

An Audience of God

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Date: 10 April 2016

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- [0 : 0 0] If you're like me, then I'm sure you have many questions. Questions like, who are these three men that came to Abraham? How are they connected with the Lord?
- Or secondly, you may be asking, is Sarah wrong to laugh? I noticed that all of you laughed at the same point, verse 15, when Sarah laughed and said she didn't.
- But I guess the question is, didn't Abraham do the same in the last chapter? So was she wrong? And then thirdly, as you read the exchange between Abraham and the Lord, you might be asking, is it okay for Abraham to be bargaining with the Lord like this?
- And if that's okay, does that mean we can do it too? Also, this is only half the story, because the second half will be in Genesis 19, which we'll deal with next week.
- Now for those of us who are new to the church, let me just maybe say a few words to bring you up to speed. Well, last year, we were looking at Abraham's life of faith. We started in Genesis chapter 12, and we paused at Genesis chapter 17.
- [1 : 0 9] There, Abraham had just been instructed to be circumcised. And in turn, God had specifically promised that Sarah will have a son within a year. And it's true him, Isaac, the name Isaac means he laughed, a bit ironic, that God will fulfill his promises.
- So Genesis 18, this very chapter then, occurs very soon after. Here we find Abraham in front of his tent, under the great trees of Mamre, on a hot day, sitting.
- And suddenly, in verse 2, Abraham looks up, and he finds three men standing nearby. Now we're not sure how much Abraham knows of their identity, but his acts are all done in submission.
- So he hurries over to them, and he bows low to the ground. And then he says, And when the three men agreed, Abraham hurries away again, first to Sarah, whom he gets to make bread.
- Now it says three seers in verse 6, but if you look down at the footnotes there, it says that it's actually about how much? 16 kilos.
- [2 : 3 3] Alright, that's a lot of bread for three people, right? 16 kilos. And then the calf that he prepares, well, a calf is not a big animal, but even then, that's going to be a huge meal, even for three people.
- So he goes to great lengths, doesn't he? All the actions are done with urgency, like a servant. And then when the meal's finally served, notice that Abraham hangs back. He's standing near them, a bit like a butler in Downton Abbey, yeah?
- Not joining in. So we know these men were important, just by the way Abraham treated them. But who are they exactly? After all, in verse 1, it says, The Lord appeared to Abraham.
- And then if you look in verse 13, it's very clear that the Lord is speaking. Also, you might not have picked it up in English, but in verse 3, Abraham appears to be giving greater reverence to one of the three men.

For he addresses him as my Lord, in the singular, and then the your, your servant there, is actually in the singular as well. Although by the time we get to verse 5, the your there is plural to all three.

[3 : 38] So I think the best way to sort of look at this is to see that one of the three was actually the Lord himself. While the other two were angels. And it sort of makes sense when we then read to the start of the next chapter in Genesis 19, when it's actually the two angels that arrive in Sodom.

But some people may ask, Is it possible for the Lord to appear in bodily form like that? Well, we've had appearances, even in this sort of early part of the Bible, appearances by the Lord before, haven't we?

In Genesis 3, if you remember, the Lord himself is said to walk in the garden, even as Adam and Eve hid from him. And then later in Genesis 5 and 6, we find Enoch and Noah walked with God.

Although this, you know, could be metaphoric in the sense that it's not physical, but spiritual. And I think here that although there's some ambiguity, this is probably the closest we get to the Lord not only appearing in bodily form, but also sitting and physically eating.

Now, I think this is really significant because eating is an act of fellowship and community. It was that back then in their culture, and it's our culture as well. We don't eat unless we sort of value the person we're eating with.

[4 : 59] And so what's happening here, I think, is that the Lord has condescended himself or humbled himself to come in person, as it were, bodily form, to be in relationship with Abraham, even though Abraham at this stage doesn't dare sit to eat.

And so there must be a reason for this visit, for the Lord to grant Abraham an audience with him, as it were. And we soon see what it is, and actually there are two reasons.

First, the Lord comes to give Sarah a message. That's the first reason, I think. And then secondly, the Lord comes to reveal to Abraham what's about to happen in Sodom and Gomorrah.

So let's turn to the first reason, to Sarah's part in the story. And here we get to our second question. Was Sarah wrong to laugh? Now, all this while, as this was all happening, Sarah, you would note, has remained in the tent.

And the three men, having confirmed that she was there in the tent, I think mainly to ensure that she was within years short, one of them, presumably the Lord, now repeats the promise he's already made to Abraham.

[6 : 09] You compare this verse, verse 10, with Genesis chapter 17 and verse 21, and you'll find many similarities between what's said there and here. Here, the Lord says, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

Now, we've all probably been guilty of the slip of the tongue. And many of us, having been caught once too often, we try and train ourselves to bite our tongue, don't we?

And I have to say, not to be boastful, but I think I'm getting better at it. But what I find simply impossible, that even though I may be able to bite my tongue, is that I cannot do the same with my thoughts.

I can't control what comes into my brain. And often we would betray our thoughts, perhaps with the roll of the eye, you know, or the raised eyebrows, or that reflex chuckle, you know.

Sometimes we just can't help, we try and keep it in, but we can't. And I suspect that that's exactly how Sarah reacts here, when she hears what the Lord has said. She can't stop herself laughing, sort of within, and although she manages to bite her tongue, she can't help but think, after I'm worn out, and my master's old, will I now have this pleasure?

[7 : 30] You know, for all these years, she's been wanting to have a baby, right? And so this would have been playing over and over in her mind. So it would just be coming naturally to her. And again, if we compare these words to Abraham's own words in Genesis 17, we see actually that Sarah's thoughts are very similar to Abraham's.

Now with anyone else, Sarah's thoughts would have been safe, right? But unfortunately, not with God. God knows because He's God. And I suppose we all know this as well, and yet often we act like He doesn't, that we can get away with our thoughts.

Anyway, the Lord says to Abraham in verse 13, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Will I really have a child now that I'm old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? That's the key question there.

I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son. So Sarah, I think it, you know, is caught up with her thoughts, probably startled when she hears what the Lord says.

After all, if you note, the Lord's back was turned towards her. He wasn't even looking her in the face and not even able to see any reaction. Now I'm sure that if Sarah had her time over again, she probably wouldn't have reacted like this.

[8 : 50] But here she is, she's caught off guard, and so she reacts as we all do, instinctively and in self-preservation. She was afraid, and so she lied.

I did not laugh, she said. To which the Lord says, No, you did. Very familiar kind of, you know. Did you steal the cookie? No, I did. Yes, you did. Of course, she should have known, shouldn't she?

That if the Lord could read her mind, then he would surely know that she's lying. Now you may wonder why the Lord seems to treat Sarah differently to Abraham.

After all, Abraham laughed too and questioned the Lord's ability. Yet Sarah receives a mild rebuke, but Abraham doesn't seem to. Well, I think it's because Sarah already knew the promise.

So after the last chapter, when Abraham comes back, he would have, you know, gone about circumcising himself and every other male in the household.

[9 : 52] And so it would have been painful, and you know, as, you know, men in pain, it would be pretty obvious. And so Sarah would have asked, you know, What's going on here? Why are you doing this? And I'm sure that Abraham would have then told her, Well, it's because this is what the Lord's promised.

So I think Sarah knew about the promise. She had time to think about it. And the fact that she became afraid when she was found out, I think shows too that she knew that her faith was lacking.

Of course, I think if she had the time over again, what she should have done is to just openly admit her lack of faith. Say, Lord, yes, I lack faith. Please help me. But that's not what she does.

Because like I said, she's just like us. And I suppose that's why we shouldn't be too harsh on her. Because we too are made of the same stuff, aren't we?

Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, our natural instinct is to hide, isn't it? Rather than own up when we've done the wrong thing, or even to admit our weaknesses. We would rather put up a front than to show that we're wrong.

[10 : 57] But the Lord knows because He is God. And so while the Lord rebukes Sarah, I don't think He's sort of rebuking her very harshly. Rather, as I said, the reason that the Lord has come in the first place is with a message to Sarah.

And I think the purpose of that message is to build up Sarah's faith. After all, if you look back, Abraham himself has had multiple encounters with God, right? God has appeared to him multiple times.

But this is the first time that Sarah actually hears from the Lord directly. So I think He's actually come to encourage her, to show her that nothing is too hard for him, not least knowing her very thoughts and fears.

Well, the story now moves on because the men get up to leave after they've eaten. I'm not sure if they ate everything, but as they do, the sight of Sodom comes into view, right? They're up on a hill, and the Sodom is in a valley.

And here we discover the Lord's second reason for visiting. In verse 20, He says that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great. And so He's come down to check things out for Himself.

[12:08] In fact, the two angels head down to Sodom just to do just that. And we'll find out next week what becomes of it. But this week, what we're going to look at is what happens when the Lord Himself remains with Abraham.

When He does, He reveals His plans to him. Now many of us know this story already. God tells Abraham what I've just read out.

And Abraham then intercedes for Sodom. We know, of course, that Abraham's biggest concern is not for the city, but actually for Lot, right? For his nephew, his wife, and the two daughters, four of them.

But Abraham isn't so bold as to ask for Sodom to be spared. Just for four people. And so he starts with a bigger number. Less courageously, he said, If 50 righteous people are found, will the Lord save Sodom?

And then with each concession by the Lord, Abraham edges lower and lower until he reaches 10. He never quite gets to four. Now, I've heard this before, and I know some people take this to be a model for prayer.

[13:16] They see that God is open to persuasion, so this is how we should pray too. So if Abraham could bargain with God, then so can we. We get something from the Lord, then we ask for a bit more, and we ask for a bit more.

And I suppose if we're interceding for others rather than for our own selfish desires, well, that's legitimate, isn't it? But I want to say that I think if we think this is the only application to the story, then we've missed the bigger point here.

You see, this story isn't primarily about prayer, I don't think. Look back at verse 17, and just read carefully what God actually says.

This is what he says, 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.

[14:19] You see what the Lord is saying? He's saying that he's chosen Abraham to help bring about his plans for this world. But to do that, Abraham and his children and his household, they have to walk in the way of the Lord.

They have to do what is right and just. And so the Lord is actually using this event, this outcry, as an opportunity to give Abraham a master class in justice and judgment.

Abraham is the pupil, and the Lord is his teacher. Now some of you would be great at mental maths. So here's a little problem for you.

Can you all work out the answer to this simple problem? I've got it. 32. Just easy. Done in your head, I'm sure. 32 is the answer. Correct.

Now suppose, however, that I wanted to teach my daughter how to do this. How would I go about it? Would I just give her the answer? 32. There you go. I've taught you.

[15 : 18] I wouldn't do that, would I? Instead, I'll give her strategies to solve it. So for example, I could say, let's split 128 into two numbers. 120 and 8.

Then I'll ask her to divide each number by 4. With 120, I would show her how, if 120 is 10 times 12, yeah? And so if you divide 12 by 4, which is 3, then 120 divided by 4 is 30.

And then if you divide 8 by 4, it's 2. So 30 plus 2 is 32. But can you see what I've just done? I've accommodated my teaching method to her level. And that's what good teaching is, isn't it?

We allow the student to explore, to ask questions, make mistakes even, but not give them the answer straight away. Not jump in and go, 32. That just spoils everything, doesn't it?

So just think, if the Lord just proved that he could read Sarah's mind, then don't you think he already knows what's happening in Sodom and Gomorrah? Don't you think he knows that there is not 10 righteous people there to be found?

[16 : 22] Of course he does, right? He doesn't need to send the angels to find out. And yet the Lord accommodates to Abraham's level of knowledge. He doesn't just blurt out the answers, I'm going to, Sodom's gone, too bad.

There's not, no, he doesn't do that. Rather, he helps Abraham work through the process of justice, of thinking it through. See, God isn't simply interested in executing justice.

He also wants to teach Abraham how it works. And allow him even to have a say in how it's exercised. Why? Because he's going to be through him blessing the whole world, him and his household.

So Abraham needs to learn these things. And so Abraham has to weigh up conflicting priorities. On the one hand, punishing evil, but on the other hand, protecting the righteous from collateral damage.

And it is through this process that Abraham then learns what the Lord's character is. and sees how right is done by the judge of all the earth. And if we think of our own lives, we have these scenarios today as well, don't we?

[17 : 31] So yes, a drug addict mom who's just been convicted of murder ought to go to jail for long term. But at what cost to her innocent children? Got her way up.

A teacher ought to stop the class and deal justly with the three misbehaving boys in the back row. Yes. But what about wasting precious time preparing the other students for their exams?

Again, weighing up. Well, in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, what we see is that the Lord is actually predisposed towards grace. The Lord reveals that for the sake of ten righteous people, He will spare an entire city of otherwise evil and wicked people.

The judge of all the earth is more concerned with doing right by ten people than with the judgment of the many. Well, I think so far in the story we've seen how God's character is, how He keeps His promises because nothing is too hard for Him, and also how when it comes to justice, His inclination is to do right by the few, even when the many go unpunished.

But I think the other thing we see here is how God intends His relationship with humanity to be. Here is a God who actually comes down to our level to enter into relationship with His chosen ones.

[19 : 01] And what we've seen here in Genesis between Abraham and God, I think, is simply a foretaste of things to come. For when we turn to the New Testament, we can begin to see a fuller picture of how God relates to humanity.

So, just over 2,000 years ago, God did come down, didn't He? And He stayed, not merely for a while, but He stayed for a lifetime in the person of Jesus. Fishermen, prostitutes, tax collectors, all these got to share a meal with Him.

Indeed, they shared life with Him. For some were invited into His very council and shared in the secrets of the kingdom, God's plans for salvation. These are the children of Abraham that Genesis 18 actually speaks of.

And I think there's no clearer picture of this than in the upper room. You know, remember the Last Supper when Jesus called His disciples, my friends. So, I've got a verse in John 15 and verse 14.

He says, You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I've called you friends for everything I've learned from my Father I have made known to you.

[20 : 19] How amazing is everything that I've learned from the Father I've made known to you, not my servants, but my friends. Can you see the parallels there? Jesus is doing with His disciples what the Lord did with Abraham, letting them in on the master's business.

And this continues with us too. For even though Jesus is no longer with us physically, we too continue in this intimate relationship with God. How? By His Spirit.

For Paul says in Ephesians that the church now has access to the Father by the Spirit. And so we jump to another passage in Ephesians chapter 1 and verse 9. It's to the church that God has made known on the slide the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth under one head even Christ.

And then he continues in Ephesians chapter 3 and verse 10 that it is through the church that the manifold wisdom of God is made known to all authorities according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So friends, every time we gather and we open the Word of God, we are actually entering into the heavenly counsel of God. God is schooling us even right now in His ways and showing us how He administers justice and grace.

[21 : 43] just as God did with Abraham, He has not hidden from us what He is doing in history. It is revealed to us in His Word. And as a church we are privileged to know what He has promised to do through Christ Jesus.

And so as we look around the world, we look at all the problems and conflicts, God has actually given us the wisdom to make sense of it. We don't watch the evening TV news with utter hopelessness.

Because we know what God's plans are. We may not know exactly how or when God will act, but we know where salvation will come from. And as we pray for our brothers and sisters who are persecuted overseas, God is involving us in the exercise of His justice.

For He acts even as we intercede for this world. And again, if we head into work and school and we need to negotiate difficult relationships or situations, well, God's Word gives us the wisdom of what we can do right and just.

So friends, I know that's not how you feel, but never despise belonging to the church. I know we're getting attacked or criticized or whatever, but it is through the church that God is using us to accomplish His purposes.

[23 : 04] He's revealing to us His plans. As Christians, we know the way of the Lord because we have the Word of God. God gives us His Word so that we can keep His way.

Now friends, if that's not great enough already, wait, there's more. Because God's promise gets even better. For all these things that I've just mentioned, I think in turn are simply a foretaste of what more is to come.

Things will get even better when Jesus returns and we spend eternity with Him. And for that, we go to our final reading, the second reading today in Revelation when the angel actually prophesied to the church in Laodicea.

There we receive an invitation from Jesus to receive Him into our lives just as Abraham receives the three men and to persevere in faith and to overcome the challenges to that faith.

So listen again to Revelation 3 verse 20 and 21. Here I am, Jesus says, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.

[24 : 11] To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne that is to rule, to exercise justice, just as I overcame and sat down with my father on his throne.

Friends, there will come a time when we will all sit at God's table forever. Not just stand under a tree like a butler, at that time there will be no need for us to hide our thoughts just like Sarah did.

Instead, we will rule with Christ. And on that day, the rule will be that of peace and joy. We wouldn't have to deal without Christ that come from Sodom and Gomorrah.

So friends, if any of you here have not yet opened the door to Jesus, then now is the time to do it. Trust in him for your salvation and be an overcomer in this world. But for the rest of us, I want us just to remember the crucial role that we play in history as a church, as members of Christ's church.

We are called to do what is right and just. We are called to intercede for the lost. We are called to build one another up as the church and to accomplish God's purpose in Christ.

[25 : 22] So let's thank God for that and let me pray for us as we press on with this vital work. Father, we thank you for your son again and again.

We thank you that even now he stands at the door and knocks and invites us to receive him into our lives. And for those of us who are already Christians, we continue to want to receive him, to obey him, to put our trust in him.

Thank you that you have revealed your plans for this world to us. Not the minutiae of the details but the big picture. And we have great confidence as we see coming to pass that again and again as we pray, as we look out at this world, we see how your hand of justice is at work.

And more than that, your hand of grace and mercy on many of us, on all of us who do not deserve this privilege, this place in your kingdom.

So help us to be as a church pressing forward, being agents for you in history and seeing your great plans come to great accomplishment in Christ Jesus.

[26 : 38] We pray this and ask this in your son's name, the name of Jesus. Amen.