

Will the Judge of all the earth do right?

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[0 : 00] Well, we're continuing in Genesis chapter 18 verses 16 to 33 today. So the most important thing you can do is to make sure that your Bible is open in front of you to that passage.

And there's also a sermon outlined on your order of service if you find that helpful. But let's plead with God now to speak to us through his word today.

Heavenly Father, we just plead with you now, please, would you open our minds and open our hearts that we might receive your word, that we might come to know you, that you might stir our affections for you once again so that we can be the people that you want us to be.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. The name Maurice Hilleman probably doesn't ring a bell for you. But the case could be made that this one man blessed the whole world more than any other in the 20th century.

During the course of his remarkable career, Dr. Hilleman was responsible for developing more than 40 vaccines, including those for measles, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, meningitis and rubella.

[1 : 14] In fact, he developed the vaccine for mums. He's still in use today after swabbing his own daughter's throat and isolating the virus in the lab. There's a good reason why he's known as the father of modern vaccines.

It's estimated that his measles vaccine alone has prevented approximately 1 million deaths. Robert Gallo, the co-discoverer of the HIV virus, said of Dr. Hilleman, If I had to name one person who has done more for the benefit of human health, with less recognition than anyone else, it would be Maurice Hilleman.

Maurice should be recognized as the most successful destinologist in history. Dr. Fauci, you probably know who he is, said of Dr. Hilleman, One could say without exaggeration that Maurice has changed the world.

Well, God wants to change the world. And his aim is to do it through one man, bringing blessing to the whole world.

Ever since Genesis 12, right at the beginning of the Abraham story, that has been God's declared intention. You will be a blessing, he says to Abraham, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

[2 : 34] And it's something he periodically reminds Abraham about, whether in chapter 14, when the priest King Melchizedek blesses Abraham, or a couple of weeks ago in chapter 17, where he once again tells Abraham that he'll be the father of many nations, that kings would come from his line, that he will be their God.

It's repeated right here again in today's passage in 18 verse 18, where the Lord says, Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.

God wants to change the world by bringing blessing through this one man. But how exactly is that going to happen? How exactly is the world going to be changed?

How exactly will one man bring blessing to the whole world, especially given the state the world is in? Will it be through the creation of the scenes, which is where many people are placing their ultimate hope in at the moment?

Or will it be ultimately through some other means? Well, that's where today's passage comes in. That might surprise you. It certainly surprised me.

[3 : 54] You see, this week, in preparing for this sermon, I read or listened to a number of expositions on this passage, and they typically treat this passage as being all about lessons for prayer.

And that's what I thought it would be all about too, when I first started working on this passage. Hence my original title for this sermon, Pleading with God. But as I studied the passage this week,

I've come to a different conclusion.

I don't think Genesis 18, verse 16 to 33 is primarily here teaching us how to pray. Now, don't get me wrong. We can learn from this passage about prayer.

But I believe that the main focus of this passage is ultimately all about God, his character, and his purposes. And that's what I hope to show you today.

It's about how he is determined to bless this unrighteous world in a way that is true to his righteous and just nature. Because that's the first thing this passage wants to teach us today.

[5 : 02] That we live in a world that is unrighteous and unjust. This is a world that needs blessing. This is a world that needs change. That reminder comes right at the beginning of today's passage, where in verse 16, we find the three men, who have just been visiting Abraham, we saw that in last week's passage, looking down towards Sodom.

We haven't really heard much about Sodom since chapter 14, but of course it still exists. In fact, it's going to take center stage next week. But what little we've heard so far is not flattering at all.

Back in chapter 13, you might remember, Lot looked at Sodom and saw a place that looked like the garden of the Lord. But Genesis 13 reminded us too, that Sodom was a wicked place where the people were sinning greatly against the Lord.

And so Sodom represents the world in all its unrighteousness and injustice. In fact, that's what we discover when we look at how the entire Bible treats Sodom.

Look for example at Isaiah 1. There, God describes Jerusalem's sins. They partner with thieves. They love bribes. They exploit the widows.

[6 : 23] They persist in rebellion. They should be a light to the nations, but they bring darkness instead. And in verse 10 of Isaiah 1, the prophet gives this damning verdict.

Jerusalem, he says, you have become Sodom and Gomorrah. You are exactly like those cities. And so in making this comparison, Isaiah assumes Sodom to be a model for human wickedness.

Just like how Las Vegas today is equated with casinos, Sodom is equated with unrighteousness.

And if we look at other places in the Bible, like Ezekiel 16, for example, we'll find similar portrayals of Sodom.

Throughout the entire Old Testament, again and again, Sodom is always, without exception, painted negatively as a place of violence, of sexual immorality, of exploitation, and oppression. We'll see that for ourselves more vividly next week. But even if we didn't look outside Genesis 18, but confine ourselves to this passage, we'll discover the exact same truth.

[7 : 40] Well, notice what the Lord says in verse 20. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great. And they are seen so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.

That word outcry is the Hebrew word za'akah. And it's basically referring to the woeful cries of victims who suffer injustice.

It's the exact same word we encounter in Exodus 2 verse 23, when the Israelites are in Egypt and were beaten and whipped by their Egyptian slave drivers.

And there we're told the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out za'akah. And their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.

And indeed, perhaps most shockingly, it's the word used in Deuteronomy 22, when victims of rape scream for help.

[8 : 49] And it is such cries, such screams that reaches God in heaven from Sodom itself. Sodom is filled with oppression and suffering and wickedness.

And so like the blood of Abel, those on the receiving end of such cruelty cry out for justice to be done. And my brothers and sisters, these cries go on today, though we are no doubt unaware of most of them.

Think of the desperate cries many Afghans would have uttered just this past week as they watch planes leave without them while the Taliban move in to take control.

Think of the cries of vulnerable girls all around the world being taken advantage of and raped by evil men. Think of the cries of those being exploited by harsh masters and corrupted rulers.

Think of the cries of those beaten by gangs or cheated by conmen. Think of the cries of those abandoned by spouses and children. Think of the cries of those addicted to alcohol and drugs.

[9 : 59] Sodom still exists today. And these cries, the preacher James Montgomery Boyce says, are only a fraction of those millions of cries that are rising every minute of every day, from every

street, in every city and village of our land.

Cries that are all heard by God and felt by God. And if so, there can be only one way that God has to act.

He must come in judgment to act against those who have caused these cries. He must judge Sodom. Now, verses 20 to 21 might be slightly confusing at first glance because it sounds like God is like the person in your office who is always the last to know.

Huh? Are things really that bad? I didn't know that. I guess I better go see myself. That's what verses 20 to 21 sound like at first glance.

But look a little closer at the language that's being used here. Remember how I mentioned that Old Testament narrative loves to echo things that we've seen before? Well, what previous story in Genesis does the language of going down and seeing remind us of?

[11 : 24] It's the story of Babel. And so the writer is deliberately signaling to us that God is going down, not because he's ignorant, but because he's going to pass sentence, just like at Babel.

He's going to proceed in a fair and impartial manner, carefully observing, collecting evidence, not making rash pronouncements.

He will be present in Sodom itself. And no injustice will escape his all-seeing eye. No one will get away with it if they've done wicked acts.

That's true in Sodom. That's true in Afghanistan. That's true in Malaysia. And if today you're someone who's participating in doing something wrong, know that God sees it.

And that's a good thing. We often think of judgment and blessing as opposites. But as the pastor Tim Keller points out, no true victim of injustice would think that.

[12 : 32] After all, if you're the one being oppressed, then you will only experience blessing if God hears your cries for help and brings a righteous judgment to bear on your situation.

Only in judgment will you experience mercy and freedom and relief. Only in judgment will you gain blessing. Judgment is good news.

But here's the conundrum. If God's declared intention is to bring blessing, not just to Abraham, but to all the nations of the earth, to places like even Sodom and Gomorrah, to places like Egypt and Babylon, to places like Afghanistan, and yes, even to us here in Malaysia, then how can he do that while maintaining his just and righteous character at the same time?

In fact, will he follow through on his promises or will he just back up? Well, let's find out. Let's come back to the passage.

And that will bring us to our second point for today. A world that is unrighteous and unjust needs the family of Abraham to be righteous and just.

[13 : 53] A world that is unrighteous and unjust needs the family of Abraham to be righteous and just. Now, when we stop to think about it, in a sense, none of today's passage has to happen.

God could just go on his way to act in judgment against Sodom without any of the dialogue that happens in Genesis 18, verse 16 to 33. God doesn't have to stop and chat with Abraham.

He certainly doesn't need to say anything about his plans to Abraham. But look at verse 17, where we're given a glimpse into an internal dialogue God has with himself.

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, he says. Or put another way, God is saying, why don't I tell Abraham what is about to happen?

God wants to let Abraham know what he's up to. That's quite amazing when you stop to think about it. God is under no obligation. And so why bother at all?

[14 : 59] There seems to be two related reasons. One is for reassurance. That's verse 18. God wants Abraham to know that even in the context of judgment, he's not forgotten his promise of making him a great nation for the purpose of blessing the entire world.

that hasn't changed even if Sodom is going to be judged. That's what God wanted Abraham to know. And that's what God wants us to know still today.

Are you wondering, what in the world is God doing in this pandemic? Well, God doesn't give us his Google calendar where he tells us in great detail what and why he's doing everything he's currently doing.

And yet, we do know what God's ultimate plans for the world are. Yes, even now in 2021 during a pandemic. Because he's told us in his word.

everyone can know God's plan if they look at the Bible. And what we find is that his great big plan is still to bless the world.

[16:17] His great big plan is still to keep his promise to Abraham. So that means his great big plan is still for people to turn to Jesus, the seed of Abraham through whom all blessings flow.

His great big plan is still for people to throw themselves at his feet for mercy and follow him as their Lord. That's what we know for sure.

Even when there's judgment and I personally think there's little doubt that this pandemic certainly feels like a form of judgment. That's what God's ultimate plan is.

Even in the context of judgment, God intends to keep his promises of blessing the world. And we have this privilege inside because God has told us.

But there appears to be a second reason. It appears God wants Abraham to be moved to action.

Look at verse 19. I have chosen Abraham, God declares at the beginning of this verse.

[17:27] And then at the end of verse 19, God says, I will keep my promise to Abraham. Abraham. But notice what comes in the middle of verse 19. For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just.

And so notice what we have here in verse 19. At the beginning, we have God's choice of Abraham. And then at the end, we have God's promise to Abraham.

But right in the middle, we have God's method for how this promise is going to be fulfilled. We have God's method for how this one man is going to bless the entire world.

For this promise to be fulfilled, Abraham has to act as a teacher. He has to pass down to his household, to his descendants, the way of the Lord.

That's the curriculum. And this curriculum consists of righteousness and justice. In contrast to Sodom, the family of Abraham down the generations has to be righteous and just.

[18:47] Otherwise, they too will suffer the same fate. But if Abraham is going to teach his family well, then he needs to know the curriculum well, doesn't he?

He needs to know why it's important for his family to be righteous and just. He needs to understand how God's own righteousness works. And that's what the remainder of the passage is going to focus on.

It's going to get us to pay attention both to Abraham and God's actions. To understand how the actions of the righteous will impact will impact the world of the unrighteous.

It's going to show us how blessing can come to even places like Sodom. So let's watch Abraham's actions first. Don't forget in verses 16 to 19, God is talking to himself and he only actually starts conversing with Abraham in verses 20 to 21.

And as he talks with Abraham about the cries against Sodom and his plans to go there and pass a sentence, God is not just giving information to Abraham.

[20:02] He's actually inviting him to do something. Think of it this way. Sometimes my son at the end of dinner will say, I like pineapple.

Or it could be dragon fruit or guava, it depends on the day. Now, why is my son telling me that? Is he simply giving me a piece of information about himself that he likes pineapples?

No, he obviously has other intentions. He's hoping that I would say, okay, then let's look in the fridge to see if we can have pineapple for dessert.

His statement is really an invitation for me to act in a certain way to take out the pineapple. God's statement in verses 20 to 21 also works in the same way.

He's not simply giving a piece of information to Abraham. His intention is to invite Abraham to act a certain way. In this case, to have a conversation with God about how God sees justice and righteousness.

[21:09] righteousness. And that is exactly what happens. In verse 22, Abraham approaches God, and verses 23 and 24, he asks him a question.

Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it?

And so the first thing Abraham is asking is this. Is it really fair that the righteous are going to be punished alongside the wicked?

Is this really the way of righteousness and justice? Is this really the way of a righteous judge? Will not the judge of all the earth do right?

Verse 25, Abraham wants to know. I don't think Abraham means this in an accusatory way here. He's really wondering.

[22 : 09] I know God. He says that you are righteous. You are just. You do what is right. Far be it from you to do the wrong thing. But show me.

How does this play out in this case? Are the righteous just going to be destroyed? Just like that? And so Abraham's question is founded on a concern for justice.

God's choice. And so he appeals to the justice of God. But there's even more going on. Look again at verse 24 and look at his specific request.

Abraham asks, will you not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it? Think carefully about what he's asking.

Abraham is not asking God to rescue the righteous from the company of the wicked. Instead, he's asking God, will you not spare the wicked on account of the righteous field?

[23 : 18] Will you not spare all of Sodom? And notice he's referring to the entire place, not just a couple of people here and there. So will you not spare all of Sodom? Should you find a few who are in right relationship with him?

This is simply a remarkable request. For those of us who have heard this story before, I think we often assume that when Abraham pleads before God, he simply wants his nephew Lot to be spared.

But Lot is not even mentioned. Now, that doesn't mean that he's not in Abraham's thoughts. But Abraham is not just thinking about saving Lot.

He's thinking about strangers, not just friends or family. He's thinking about despicable Sodomites, not just nice people. He has zero obligation to them.

He owes them nothing. But with remarkable compassion, Abraham asked God, will you not spare the place?

[24 : 25] God is not in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, we do find various figures pleading with God on behalf of their people. Samuel, Amos, Jeremiah.

But here, we find Abraham pleading on behalf of those who are not even his people. You know, I said earlier that this passage is not primarily about prayer.

But here is something that we can ponder on. Are we gripped by the fate of the lost when we pray? Or do we only pray for ourselves, our immediate families?

Or do we pray for those who do not yet know the Lord? Do we pray with compassion in the manner of Abraham?

And here is what Abraham is really asking God. Lord, do you place a great value on righteousness? Do you place such a great value on righteousness that it might even cover the acts of the unrighteous?

[25 : 33] Could such righteous people even exist that they might affect the fate of the wicked positively? And if so, will the judge of all the earth be able to do right?

Or perhaps most simply, Abraham is asking, is there hope? Is there hope for the nation still? Is there hope for the world that they can still be blessed?

Or does their unrighteousness condemn them to a hopeless existence that can never be corrected? Does our own unrighteousness mean we are doomed forever?

forever? So that's Abraham's actions. But what about God? The story just gets more and more remarkable. For in verse 26, God basically looks at Abraham, smiles, and says, argument accepted.

Yes, I do indeed value righteousness so much that it can cover the many. And if I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.

[26 : 48] Now, notice God isn't saying, I'll just let people off arbitrarily. He's not saying justice is not important. We're just working like that. No, but he is saying that the righteous person can make an outsized impact on the faith of many.

You know, we find this logic in the book of Proverbs too. Look at Proverbs 11 verse 11, for example. Through the blessing of the upright, a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked, it is destroyed. The righteous can impact an entire city. And as we study the back and forth between Abraham and God in verses 26 to 32, notice something amazing.

Six times Abraham pleads for the city, getting bolder and bolder each time in his request. And each time, you know, when Abraham says 50, then 40, then 30, and so on, God just says, sure.

Now, I've heard this section described as Abraham bargaining with God, but notice that there's actually very little bargaining going on. God is not as if Abraham says, God, 30 people can or not,

and then God puts in a counter offer.

[28 : 11] Abraham, how about 35 instead? No, God just keeps saying, sure. God is more than willing. He keeps saying yes to Abraham. He wants to save.

He wants to bless. He wants to show that he is the gracious and compassionate God, abounding in love and slow to anger. This is God's heart.

You know, think of that corrupt politician who feels you with anger. Or think of that Taliban soldier who feels you with rage. Well, these are the people that God is still willing to show grace to.

Indeed, God is so willing that perhaps even Abraham can't believe it. Perhaps that's why he stops at 10. Though we can't be certain. Maybe he felt that if he went below that, he would be pushing his luck.

Or a commentator or two suggests that it's because 10 is considered the smallest unit for a community at that time. And so he's already hit the lowest number imaginable. Maybe.

[29 : 18] But whatever the case might be, what we've seen is that the judge of the earth is willing to do right. He will not sweep away the righteous just. like that.

And in fact, he is willing to go further. He is willing to spare the wicked on account of the righteous. God's But there's one problem. We know that's not what happened with Sodom. There's no happy ending. Next week, we'll see that the city is punished.

There was no one righteous. There was no one to save the city. Sodom needed righteous men, righteous members of Abraham's family to cover them. But there was no one to fit the bill.

Lot didn't fit the bill. even Abraham himself doesn't quite fit it either, as we've already seen over the past month. And our unrighteous world needs righteous members of Abraham's family as well to cover us.

[30 : 23] But is there anybody? Is there even just one member? In fact, is one enough? That's the question Genesis 18 leaves us with, isn't it?

If there is not ten, but just one truly righteous man, one truly righteous individual, will God save the wicked on account of this righteous man?

is that enough? And thankfully, the rest of the Bible gives us a clear answer to that question, doesn't it? For as we trace the various family members of Abraham, down the generations, candidates keep ruling themselves out.

David the adulterer, Solomon the idolater, until one day, a descendant of Abraham arrives, who knows the Abrahamic curriculum inside out.

He always does what is just and right, because he is just and right. He's not afraid to come as a judge, like when he enters the temple, overturns a few tables, and pronounces judgment on the corrupt merchants there, who had failed to make it into a house of prayer for all nations.

[31 : 50] He acts like the God of Genesis 18. But he also acts like the Abraham of Genesis 18.

He comes as one who pleads with God on our behalf. He comes pleading on behalf of the unrighteous. He comes before the Father, saying, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing, even at the moment he is being crucified by these people.

And so, as Romans 5 verse 15 tells us, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of this one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many?

How much did this gift of righteousness keep being given again and again? And as Jesus was being presented as this sacrifice of atonement, Romans 3 verse 25 tells us that God was doing this to demonstrate his, what?

Is it to demonstrate his love? No, although that is true. But that's not what Romans 3 verse 25 says. No, he's doing this to demonstrate his righteousness, that he indeed is the judge who does what is right.

[33 : 14] How? Because at the cross, God wasn't abandoning justice. He wasn't saying to victims of injustice, your cries don't matter.

No, on the contrary, the cross shows us that God takes justice very seriously. He takes it so seriously, he hates it so much that he punishes it.

But here's the incredible thing. It is God, the Son himself, who bears the punishment. That's how much sin and justice matters.

But what God does at the cross is to satisfy the requirements for justice while granting forgiveness at the same time. Sin is not ignored, but condemned.

But the condemnation is taken by the judge himself. for he, the judge, chose in the person of his son, though he was absolutely righteous, to take on our sin, to stand in solidarity with the weak and sinful human race, so that we can take on his righteousness.

[34 : 34] in Genesis 18, we see a longing for wrongs to be made right, for the cry of the oppressed to be heard. And we also see a longing for the wicked to be shown mercy, for them to be spared.

And at the cross, the two longings meet, and the way is open for the world to be blessed, as this gospel, this good news of Jesus dying in our place, goes out to the world.

My brothers and sisters, this is how the world is going to be changed. This is how true blessing will flow to the world. How do we make a difference? Well, as the spiritual family of Abraham today, we do what is right and just.

That's what Genesis 18 verse 19 tells us. if Christians, collectively speaking, always choose to do what they know ought to be done, in line with God's standards, without a doubt, there will be a blessing to the nation.

When Christians look after the widows and the fatherless, when they choose to honor God in their vocations as scientists and teachers, when they speak up for the oppressed, they make the world a better place.

[35 : 57] But just as Abraham's family are meant to do what is right and just, ultimately, to point the way forward to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessing, and so today, we do what is right and just, also to point to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessing.

we do good, not to show how righteous we are, but to point to that one righteous individual who alone can transform the world.

We are a light to the nations only in so far as we make clear we are reflecting the one who is called the light of the world. For our calling is not actually to change the world by ourselves.

if we try to do that, trust me, you'll be exhausted in no time at all because that's not what God has called us to do. It's Jesus who changes the world and we can say that without exaggeration at all.

And so our calling is to make him known in word and action. And so my brothers and sisters, here's the good news of Genesis 18 verse 16.

[37 : 18] 33, which is well captured for us by the psalmist. Here's the good news of Psalm 103 verses 6 to 7. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses, and we could say here Abraham as well, his deed to the people of Israel. And so Psalm 103 verse 6 to 7 tells us this is our God, God the just judge.

But then he continues on in Psalm 103 verse 8 to 10. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever. He does not treat us as our sin deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

And this too is our God, the compassionate one. God is both the righteous judge and the compassionate God.

[38 : 24] Will the judge of the earth not do right? Yes, he will. But more than that, his righteous ways are for the sake of the unrighteous.

And so my brothers and sisters, don't forget this. When we feel the severe, disciplining hand of God against this world, we must remember to set it against the context of God's intention to bless the nations.

When we despair that the cries of victims never seem to be heard or addressed, we must remember God hears because God values righteousness.

When we wonder if God bothers us to hear our prayers for mercy, we must remember God is actually more than willing. When we wonder if our own record of unrighteousness is too much to overcome, we must remember that we rely not on our own righteousness, but completely on the righteousness of Jesus.

And when we feel demotivated to live like God's righteous and just people, remember, we are his instruments so that people will know that God has kept his promise to Abraham.

[39 : 52] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much for Jesus.

Thank you that he who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might be reconciled to you as we take on his righteousness.

Father, that is a great exchange that we can never ever fully comprehend, and yet we praise you for this marvelous mystery. So, Father, thank you so much that you showed us mercy in this way, that on account of Jesus, we, the unrighteous, can now come to you.

Please help us not to take that for granted. Help us now as your spiritual children, as those who are in the spiritual line of Abraham, to now live lives that are pleasing to you.

Help us to do what is right and just in everything that we do, that indeed your gospel might be made known to all that we come into contact with.

[41 : 13] Thank you again, and we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.