

Genesis 18:16 – 33

¹⁶ Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. ¹⁷ The LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so 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 upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.’ ²⁰ And the LORD said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. ²¹ I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’ ²² Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. ²³ Abraham came near and said, ‘Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’ ²⁶ So the LORD said, ‘If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.’ ²⁷ And Abraham replied, ‘Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ ‘Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ ²⁹ He spoke to Him yet again and said, ‘Suppose forty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it on account of the forty.’ ³⁰ Then he said, ‘Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it if I find thirty there.’ ³¹ And he said, ‘Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.’ ³² Then he said, ‘Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the ten.’ ³³ As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place.

Historical and Cultural Background

- God taking life: The New Testament and the Apostles’ Creed tell the back story of what God did with those people whose lives He took. He held them until Jesus could appear to them (1 Pet.3:19; 4:6). Although Abraham and the original readers of Genesis didn’t have this explicit understanding of what would happen, it is important to glance at the whole biblical story.
- The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah involved child sacrifice¹ and incest (Leviticus 18 and 20)

¹ Archaeologists have found 6,000 jars of baby bones in Carthage, which was related to the Canaanites biologically, sociologically, and religiously. “The remains of Carthage amply demonstrate the importance of child sacrifice to its religion and culture and thus indirectly speak to the same institution on the Canaanite motherland... [In the jars] they found usually not one but two children, one a newborn and the other of two or four years of age. “It seems unlikely,” Stager and Wolff write, “that disease or some other disaster would have affected only the two youngest children...from the same family in such a regular fashion.” Moreover, in the same area that they call the Tophet, Stager and Wolff also found urns containing the charred bones of animals. “Should we conclude,” they ask, “that the Tophet was also a ‘pet cemetery’ with cremated lambs and kids?” Instead, they opt for what is surely the more likely reconstruction, “that the burned animals were intended as substitute sacrifices for children.” (Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p.21)

Questions

1. Why did God want to tell Abraham what He was going to do?
 - a. It's a mark of friendship from God's part. Friendship with God means that God shares what He is going to do. See also Daniel 9:23 and John 15:15.
 - b. 'Since' (v.18) Abraham will become a great and mighty nation. God wanted Abraham to pass down this experience to his descendants.
 - c. Who else will fight Canaanites later? The Israelites. They need to know that God's judgment on the Canaanites of Sodom and Gomorrah flows out of God's rejection of their sins.
 - d. How does this episode relate to Abraham teaching his descendants 'righteousness and justice' (v.19)? What's the lesson?
 - e. To not do what Sodom and Gomorrah did
 - f. To not do what Lot did, in addition
 - g. To pray as Abraham did
2. How does God know what the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are?
 - a. He hears them first hand. They are not rumors to God (v.20 – 21).
 - b. He goes 'down' to 'investigate' them. This is surely anthropomorphism. It's very much like God 'came down to see' (11:5) Babel in Genesis 11:1 – 9. But what is the purpose of this type of language? It stresses that God is diligent in searching out the reality of the situation. He does not stand at a distance. He is perfectly informed.
3. Why does Abraham start with fifty righteous and then go down to ten?
 - a. Is Abraham trying to get God to not judge Sodom and Gomorrah at all? His literal language suggests that, but it doesn't seem like what's going on.
 - b. Is Abraham trying to get God to separate the wicked and the righteous'? At first it seems that way, but Lot hardly seems 'righteous' in a true sense. His future sons-in-law don't listen to him and perish. His wife turns around longingly for Sodom and turns to salt. His daughters commit incest with him later and demonstrate that they were affected by the sexual practices of the Canaanites.
 - i. Perhaps Abraham doesn't even know the depths to which Lot and his family have sunk?
 - c. Is Abraham just pleading for Lot's life? Ten people might have been Lot's household if we include his future sons-in-law.
 - i. Perhaps God answers the spirit of Abraham's prayer but it really costs Lot big time.
4. So how do we pray? What is justice? What is righteousness?
 - a. For God to delay His judgment, on the basis of His people being mixed in there?
 - b. For God to save His people (our friends) from judgment?
 - c. For God to separate His people from judgment, but to judge the wicked?
 - d. But in a deeper sense, the New Testament reveals that God wants to separate our wickedness from our personhood, by bringing us to Jesus and healing the corruption in our human nature. See Romans 8:1 – 4 and Romans 6:1 – 11. This was not fully revealed in the First Testament (Hebrew Bible). So now, we pray that God will help people respond to Him in Jesus, so that they can pass through His judgment and into His restoration