Genesis 18:1–15 — The Feast Under the Tree, Abraham's Communion, and Sarah in the Tent

Bible Study · Genesis 18

The Tree of Rest — and the Contrast with Lot

Verse 4: rest yourselves under the tree. That small phrase marks a profound difference between what is happening here and what happens in chapter 19 with Lot. Lot was not in a place of rest. He had chosen the world, settled deeper and deeper into Sodom, been rescued once from its captivity by Abraham, and returned willingly. When the angels came to him, there were no words like rest yourselves under the tree. His was a place of the world's restlessness; Abraham's was the rest of the pilgrim.

The tree under which Abraham entertained his guests is one of those Old Testament expressions that turns the mind toward the cross of the Lord Jesus. At Marah, when the waters were bitter, Moses cast a tree into the waters and they were made sweet. The cross brings sweetness into what would otherwise embitter and overwhelm. And here, near the cross, so to speak — under the tree — there was rest. The separated pilgrim's tent was near the tree. The place of communion was near the cross.

Abraham's Promptness — Hastening in the Father's Business

When Abraham saw the three men, he ran to meet them, bowed himself, and immediately began to arrange hospitality. He went into the tent and told Sarah: make ready quickly — three measures of fine meal, knead it, make cakes upon

the hearth. He ran to the herd, fetched a calf tender and good, gave it to a young man, and the young man hasted to dress it. Ran, hastened, quickly — the whole scene is marked by urgent, joyful promptness.

This promptness is characteristic of Abraham throughout his life. When God gave him the covenant of circumcision, he performed it the selfsame day — on himself, on 318 fighting servants, on everyone in the household. In chapter 22, he rose up early in the morning. There is a pattern: when he knew God's will, he did not delay. He that is called the father of the faithful should exhibit that characteristic, and he does. That characteristic is to mark the seed of Abraham — those who are by faith one with Christ are called to the same promptness of obedience.

The Menu — Abraham's Feast and Lot's Unleavened Bread

Abraham told them he would fetch a morsel of bread. What he actually served was: cakes of fine meal from the hearth, a calf tender and good, butter, and milk. He said morsel; he gave a feast. The modesty of what he offered in words, and the generosity of what he gave in practice, is a feature of the man. More importantly, the contents of the menu carry spiritual weight.

The three measures of fine meal link to the same quantity we find with Gideon and with Ruth — three measures are associated with the saints in the Old Testament, and they link to Matthew 13 where a woman takes three measures of meal and leavens the whole. Those three measures are the food of God and His people; in Matthew 13 that food is being leavened throughout Christendom, changing its character entirely. Here Abraham prepares it unleavened — cakes upon the hearth, not the leavened bread of the world. And the fatted calf speaks of Christ in sacrifice: in Luke 15, the fatted calf is killed at the father's table when the prodigal returns, and the father and the returned son eat together. That is the food of God and of His people.

Lot's menu by contrast is mentioned only to note that he baked unleavened bread. That is the only hint in the Old Testament that Lot was a righteous man — one small token of Christ in the house, among things otherwise unspecified. What is in Abraham's house that speaks of Christ is full and rich; what is in Lot's house is minimal, a single telling detail. The thoroughgoing separated man has a fullness of what speaks of Christ; the worldly believer has very little. The menu of each host reflects the walk of each host.

He Stood Before Them — Reverence and Service in Communion

Verse 8: he took butter and milk and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them, and he stood before them under the tree, and they ate. Abraham stood. He did not recline beside his guests in relaxed equality. This was communion — but communion marked by reverence. He knew something of who his guest was, having discerned from the beginning that one of the three was Jehovah Himself (he addressed him as Adonai — the Lord — a term not applied to a mere man). The communion was real; the reverence was also real. Abram fell on his face in chapter 17; here he stands before them in readiness to serve.

There is a form of communion that involves kicking off one's shoes and settling back in comfortable familiarity. That was not this. This was the father of the faithful in the presence of God come to commune with him, and his posture expressed his understanding of what was happening. Intimacy without familiarity. The word Abba captures something of both: it is the cry of a child to its father, the most intimate possible address — but it is not casual. Reverence and nearness belong together in communion with God.

Sarah in the Tent — Behind Her Husband

Verse 9: where is Sarah thy wife? He said, Behold, in the tent. The question was not really for information — it was to establish the scene, to document where Sarah was. And she was in the tent: behind her husband, within the pilgrim

dwelling. The tent door was behind Abraham; Sarah was at the tent door; which meant Sarah was behind him. The pilgrim path and the proper order of the household are in the same picture.

There are inconveniences to this arrangement. When your husband is in front of you, he is in the way. You cannot see as clearly; you cannot hear as well. One can compile a long list of the practical difficulties. And yet: she was in the tent, she was behind him, she was on the pilgrim path with him. That is beautiful. Whatever her failure of faith in the moment of the laugh, she was there — behind him in his pilgrim walk and his service to God. Peter, in 1 Peter 3, points to Sarah calling Abraham lord as the outward expression of a beautiful inward ornament of the heart. Remarkably, this very verse — where she laughs in unbelief — is the verse that contains that word. In the same breath as her failure in faith, she says my lord. Her calling Abraham lord is proof of a real beauty of soul, present even at the moment of her stumbling.

The Morsel of Bread and the One Loaf

Abraham said he would fetch a morsel of bread. That is all he promised — a morsel. When the Lord was in the boat with His disciples in Mark and they had forgotten to bring bread, the scripture notes they had not more than one loaf with them. Not: they brought one loaf. But: they had not more than one loaf. The one loaf was there with them, which is how the breaking of bread points to the oneness of the body — there is one loaf. Abraham's morsel points in the same direction. The bread he offered spoke of Christ and His body, as the loaf on the Lord's table does. A morsel — just one — but the one thing that means everything.

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