, the language switches to “the LORD.”

It is odd for us to speak about ourselves in the third person in English, and also in Hebrew. If I were to talk about Jason's likes and Jason's interests, if I were to say, “Jason likes to go eat at Grand Azteca,” you would look at me funny, and rightly so. It's bizarre, even off-putting. God is not speaking this way to be confusing, and when the story was written down by Moses, he didn't get it wrong. This is Jesus before the incarnation visiting Abraham, speaking about the Father in the third person. The early church fathers all read this passage that exact way. We see the Trinity in action here as the Son visits, carrying out the Father's plans.

If you were here last week, you heard me say much the same thing because similar pointers to the Trinity were in the passage too. You might say, “Why are you repeating yourself?” It’s because of this vital point: *God has always been Triune, one God in three persons, which means God in His essence is relational.* God has always been God. Jesus doesn’t come into being later. As John 1 tells us, Jesus was with the Father at creation. “In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” As the later creeds would say, Jesus is eternally begotten of the Father. There is no time when Jesus is not present.

Why this is so important is because it is through Jesus that the Father makes Himself known to the world and relates to us. Jesus tells His disciples before His death, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” They are spiritually inseparable from one another and from the Holy Spirit, which works to make the will of the Father and Son known and makes it possible for us to grow in the likeness, goodness, and righteousness of God. The three persons of our one God relate to each other apart from us. We are made in the image of God, which means we are created to be relational beings as God is relational within Himself.

This is so very important because it separates Christianity from many other world religions, even ones that claim some of the same origins. Hinduism has millions of gods, but a knowledgeable Hindu will tell you that all of those millions of gods stand for and are ways humans relate to Brahman, the one completely transcendent and utterly unknowable true god. Muslims believe Allah is also utterly transcendent and is utterly and completely unlike us. The idea of incarnation or God taking on any sort of human form or even speaking of God in language that is anthropomorphic, like saying, “God’s hand was on me in my healing,” or “God saves by His mighty arm,” is repugnant to Islam. In those religions and others like it, God is to be worshiped, feared, and obeyed, but God is not relatable to human beings. It’s not even certain that God could be relatable, He is so much unlike us.

But in the Trinity, we see that God is both transcendent and immanent. He is both beyond His creation and over His creation and outside of His creation, and He is in close personal contact and relationship with His creation. He is sovereign and nothing escapes His control and knowledge and will; yet He also comes near to us, speaks with us, and through His Holy Spirit now lives within us. It’s amazing, it’s a mystery, and it’s precisely what we need – our God is so much greater than even the world’s biggest problems, yet He relates to us on an intimate level.

Now there’s something else about our relationship with the LORD that is very subtle but incredibly important here, and it’s within the wording of God’s statement about Abraham. Here’s the key: *we are not chosen for relationship with the LORD because of our righteousness, but we are chosen by God and God makes us righteous through our relationship with Him.* Look carefully at what God says: “For I have chosen him [literally, I have known Abraham], *so that* he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, *so that* the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” The string starts with God – God has chosen Abraham, God has known Abraham and made Himself known to Abraham, *so that* Abraham will teach righteousness, *so that* the promises will occur. It’s not because of Abraham’s righteousness that he is chosen by God, but because of God’s choice, Abraham becomes righteous and teaches God’s ways to his household.

Maybe you've thought, "God could never want me in His family because of the things I've done in my past." Or maybe you've thought, "Well, certainly that person must know God because they have done nice things. They're a good person." Neither one of those things is what Scripture tells us. God works things out according to His will. No one is bad enough that He cannot turn their lives around and make them into His son or daughter. No person is good enough that God will choose them as a friend on the basis of their own righteousness. God chooses, and in His extraordinary way of bringing about history, He brings us to Himself, teaches us His ways, and makes us His own.

God chooses this to be a teaching moment with Abraham. Abraham is in the stunning place of knowing God's plan and will because God reveals it to him. God tells Abraham about the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. God plans to go and see for Himself about what has been said; He will know if it is as bad as the prayers and cries for justice have said. Then the angels leave; but God and Abraham stand together and Abraham makes his plea for the city.

Again, what we see here is God's unique desire to be in relationship and conversation with us. God does not need to come down to see the wickedness of Sodom. The maker of the universe doesn't have to make a personal visit to know with absolute clarity and truth what's going on in His creation. And yet He does precisely that. God does not make pronouncements from on high without knowing every detail. His justice is always based on the truth. In coming down to witness the depravity of the twin cities, God cannot ever be accused of not considering the facts of the case.

How often have you heard of an earthly judge coming down off the bench and visiting the scene of the crime? How often does a jury make a field trip to confirm the evidence? And yet that's what God does. While He knows all the details, He nevertheless comes to prove His justice and righteousness is not far removed. He is not in an ivory tower. He sees. And in the incarnation of Jesus, we again see that God wants to be with His people, taking on humanity and humanity's sinful burden so that He can draw near to us.

God is also teaching Abraham about His righteousness. God cannot let wickedness abound unpunished. Justice requires consequences. But justice also requires a full knowledge of the facts. In a world of deceit, we must establish the truth. We do not convict on hearsay but direct evidence, not gossip and rumors but on established fact. All of these things are evident in God's coming to examine the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now we come to the conversation – what is really prayer with God there in person answering Abraham directly. What is left unsaid but is obvious to everyone who has read Genesis up to this point is that Lot, Abraham's nephew, is in Sodom with his family. Abraham's desperate pleading appeals to God's mercy, but it's not as if Abraham doesn't have a deeply personal stake in the outcome. He graciously gave Lot the first choice of land to settle in when their families became too large and wealthy to stay together. He's gone into battle to rescue Lot and his family. He clearly loves his nephew and doesn't want his family to be destroyed because of other people's wickedness. Yet the very plea that Abraham makes shows that he is all too aware of the vile behavior of the twin cities. And the Lord's replies to Abraham are about Sodom, not its neighbor, so God is well aware what Abraham is really on about.

Abraham's appeal is desperate, so desperate in fact that Abraham makes himself look like he is more merciful and just than God Himself. Either there's a part of the conversation that's unrecorded, or Abraham assumes God is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. (It's a pretty fair assumption, seeing that things are so bad that God is investigating personally.) But there's nothing in the conversation that makes God less grace-filled than Abraham. Abraham says, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Of course He will. Abraham appeals to God's mercy, but God turns out to be more merciful than Abraham asks for.

The truth is, Abraham does not yet understand that no one is truly righteous in God's sight. No one is absolutely blameless. God accepts Abraham's faith as righteousness; God accepts us through Christ as righteous. Yet no one but Jesus can stand before God and say, "I am blameless." When terrible events happen and nice people die, Christians die, God is still right and good and just. Because all of us are sinners, and as Romans 3:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death." But as the verse goes on to say, "The gift of God is eternal life." For all those God declares righteous through His Son, though we die because of sin, we will live forever because of His grace to us.

Despite Abraham's lack of theological precision, Abraham's conversation with God is still an extraordinary example of what fervent prayer looks like and how God responds to it gracefully. Abraham is bold but deferential, self-deprecating but also audacious. If you know anything about this region of the world, haggling like this is common in the marketplace; to not do so would be either disrespectful or unaware. But we shouldn't put much weight in how Abraham phrases things. Abraham asks God not to be angry with him twice. Yet God is never angry with Abraham. God does not criticize anything Abraham says. God understands. God knows that Abraham is haggling in the hopes that his nephew Lot will be saved. And even though, as we'll see next week, Sodom doesn't even reach Abraham's criteria, Lot himself and parts of his family are saved from destruction anyway.

There's so much I could say here, but if I were to put all my thoughts about this in a sound-bite, it would simply be this: *pray no matter what obstacles stand in your way, because God wants a conversation with you.* Abraham is indirect about what he's really praying about, which is Lot and his family, and God responds to what's really on Abraham's heart. Abraham stumbles around in prayer and God answers anyway. Abraham comes on strong, then backs off; he is not a professional in talking to God. But God doesn't get upset, doesn't condemn Abraham, in fact is pretty patient with Abraham given that Abraham comes back six different times changing the number he's asking for. Abraham doesn't really know what he's asking for, but God honors the heart of Abraham's conversation with Him and provides a way out for Lot's family. We'll see that more next week.

There's a sign outside a skate shop in Mount Clemens, and the message intrigues me. It says, "You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great." Before you're ready for tricks on a half-pipe, you've going to have a lot of scraped knees and elbows. But the only way you can get to those amazing tricks skaters do when they're airborne is to buy a deck and get to practicing.

In the same way, you don't have to have the right words to talk to God, but you have to talk to God – whether in your heart and mind or in ordinary words – in order for Him to hear you. We're told by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit intercedes for believers; He provides the words and message for those things we don't even know how to say. You might feel insignificant. Pray. You might not know what to say. Pray. You might feel your sin disqualifies you. Repent, reject that sin, pray about it to God, then pray some more.

Just like God graciously condescended to come to us in a way we can comprehend through Jesus, He also meets us where we are at in prayer. We don't tell a four year old he isn't really riding a bike because he has training wheels. We don't get upset with a first year piano student because they can't play Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto Number 3. We cheer them on where they are at. God doesn't want us to remain amateurs at prayer, but He desires conversation with us, and He is not disturbed by our halting, primitive attempts. Pray.

Through this conversation with God, Abraham knows that the LORD hears him and responds to Him. God answers Abraham's prayer in an unexpected way come next week, and yet God answers a way that saves Lot's life. Would God have done otherwise had Abraham not struck up this desperate conversation? We don't know. But what we do know is that God, knowing all things, knowing all His plans, who determines all that will finally come to be, has made provision in those plans for our prayers. God hears and answers and makes provision for what He ask according to His good will.

So let's pray. God, who is relational in and of Himself, has chosen to be in relationship with us. He meets us where we are. The king of the universe has stepped into our world, not only to meet Father Abraham but to save the world He loves. The least we can do is talk to Him.