

## **“BEING FRIENDS WITH GOD”** **(Genesis 18:1-15)**

This morning we continue our study of the life of Abraham from the book of Genesis, and today come to chapter 18. A.W. Tozer was a great Christian thinker and author of yesteryear who was known for his thought-provoking quotes. In one of his books, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, he wrote, “What comes to your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you.” It’s quite a statement, and he’s probably right. What you perceive God to be like determines how you will relate to Him.

What people think about God spans the spectrum. Atheists and agnostics deny that God even exists, but often act as though He does by blaming Him for all the world’s problems. They carry a great deal of hostility against someone they claim to not believe is real. Many people say they believe there is a God, but go about their daily life with no conscious awareness of Him, except when there’s an emergency or crisis. They have no real relationship with Him. Then there are people who belong to a particular religion and engage in religious activities, but view God as distant and remote – as someone you don’t want to get on the wrong side of – and to stay on His good side you must perform certain rituals or follow particular rules. What makes Christianity unique is that the one, true, living God of the Bible desires to have a personal relationship with His creation and wants to be our friend.

Hearing the concept that God wants to be your friend causes some to recoil... God is not a friend – He’s not a buddy – He is holy and transcendent – He is up there and we are way down here. To speak of God being our friend is almost blasphemous. Yet in the Bible God reveals Himself as both transcendent and immanent. Transcendent means that God is God and we are not. He is the creator and we are His creation, and He is to be revered. Immanent means that God is active and present in His creation and is relatable to His creation.

We learn a great deal about who God is through His relationship with Abraham, where He reveals both His transcendence and immanence. He reveals Himself to Abraham as the Almighty, sovereign God who chooses Abraham to enter into a covenant relationship with Him and He is the one who sets the terms for their relationship; and we also see God appearing to Abraham on several occasions and speaking with Him as a friend.

Three different times in the Bible Abraham is called “the friend of God,” and this leads us to the question I want us to consider this morning: What does it mean to be friends with God? How do we as human beings relate in a personal way with the transcendent God of the universe? In the first 15 verses of Genesis 18 we find one of the most intimate encounters God has with a human in the Bible – and God’s encounter with Abraham provides a down-to-earth picture of what friendship with God looks like.

Abraham’s relationship with God begins in chapter 12 when God calls him out of a pagan environment and chooses Him to be the father of a great nation – a nation that will be a conduit of blessing to the whole world. Through Abraham and his descendants, God is going to show mankind how they can be delivered from the curse of sin and be in a right relationship with Him. All this will ultimately be accomplished through Abraham’s greatest descendent – Jesus – who will reverse the curse by paying the penalty of our sin upon the cross.

In order for all of this to happen, Abraham must have a child, and God repeatedly promises that in due time he and Sarah will have a son. The tension throughout Abraham's story is that Sarah is barren and is physically unable to have a child. After God promises a child, Abraham waits – five years, ten years, twenty years – and in chapter 17, after twenty-four years of waiting, God appears to Abraham and, for the first time, gives him a timeline... “At this same time next year, Sarah will give birth to your promised son and you will name him Isaac.” Abraham laughs in amazement... “How can an old guy like me and barren woman like Sarah ever have children?” Yet through it all Abraham believes God's promise and waits.

Now in chapter 18 God appears again to Abraham, this time in very unusual way. In verses 1-2 we read... “The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.”

Picture in your mind a very normal, ordinary day. It's afternoon, which in Middle Eastern culture is the time when you escape the soaring heat and take a break from work. Abraham is doing just that, sitting in front of his tent under the shade of some large trees – taking a siesta – and he looks up and sees three men standing nearby. Who could they be? Abraham immediately recognizes that they are no ordinary men, and hurries out to meet them and bows before them.

Verses 3-8... “He said, ‘If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.’ ‘Very well,’ they answered, ‘do as you say.’ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. ‘Quick,’ he said, ‘get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.’ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.”

At first glance there doesn't seem to be much that stands out about these verses, other than Abraham displaying some traditional Middle Eastern hospitality. But the story takes on significance when we discover throughout the next two chapters that these are not normal visitors – they are heavenly messengers.

One of the men is referred to as “the Lord,” and since the first phrase of verse one says “God appeared to Abraham,” we know that one of these three messengers is God Himself. In theology this is called a theophany – where God appears in the Bible in human form. We saw just such a theophany in chapter 16 when the angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar in the wilderness. God appearing here in human form is a foreshadowing of Christ coming to earth in human flesh to dwell among us. No other religion teaches the idea of personal God who would descend down to earth in such an intimate way.

If one of the three men is God, who are the other two messengers? Later in chapter 19 they are identified as angels. So in chapter 18 Abraham is being visited by God and two angels, not the kind of guests you expect to show up at the front door of your tent. It reminds us of Hebrews 13:2 which says, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” In other words, treat every person you meet well because that person just might be an angel in disguise – and since every person is made in the image of God, how we treat them is how we treat God.

The three men show up very unexpectedly. There's a story told about President Eisenhower who was vacationing in Colorado one summer and read a story about a local boy dying of cancer who expressed a wish to see the president. Eisenhower was moved by this and decided to pay a surprise visit to the boy at his house. His limousine took him to the boy's house and Eisenhower himself walked up to the door and knocked. The boy's father opened the door and his jaw hit the floor when he saw the President of the United States.

After his visit the father was asked how it felt to have the President show up at his front door, and he said all he could think about is how terrible he looked, how the front yard was not mowed, and the house was a mess. He said, "If I would have known he was coming, I would have been ready."

Abraham had no advance warning that three divine messengers were dropping by, and as the next two chapters unfold, we find out that the purpose for their visit is to disclose two things – the first is to tell Sarah personally that she will have a son by this time next year – and the other is to tell Abraham of the impending judgment about to fall on Sodom and Gomorrah, where Abraham's nephew Lot and his family live.

What appears to be a mundane story takes on special significance in that God Himself is paying Abraham a personal visit – He comes a friend – and their interaction reveals four characteristics of what it means to be friends with God.

Number one, being friends with God requires **desire** – a desire to be with God. It's interesting to read in verse one that the three men "stood nearby," as if they were waiting for Abraham to come to them. They come within the vicinity of Abraham, but they wait to see what Abraham will do. Abraham responds immediately – he *hurries* out to meet them. In verse 6 he *hurries* into the tent to have Sarah start preparing a meal for them. In verse 7 he *runs* out to the herd to select a choice calf for the meal. All this shows a passionate desire on the part of Abraham to do all he can to welcome his guests and fellowship with them.

From the very beginning of the Bible, we see God's desire to have a relationship with His creation. After Adam and Eve sinned, God is the one who takes the initiative to seek them out and clothe them with animal skins. God's desire to fellowship with His creation is perhaps best reflected in Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says, "Here I am! 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."

In this verse Jesus is addressing the church at Laodicea that had become spiritual lukewarm and complacent, and were more satisfied with the world than with Him. Jesus is offering to give them something nothing else in the world can give them – intimate fellowship with the God of the universe. In ancient culture eating with someone was the ultimate symbol of friendship, and it portrays the kind of relationship that God desires to have with us.

Jesus says, "I stand at the door and knock, but I won't make you open the door and I won't barge in – it's up to you to open the door and let me in." The psalmist wrote in Psalm 73, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25). Friendship with God is something we must desire above any other earthly desire. David writes of this desire in Psalm 42:1-2 when he says, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" David is a man who seeks God with his whole heart and has an intense desire to be in His presence.

J. Oswald Sanders spoke of desire with God this way... “It would seem that admission to the inner circle of deepening intimacy with God is the outcome of deep desire. Only those who count such intimacy a prize worth sacrificing anything else for, are likely to attain it. If other intimacies are more desirable to us, we will not gain entry to that circle.”

God offers us friendship – something that nothing in this world can replace, but we must desire it. Abraham says to his guests, “Don’t leave – stay a while – relax – let me get you some food and water and wash your feet.” He desired the company of the Lord more than anything else, and showing hospitality to his guests is his sole concern.

Being friends with God not only requires desire, but secondly, it requires **time**. Abraham is a busy man – he has a large household of 318 servants – he has flocks and herds – he has a small kingdom to run – but he sets all this aside to focus on the Lord.

Any relationship requires time – time that is not rushed, but is set aside to simply be with someone – like Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus and focused on nothing but Him. Busyness is the great enemy of friendship with God. I’ve never meet anyone who isn’t busy, have you? You say, “How are you doing?” And they say, “Busy, I’ve been so busy.” People have always been busy, but never before in history have we had more to distract us and preoccupy our time as we do today. Jesus talked about the thorny soil – the person who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word. We can get so busy with pursuing the temporal things of this life – some of which are good things, but things that crowd the most important thing – being with the Lord.

Jesus Himself knew what it was like to be busy, and He packed as much into three-and-a-half years of ministry as anyone, yet He prioritized spending time with the Father. The busiest day of Jesus’ life takes place in Mark 1, and His day begins by preaching a sermon in the synagogue and casting a demon out of a man. Word of His healing power spreads and people flock to the house where He is staying, and He takes the time to minister to each one. It’s not until late in the evening that He finally gets some rest.

But the next morning, while it’s still dark, between 3-6 am, He gets up and goes to a solitary place and prays. At least ten times in the gospels we read of Jesus withdrawing to a lonely place to be with the Father. It was from this time that Jesus drew the strength and energy to meet the demands placed on Him, and no matter how busy things got, being with the Father was His top priority.

If the Son of God needed time with the Father, how much more do we need to make time to be with our creator – to slow down and be still before God – to pray and meditate on His Word and listen to His voice.

Being friends with God requires desire, it requires time, and third, it requires **service**. When Abraham goes out to meet the Lord, he bows low to the ground as one would to a superior, and in verse 3 he refers to himself as the Lord’s “servant.” He rightly sees the Lord as his master, and out of respect and honor for his Lord, he does everything possible to serve Him.

Notice two things about Abraham’s service. First, he serves *eagerly*. No one has to prompt him to act – he serves the Lord with gladness. He hurries and goes to great lengths to show hospitality to his guests. Romans 12:11 says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” That perfectly describes Abraham – he throws his whole being into serving God and enlists the help of Sarah and his servants as well.

The closer we grow in friendship with God, the more passionate we will be to serve Him. The love of God compels us, it motivates us, to serve. I think of Jacob who labored seven years in order to get Rachel for his wife. He said that seven years seemed like only a few days because of his love for her. When God's love fills our lives, working hard for the Lord is not a burden, but a delight.

Second, he serves *generously*. In verse 6 he tells Sarah to make three seahs of the finest flour and make bread. My Bible footnote says that a seah is about 36 pounds – enough bread to feed a small army. In verse 7 he then goes out to his herd and gets his best, most tender calf for the main course, and in verse 8 he brings his guests some curds and milk. He spares no expense, he holds nothing back, but gives the best of what he has to the Lord. Later in the law of Moses God will instruct the Israelites to bring their best animals to be sacrificed, and bring the firstfruits of their crops as an offering.

There's a great story in the life of David when he is looking for a place to build the temple for the Lord and has his eye on a threshing floor owned by Araunah. He goes to Araunah and offers to buy it. Araunah says, "If this is for God, you don't have to pay me anything – I'll give you the land." But David insists on paying and says, "I will not sacrifice to the Lord that which costs me nothing." David's attitude was the same as Abraham's – if I'm going to give something to the Lord, I want it to cost me – I want to give Him the best."

Because of who He is and what He's done for us, God deserves our best – the best of who we are, the best of our time, the best of our talents, the best of our energy.

Being friends with God requires desire, it requires time, and it requires eager and sacrificial service. In verses 9-15 we see a fourth quality of friendship – the requirement of **trust**. While they eat, in verse nine the guests ask Abraham a question, "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. 'There, in the tent,' he said." One of the reasons the messengers visit Abraham is to personally tell Sarah that she will have a child by this time next year. Up to this point God has only communicated His covenant promises with Abraham and Abraham has taken God at His word – He trusts God. But Sarah is having a harder time believing that she'll have a child. She was the one in chapter 16 who suggests to Abraham that he conceive a child with Hagar. Her trust in God is lagging behind Abraham's.

"Where is Sarah?" they ask. The Lord knows exactly where she is – she's just on the other side of the tent flap – but their question prompts Sarah to eaves-drop on the conversation.

Verse 10a, "Then one of them said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.'" This reaffirms the same thing God told Abraham in chapter 17, only this time it's intended for Sarah to hear. Verses 10a-12... "Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?'"

I picture Sarah starting to laugh out loud, but puts her hand over her mouth. There are different kinds of laughs, but Sarah's laugh is a cynical laugh – a laugh of unbelief... "Me, an old woman, have a child? That's completely absurd."

Verses 13-14, “Then the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” God uses Sarah’s unbelief to reveal a major theological truth about Himself – nothing is too hard for Him to do. In contrast to Sarah’s lack of power and ability through human efforts for have a child, nothing is beyond God’s power and ability to accomplish.

Billy Graham said, “There is no promise too hard for the Lord to keep, there is no prayer too hard for God to answer, there is no problem too hard for God to solve, and there is no person too hard for God to save.” When, like Sarah, you are waiting for God to act, you can grow weary – you can grow doubtful and cynical – you can give up hope that anything will change. All you need to do is go back to the very first verse of the Bible and read, “God created the heavens and the earth.”

Imagine reading this and saying, “God created the entire universe, but I don’t know if He can take care of daily needs, I don’t know if my marriage problems can be solved, I don’t know if my unsaved loved could ever come to faith in Christ.” If God made the heavens and earth by simply speaking them into existence, then giving Sarah a child in her old age is no problem. If Jesus can walk on water and make a blind man see – if He can rise from the dead – there is nothing too hard for the Lord. God simply asks that you trust Him – that you place your problem in His hands and never give up hope in what He can do. However He chooses to handle your problem, you can trust the sovereign Lord of the universe.

The Lord asked why Sarah laughed, and in verse 15 we read... “Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh.’ But he said, ‘Yes, you did laugh.’” Sarah thought she had muffled her laugh and kept her doubt from being exposed, but the Lord heard it. I love the simplicity of the verse. Sarah says, “I didn’t laugh,” and the Lord says, “Yes, you did.” It’s that simple. The Lord exposes Sarah’s lie so that she will admit her unbelief, turn from it, and trust the Lord.

A year later, when their promised son is born, they name him Isaac, which means “laughter.” When he’s born Sarah laughs, but this time it’s a laughter of joy. Sarah says, “God has brought me laughter, God has brought me joy – He was able to do the impossible,” and every time she looks at her son, she will be reminded that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

This passage reveals that the God of the universe wants to be your friend and took the initiative to make that possible by sending His Son to reconcile us with God by His death on the cross.

- Are you friends with God? Have trusted Him to be your personal Savior from sin?
- Do you desire Him more than anything else on earth?
- Are you taking time to slow down and be with Him?
- Are you eager and zealous to serve Him and give Him your best?
- Do you trust Him to solve your problems in His way and in His time?