

ALL SAINTS PONTEFRACT
LEARNING TOGETHER
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THE PATRIARCHS
ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB
STUDY 1 - ABRAHAM WEEK 6



The Promise Learned - an interlude about Righteousness & Justice

Abraham, with his new name, and Sarah, with her new name, now had a timeline to the means of delivery of their God's Promise. This time next year Sarah will have a son, and we even know what the boy is to be called - Isaac, which means Laughter. But...

Straight away we seem to go off message. Abraham has heard the original Promise affirmed a number of times, and each time the promise is revealed in its fullness a little more. Whilst Abraham's Friend and God has taken upon himself the weight of promise through a somewhat one-sided covenant, where God seems to promise to pay the price of a broken covenant whoever is to blame for its fall, God also requires of his Friend, Abraham, a certain standard of behaviour which is defined as Righteousness or Blamelessness. Abraham is to live a life before God and Man that is plainly seen by all as being right. Righteousness and Justice are a great theme of this whole story, 'walk in my presence and be blameless' says God to Abraham in chapter 17, which sounds easy, but **what does it mean to be 'blameless'?**

It will be many years before the Israelites receive the Law, as a definition of righteousness, so in the days of Abraham how would you know what Righteousness looked like? The next two stories begin to unpack that idea, more for the reader's aid than Abraham's. Indeed, it is Abraham that is the upholder of righteousness, in particular of God's Righteousness and Justice.

Read chapter 18:16-19

The way the story is told Abraham is left in the dark about what is to happen next. Instead it is the reader that is an eavesdropper onto God's most private thoughts.

'The LORD had thought, (to himself) 'Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am about to do?'

God has just told Abraham about his future in the Promise, and now that the two Messengers are going off, the two covenantal partners will be left alone. If Abraham is truly God's partner in this grand plan to bless the whole world, then how can one leave the other out of his confidence?

'For I have embraced him so that he will charge his sons and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD to do righteousness and justice,...'

So God, stood before Abraham, confides in His Friend, and seems almost to ask Abraham's permission, or at least, his approval - *'Let me go down and see...'* -

Read Chapter 18;20-33

Abraham's response to this revelation is amazing! First, he *'...stepped forward...'* towards God, who is still standing before him. **Why amazing?**

Abraham is risking all, so it seems - or he is so relaxed and at ease in God's presence that he feels he can do this. Later on he protests his innocence in being so bold, but continues anyway. At the end we learn that in God's eyes 10 Righteous people would save the city. Ten is regarded as a sort of minimum family unit in this regard, so, as we have previously discussed, the theme of God and Family is still woven in this narrative as part of the wider story. After this conversation Abraham is left out of the story, which continues down in the city with Lot and his family. **How many people appear to be in Lot's household now?.....? Read 19;1-9 -**

When we last met Lot his group was so large that the two family groups had to part to keep the peace. Now Lot is much diminished. Contrast the meeting with Lot and the meeting with Abraham! All Lot seems to be able to offer is flat bread - a quick snack, not a great feast! Is this maybe a reflection on the 'City Life'? - there is a tension throughout the Old Testament, and maybe still is today, when the 'City Life' motif is raised?

What is it that sets Sodom and Gomorrah apart for destruction? -

(Maybe read Ezekiel 16;48 - 50)



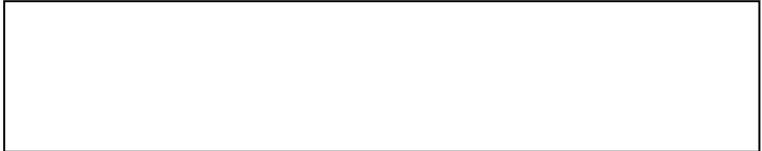
When, at long last Lot sees that they have no choice but to flee, he still hesitates. **Why might this be?**

Note that those who are saved are just four souls, and one of those is lost on the way. So although Abraham had made a case for saving the city, it still falls. Ten were not found there to save it!

Lot really disappears from view now, other than a very sad story that tells of the birth of two nations, Moab and Amon, who would become Israel's great enemies.



But Abraham does re-appear. The very next morning Abraham rushes up to where he had last met the LORD to look down over the scene of destruction. Oddly we do not get any hint of his reaction or of any meeting with Lot. But we are told that Lot was saved because God '*remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the upheaval*' - Although we have seen the 'Men' rescue Lot because God had compassion on him, it seems that this compassion was based on Abraham's Righteousness! **Does Righteousness 'Rub off onto others'?.....?**



Read Genesis 20;1-18... and discuss as we read it verse-by-verse...

There are some problems on the surface with this story being just where it is in the narrative. To me, it does not look as if it belongs here from a chronological point of view. It sounds very like the story we considered earlier on when

Abraham took Sarai to Egypt, and so some commentators see it as really being the same story that had got changed (Chinese Whispers?) and so put back in later on. However, we often tend read with a narrow view of how a story must continue along a time line, and that gives us a problem. We last heard about Abraham and Sarah as a very elderly couple, who were both past childbearing age by a long chalk! Why then is Sarah suddenly perceived as desirable by Abimelech? Also, where are Hagar and Ishmael? And... by now surely, Sarah is with child and obviously so! However, if we can see this story as put here for reasons of subject matter it makes sense again. Even modern novelists do this sort of thing.

Righteousness and Innocence; Justice and Judgement. These are the threads running through the two stories. Abraham says to God, *'will you slay the innocent with the guilty?'* and Abimelech asks *'Will you slay a Nation if innocent?'* These stories are about God as much as about the combatants. Abraham's deception is not allowed to lessen the wrong intentions of Abimelech and it is God who maintains righteousness by preventing the evil being literally consummated.

Does this maybe speak into our World today?

If God so acted to prevent unrighteous actions then, is He still at work today, through conscience, natural Righteousness as well as through His Church? St. Paul seemed to think so!

'Look,' says Abimelech to Sarah, *'I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your brother...and you are now publicly vindicated'* - '1000 pieces of silver' is a fantastic sum! - a 'Great Price'!

Abimelech pays the price of his intended unrighteousness. Abraham intercedes for him too (Abraham 'Blessing' a Nation?) and Abraham again receives great riches, but this time is invited to stay. There seems to be some recognition that Abraham is somehow a source of blessing because he is Blessed by the LORD. Oddly, when Abimelech talks to God he addresses Him as 'LORD' whilst Abraham, when talking to Abimelech, uses just God or gods. Abraham assumes, right from the start, that here there is no knowledge of the LORD and no fear of Him. From that he assumes further that there will be no sense of right and wrong, or of Righteousness and Justice. But there is!

Abraham learns, and we can learn through him, what it is to be 'Righteous' in the eyes of a Holy God. God say of Abimelech *'I know that it was with a pure heart that you have done this...'* Righteousness seems to have more to do with intention than action. Remember King David, a 'Man after God's own heart' - yet a murderer! And it seems to be 'imputed' or 'accounted' - that is, declared by another as a characteristic of someone else. (c.f. 'Self Righteousness'!)

Similarly, God's Justice is based on His views Righteousness, (or otherwise!), which is a characteristic of the heart. But... the measure is God's Righteousness?- & in some way is connected with Faith, but that is for next week!