

F.B. Meyer:

"And Abraham stood yet before the Lord; and Abraham drew near." -- Genesis 18:22-23.

As the day wore on, Abraham's mysterious guests went off across the hills towards Sodom; and Abraham went with them to bring them on their way. But all three did not reach the guilty city, over which the thunder clouds had already commenced to gather. That evening two angels entered it alone. And where was their companion? Ah! He had stayed behind to talk yet further with His friend. Tradition still points out the spot on the hills at the head of a long steep ravine leading down to the sullen waters of the Dead Sea where the Lord tarried behind to tell Abraham all that was in His heart.

Why did not the Lord accompany His angels down to Sodom? Was it because vengeance is His strange work, in which He can take no pleasure? It surely befits the dignity of the sovereign Judge to delegate to other hands the execution of His decrees. "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them that do iniquity" (Matthew 13:41).

But there was a deeper reason still. Abraham was the "friend of God"; and friendship constitutes a claim to be entrusted with secrets hidden from all beside. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him." "Henceforth," said the Master to His disciples, "I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you" (John 15:15). If we live near God, we shall have many things revealed to us which are hidden from the wise and prudent. The Septuagint version has well brought out the spirit of the Divine reverie, when it puts the question thus: "Shall I hide from Abraham, MY SERVANT, the thing which I do"? The Lord does nothing which He does not first reveal to His holy servants and prophets.

But the words which follow point to a yet further reason for the full disclosures that were made: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him; and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment" (Genesis 18:19). Was there a fear lest Abraham and his children might doubt the justice of the judgment of God if the righteous were summarily cut off with the wicked; and if the cities of the plain were destroyed without a revelation of their sin on the one hand, and the display of the Divine mercy on the other? Certainly it has placed the Divine character in an altogether different light, in that we have been permitted, in such a case as this, to understand some of the motives which have actuated God in His goodness or severity. And though His judgments must ever be a great deep, yet such a wondrous colloquy as this shines above them; as the rainbow trembles in its matchless beauty over the steamy depths of Niagara's plunge.

(1) THE BURDEN OF THE DIVINE ANNOUNCEMENT

"The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great." What marvelous expression is this! There, far down the valley, bathed in the radiance of the westering sun, lay the guilty cities, still and peaceful. No sound travelled to the patriarch's ear, not even the roar which aeronauts detect in the dizzy heights of air, through which they travel on their adventurous way, passing mighty cities far beneath, which betray their existence by their voice. Quiet though Sodom seemed in the far distance, and in the hush of the closing day; yet to God there was a cry. The cry of the earth compelled to carry such a scar. The cry of inanimate creation, groaning and travailing in pain. The cry of the oppressed, the down trodden -- the victims of human violence and lust. The cry of the maiden, the wife, and the child. These were the cries which had entered into the ears of the Lord God of Sabaoth. And each sin has a cry. "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me" And it will go on crying; unless it is silenced by the yet greater voice of the blood of Christ, "which speaketh better things." And, if each sin has a cry, what must not be the volume of sound for a life, and for a city! Must not God still have to say of our great cities, one by one? -- "Its cry is great; and its sin is very grievous."

"I will go down now, and see." God always narrowly investigates the true condition of the case, before He awards or executes His sentences. He comes seeking fruit for three years, before He gives the order for the cutting down of the tree that cumbered the vineyard soil. He walks our streets day and night. He patrols our thoroughfares, marking everything, missing nothing. He glides unasked into our most sacred privacy; for all things are naked and open unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. He is prepared, nay, eager to give us the benefit of any excuse. But flagrant sin, like that which broke out in Sodom that very night, is enough to settle for ever the fate of a Godless community when standing at the bar of Him who is Judge and Witness both.

And if not, I will know." There was something very ominous in all these words, which Abraham clearly understood to indicate the approaching destruction of the place; for in his prayer he again and again alludes to

the imminence of its doom: "Wilt Thou, also, destroy the righteous with the wicked?" But what is there that God does not know? "The darkness and the light are both alike to Him." Yet He says, "I will know." Yes, ungodly man who mayest read this page: remember that from God no secrets can be hid. He will search out the most hidden ramifications of thy sin; bringing them out before the gaze of the universe; and justifying His righteous judgments which He will not spare.

(2) THE IMPRESSION WHICH THIS ANNOUNCEMENT MADE ON ABRAHAM'S MIND

So soon as the angels had gone on, leaving Abraham alone with the Lord, he was thoroughly aroused by the revelation which had broken upon him; and his mind was filled with a tumult of emotion. He hardly dared expostulate with God: what was he, but "dust and ashes"? And yet he was impelled to make some attempt to avert the doom that threatened the cities of the plain.

The motives that prompted him were twofold: (1) THERE WAS A NATURAL ANXIETY ABOUT HIS KINSMAN, LOT. -- Twenty years had passed since Lot had left him; but he had never ceased to follow him with the most tender affection. He could not forget that Lot was the son of his dead brother Haran: or that he had been his ward; or that he had braved the hardships of the desert in his company. All this had been present to his mind, when, a few years before, he had made a heroic effort to extricate him from the hands of Chedorlaomer. And now the strong impulse of natural affection stirred him to make one strenuous effort to save Sodom, lest his nephew might be overwhelmed in its overthrow. Real religion tends not to destroy, but to fulfill all the impulses of true natural love.

(2) THERE WAS ALSO A FEAR LEST THE TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE CITIES OF THE PLAIN MIGHT PREJUDICE THE CHARACTER OF GOD IN THE MINDS OF THE NEIGHBORING PEOPLES

Abraham did not deny that the fate which was about to overtake them was deserved by many of the people of that enervating and luxuriant valley: but he could not bring his mind to suppose that the whole of the population was equally debased; and he feared that if all were summarily swept away, the surrounding nations would have a handle of reproach against the justice of his God, and would accuse Him of unrighteousness, inasmuch as He destroyed the righteous with the wicked.

The character of God has ever been dear to his true-hearted servants of every age. Moses was prepared to forego the honor of being the ancestor of the chosen people, rather than that the nations which had heard of the Divine fame should be able to say that God was not able to bring them into the Land of Promise. [See Exodus 32:10, Numbers 14:12.] And when the men of Israel fled before Ai, Joshua and the elders appear to have thought less of the danger of the immediate rising to cut them off than of what God would do for His great name. Oh for more of this chivalrous devotion to the interests and glory of our God! Would that we were so absorbed in all that touches the honor of the Divine name amongst men, that this might be the supreme element in our anxiety, as we view the drift of human opinion concerning the enactments of Divine providence!

This passion for the glory of God burnt with a clear strong flame in Abraham's heart; and it was out of this that there arose his wondrous intercession. And when we become as closely identified with the interests of God as he was, we shall come to feel as he did; and shall be eager that the Divine character should be vindicated amongst the children of men; content, if need be, to lie dying in the ditch, so long as we can hear the shouts of triumph which our King rides over us to victory.

(3) THE ELEMENTS IN ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION. -- IT WAS LONELY PRAYER

He waited till on all that wide plateau, and beneath those arching skies, there was no living man to overhear this marvelous outpouring of a soul overcharged, as are the pools, when, after the rains of spring, they overflow their banks. "He stood before the Lord." It is fatal to all the intensest, strongest devotion to pray always in the presence of another, even the dearest. Every saint must have a closet, of which he can shut the door, and in which he can pray to the Father which is in secret. This "closet" may be the mountains, or the woods, or the sounding shore; but it must be somewhere. Pitiable is the one who cannot -- miserable the one who dare not -- meet God face to face, and talk with Him of His ways, and plead for his fellows.

"For what are men better than sheep or goats, That nourish a blind life within the brain, If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer Both for themselves and those who call them friend."

IT WAS PROLONGED PRAYER

"Abraham stood yet before the Lord." The story takes but a few moments to read; but the scene may have lasted for the space of hours. We cannot climb the more elevated pinnacles of prayer in a hasty rush. They demand patience, toil, prolonged endeavor, ere the lower slopes can be left, and the brooding cloud-line passed, and the aspiring soul can reach that cleft in the mountain side, where Moses stood beneath the shadow of God's hand. Of course, our God is ever on the alert to hear and answer those prayers which, like minute-guns, we fire through the live-long day; but we cannot maintain this posture of ejaculatory prayer unless we cultivate the prolonged occasions. How much we miss because we do not wait before God! We do not give the sun a chance to thaw us. We do not linger long enough upon the quay to see the vessels return freighted with the answers we had been praying for. If only we had remained longer at the palace door, we might have seen the King come out with a benediction in His face and a largess in His hands.

IT WAS VERY HUMBLE PRAYER

"Behold, now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes." "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak." "Behold, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord." "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once." The nearer we get to God, the more conscious are we of our unworthiness; just as the higher a bird flies in mid-heaven, the deeper will be the reflection of its snowy pinions in the placid mere beneath. Let the glow-worm vie with the meridian sun; let the dewdrop boast itself against the fullness of the ocean bed; let the babe vaunt its knowledge with the intelligence of a seraph -- before the man who lives in touch with God shall think of taking any other position than that of lowliest humiliation and prostration in His presence. Before Him angels veil their faces, and the heavens are not clean in His sight. And is it not remarkable that our sense of weakness is one of our strongest claims and arguments with God? "He forgetteth not the cry of the humble." "To that man will I look who trembleth."

This Prayer Was Based On A Belief That God Possessed The Same Moral Intuitions As Himself. -- "Wilt Thou destroy the righteous with the wicked? That be far from Thee that the righteous should be as the wicked!" "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" There is an infinite interest in this. It is as if the patriarch looked up from the clear depths of his own integrity into the azure heights of the Divine Being, and saw there enthroned a moral nature, at least as upright, fair, and true as his own; and to that he made his appeal, sure of a favorable response.

It was as if he had said: "Almighty God, I could not think it right to destroy the righteous with the wicked; and I am sure that any number of righteous men would shrink from doing so. And if this is binding on man, of course it must be much more binding on Thee, because Thou art the Judge of all the earth." And God was not angry; indeed He assented to Abraham's plea. And may we not go further, and say? -- that though God may act in ways above our reason, yet He will not contradict those instincts of the moral sense which He has placed within our hearts. And if at times He seem to do so, it is because we have falsely conceived of His dealings, and put an erroneous interpretation upon them.

It was a cherished motto of bygone days that "the king could do no wrong." "Alas! it was a vain dream. But what was untrue of the Stuarts is literally true of the Eternal God. He cannot outrage the moral nature in man, which is made in the likeness of His own. Let us possess our souls in patience, sure that any appearances to the contrary are mists generated by our own evil natures or limited intelligence, and will be swept away from obscuring that everlasting righteousness which is steadfast and changeless as the great mountains.

THIS PRAYER WAS PERSEVERING

SIX TIMES Abraham returned to the charge, and as each petition was granted, his faith and courage grew; and, finding he had struck a right vein, he worked it again, and yet again. It looks at first sight as if he forced God back from point to point, and wrung his petitions from an unwilling hand. But this is a mistake. In point of fact, GOD WAS DRAWING HIM ON; and if he had dared to ask at first what he asked at the last, he would have got more than all that he asked or thought at the very commencement of his intercession. This was the time of his education. He did not learn the vast extent of God's righteousness and mercy all at once; he climbed the dizzy heights step by step; and, as he gained each step, he was inspired to dare another. What a pity that he stopped at ten! There is no knowing what he might have reached, had he gone on. As it was, the Almighty was obliged, by the demands of His own nature, to exceed the limits placed by Abraham, in bringing out of Sodom the only persons that could, by any possibility, be accounted "righteous."

It is so that God educates us still. In ever-widening circles, He tempts his new-fledged eaglets to try the sustaining elasticity of the air. He forces us to ask one thing; and then another, and yet another. And when we have asked our utmost, there are always unexplored remainders behind; and He does exceeding abundantly

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above all. There were not ten righteous men in Sodom; but Lot and his wife, and his two daughters, were saved, though three of them were deeply infected with the moral contagion of the place. And God's righteousness was clearly established and vindicated in the eyes of the surrounding peoples.

In closing, we remark **ONE OF THE GREAT PRINCIPLES IN THE DIVINE GOVERNMENT OF THE WORLD.** -- A whole city had been spared, if ten righteous men had been found within its walls. Ungodly men little realize how much they owe to the presence of the children of God in their midst. Long ere now had the floods of deserved wrath swept them all away; but judgment has been restrained, because God could not do anything while the righteous were found amongst them. The impatient servants have often asked if they should not gather out the tares. But the answer of the righteous Lord has ever been: "Nay, lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat also with them." Ah, how little the world realizes the debt it owes to its saints, the salt to stay its corruption, the light to arrest the re-institution of the reign of chaos and night! We cannot but yearn over the world, as it rolls on its way towards its sad dark doom. Let us plead for it from the heights above Mamre. And may we and our beloved ones be led out from it into safety, ere the last plagues break full upon it in inevitable destruction!