

In the House Of, Part 9 (Abraham)

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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We are living in a time period when the prophecies of the last days, the few remaining ones yet unfulfilled, could come to pass. Even now voices are heard calling for a return to the values of the past. Such a movement could be hijacked by Satan and lead to the erection of the image of the beast, a copy of how the Church of the middle ages attempted to use religion as a political tool. Prophecy predicts that someday this will happen, and America will be the leading agency in taking something made by the hand of men, a Sunday Sabbath in place of the day of God's choosing, and compelling all to worship on it.

A few days ago Allen West, freshman congressman from Florida, gave the final speech at CPAC, the Conservative Political Action Conference. As one of his three main points, the keynote address promoted defending American values and contained the challenge, "If we are to have a New Dawn in America, it means reclaiming our Judeo-Christian heritage." A few days ago Muammar Khadafi issued a call for Muslims to unite against the evil powers of the west. Will we see the Christians of America coalesce, setting aside their doctrinal differences, and call for a united front against a common enemy? Will we see the token of this confederacy to be a common day of worship, the Sunday Sabbath of the papacy? It makes you wonder. We must be ready. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." Romans 10:17.

Today our study is going to take us far back in the pages of the Old Testament, approximately 1800 years before Christ. The story of Abraham contains many themes and lessons, much more than we'll have a chance to look at today. For example, his life story is a case study of the call to "come out of Babylon," which the book of Revelation throws on a global screen. His life is a case study of the Christian pilgrimage, as he continuously lived in tents and constantly moved from place to place in his time of sojourning. Interesting topics!

Today we're going to look at a story in Genesis 18, which took place while Abraham was living at Mamre. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since he left Ur of the Chaldees and trudged south and west toward Palestine. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since the promise had been given to him that he would bear a son; a son borne by his wife Sarah. And yet, no child had been born. Time seemed to eke on day after day, and his patience was being tried. In this story, we will find three pictures of God's condescension, His stepping down to the level of His creatures.

“Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, ‘My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant.’ And they said, ‘Do as you have said.’” Genesis 18:1-5.

The first of the three pictures is the manner of the Lord’s appearance to Abraham. Like His appearance to the Emmaus travelers, to Abraham’s eyes these wayfarers looked no different than any other strangers. How incredibly humble! And yet, it was no less than God Almighty Who stopped by Abraham’s tent that day. Notice the way the name of the Lord is printed in your Bible. It is with all capitals, LORD, indicating that the Hebrew word behind it is Yahweh, signifying “the One Who Is,” taken from the Hebrew verb “to be.” This is God’s “personal name,” being used to refer to no other creatures or false deities. It was the Creator God Who walked the dusty paths of Mamre that day with two of His angel escorts, at first unrecognized by the patriarch.

Genesis 18 is a type of the incarnation. This picture in Genesis 18 is true to His character, as illustrated by the supreme sacrifice of Jesus, leaving His throne, His crown, and coming to this rebel planet, wearing the garb of humanity, donning the cloak of human flesh. Yet He was the eternal, Creator God! While Satan aspired to take hold of position and honor that was not his, Jesus “did not consider it a thing to be grasped” and laid aside the prerogatives of divinity in a daring and courageous move to save lost humanity. He is truly the “Jared” (the name Jared means “the one who comes down”) of history!

This picture of God’s stepping down could well represent the mission of Christ to this world. As you review the conversation between the Lord and Abraham in this 18th chapter, you will see that the subject matter had to do with two main concerns. It had to do with the new life represented in the birth of Isaac, the child of promise, and the warning to be given to the wicked cities of the plain. It was, literally, a “life and death” mission that the three heavenly travelers were on. So was Christ’s mission to the earth centuries later.

He came at that time also in humble form, unrecognized by most. Even after His triumphant victory of the cross and tomb, He appeared to the travelers on their way to Emmaus in a way that did not at first reveal His true identity. When He came to earth, to human view, He did not appear to “stand out,” in the physical sense. To many, He was just “the carpenter’s son” of Nazareth. They saw nothing more than a Galilean itinerant teacher Who had attracted a following through His different doctrine. Yet His coming to this earth had life and death consequences, just as did His visit to Mamre long before. Take notice! Though God may come to you in humble form, just as it was the “still small voice” that spoke to Elijah, the results may have eternal repercussions.

It is too easy to brush aside the calls from the heavenly Dove, the Holy Spirit, when He is calling us to walk in the path that leads to life eternal. Do not judge the value of the message by the wrapping in which it comes. Abraham didn't that day! The Syrian army captain Naaman, contracted leprosy, threatened to, when he was given direction by Elisha's servant Gehazi to wash in Jordan's muddy rivers. What a mistake that would have been! Many today underestimate the value of the teachings of God's Holy Word, the Bible, and because it seems to be of ancient origin, because its pages may contain language that some consider out of date and irrelevant, they set aside the Volume that is God's Word to us, the Book that opens the way to life eternal.

To Abraham's credit, he extended typical middle-eastern hospitality and urged his guests to take respite in his humble dwelling, offering to provide for their refreshment. What a blessing would have been lost if he had not! The book of Hebrews alludes to episodes such as this when it says, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels." Hebrews 13:2.

The next part of the story we will focus on, the second "picture," has to do with God's system of justice. There's a startling statement made in this chapter which deserves more than casual notice. Before we read it, let me ask you a question. If you were asked, "Does the Bible teach us that God knows everything?" What would your answer be? You would reply, "Most certainly He does. He is omniscient. He knows the end from the beginning." You would be right. And yet, in this story, there is a statement made by the Lord Himself that seems to belie that truth. It has to be understood in the context of God's condescending nature, of which this is a picture. He not only stooped to appear to Abraham as a common sojourner, but He stooped to speak in a language that earthlings can grasp. The passage we're looking at is Genesis 18:20, 21. Pay careful attention to these verses, because they shed light on God's system of justice and they help us understand a very important part of His plan as revealed in the Bible.

"And the LORD said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.'" This "going down" beautifully exemplifies His nature to stoop to the level of His creatures, as did Jesus when He was born in Bethlehem. When the Lord says, "I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me, and if not, I will know," it seems at first glance to suggest that the Lord was not in possession of all the facts and a personal visit, through His emissaries the angels, was required to ascertain the details. Is that actually true? Did God really need to send his angels to investigate in order to know what was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah? Of course not! He already knew!

Why then would He say such a thing? It was to give Abraham the confidence that God's justice would be administered in an absolutely fair way. Remember that the fairness of God's administration is what was called into question by Lucifer in the first place. No, He didn't need to make a personal visit before knowing everything about Sodom, but He did. No, He didn't need to inquire in the Garden of Eden whether Adam and Eve had eaten from the forbidden fruit, but He

did. He didn't need to conduct an accounting of Babylon's King Belshazzar, but He told him that the divine audit had checked and rechecked the ledger and found it in bankruptcy. In all these cases, and many others, God "investigated" before He "acted."

In this second picture, we are given a glimpse of God's nature! It is not because He is short on facts that this process is conducted; it is to inspire His creatures that His is the ultimate transparent government, that everything He does is above reproach and above the table. Thus at the end of time, in the period in which we now live, a phase of divine justice is at work. An *investigative judgment* is going on right now, which Daniel saw in vision, as the "court was seated and the books were opened." Daniel 7:10.

This is not done because God doesn't know who will be saved or lost; it is to inspire us that His justice is perfect, and it is to demonstrate to the angels that the ones He is bringing to heaven are safe to save. God could ask the angels to "trust Him" that the ones resurrected from the graves and the ones translated at His coming will not infect the universe with the virus of sin. But He goes beyond this. He opens the books in this pre-advent heavenly judgment so that the angels, who are not omniscient, will be able to see the hearts of men and women and know that they are indeed truly converted and "affliction shall not rise the second time."

Thus in the last chapter of his book we are told that, "At that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is *found written in the book*." Daniel 12:1. The only possible way to understand that passage is to see it in the context of God's great pre-advent judgment in which investigation takes place and decisions are rendered prior to His return in glory. Who are the ones "delivered"? They are the ones "*found written in the book*," an obvious reference to the books mentioned in the court session portrayed in Daniel's 7th chapter.

What's important to us now, is to know that this pre-advent judgment is taking place today. It began in 1844 and must conclude before His return in the sky. When He comes back, "His reward is with Him." Before He comes back, the pronouncement will have been made, "He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still." Revelation 22:11. Notice that it is the next verse which then states, "Behold I am coming quickly!" Without question this finalization of decisions will have taken place prior to His coming in the clouds of heaven. Are we "righteous and holy" today? Is there yet more work to be done in our hearts to make us so? Are we trusting in Jesus as our High Priest to accomplish His work within us? Are we pleading each day for that work to be done?

The judgment seen by the prophet Daniel, when the "court is seated and the books are opened," a process which determines the fate of every soul before His glorious return, is wonderfully illustrated in the story of Genesis 18. Sodom and Gomorrah well typify the wickedness of the entire planet. Their misdeeds called forth divine justice. Punishment must be administered. But before the gavel of God's justice would fall, the Lord said He would come and "take a look and see." What condescension! What humility! What justice!

Of course, we know when we read the 19th chapter, that the “outcry” was true, and that the residents even attempted to assault the heavenly ambassadors. Their behavior only underscored the veracity of the “outcry” and lent credibility to the sentence about to be unleashed. Someday soon this story will be played out on a global scale and the fire will fall on those who have resisted the Spirit of His grace. If given the chance, evil would aspire to destroy the Life-giver Himself. Thus the attack on the New Jerusalem by those under the sway of Satan at the close of the millennium will only confirm the truth of the verdicts rendered against them.

The third picture we want to see in this story is also one of God’s stepping down. He is, as Abraham himself notes, the “Judge of all the earth.” Genesis 18:25. He is the rightful Arbiter of destiny. He is the authoritative and qualified Supreme Justice of the universe. Yet He stoops to allow Abraham an opportunity to participate in His administration. He will give Abraham the chance to intercede on behalf of the sinners in Sodom.

Intercessory prayer is a common trait among many of God’s saints. Daniel interceded on behalf of God’s people during the captivity, recorded in Daniel 9. Moses interceded on behalf of disobedient Israel a number of times, with effective results. Elijah prayed for revival in his day, and it didn’t rain for 3 ½ years, then the fire fell on the sacrifice and the rain fell bringing to an end the drought. Job prayed for his friends.

With true agape love in his heart, Abraham is moved with compassion toward the ungodly and attempts to tilt the scales of divine justice in the direction of mercy. He argues that it wouldn’t be right to kill the righteous with the wicked, would it? What if there were 50 righteous people in Sodom, would the Lord spare the city for their sake? He is given the assurance that should 50 righteous be found, the city would not be destroyed.

Abraham then proceeded to negotiate the number lower. First he ventured to drop the number 50 by 5, reasoning that it wouldn’t be right to destroy a whole city merely because there were only 5 less righteous. He was given assurance that for the sake of 45 righteous, the city would survive. Abraham’s stepped forward again to see if the city could remain if there were 40 righteous, and then, becoming bolder, dropped the number by ten each time, finally arriving at his last proposal. “And he said, ‘Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more. Suppose ten should be found there’ And He said, “I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.”” Genesis 18:32.

Notice in this verse that it is the Lord Who says He will destroy, yet the angels later, as God’s authorized agents, are the actual dispensers of the judgment. They say to Lot, “We will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.” Genesis 19:13. The Lord is said to do that which, on His command, His angels accomplish.

In the end, there are not ten righteous who are found, and the cities of the plain are consumed with “eternal fire,” (Jude 7) meaning, that their destruction is eternal, not the process of

destroying. Those cities remain in a state of destruction to this very day, though there are no flames presently arising. This is an illustration of the fires that will eventually consume sin, its author and its adherents on that last day. Their destruction will be “eternal,” though they will not be suffering in flames throughout eternity, any more than Sodom and Gomorrah are burning today. Language couldn’t be clearer: they are “set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” If anyone wants to know what the Bible means when it talks about eternal fire, the answer is given in the illustration of what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

We long for Jesus to come and bring to an end this night of sin. We look forward eagerly for His cloud to come and take us to the city which has foundations. Yet, this has not happened, because the bride has not made herself ready. No marriage I’ve ever attended took place before the bride was ready.

Here’s a question we can ponder today. Is there something we can do, some cautious negotiation into which we can enter as did Abraham? Let’s think about what happened back then, as he interceded for Sodom and see if there’s an application for us today. The Lord was about to initiate a momentous action, one involving life and death. This action was hinged on a quantitative element; it was tied to the number of righteous that could be found. Abraham pleaded with the Lord, and the number required to bring salvation became lower and lower. Is there something we can learn from this?

We know that God is looking for a group of people who will reflect His character whom He can use to finish His work. We are told about this group being the “144,000,” which we understand to be a symbolic and not a literal number. It won’t be the whole world, that is clear. It won’t be everyone who claims to be a Christian, or everyone whose name is enrolled on the Church membership list. But how many does God need to compose this group who will be His bride?

With Abraham’s humility and his faith, can it be that we can intercede with the Lord in this matter? Not only to cause the bride to be ready, but to accelerate the process by determining the number of saints composing the bride to be on the smaller side, rather than the larger side. What if God could finish the work with the same number of disciples He began the work? That was a very small number! For His name’s sake, to bring to a conclusion this ordeal of suffering and pain, can we pray, in a similar way as did Abraham, that the number be smaller and smaller, increasing the chance that it might be comprised sooner rather than later?

Did not Jesus “turn the world upside down” by His disciples, numbering only 11? Did not Gideon win a mighty victory over the Midianites hosts of 135,000 with his band of merely 300? Did the Lord not work a huge victory over the Philistines through Jonathan and his armor bearer? Yes, the Lord needs a harvest; a representative number in order to accomplish His objectives in answering the charges of Satan and to be the catalyst which will spread the Gospel to the world. Would it be inappropriate to plead with Him that that number be small, so that He could, for the sake of His glory, accomplish the work sooner?

This is the time for us to pray that we will be converted, that the bride will be made ready, that God may finish His plan for this planet quickly; for the benefit that we may go home to glory? Yes, but much more than that, for the sake of His glory and the honor of His name.