**THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM**

**LIVING LIKE GOD**

**Genesis 18**

**INTRODUCTION**

A few weeks ago at our King’s World Summer Music Camp I had a memorable conversation with a seven-year-old boy from the community after one of our chapel sessions. On this particular day, we invited kids who wanted to talk more about Jesus to stay where they were seated so that they could talk with one of the counsellors while the rest of the kids did some activities at the back of the sanctuary.

This little boy was one of them. I went up to him and asked, “What can I do for you?” He said, “I know that God forgives me when I sin because Jesus died for me, but how do I stop sinning so much?” What a great question. It’s hard to believe that it came from a little boy who doesn’t even go to church! Knowing this, I wanted to get as practical as possible and avoid getting too theological, so I gave him three things to do: read the Bible, pray to God, and go to church.

These three things form the core of all Christian growth. There are other things as well, but without these essential practices you’re not going to grow very much. You’re not going to stop sinning. You need to prayerfully read the Word under the guidance, protection, and teaching of a local church.

But why are these three things so important? They’re important not because they have power in themselves, but because they bring us into the presence of the one who has power to save. Reading the Bible, praying, being part of a local church only help us grow to the extent that they bring us into an encounter with the living *God*. If we do these things without a genuine desire to know God and to worship him, it doesn’t matter how much we read or pray or go to church. It would all be in vain, because *we* can’t do anything to make ourselves stop sinning. Only God can, and that’s just what he does when we read the Bible, pray, and participate in the life of a church with a genuine desire to know him.

This is an essential teaching of the New Testament. *Beholding* God leads to *becoming* like God. *Seeing* God leads to *Sanctification* by God. That’s why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

The better we *see* God, the better we come to resemble and imitate him. The reason why we don’t imitate God is that we don’t see him as we should. The eyes of our hearts are so tainted by sin that we only see as through a mirror dimly. But in that glorious day when we finally stand in the presence of God looking at him face to face, in an instant we will become perfect. Saved to sin no more. Or as the Apostle John put it in 1 John 3:2:

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

The same was true of Abraham. Here in Chapter 18, God reveals that he didn’t just choose Abraham to bless him. He chose him so that he might stop sinning and start living in a way that reflected God’s character. He was to live in a way that revealed God’s mercy and justice to the rest of the world. As verse 19 says,

“For I have 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…”

And how would God make him into that kind of man? By showing up. God appears in human form and demonstrates what holy living looks like, so that Abraham might see God as he is and be changed.

The title of this message is **Living Like God**. My aim today is to show you that **Knowing God Makes Us More Like God.**

We will have three points today:

1. God’s Kindness
2. God’s Justice
3. God’s Mercy

(1) **GOD’S KINDNESS**

Verses 1-8 open with an over-exuberant display of Middle-Eastern hospitality. Verse 1 says that Abraham was sitting “at the door of his tent in the heat of the day”. It’s hot outside, Abraham’s tired from a long morning of work, and he’s ready to take a break in the shade of his tent. But as he lifts up his eyes in verse 2, he sees three men standing at some distance in front of him. The text itself tells us in verse 1 that the LORD himself was in this group,, but Abraham doesn’t know this yet. All he sees is three men of some noble bearing approaching him.

Most of us would have been strongly tempted to just keep sitting there, close our eyes, and take a nap, but not Abraham. Verse 2 says that he “ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and essentially begs them for the privilege of serving them, and to his great delight, they accept.

And so, this hundred year old man springs into action. The whole scene captures an amazing flurry of activity. Verse 6 says that he “went quickly” to Sarah’s tent and says, “Quick! Make some cakes with our best flour”. Then verse 7 says that “Abraham *ran* to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly.” Then when everything was prepared, he took curds and milk along with the meat and set it before them, standing at attention, watching and waiting to serve them while they enjoyed this feast.

What a stunning display of service. This rich, powerful, and *elderly* man spares no expense or effort to welcome these three strangers who were just passing by. He doesn’t expect others to serve him and wait upon him just because God’s favour rests on him. He happily springs into action to serve people he doesn’t even know and may not ever see again, because he knows why God has blessed him. God has blessed him to be a blessing, not just to his family, or clan, or people, but to all the nations of the world, including these three strangers, whoever they may be.

But as great as his act of service was, it was tiny and insignificant compared to the service that they had come to show him, because among these three men was the Lord himself. We already saw this in verse 1, but we also see it in verse 10 when it says that when the leader of the three spoke, it was “the LORD” who spoke. We see that again in verse 20 when the LORD speaks to Abraham about the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and then again in verse 22 when two of the three men (who appear to be angels) depart for Sodom, leaving the leader with Abraham, and it says “Abraham still stood before the LORD.”

There’s no question about it. Abraham wasn’t just hosting men. He was hosting God. *God* had appeared to him. *God* was the one who was sitting in front of him. The God who called him out of the land of Haran when he was nothing and brought him into the land of Canaan with everything was there in human form, visiting him as a man would visit a friend.

This is what scholars call a “Theophany”, a visible revelation of God to his people. And this particular theophany in Genesis 18 was special. In the past, God appeared to Abraham with audible words or with visions, but here, he appeared to him as a man.

You could call this a proto-incarnation. The true incarnation would only take place when the Word would become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, but here we have a foreshadowing of that moment. God may not have become flesh, but he was still pleased to appear in the flesh. And that is an incredible kindness. That the Holy God of eternity would condescend to meet us in the dirt and muck of our sinful world and our broken lives isn’t a right that we possess. It’s a gift that we have been given. He gave this gift to Abraham here in Genesis 18, and he would give this gift to all of us in Jesus Christ, when the Son of God himself, the eternal Word of God, would become flesh and dwell among us.

Abraham may not know it yet, but he is being wonderfully served by these unexpected visitors. The servant is the one being served, and that begins to become apparent to him in verses 9-15.

In verse 9, they ask, “Where is Sarah your wife?” Wait a second. How did they know her name? Or to be more precise, how did they know her *new* name? “Sarah” was the name God had just given her in Genesis 17 when he changed her name from Sarai to Sarah. People didn’t know about this yet. It was her secret name, her divinely-given name, the name God gave her to communicate his personal care and blessing to her.

But that’s not all these strangers knew. After Abraham tells them that she’s in the tent, the leader of the three says in verse 10, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”

They don’t just know her divinely-given name. They know her divinely-given *promise*. They tell Abraham what only he would have known, that Sarah *shall have a son* when the Lord returns to her at this time next year. Abraham is beginning to realize that there’s more to these three men than he thought.

As it turns out, verse 10 tells us that Sarah was listening in to their conversation. She was at the doorway of her own tent behind him, meaning that she was positioned where he couldn’t see her. Verse 11 repeats what we already know about Sarah from Genesis 17 but says it in three different ways. Abraham and Sarah are “old”. They are “advanced in years”. And “the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.” Verse 11 says in no uncertain terms that, humanly speaking, it was impossible for Sarah to have children. It wasn’t just unlikely. It was physically and biologically *impossible* for God’s promise to be fulfilled.

So Sarah responds as any of us would have responded. She laughs, quietly and to herself, because she’s not supposed to be listening, and says to herself, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” These are the words of a woman who has suffered profound disappointment. To use her very own words, she is *worn out*. Or to quote Bilbo Baggins, she feels like she’s “too little butter spread over too much bread.”

She’s tired of talking about children, hoping for children, waiting for children. She’s been disappointed too many times. Too many times of thinking, “Is this the time? Am I finally pregnant? Will I finally have my own child?” only to realize that the answer is “No”, every single time. A lifetime of hoping, a lifetime of “No’s”, and now there’s nothing left. She is worn out.

How about you? Are you worn out today? Have you been disappointed far too many times to hope in God’s Word and to trust in His promises? Are you so tired and exhausted that all you can do is chuckle at God’s promises to care for you, nurture you, and provide for you? Then take comfort in what happens next.

In verse 13 the Lord reveals that Sarah’s secret laughter wasn’t so secret after all. Though she was in her own tent, standing behind him, laughing to herself, the Lord knew. He heard her. He knew what was in her heart, and he reveals this knowledge to Abraham when he asks, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’”. He asks not because he doesn’t know. He knows all things. If he knew that she laughed, he also knew *why* she laughed. He asks the question as a challenge to her response because of the glorious truth contained in verse 14: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” The answer is *nothing*. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. Not blessing them. Not multiplying them. Not fertilizing an egg in a worn out, barren-woman’s womb. God will do all that he says, because nothing is too hard for the Lord.

With this, Sarah begins to realize who her husband is speaking to. This is no ordinary man. He’s an extra-ordinary man possessing extra-ordinary knowledge, and that makes her very afraid. So she tries to cover up her doubts by lying in verse 15. “I did not laugh”, she said, “for she was afraid”. It’s ironic that she tried to hide the truth from someone she feared knew all truth, but we don’t act rationally when we’re afraid. We just do the first thing that comes to mind.

And so, here we have Sarah doubting God’s Word, laughing at God’s promises, and lying to God’s face. How would God respond to her? With a harsh word of correction? With a lightning bolt from the sky? With disappointment and rejection? None of that. He responds with a gentle reminder that he knows all things. “No, but you did laugh.” That’s it. No raised voice. No hand raised to strike. Just the simple truth.

Do you see God’s kindness in this simple act? God didn’t treat her according to her iniquities. He didn’t give her what she deserved. He showed her divine patience and care, because he knew how weak she was. He knew how worn out she was. He knew that rebuking her or disciplining her would ruin her, so he stayed his hand.

That’s how God treats us as well, when our doubts, and perhaps even our sins, arise out of hopelessness and despair. When they arise out of pride or arrogance it’s a different matter, but when it’s our weakness that drives our despair, God shows us special grace and kindness. As Isaiah 42:3 says,

“a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench”.

If you are bruised today, if the fires of your faith are burning low and cool because God has been taking you through a long and dry season of disappointment, don’t be afraid. God stands ready to forgive you. He waits for you to return to him, and even before you do, he will deal gently with you, knowing that you are frail, you are weak, you are but dust and ash.

This wonderful truth about God would become even more precious and comforting after the true incarnation. Many of us know those precious verses in Hebrews 4 about how Jesus is our high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses because he has been tempted as we are, but not many of us know what it says a few verses later in Hebrews 5:2:

“He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.”

The Lord deals gently with us in our weakness, because in Christ, he knows what it’s like to be weak. He knows what it’s like to be tempted to sin and to doubt, and because of that, we can be confident that he will be patient with us in our weakness and kind to us in our doubts.

(2) **GOD’S JUSTICE**

Following this conversation, the three men set out in verse 16 to a place where they can overlook Sodom, a wicked city that has been rotted by corruption. And Abraham, as the generous host, went with them to set them on their way. It is here that the Lord models another lesson for Abraham, which leads to our second point: God’s Justice.

Verses 17-19 capture a conversation that God has about whether he should disclose what he’s about to do to Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham. We don’t know who God is speaking to, though the context implies that he’s speaking to his two angelic companions. He’s taking counsel with them before he decides what to do next.

In verse 17 he asks, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” We know from verse 20 and onwards that what God is about to do is destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah along with the neighbouring cities, which is exactly what he ends up doing in Chapter 21. The question is, does Abraham need to know? After all, why should he care? What business did he have with Sodom and Gomorrah and the execution of God’s justice? God has already shown that he’s perfectly content hiding things from Abraham. He had just hidden the fact that Sarah would have a son from him for twenty four years, so why not hide this as well?

Two reasons. The first is in verse 18. God reflects on the fact that “Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.” In other words, God’s justice against Sodom and Gomorrah *was* Abraham’s business, because they were among the nations that Abraham was called to bless! God’s work in the world was very much within Abraham’s jurisdiction, not because Abraham wanted that, but because God *said so*.

That gave God reason to disclose what he was about to do to Abraham. It would be a test. Abraham knew that God had called him to be a blessing to the nations, not a curse, but what would he do with that calling? Would he seek God’s blessing for them, or would he only care about himself? That’s the first reason.

The second reason is disclosed in verse 19: “For I have 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”. In other words, God is saying that he should tell Abraham about his plans for justice because Abraham was called to do justice and to teach his family about justice. God saw value in inviting Abraham into his plans so that he could see how God acts justly and go and do the same. Only then would he have the wisdom and experience to command his children and his household to keep the way of the LORD.

With these reflections complete, God’s decision has been made. He decides to disclose rather than hide. He tells Abraham in verses 20-21, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.”

God has heard an outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah, great cries of sorrow and anguish that testify to the gravity of their sin. I don’t think that means that the victims of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were praying to God and crying out to him for justice. I think this is more akin to what Genesis 4:10 said about Abel after he was murdered by his brother Cain when the Lord says,

“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.”

God hears injustice even when those who have suffered injustice are dead. His knowledge of the evil acts of men aren’t dependent on the prayers of their victims. It’s dependent on himself, on his omniscience. He knows all. He hears all. And he will act upon all.

One of the hardest things about suffering injustice is the fear that no one knows about it except you. Suffering injustice *alone* is just as hard as the injustice itself, isn’t it? God wants you to know that you don’t suffer alone. He has heard the injustice that you’ve suffered. He has seen the sins that have been committed against you. You don’t need to explain it to him. You don’t need to give him all the details. He wants you to come to him, of course, but he doesn’t need you to. God will address every injustice because he is a God of justice, and He will make everything that’s wrong right again.

Now you may be wondering, “If God knows about their sin, why does he say in verse 21 that he will “go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me?” If God has heard not only the accusations of injustice but the injustice itself, why does it seem like he needs to go and investigate?

That’s a good question, and I think the answer is that God is modelling what justice should look like for Abraham. God doesn’t need to investigate injustice, but Abraham will. Abraham’s descendants will. We will. When we hear outcry, when we hear about the sins of others, we aren’t supposed to rush to judgment. We are to carefully inquire, to see for ourselves, whether the allegations are true.

The fact that God does this in verse 21 ought to be a comfort to us, because it shows us that he treats justice with great caution. Verse 21 is a picture of God’s intimate knowledge of injustice, so that when he pours out his justice, we can have confidence that it wasn’t arbitrary or impulsive or excessive. It was carefully measured and considered. As Kenneth Mathews puts it,

“By examining the situation, the Lord acts justly, not capriciously, in the determination he makes.” – Mathews

That is true, not only in the situation of Sodom and Gomorrah, but in every situation where God’s justice is poured out against sinners.

(3) **GOD’S MERCY**

This leads to the final portion of Chapter 18 and to the Lord’s third lesson for Abraham: God’s Mercy.

We saw earlier that one of the reasons why God decided to tell Abraham about his justice against Sodom and Gomorrah was to test him. Would he fulfill his mandate to be a blessing to the nations, including the nations that were wicked? Verses 22-33 reveal that Abraham passed that test. He prayed for them, not that God would show them justice, but that God would show them mercy, because he didn’t want God’s curses for them. He wanted God’s blessings.

In verses 23-25, Abraham makes an eloquent moral argument as he appeals to God to spare these cities. In a way, he challenges God to do what is right for the sake of the righteous. In verses 23 and 25, Abraham expresses his belief that it would be wrong for God to sweep away the righteous with the wicked, because the righteous shouldn’t receive the punishment that the wicked deserve. And so, Abraham makes an appeal to God in verse 24, that if there are fifty righteous people within the city, God will spare the entire city for their sake.

God listens to this and agrees, saying in verse 26: “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

Then in a series of five subsequent appeals, Abraham continues to whittle down the number of righteous people that would result in sparing the entire city. It goes from forty-five in verse 28, to forty in verse 29, to thirty in verse 30, to twenty in verse 31, and finally to ten in verse 32. Every single time, Abraham addresses the Lord with reverence and fear, and every single time, the Lord answers his intercession affirmatively, promising that he will spare the entire city for the sake of the righteous, even if it were as few as ten.

In order to understand what this means, we need to first understand what it *doesn’t* mean. It doesn’t mean that the Lord was about to do something that was evil until Abraham interceded. Abraham didn’t put God in his place or keep him from doing evil. He didn’t teach him what true justice requires. How do we know that?

We know that because of what ultimately happens in Chapter 19. It turns out that there weren’t fifty, or forty-five, or forty, or thirty, or twenty, or even ten righteous people in the city. There’s only *one*, Abraham’s nephew Lot, and even he had been tainted by Sodom’s corruption. So what would God do? None of the scenarios Abraham prayed about had taken place, so did that mean that God would wipe out the righteous along with the wicked? No. The Lord’s two angelic messengers rescue Lot and his daughters from being destroyed with the city. God does what is just in a situation that Abraham hadn’t even envisioned or prayed for.

So what do these verses teach us? They teach us something profoundly glorious about God, that as great as God’s justice may be, God’s mercy is even greater. God was willing to stay his hand of justice against the wicked for the sake of his mercy towards the righteous. Ten righteous people would be all it would take for the whole city to be saved. Ten righteous people would cover the wicked like a protective shield from God’s justice, because as one commentator puts it,

“God’s mercy on the few will outweigh his anger with the many.” - Wenham

We read these verses and think they’re about the power of prayer, about what can happen if we just keep interceding for others, but the main lesson here isn’t about intercession. It’s about the revelation of God’s heart. He is compassionate. He is merciful. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love even towards the wicked. Abraham’s prayers didn’t create this. They merely revealed this gloriously comforting reality. As Kenneth Mathews puts it,

“The Lord does not require any ‘arm twisting’ by Abraham to act benevolently; the tactic by Abraham only further exposes the compassionate heart God has for the ‘whole place’, including the wicked.” - Mathews

I wonder how much God has spared our world, our nation, our communities, perhaps even our *families* because of the righteousness of a few. If faithful Christians and faithful churches were to disappear from our land, who knows what God would do against our nation? But thanks be to God, that the faithfulness of a few holds back the justice of God against the many.

That’s exactly what God did for us in Christ. In Christ, the righteousness of one man would stay God’s justice against us because he would take that justice upon himself. Jesus would die on behalf of all who trust in him so that God’s justice wouldn’t be aimed at them. It would be aimed at him. The righteous would be punished like the wicked so that the wicked would be rewarded like the righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Put your trust in him. Find your refuge in him, that you would know the Lord as the God of all mercy and be free to show the same mercy to others.

**CONCLUSION**

So what can we do in response to these wonderful truths about God? Let me suggest two things.

First, learn to deal kindly with the weak. I can’t help but think of the parents of young children here (including myself). It’s far too easy for us to fall into the trap of treating our kids like little grown-ups. We expect them to be mature like us. We set the same standards for them that we set for ourselves. We treat them more like equals than like little children.

We need to remember that children are *weak*. They’re immature *by definition* by virtue of their limited age and experience, and because of that, we ought to treat them with unique kindness. We don’t just give them what they deserve. We spare them. We don’t speak harshly with them. We speak gently. We don’t accuse and threaten and rage. We patiently correct and nurture. Why? Because that’s how God deals with us. The kindness he showed to Sarah is the kindness he shows to us every day. I am amazed that God does not discipline me every day because of my sin. There is a time for discipline, just as there is a time for parental discipline, but so often God spares me because he knows I’m weak. He doesn’t want me to stay weak. He wants me to become strong, but he does so primarily by showing me the kindness of his grace in Christ, because it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance.

The same is true for those who are weak because of their suffering. As we saw last Sunday, one of the biggest mistakes that Job’s friends made was that they didn’t treat him as one who was weakened by suffering. They treated him like a peer in a classroom who just needed information, and because of that, they weren’t kind to him. They were harsh and judgmental. When those around us are weak, whether by virtue of their age or their suffering, we are called to treat them with exceptional kindness.

Second, learn to be slow to judge. We live in a time of instant judgment. Accusations are made and believed simultaneously. That is not how justice works. Accusations need to be tested. Accusations need to be proven. When they are, there needs to be justice *against* that person. But when they’re not, there needs to be justice *for* that person.

If God saw fit to inquire about the outcries against Sodom and Gomorrah, how much more should we? When one of our kids accuses his sibling of wrongdoing, do we rush to judgment, or do we inquire? When the latest Twitter trend tears down that public figure’s reputation, do we rush to judgment, or do we inquire? And if we find that we cannot conduct a full inquiry that would give us both sides of the story and allow us to test that evidence, are we content to reserve our judgment?

We must be ready to judge what is wrong, but we also must be ready to not judge what is unclear and be ok with that. How? Because we know that nothing is unclear before God. He hears all injustice. He sees it with his own eyes. And he will bring justice in his own way, and in his own time.

And so, let us recommit ourselves to knowing the God of the Scriptures, to beholding his glory, to studying how he deals with sinners, because that’s the only way we will become people who deal kindly with the weak, who are slow to judge, who are content to entrust ultimate justice to him. Let us behold him in the face of Christ, our perfect example and loving Saviour, who showed us the ultimate kindness and mercy on the cross.