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ABRAHAM'S PRAYERS FOR SODOM

– GENESIS 18:16-33. – MARCH 3. –

Golden Text: – "Men ought always to pray and not to faint."
– Luke 18:1.

THERE are several very interesting matters connected with this lesson. Abraham had been living in Canaan and Lot in Sodom for a considerable time, when, at the noon hour, three men one day appeared to Abraham – strangers. He was prompt to show them hospitality, and Sarah his wife joined. The Apostle evidently referred to this incident in the words, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unawares." (Heb. 13:2.) Present-day conditions render such hospitality less necessary, especially in cities where public boarding-houses and hotels are expected to care for the strangers. There is danger, however, that the blessing which goes with hospitality is to a large extent missed by a considerable number of people. While the modern methods have some advantages, the general tendency of all of them is toward greater selfishness – neglect of our neighbor, whom the Lord would have us love as ourselves – not neglecting to do good unto all men as we have opportunity, especially to the household of faith. – Gal. 6:10.

To whatever extent these divine injunctions are disregarded we are in danger of losing a blessing, of failing to cultivate generosity, and, on the contrary, cultivating selfishness. God is the great Giver "from whom cometh every good and perfect gift"; and in proportion as his children would return to his image they must cultivate his spirit of benevolence, generosity, kindness, helpfulness – especially to the poor and the needy and the strangers. We are not wishing to suggest the receiving of any and every person [R3946 : page 60] into the home, which might be a very dangerous practice; but we do urge that the changed

conditions of our time be not allowed to make our hearts hard, selfish and unthoughtful as respects the interests of our friends or neighbors, and the stranger. We cannot afford to do so, for "If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his," and this would mean the loss of those things which God hath in reservation for them that love him.

THE LORD AND TWO ANGELS

The three strange men, Abraham afterwards learned, were angels, one of them the special messenger of Jehovah. We feel confident that this one was the Logos, the Only Begotten One, through whom the Father's power was exercised, so that by him all things were made that were made. (John 1:1.) We are clearly to distinguish between our Lord's appearance here *as a man* and the appearance of his two companions, the angels, as men, and our Lord's subsequent appearance in the world as the man Christ Jesus. The two were totally different. In the first case the spirit nature was retained, and a human body was merely created and used temporarily for a special purpose, just as our Lord after his resurrection as a spirit being appeared in various forms as a man, but was not really a man. When the due time came for the redemption of Adam and his race it was necessary that our Lord should become a man – perfect, complete as was father Adam in his original creation – "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." When he thus became a man, or as another Scripture expresses it, "was made flesh" (John 1:14), it meant the complete laying aside of the spirit nature before enjoyed – a change or transmutation to another nature, the human.

This was necessary, because it was a man who had sinned, and because the divine law required a man's life for a man's life as the ransom price. But no such transmutation was necessary for the work mentioned in our lesson. The Lord and his two angelic companions could have appeared to Abraham as to Moses as a

flame of fire in a burning bush, or as the bright angel appeared to Daniel, or as an angelic form with less glory and brightness; but God was dealing with Abraham according to faith – he wished him to learn to walk by faith and not by sight. Hence the angels appeared as strange men and were entertained as such, and Abraham's hospitality was demonstrated and became a lesson to all the children of God. Furthermore, the faith of both Abraham and Sarah was tested on this occasion by the Lord's predicting the birth of Isaac shortly, to the amusement of Sarah, who was then old and who doubted, and to the confirmation of Abraham's faith in the promise already given him and trusted in for twenty-five years without sign of accomplishment.

THE CRY OF SODOM

Still hospitable, Abraham accompanied his visitors, whom he had now discerned to be celestial beings appearing in human form. As they moved in the direction of Sodom the Lord is represented as holding a colloquy with himself as to the propriety of intimating to Abraham what might be expected as a judgment upon Sodom, of whose wickedness Abraham certainly was aware. We are given to understand that the fact that Abraham thus far had proven faithful, and that to him belonged the ultimate promise of the blessing of all the families of the earth, was one reason why he was informed respecting the fate of Sodom, "For I have known him [become intimate with him, made a covenant with him, revealed myself to him], to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment; **[R3947 : page 60]** that the Lord may bring upon him that which he has spoken of him." Thus we see by this indirect teaching that there is method in the Lord's revelation. Matters are made known to his people not merely to satisfy curiosity, but especially because they are in relationship to the Lord and because they are to learn certain lessons in

connection with their experiences of life that may be helpful to them in the ultimate work to which they have been called.

In this case, we remember that Abraham had the promise that in his seed all the families of the earth should be blessed, and this included the Sodomites as well, as we shall see later. Abraham then, believing the Word of the Lord, had a right to expect that in some way or other, either then or in the future, he and his posterity would have to do with righteous judgment upon the Sodomites. Besides, the Lord is pleased to have those who are in harmony with him know the equity, the justice of all his dealings. "Come, let us reason together," shows us this principle. (Isa. 1:18.) But the Lord never reasons with any except those who have faith in him and trust in his promises. These are the truly wise, of whom it is written, "The wise shall understand [matters as they become due], but none of the wicked shall understand" (Dan. 12:10); and again, "The secret of the Lord is with them that reverence him, and he will show them his covenant." – Psa. 25:14.

Explaining his mission the Lord declared that a great cry had come up to heaven from Sodom and that he was about to investigate, which implied that forbearance had ceased to be of avail and that the time for Sodom's punishment was at hand, and so Abraham understood the matter. We are not to suppose that merely rumors of matters reached the Lord, and then special investigating committees were sent, but rather that this affair was stated in simple language, so that Abraham and all who have read the record since might know that the Lord takes full cognizance of the affairs of earth, that he does not ignore our conditions, and that while he is plenteous in mercy, and long-suffering and patient, he nevertheless "will not always chide, neither hold back his anger forever": a time of retribution shall come.

This is the same thought to which the Apostle Peter draws our attention in connection with the end of this Gospel age and the

trouble which will then be precipitated upon the world of mankind. He represents God as having great mercy, long suffering and willingness, that all might turn unto him and live. Nevertheless he shows that a change of dispensation will come, that justice will be laid to the line and righteousness to the plummet, and that all who will not obey that great Prophet shall be ultimately destroyed. (Acts 3:23). In this connection the New Testament refers to Sodom and its sister cities as illustrations of the fact that God will not always chide. We read that the calamity which came upon the cities of the plain were set forth as an example, "suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" – [utter destruction, not eternal torment]. (Jude 7.) Thus eventually God will destroy all evil doers with an "everlasting destruction [not preservation in torment or otherwise] **[R3947 : page 61]** from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power." – 2 Thess. 1:9.

LOVE IN ABRAHAM'S CHARACTER

This one little incident in Abraham's life shows us something of the loving benevolence of his heart, and causes us to love and appreciate him more than ever. The intimation that judgment upon Sodom was near would upon a cruel and loveless heart have suggested a very different course from that pursued by Abraham. Such would have said, "Well, that is an awfully wicked community; they certainly deserve all you could give them; they could not be worse. I told my nephew Lot that he was making a mistake in going to live with such a deplorable set, and having his family intermingle with them; it will serve them all just right whatever kind of punishment you mete out to them."

But Abraham was not at all of this disposition: his heart at once went out in sympathy, and benevolently he surmised that although the plain was notoriously wicked there might at least be fifty righteous persons there – not righteous in the absolute sense of being perfect, but in a relative or accommodated sense of doing

right to the best of their ability. (Rom. 8:4.) Abraham had the spirit of a mediator: he said to himself, God has been wonderfully gracious to me every way, and now that he has opened this subject to me I will make bold to tell him of my heart-sympathy for the people, and to express a hope that he will be generous to them. Then he adds, "Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous in the city, wilt thou consume and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from thee. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

If these words surprise us – to think that Abraham would dare to call in question the righteousness of the Lord – we should remember that he did not have the blessed advantage that we possess, namely, of the guidance of the Word of God and the enlightenment of the holy Spirit, whereby the Lord's people since Pentecost have been begotten again and granted insight into the deep things of God. We may indeed esteem that this was Abraham's way of putting a question to the Lord rather than criticising him – "If you would destroy the righteous with the wicked, show no difference, would it be just? Lord, show me how this would be just? surely you would do right. I would like to see how justice would be compatible with the course I understand you to have in mind."

PARALLELS IN OUR EXPERIENCES

Similar questions come to us now. Financial disasters come, and probably as often affect the righteous as well as the wicked; storms and tempests do injury to their interests; indeed, sometimes the Lord seems not only not to show favor to the righteous, but, if anything, permits, as in Job's case, more peculiar disasters to fall to their lot. Under the instructions of the great Teacher and his

various assistants, the apostles, we have learned that our interests as New Creatures are sometimes best served by difficulties in the flesh, and that God's promise that all things shall work together for good to them that love him and are called according to his purpose, is true. The Lord supervises the experiences of his faithful, so that these afflictions shall seem but light, and shall work out for them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory as New Creatures, in the life to come.

Abraham's love of righteousness and sympathy for all who desired to do right was manifested in this petition. It suggests to us that God, in choosing him as one through whom some of his blessings should flow to the world of mankind in due time, made a good choice. We may be sure also that all who will be associated with Christ in his Millennial Kingdom, either as members of the Bride class on the Spirit plane, or as members of the great company, or of the ancient worthy class of princes (Psa. 45:16), must all have such a broad benevolence and desire to do good and to favor the righteous in every way, else they would not be fit for the great work to be entrusted to them.

And as we have noted the character which God chose in Abraham, we may feel sure that the calling and drawing of the Father are chiefly if not exclusively to the same class of benevolent hearts. We cannot say that God has not drawn some very selfish persons into close fellowship with himself, and that none of this class will ever attain to a share in the Kingdom itself or in its work; but we may surmise that this would be very nearly the truth, "The liberal soul shall be made fat." The stingy, the selfish, the ungenerous, we incline to think, will not be drawn, not be called to a participation in the Kingdom. Not that any of us have anything whereof to boast in the way of generosity – not that the grace of God is not able to effect a wonderful transformation from selfishness to generosity – but because those who are most selfish have proportionately less of an eye to see and less of an ear

to hear of the message of God's mercy and grace and boundless goodness, and therefore will be less in sympathy with the various features of the divine plan as respects the present and the coming age and its work. So that as a measure of love would seem to be indispensable to our drawing, we see most assuredly that a full development of love is absolutely necessary to our attaining the prize of our high calling.

GROWING IN GRACE, IN MERCY, IN LOVE

The Lord answered Abraham that if there were fifty righteous, well-intentioned people in Sodom it would not be destroyed, and Abraham perceived that he was not more just nor more generous than the Lord. But as he thought over the matter it occurred to him that there might perhaps be one or two less than fifty, and so he asked if the city might be spared if there were only forty-five. The reply was, Yes: the Lord was still as benevolent or more benevolent than Abraham: he was merely finding out the goodness of the Lord. His own courage increased, the spirit of love and benevolence having begun to operate, and he queried of the Lord whether now forty would secure mercy upon the city. The answer was, Yes. Abraham had not yet touched the bottom in seeking to measure the Lord's goodness. Step by step he increased his request. Would it be spared for thirty? Then would it be spared for twenty? until finally he asked the Lord if he would spare the city for ten. In every case the answer was, Yes. In every case the Lord was proven to be no less just, no less generous, than his servant. He had not yet been blessed as we have **[R3948 : page 62]** been with the anointing of the eyes of his understanding to an appreciation of the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the love of God, which passeth all understanding.

There is a lesson for us in all of this – a lesson that we should be more and more like our Father which is in heaven, whose message is, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain

mercy"; and again, "If ye do not from the heart forgive those who trespass against you, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses." – Matt. 5:7; Mark 11:26.

THE DEPTHS OF GOD'S MERCY

Abraham's solicitude was not for the wicked but for the righteous, and so our sympathies should be with all who in every place love righteousness and hate iniquity – to do them good, to serve their interests, to render them assistance, doing good to all men, especially to the household of faith. Abraham's prayers were not for the wicked but for the righteous. "Shall the righteous suffer as the wicked?" was his plea. It is to be remembered, however, that some who now pray for the wicked do so under the misconceptions handed down from the "dark ages," that the wicked are not destroyed, but preserved either in a purgatory of suffering or an eternity of torture. This ungodly, unscriptural, unreasonable thought had not yet been introduced to the world; the plain word death still meant death, and the hope for a future was that of a resurrection of the dead in God's due time, and under more favorable conditions than in the present – when God's Kingdom would be in power, in control.

When Abraham subsequently heard the result of the disaster – that only his nephew Lot was found a righteous man, and that the Lord delivered the one from destruction, and delivered on his account some who were not as worthy of his favor, members of his family, it must have brought a blush to his cheek – to think that he had questioned the justice of God in supposing that he was about to destroy, with the wicked in the city, as many as fifty righteous when here he beheld God's loving mercy even to the extent of delivering the one righteous person and some of his dear ones. Thus it is with us all: we are finding continually that the "heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind"; – that in our poor, imperfect, fallen condition we have no measures that will reach to

those lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the love of God, which passeth all understanding. Truly, as the Word declares, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my plans loftier than your plans."

STILL NEW BEAUTIES SEEN

While our minds are contemplating the glories of God in connection with this incident of the destruction of Sodom, let us remember that now he has shown us a still deeper degree of sympathy and love in his provision for the whole world of mankind through the great Redeemer, Abraham's son, our Lord. What more do we see? Ask the Lord himself and hearken to his answer, "It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for you" – of Bethsaida and Chorazin and Capernaum. What is this? A day of judgment? Is not the judgment of Sodom past? Yes, truly they were declared of the Lord unworthy of life and were cut short. To quote the words of inspiration, They were haughty, they neglected the poor and the needy and committed abomination, and the Lord took them away from life in the great catastrophe which came upon their city "as he saw good." (Ezek. 16:49,50.) That our Lord had these very people of Sodom in his mind is evidenced by his own words, "fire came down from God out of heaven and destroyed them all." They had a day of judgment and now met their doom and were made an example of, illustrating God's indignation against all unrighteousness, and his will that all evil-doers shall be destroyed. What then did our Lord mean by referring to a day of judgment future? Will they be judged again?

We answer, Yes. They will be judged again, not in the sense of punishing them a second time for their evil deeds – they have already suffered for those. The promised day of judgment means a fresh time of trial pending. But how can this be? Is God not satisfied with his previous judgment respecting this people? Is he

not satisfied respecting his decision concerning Adam and the entire race – that none are fit for eternal life because of the impairment of sin, because under the sentence of death?

"A RANSOM FOR ALL, TO BE TESTIFIED"

Ah! the key to this promise of a judgment day in the future for the world of mankind, including the Sodomites, lies in the fact that by divine arrangement "Jesus Christ by the grace of God tasted death for every man" – "gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time." Thus we see that he paid the penalty for the Sodomites and for all the rest of us – the death penalty. Hence God's original sentence or judgment, which would have meant the everlasting destruction of us all, has been met, has been satisfied. It was from this standpoint that God spoke to Abraham in advance about the coming day of judgment, and predicted that then Abraham's seed, Christ, would bless all the families of the earth. It was not explained to Abraham how divine justice would be met and the sinner released through a ransom. This we see because it is in the past, and, more clearly than he, we may understand, guided by the Apostle's words, that "God hath appointed a day [the Millennial age] in the which he will judge the world in righteousness [grant the world a fair trial that will take cognizance of these weaknesses and frailties through the fall] by that man whom God hath ordained" – Jesus and his Church, his Bride. – Acts 17:31.

From this standpoint of present truth, unfolding of the divine plan, how we perceive the riches of God's grace and loving kindness, not only toward us who have accepted of his favor through Christ and received of his holy Spirit as his servants and handmaidens, but his proposed blessing in due time upon the world of mankind in general, the majority of whom are in the great prison-house of death, of which Jesus has the key (Rev. 1:18), that in due time the holy Spirit shall be poured out upon all flesh – that

all the blind eyes may be opened and all the deaf ears unstopped, to the glory of God and for the assistance of all mankind, who, under those favorable conditions, will turn wholly and completely to the Lord to serve him with full purpose of heart – and as for the remainder who will not so do, after all this opportunity, they shall be utterly destroyed from amongst the people. – Acts 3:23.
