

Abram and Lot

Genesis 18:17, 23-26, 32-33 ¹⁷ The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ²³ Then 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 then sweep away the place and not forgive it for 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 fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ²⁶ And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." ³² Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

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Last week we talked about Abram's call by God to leave his home and family in Haran and to go to Canaan. Haran is shown on the map by a red star. From there Abram and his family went to the region where you see the red circle. And then, when there was a famine, Abram went on down to Egypt.

In Genesis chapter 13, we read that when Abram returned from Egypt with his wife, his orphaned nephew, Lot, and all of their possessions and servants, they went about fifteen miles north of present day Jerusalem to Bethel. This is in the region where you see the red dot. Abram had large flocks and herds, and so did Lot. The land couldn't support so many animals and people. As a result, conflict broke out between those who cared for Abram's flocks and those who took care of Lot's herds.

Abram told his nephew, Lot, to choose where he would like to settle. Abram said, "If you decide to go settle in one direction, I'll go settle in the opposite direction." In ancient cultures, this was a very unusual offer. The patriarch of the family received the highest respect and made all of the important decisions. But here we see a different side of Abram than we did in Egypt. Abram deferred to his nephew and told him to choose land in whatever direction he wanted, and Abram would turn in the opposite direction to put distance between them.

Lot looked at the Jordan River Valley and saw lush greenery and good forage for his flocks and herds and he selfishly chose what looked best. He headed east and south and ended up near the city of Sodom. The most probable location for Sodom was near the southern tip of the Dead Sea, where you see the red star. After Lot moved to the river valley, Abram stayed in the hilly country and moved down to the area around Mamre, where you see the yellow triangle. This separated them by more than forty miles, a considerable distance to travel by foot or donkey.

Sometime later – we don't know how long – there's a second story about the relationship between Abram and his nephew, Lot. In chapter 14, the kings of four cities are engaged in battle with the kings of five other cities, including the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The four attacking kings were stronger and drove the five kings into the mountains. Then they looted the cities and the citizens of the area. Lot lived near Sodom, and in the process, Lot, his family, and all he owned were carried off by the victorious forces. Now we get to see yet another side of Abram. When he learned that his nephew had been carried off by the four kings, he gathered up 318 loyal men who were born in his household and went off in pursuit. We're told they chased those who captured Lot all the way up Canaan to north of Damascus, where the blue rectangle is, a distance of around 120 miles! It's an incredible story! Abram and his men rescued Lot and all of his family and possessions, and all of the booty that had been looted from Sodom and the adjoining cities and he took them back to Sodom.

Here we meet Melchizedek, the king of the city of Salem. But Melchizedek is also a priest of the Most High God. He brought bread and wine and blessed God and Abram. In gratitude to God and

response to the blessings of Melchizedek, Abram gave one-tenth of everything to Melchizedek. It's interesting to note that this priest wasn't kin to Abraham. He wasn't part of his household, and yet he knew and worshiped the Most High God, the creator of the universe. Just as Pharaoh acted more honorably than Abram down in Egypt, so here, we again run across a righteous person who was outside the clan, someone who wasn't part of the central thread of the people chosen by God, but whose life and actions are lifted up as examples for us all.

In the final part of this story of the rescue of Lot, the rest of the booty was divided up. The King of Sodom asked that the people be returned, but told Abram to keep all of the property. Abram declared that the young men could keep whatever they had taken to eat, and three local men who went with him could keep their share. But Abram kept nothing for himself and returned the property back to the King of Sodom.

The third story that touches on the relationship between Abram and Lot occurs in the second half of chapter eighteen. By this time, God had appeared to Abram again and had changed his name from Abram to Abraham, that is, from "exulted father" to "ancestor of a multitude." At the same time, God changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "princess." Now, God appeared to Abraham yet again, this time as one of three traveling men who stopped at Abraham's tent and were guests who experienced Abraham's hospitality. As the men are leaving we learn that one of them is God. God reasoned with himself that because of the relationship with Abraham, he would reveal the plans regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. God told Abraham, "I have heard cries of distress from these two cities and I am on my way to investigate these accusations of injustice." Here we come across a view of God that we don't expect. Instead of being all-seeing and all-knowing, God says, "I've heard cries of distress and I'm going to go see for myself."

We know where this story is headed, but we shouldn't project what is learned later back on the early part of the story. All that's certain at this point is that Abraham knows that God is concerned about the cries of distress and injustice that he's heard. But Abraham knows that if God is directly involving himself, this is a serious situation. Stories from the past say that God has inflicted universal punishment in the form of expulsion from Eden, a great flood, and inflicting humanity with the inability to communicate with each other. When things are bad enough for God to take direct action, the consequences can be enormous!

Abraham undertakes a bold conversation with God. Perhaps he's made bold by the openness God has shown in talking about the situation. Perhaps he's bold out of desperation about what might happen to Lot and his family. We've already seen the lengths Abraham has gone to in the past on behalf of Lot. And so, Abraham began to defend God's own righteous character. ²³ "Abraham approached and said, 'Will you really sweep away the innocent with the guilty?' ²⁴ What if there are fifty innocent people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not save the place for the sake of the fifty innocent people in it? ²⁵ It's not like you to do this, killing the innocent with the guilty as if there were no difference. It's not like you! Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?'" (Genesis 18:23-25 CEB)

When there is bartering going on, you expect the reply to move the ante in the opposite direction. We expect God, if he's willing to barter at all, to reply, "Tell you what: I'll save the city if I find 100 innocent people in it." But instead, God agreed to the number that Abraham proposed. I suspect that Abraham was really surprised that God accepted this bid, so to speak. And Abraham became bolder and dared to speak again. "Since I've already decided to speak with my Lord, even though I'm just soil and ash, ²⁸ what if there are five fewer innocent people than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city over just five?" Is the difference between 45 and 50 critical, Lord? Do five people make the difference between salvation and destruction? The LORD said, "If I find forty-five there, I won't destroy it." (Genesis 18:27-28 CEB) Knowing that he might be trying God's patience, knowing that it's presumptuous to wrangle and barter with God about God's sense of justice, nonetheless, Abraham went on to propose forty people, then thirty, then twenty, and finally ten people as the threshold for saving a whole city. And each time God agreed!

I've always been fascinated by this story. Abraham has always seemed so courageous to bargain with God. Or was he brash and foolhardy – and survived his insolence because of God's generous graciousness? We know from reading the Psalms that when we're scared, when we're threatened or frustrated, we can shake our fists at God and ask, "When are you going to do something about this? You're in charge. Take charge and rescue me!" But this situation is different. Is Abraham trying to lure and wheedle God into being more forgiving, more gracious? Is that what this bartering is about? That's sort of how I've always understood this passage, but I think I've always missed something here. This isn't bartering.

Abraham bids 50 people. God doesn't say, "how about if we make it 100? Rather, God says, "Okay, fifty." "How about forty-five?" "Okay." "Forty?" "Sure". "Thirty?" "Yeah, thirty will do." "How about twenty?" "Twenty is enough." "Here's as far as I dare go, Lord. Is ten enough?" "Yes, Abraham, ten is enough."

Who is changing whose mind, here? Is Abraham teaching God about grace and wearing him down? I don't think so. God never resists. God never says, "Watch out! You're skating on thin ice! Careful. You're pushing me too hard!" No, all of the reluctance is on Abraham's part. It's Abraham who is being gently led by God to explore how wide God's mercy is. And Abraham is tapped out at ten. He can't imagine grace extending beyond ten. But later we'll see that God extends rescue to six before the city is destroyed. Only four accept the gracious offer. In the end only three obey and escape. God's grace is bigger and more versatile than Abraham can imagine.

Abraham is more complex than we learned as children. With blind trust, he left Haran to go where God would lead him. But lack of trust took him to Egypt where he lied and demeaned his wife to save his own neck and get rich. But he was generous to Lot to the point of spoiling him, letting him pick the choice grazing lands. Compared to the way he treated Sarai in Egypt, Abraham was quick to risk battle and went to great lengths to rescue Lot from captivity. Abraham was generous in his thanks to God and with those who helped him rescue Lot, but refused any of the spoils of war for himself. Finally, Abraham was bold enough to talk with God and even question God, not realizing that it was his own limits and his own understanding that would be challenged.

By seeing Abraham as a complex person with many facets to his character, perhaps we can understand ourselves as neither shining examples of goodness nor miserable and sinful failures. Like Abraham we aren't pure. We aren't purely good or purely bad. And like Abraham, God is faithful to us - faithful through all our ups and downs, faithful during our strengths and our weaknesses.

Certainly we need to remember that conversation with God is critically important. God wants to have a conversation with us. But we have to approach and talk. And it helps immensely if we also stop and listen. Most of all, even when we might think we're praying on behalf of someone else, or even if we're trying to steer God in some direction, it may well be that the greatest wonder is that prayer changes us! Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Like Abraham we are called by God to be a blessing to others.

Like Abraham we have admirable qualities and considerable flaws.

And if like Abraham we spend time in dialogue with God, we will be changed!