

Genesis 17:23–18:8 — The Selfsame Day, Abraham's House, and Communion at Mamre

Bible Study · Genesis 17–18

The Selfsame Day — Promptness of Obedience

Genesis 17:23: Abraham took Ishmael his son and all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that same day as God had said to him. And verse 26: in the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. The phrase the selfsame day is stressed twice in the passage. God communed with Abraham, left off talking with him, and went up from Abraham. And Abraham did it that day. Not the next morning. Not after he had had time to think it over. That day.

This promptness is a pattern in Abraham's life. In chapter 22, when God told him to take his son and offer him, he rose up early in the morning. When God had given him the command to circumcise his household, he did it the selfsame day. These are not isolated incidents. They reveal the character of the man. There was no lag between hearing and doing. That character is what marks those who take their calling as the seed of Abraham seriously — obedience that does not linger and does not negotiate with the will of God.

The selfsame day is also important for another reason. Circumcision appears to be a prerequisite for the communion that follows immediately in chapter 18. When the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, Abraham's whole house had been marked with the seal of his faith. Circumcision came before

chapter 18. And God came to Abraham's house for communion. The connection is not accidental.

All the Men of His House — Obedience Without Option

There is a notion in Christendom that at a certain age children need to make their own choices about these things, and that parents can only entreat but not command. Abraham's house had no such arrangement. Born in the house, bought with money, stranger — every male. The infant of eight days had no say; he was circumcised because he was in Abraham's house. The slave purchased with money had as much say as the infant. There was no consultation, no consent process, no individual opt-out. It was Abraham's house.

This does not mean that circumcision of the household created saving faith in every heart. Paul is explicit in Romans 2:29 that circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men but of God. Not everyone in Abraham's house was necessarily the Lord's. But the mark of death on the first man — the sentence that no flesh shall boast before God — was to characterise that house. When Abraham commanded his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord (as God says of him in chapter 18), the practical expression of that command included exactly this kind of authority over his household.

God later tells Abraham, shall I hide from Abraham the thing which I do? And the reason given is precisely that God knew him — that he would command his children and his household after him. The communion and confidence that Abraham received in chapter 18 is directly connected to the obedience he exercised in chapter 17.

The Oaks of Mamre Versus the Gate of Sodom — Two Men, Two Positions

Chapter 18:1: Jehovah appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. The comparison with Lot in chapter 19 is pressed on every point. Abraham was at the tent door — a pilgrim. Lot was at the gate — a judge in a city. Abraham was in the heat of the day. Lot was sitting in the cool of the evening. Abraham was in the oaks, which JND translates rather than the plains — Mamre was at Hebron, which was elevated country. Lot was in the flat plain of the Jordan valley. Plains make it easy to slide from place to place; uphill work is good work.

The oaks, or the tree, is mentioned again in verse 8 — he stood before them under the tree. In moral terms, the tree is a pointer toward the cross of the Lord Jesus. At Marah the tree sweetened the bitter waters. Here under the tree there was rest, communion, a feast set before God Himself. The cross puts an end to all thought of compromise. Abraham was there, in that place, separated, circumcised, in the heat of the day, sitting at his tent door, under the tree. Lot was sitting in the gate in the cool of the evening, having settled into the city whose iniquity was full.

The Lord came to Abraham for communion. The Lord did not come to Lot for communion. The two angels came to Lot, but not for communion — for extraction. When does it ever say the Lord appeared unto Lot? Abraham is called the friend of God. That friendship was not extended to Lot, not because Lot was not a child of God, but because of the path Lot had chosen. He had Egypt in his heart and never judged it, and it took him to Sodom.

He Ran — Energy of Faith in Communion

Verse 2: he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, three men standing near him, and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door. He ran. That is a very small word but a very significant one. Lot, by contrast, rose up to meet them. Abraham ran. He knew something different was here — he addressed the

principal one as Adonai, the sovereign Lord, not merely Adon which Lot used for his visitors. Abraham had spiritual discernment; Lot entertained angels unawares. Both are true. But the preferable position is Abraham's — to run to the Lord rather than to entertain him unknowingly.

He also bowed himself to the ground. He took his rightful place before God. Communion does not mean relaxed familiarity. Brother Klassen used to point to the account of Abishag and David — she was in his bosom and he knew her not. There is an intimacy in that relationship that is still marked by restraint. Intimacy without familiarity. Abraham ran, bowed, and stood before them — ready to serve, not reclining in ease. These are not contradictions; together they characterise what communion with God looks like.

The Morsel of Bread — What Abraham Had in His House

Abraham said: I will fetch a morsel of bread. One morsel. What he actually brought was three measures of fine meal as cakes, a tender calf dressed and served, thick and sweet milk, and butter. He understated what he was offering and gave more than he promised. But the first thing he mentioned — and the foundational thing — was water: let a little water be fetched. Water in Scripture is often a picture of the word of God. Even if we cannot take hold of a great portion of Scripture at once, we can offer a little water. It is what we have; it speaks of the right thing.

Abraham's house had things in it that spoke of Christ: the three measures of fine meal (connecting to Gideon and Ruth and to Matthew 13, where the same three measures are used as the food of God's people), the fatted calf (echoed in the prodigal son's return in Luke 15, the food of God and His people at the table). Lot's house had one thing: unleavened bread. A single token of Christ. That was the entire hint in the Old Testament that Lot was a righteous man. The separated man has a fullness of what speaks of Christ; the worldly Christian has very little.

Abraham said he offered a morsel of bread, and he gave a feast — but he did not call it that himself. In this he is like the one who offered not more than one loaf in the boat with the disciples. Not: they brought one loaf. But: they had not more than one loaf. The one loaf — the one body — was with them. What Abraham offered was the right character of thing, even if his own description of it was modest. If God himself came to your house today, what would you have?

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