

Genesis 18 vs 1-15 Friendship with God

Introduction

Friendship is one of the most important aspects of human existence. Everyone needs friends and to be a friend to other people. The word in its most vague terms can refer to acquaintances like 'Facebook friends'; who may be people whose paths cross our own at infrequent intervals. Yet in its fullest and richest sense refers to a small and select group of people whose support to us and influence on us can be most profound. In life we cannot choose our relatives, but we do choose our friends. In the Bible there is one person, Abraham, who was described as a friend of God. This is not stated in Genesis 18, but in three other passages of Scripture. The first is in II Chronicles 20, at a time of a crisis in the Jewish nation. Jehoshaphat, the godly king was on the throne and led his people out to face a mighty army of three neighbouring states. In an extract of the prayer that Jehoshaphat prayed prior to the battle, there is a specific reference to Abraham. *O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no-one can withstand you. ⁷ O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it for ever to the descendants of **Abraham your friend**?* (II Chronicles 20:6-7); the other Old Testament reference is found in Isaiah chapter 41:8: *But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of **Abraham my friend**.* The final reference is from the New Testament in James 2:21-23: *Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called **God's friend**.* What an extraordinary tribute to this man to be described in this way. This designation came about supremely because of his trust in God, despite his circumstances and his willingness to continue believing as decades passed by before this fulfilment of God's promises. The extraordinary willingness to offer his only son Isaac in Genesis 22, something God could only have asked Abraham to do if He was willing to do the same, was a demonstration of his faith in an amazing God. However, here in this passage in Genesis 18 we have an insight into the nature of this friendship.

1. The Special Visitors (Genesis 18:1-8)

(a)Unexpected Guests (Gen.18:1-2) *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. ² 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.* Abraham and Sarah were not expecting to receive any visitors that day. Yet in that world there was no way a person could inform their friends or relatives of a forthcoming visit. This was a world of nomadic herdsmen from various tribal groups. Hospitality was culturally expected when any guest appeared, not just your relatives and friends. This tenet of Middle-eastern society is still powerful to this day amongst those who hold closely to their inherited values. We need to remember that when guests appeared in front of Abraham he had no more expectations of a divine visitation than you or I would have if we received a knock at our door. The degree of welcome the aged patriarch offered went beyond anything that could have been expected. Abraham took the initiative in offering hospitality. Unusually in a culture where everything proceeded at a leisurely pace there is a reference to him hurrying to greet them. Then the bowing to greet them, which although culturally appropriate in that context showed the willingness of this older man to use his gifts and abilities to serve God and other people with

his remaining health and strength; in the following chapter Genesis 19:1-3 we see another enthusiastic welcome from Lot when *the two angels* visited him after meeting with Abraham. In Hebrews 13:2 the author makes the following statement: *Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.* It is often assumed that he is referring back to this gathering here in Genesis 18. This viewpoint is likely to be correct, but an incomplete account of the visitors Abraham and Sarah entertained that day in Mamre. The principle of generous hospitality towards people around us is not only taught in the Old Testament, but equally in the New. Jesus in an account of the Day of Judgement when all will stand before Him on the Day of Judgement made the following observations about people He described as *the righteous*: *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*³⁷ *Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?'³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you?'³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'⁴⁰ The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25:34-40). Paul in the list of spiritual gifts recorded in Romans 12:13 wrote: *Share with God's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.* Not everyone is in a position to invite others to their homes, but there are occasions when meeting someone for a coffee and a chat in a public place might be just as appropriate and helpful. It does not have to be a major dinner in our homes or overnight hospitality, though that is needed at times, but sharing food together whether as a church family or in other contexts is something very familiar amongst Christians over the last two thousand years.*

(b) **Unreserved Hospitality** (Gen.18:3-8) (i) **The welcome** (18:3-5) *He said, If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.⁵ 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.* Abraham here saw three men standing in front of him. Yet his words in verse three are addressed only to the central figure of the three, whom he addresses as *My Lord*. This is a title in Hebrew used for God. Then in verses four and five Abraham's vocabulary indicates that he is now speaking to all three men as he used the 'you plural' form of address. In my sermon on Genesis 16, with reference to Genesis 16:7-9 [page 4 in the sermon notes on the BFBC church website], I explained that the reference there to *the angel of the Lord*, was a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ. On that occasion the Lord Jesus met with the servant girl Hagar; here He comes to share fellowship with Abraham. Although Jesus was not revealed in His glory until the New Testament era there is plenty of indications of His work and ministry amongst the Old Testament people of God. We live in the privileged position of knowing who Jesus is and why He came to earth, truths that amazed His first followers. We can sense the amazement of John as he writes about it in his gospel and first letter. *The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 14:6). That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched— this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (I John 1:1-3).* We will never know what Abraham was thinking that day for certain, but it appears from his words that he senses that his visitors were of sent from God. In particular that the leading figure here was God in human form. Yet this

understanding of the text is consistent with other references in the passage. Genesis 18:13 mentions God speaking directly to Abraham about the child Sarah is soon to carry in her womb. This is such an incredible event that we can scarcely imagine ourselves in his shoes entertaining such exalted company in our own homes. We echo the feelings of Solomon, who in his dedication prayer for the Jerusalem Temple declared: *But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*²⁸ *Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day* (I Kings 8:27-28). Yet God also reminds us through the prophet Isaiah how it is possible for Him to meet with His people. *For this is what the high and lofty One says— He who lives for ever, whose name is holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite* (Isaiah 57:15). Jesus on earth ate both with religious leaders and social outcasts like tax-collectors and other people of ill-repute, together with a wide range of ordinary people as well. He invites all who will heed His call to become His disciples. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? Has there been a time in your life when you took this step of faith? If not why not today?

(ii) **The meal** (18:6-8) *So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. Quick, he said, get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.*⁷ *Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it.*⁸ *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.* The one quantity of food stated concerned the quantity of flour to make bread. In I Samuel 25:18 there is a reference to Abigail, wife of Nabal, providing food for David's army and camp followers in the Judean desert. It included *five seahs of roasted grain*. From the numbers of people listed in I Samuel 25:13 it is not unreasonable to assume at least 1,000 individuals were associated with David in that place, including 600 soldiers under arms. Two hundred loaves of bread was also donated by this lady and her servant girls. Although we cannot be certain about the precise quantities of food, both the meal organised by Sarah and Abraham and the one planned by Abigail nearly a thousand years later, would have been sufficient to feed a large number of people. This was a banquet and the participants viewed as honoured guests. It seems likely from the hints we have in the passage that Abraham and his household had delayed partaking of the food until their special guests had completed their meal, something that might have been a pattern for household servants. If this reading of the story is correct it displays humility on Abraham's part and a recognition of the heavenly status of these guests. In general terms, here are hospitable hosts who make their guests welcome, no 'you'll have had your tea havn't you?' stingyness on their part!

Abraham has more than complied with the conventions of hospitality of his day. Water was provided to wash their feet; a place of comfort in the shade was offered for them to rest and the provision of a main meal, on the assumption that these travellers would have found it difficult to obtain food elsewhere in the locality (Genesis 18:3-5). Our Lord would go further in John 13 with His disciples, not only ensuring a special meal was arranged that evening, but also in washing their feet, a task reserved for a lowly Gentile servant. Later that evening in words recorded in John 15:9-15, Jesus would explain the kind of relationship He had with the Father while on earth and how His followers would be treated as His friends if they followed in His footsteps. *As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.*¹⁰ *If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father's commands and remain in His love.*¹¹ *I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*¹² *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*¹³ *Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*¹⁴ *You are My friends if you do what I command.*¹⁵ *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. Although there was something special about the relationship between Jesus and His first disciples, compared with believers in subsequent generations, yet there is also a degree of continuity when we too obey His commands and follow in His way.

We struggle to comprehend the nature of friendship between this patriarch and God, but this chapter reveals elements of their friendship. There has been fellowship and communion over many long years since Abraham was convinced that the God who revealed Himself to Him had called him to leave his family, culture and lifestyle in Ur and travel to a destination unknown that would become the Promised Land for him and his descendants after him. The very best of provisions was made for his guests and undoubtedly they would have appreciated his generosity. Friends confide in one another and know that their confidences can be respected. This trait of friendship will also be found in this passage in Genesis 18:16-17: *When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.¹⁷ Then the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?* This decision to reveal His plans to Abraham led to the plea for Sodom and Gomorrah and their citizens in the second half of this chapter which is a model of intercessory prayer. It is an encouragement to us that God wants to hear our cries about situations of need and takes into account the petitions of His people in determining the course of action He takes on some occasions. This is utterly mind-boggling to us as human beings on this planet, but this truth is revealed here in this passage in the context of illustrating the friendship of God with His servant Abraham. In the middle of Genesis 18 we see the reason for this divine visitation. God would keep His promise to this couple. They would have the son they had desired for so many years. What had been stated on a number of years in general terms was now to be articulated in precise and specific terms. They and we can struggle with being patient with respect to the fulfilment of God's promises, but we always remember that the Lord Jesus, *the friend that sticks closer than a brother* (Proverbs 18:24), keeps His word.

2. The Special Promise (Genesis 18:9-15)

(a) **It was Specific** (Gen.18:9-10) *Where is your wife Sarah? they asked him. There, in the tent, he said.¹⁰ Then the Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. In Genesis 15:4 God told Abraham: This man [Eliezer] will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir. Then in the covenant renewal in Genesis 17, approximately fourteen years later, there was a similar reassurance with respect to Sarah being the mother of the promised heir: I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her* (Genesis 17:16). Now God specifies that in one year the longed for child would be born. God's promises to Abraham and Sarah –and to each believer –are usually given in general terms as principles and promises, urging us to trust Him for the future. There are a much smaller number of occasions where Christians appear to have assurances of more specific and detailed promises from the Lord. The pattern observed in the Scriptures appears to be that the people blessed with these more detailed encouragements have often been faithful trusting the more general promises of God over an extended period of time. However, we can never proscribe the details of how God may work in a particular life situation as He is sovereign and knows what is best for His people. Romans 8:28: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love*

Him, who have been called according to His purpose, is often cited as the general principle, but we must be very careful how we use it and not use it in a harsh or unloving way when a fellow believer is struggling with some difficult life circumstances.

(b) **It was Supernatural** (Gen.18:11-12) *Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.*¹² *So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?* The time of the menopause was long past for Sarah. Today with the aid of IVF techniques even this obstacle can be overcome in enabling a woman to become pregnant, but then it was utterly inconceivable. It would be interesting to know how much of God's previous messages to Abraham had been passed on to his wife. It would have been so easy for Abraham to keep it to himself, reasoning that Sarah would only feel sadder that her inability to conceive had been highlighted once again. Well her hearing was certainly as sharp as ever, overhearing the conversation between the guests and her husband. Yet she would not have been human had she not strained to hear what was being said when it was clear that the conversation was at least partly about her. How did she view the prospect of motherhood in old age? *Sarah laughed to herself* (v12); this is no surprise, when we pass certain ages in every family the probability of additions diminishes sharply! We have to be careful here. On the one hand we must not close our minds to the possibility of the Lord working supernaturally in ways that are beyond what we thought might be possible. But on the other hand the claims from some people in 'Words from the Lord' are so inaccurate and sometimes distressing that they can do more harm than good. In Evangelical Churches of reformed persuasions we can be too sceptical, often based on previous bad experiences; yet in causes holding more charismatic views there can be a naivety that can be exploited by leaders as members are coerced to accept opinions reported as messages from God. Spiritual discernment in testing whether a message may be from God (see I John 4:1 *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...*) is essential. The most obvious test is does this message fit with what we know of biblical teaching; does it fit in with other guidance God has given me? seeking the advice and counsel from wise Christian friends can also be most helpful. Yet having said that, we are called to *walk by faith and not by sight* (II Corinthians 5:6) and sometimes this means we face challenging steps along our faith journey. But it can also provide encouragements as we see the Lord provide for our needs.

(c) **It was Wonderful** (Gen.18:13-15) *Then the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'*¹⁴ *Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.*¹⁵ *Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, I did not laugh. But he said, Yes, you did laugh.* The verb in verse 14 translated *too hard* is literally *too wonderful*. This phraseology is used in Psalm 139 where David, after reflecting on the amazing omniscience of a God who knows everything; and the fact that there is nowhere in the whole of creation where we can hide from His presence, declares: *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain* (Psalm 139:6). One of the titles of Jesus in Isaiah 9:6 is *Wonderful Counsellor*. The Lord takes delight in exceeding our expectations. Sarah's initial scepticism is no surprise. How many of us would have reacted any differently? Yet she came to a point of trusting God to keep His promises, as Hebrews 11:11[marginal reading] makes clear: *By faith even Sarah, who was past age, was enabled to bear children because she considered Him faithful who had made the promise.* We have to be careful not to be guilty of the sin of unbelief. Moses had a weak moment in Numbers 11:21-23 over the provision of food for the Israelites in the desert: *Moses said, Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!'*²² *Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?*²³ *The Lord answered Moses, Is the Lord's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you.* The

Lord had to remind the people of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah, in the midst of some very dark and difficult days of war: ²⁶*Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: ²⁷ I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?* Is this a message you need to hear today, to encourage you in some particular situation?

Abraham was called a *friend* of God. There is no doubt that aspects of that relationship were unique to that friendship and that cultural era. Yet God does not change; Jesus does not change, His promises and assurances will stand until He returns to take us home to be with Him forever. In the letter to the Hebrews it states so clearly: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever* (Hebrews 13:8). The Holy Spirit is with us and within us each day of our lives to equip and empower us for service for God. In those times when we are so low we cannot pray, He prays for us in accordance with God's will: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*²⁷ *And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.* May He encourage us to trust Him and live in fellowship with Him and one-another as we live for Jesus together in coming days, Amen.