

“IS GOD A FAIR JUDGE?” **(Genesis 18:16-33)**

One of the first words children learn how to say is – say it together – “*no*.” No one teaches them this word, it just comes instinctively, and they greatly enjoy saying it. The second word every child learns to say after the word “no” is “*why*?” Why do I have to do this, why doesn’t he have to do it? The third word that follows right after “no” and “why” is actually three words – “*That’s not fair!*” Their parent’s let them do it, why can’t I?” One researcher says that teenagers use a form of the phrase “It’s not fair” 8.6 times a day. We accused our parents of not being fair, and our kids turn right around and level the charge at us.

From an early age we expect things to be fair. When the cookies are being handed out, we expect they will be evenly distributed. When the rules of the game are laid out, we expect the rules will apply equally to everyone. But as we grow older, we learn the harsh reality that life is not fair. Yet we continue to hold out hope that at least there’s one person who is fair, and that is God.

One of the most transparent psalms is Psalm 73 where the psalmist asks, “Why do the wicked prosper?” He looks around and sees the wicked – living as though God does not exist and breaking all of His laws – yet they appear to be happy, healthy, and wealthy. The psalmist then looks at his life – and how he has lived a righteous life and kept his heart pure – and several questions come to his mind... Does it make any difference how I live my life? Does God see any difference between the righteous and the wicked? Will the wicked be held accountable for the path they’ve chosen? These questions almost caused the psalmist to lose his faith.

At the heart of the psalmist’s anguish is the question of God’s fairness. Can I trust God to judge fairly between the righteous and the wicked? This brings us to Genesis 18 and one of the most fascinating stories in the life of Abraham. It’s a passage that shows a dialogue between God and Abraham, and in this dialogue, we learn four things about God – we learn about His righteousness, we learn about His justice, we learn about His fairness, and we learn about His mercy – it’s kind of a crash course on the attributes of God – and understanding these characteristics about the Lord bolsters our confidence in Him and our role in living in a wicked world.

Chapter 18 begins with the Lord and two angels appearing in human form and paying Abraham a visit. One of the purposes of their visit is to personally tell Sarah that she will have a child by this time next year, and the other purpose of their visit is to inform Abraham that the city of Sodom stands on the brink of destruction.

We first read about Sodom back in chapter 13 where a dispute breaks out between Abraham and Lot’s herdsmen over grazing land, and Abraham graciously offers his nephew Lot his choice of land. Lot saw the well-watered, fertile land around the Dead Sea, and moved his family there, settling in the city of Sodom. Sodom has become a byword to symbolize extreme wickedness, and is a cautionary tale of what can become of a culture that abandons God and lives purely for the flesh.

This is where Lot decided to pitch his tent, and yet 2 Peter says that Lot was a righteous man who was tormented by the evil surrounding him. Meanwhile, Abraham settles about 30 miles to the east in Hebron where he walks faithfully with the Lord.

We pick up the story in verses 16-17... “When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. Then the Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?’” Having told Sarah that she will have a child by next year, the Lord and two angels get up to leave and they look toward Sodom – off in the distance 30 miles to the east – and Abraham – the good host – walks with them to see them on their way.

The Lord says to the two angels, “Should I tell Abraham what I’m about to do?” God has entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham – they are friends and partners – and Abraham is going to be a vital part of God’s plan to save the world. Based on this covenant relationship the Lord decides to bring Abraham into the loop about something He’s about to do.

Jesus does the same thing in the Upper Room when He says to His disciples, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). As believers we have the privilege of being friends with Christ and are a vital part of His plan to save the world, and based on this relationship God brings us in on certain things He wants us to know about His plans.

The first attribute we learn about God in this passage is **He is a righteous God**. In verses 18-19 He reveals His plan to teach the world about His righteous character through the righteous lives of Abraham and his descendants. The Lord says, “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.”

God says, “I chose Abraham.” God could have chosen anybody, but in His sovereignty, He chooses Abraham, and He chooses Him to be a conduit of blessing to the world by showing the other nations who He is and how they can be in a right relationship with Him. He wants Abraham and his children to live differently from the rest of the world, and to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just. He wants Abraham to be a flesh-and-blood, visible example on earth of God’s righteousness and justice.

Righteousness means to live in conformity to God’s order and design for the world and according to the standards He has set for us to live by. To live righteously means that we turn away from our natural, sinful desires and live according to God’s desires. No one, of course, can live a perfectly righteous life this side of heaven – we need the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through trusting Him – and when we do, our desire and our goal is to live holy lives pleasing to Him.

To live justly refers to the way we act towards others – that we treat people fairly and equally and honestly – that we treat them as people made in the image of God. Living justly means that we are good citizens and conduct ourselves in a way that glorifies God.

God chose Abraham, and He chooses us, to be reflections of His righteousness and justice to the world – so that when people look at us, they are able to see what God is like and what it means to be in a right relationship with Him. This is what Jesus meant when He said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. By living rightly and justly, we act as a preservative to hold off judgment and give people an opportunity to repent and be saved, and we provide light to a dark world lost in sin – showing them the way to God.

The second attribute we learn about God as we move through this passage is that **He is a just God**. Because He is righteous, He cannot overlook sinful behavior, but will see to it that wrongdoers are held to account and judged. In verses 20-21 God discloses to Abraham what He is about to do... “Then the Lord said, ‘The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.’”

Nothing escapes God’s notice. When Cain killed Abel, the Lord said, “The brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10). Cain thought that he had gotten away with murder, but nothing escapes God’s attention – no sin goes unnoticed – and God sees to it that sin is held to account. Horrible, wicked things were taking place in Sodom and Gomorrah, and the sins of the city cried out for justice. God is longsuffering and not quick to judge, but the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were so great in scope and grievous in nature that it could no longer be overlooked.

When a culture abandons God’s order and design, it opens the door to every kind of sin and perversion, and grows to the point where nothing is out of bounds and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. We’ve seen this very thing happen in our culture in recent years as things once thought unthinkable and taboo have become accepted and applauded.

God is very longsuffering and allows sin to run its course, but there comes a time when He says, “Enough,” and He decides to judge. God said “enough” in Noah’s day, when the sins of mankind had progressed so far, and were so pervasive, that God acted in judgment by sending the flood.

One of the main objections of Christianity is the belief in God’s judgment. Someone will say, “How can you believe in a God that wipes the world out in a flood, and commands Israel to annihilate an entire group of people? How can you believe in a God that sends people to hell? I want a God who is loving and affirming, and accepts everyone as they are.”

Yet this same person, when they are robbed or swindled or abused, will shout, “Justice! I want those who wronged me held accountable and punished!” Deep inside every person lies a strong sense of justice, and its evidence that we’re made in the image of God, who is righteous and just. This God-given sense of justice is why we have laws – we know that without standards and accountability people will run all over each other. People can say, “Defund the police,” but when crime soars out of control, they say, “Where are the police?” Deep inside everyone understands that a good God judges sin and holds people accountable.

The Lord doesn’t tell Abraham that He’s going to judge Sodom, but using human language He says that He’s going down to investigate and see how bad things are. God does not judge arbitrarily or on a whim, but judges people on the basis of their works – whatever a man sows that shall he also reap. God is going down to Sodom to see what the people of the city have sown.

God is righteous, God is just, and in verses 22-25 we learn a third attribute of God – **He is a fair God**. Verses 22-23 say, “The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: ‘Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’”

Abraham knows the city of Sodom – he lives less than 30 miles away and he knows how wicked and depraved the people of the city are, and although God has not declared that He’s going to judge the city, Abraham deduces that God will do just that. He doesn’t have a problem with God judging the wicked – but he does have a problem with God judging the righteous along with the wicked. Is God going to lump the righteous with the wicked in His judgment and sweep them both away? It’s obvious that Abraham is thinking about his nephew Lot and his family – who live in Sodom. Abraham has already rescued Lot in chapter 14, and now he intercedes with God on his behalf, as well as any other righteous in the city.

Abraham takes on the role of a defense attorney in verses 24-25... “What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Abraham goes to bat for the righteous, and asks if God finds a remnant of fifty righteous people in the city, if He would spare the city from judgment. There’s a lot of speculation as to why Abraham starts with fifty, and it may be that he thinks that between Lot, his family, and the herdsmen that work for him and are part of his clan, that there are fifty righteous people in the city. “Would you spare the city for fifty people?” As a good attorney Abraham appeals to God’s character – “Far be it from you to kill the righteous with the wicked and treat them as though they are alike.” Twice he says, “Far be it from you,” – this is not who you are. Then Abraham says, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?”

Abraham knows the character of God – they are friends – and he knows unlike the pagan gods of other nations who were unpredictable and fickle – the God of Abraham is consistent and fair – He doesn’t judge people arbitrarily based on how He feels that day – God is a righteous God who only does what is right and fair.

In our judicial system we go to great lengths to make sure there is fairness, that the judge is impartial, that the jury is impartial, and that the defense and prosecution are treated equally. Yet how many times do we see someone emerge angrily from a courtroom and say that the system let them down. Many take solace in the fact that guilty people will one day stand before a higher court and receive due justice by God.

Abraham’s primary concern is that the righteous will not be killed with the wicked and treated as though they were alike. Throughout the Bible a distinction is made between the righteous and the wicked. Psalm 1:5-6 says, “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.”

In Matthew 24:40-41 Jesus says that when He comes again to judge the earth a distinction will be made... “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.” The wicked will be taken away to judgment, while the righteous are left to inherit the kingdom.” In Matthew 25:46 Jesus says, “Then they (the wicked) will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

These are just a few of many, many verses that reveal God’s fairness in judgment, and that He will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, judging each based upon their works.

In verses 26-33 we learn a fourth truth about God – He is a righteous God, He is a just God, He is a fair God, and number four, **He is a merciful God**. Mercy is not getting what we deserve, and no one deserves God’s mercy because we’ve all sinned and fallen short of God’s righteous standard of perfection and we all stand condemned before a holy God. The good news is that Jesus lived the righteous life we could not live and died to pay the penalty for our sin. As sinner we deserve hell, but Titus 3:5 says, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”

When we turn from our sin and trust Christ as our Savior from sin, we are forgiven of our sin and declared righteous in God’s eyes. Romans 8:1 says, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Having been made righteous in Christ we are kept safe from judgment.

As the passage continues, Abraham continues his role as a defense attorney and explores the extent of God’s mercy and how much influence righteous people can have in delaying God’s judgment. He began in verse 24 by asking God if He would spare judgment on Sodom if He found fifty righteous people in the city. Verse 26... “The Lord said, ‘If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.’”

Sodom is one of the most wicked cities in history, and yet God is willing to spare judgment on the city for the sake of fifty righteous people. Remember, Abraham is interceding primarily on behalf of the righteous, but if the righteous are spared judgment so are the wicked. This doesn’t mean that God is going to overlook the sins of the wicked, but that the presence of the righteous in a wicked city will defer His judgment so that they will have an extended opportunity to repent. This is what Jesus meant by Christians being the salt of the earth – our godly presence in the world acts as a preservative that delays God judgment.

Do you ever wonder why God doesn’t just come back today and wrap things up? Why does He delay His coming? 2 Peter 3:15 says that God is patient and not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. The moment He returns to judge the world, it will be too late to repent. As an act of mercy God defers judgment so that people will have ample opportunity to be saved.

Abraham goes on to explore the extent of God’s mercy – just how many righteous does it take to defer judgment? Verse 27-28, “Then Abraham spoke up again: ‘Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?’ ‘If I find forty-five there,’ he said, ‘I will not destroy it.’”

Verse 29, “Once again he spoke to him, ‘What if only forty are found there?’ He said, ‘For the sake of forty, I will not do it.’”

Verse 30, “Then he said, ‘May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?’ He answered, ‘I will not do it if I find thirty there.’”

Verse 31, “Abraham said, ‘Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?’ He said, ‘For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.’”

Verses 32-33, “Then he said, ‘May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?’ He answered, ‘For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.’ When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.”

Abraham wonders how far God's mercy would extend and the answer is: pretty far. God is willing to spare judgment on the ultra-wicked city of Sodom for the sake of just ten righteous people. Ezekiel 28:33 says, "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Lord GOD. Wouldn't I prefer that he turn from his ways and live?" Right now, as we speak, the door of salvation is wide open and all are invited to turn from their sins and trust Christ as their Savior. But one day the door of God's mercy will close and it will be too late.

In chapter 19 we find out that God does not find even ten righteous people in Sodom – they were hardened in their unbelief – and proceeds to destroy the city with fire and brimstone. But He does honor Abraham's intercession for Lot and delivers him and his two daughters from judgment – He doesn't sweep the righteous away with the wicked.

Each attribute we learn about God in this passage bolsters our confidence in His character and the role we play in the world...

- Knowing that God is *righteous* and that He has chosen us to be reflections of His righteousness to the world gives us a **purpose** and a calling to glorify God in all we do – and to daily be a salt and a light to a world that is lost.
- Knowing that God is *just* gives us **comfort** in trusting that nothing escapes God's notice. When you are wronged, you let God handle it – you leave room for God's vengeance – and you release injustice to Him.
- Knowing that God is *fair* gives us **assurance** that we will not be judged because Jesus took our judgment upon Himself at the cross.
- Knowing that God is *merciful* gives us **motivation** to pray and intercede for the lost while there is still opportunity for them to be saved.