

A Response to Graces

Genesis 18:16-33

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹⁶Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." ²⁰Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." ²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord.

²³Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ²⁶And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." ²⁷Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." ²⁹Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." ³⁰Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." ³¹He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." ³²Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³And the Lord went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. (NRSV)

I

To understand this story, let us read it in its proper literary context. Let us go all the way back to Genesis 12, when Abraham and Sarah, then known as Abram and Sarai, first received their call to ministry. In summoning them to ministry, God was both blunt and specific. God said:

"Go . . .

I will make of you a great nation,

and I will bless you,

and make your name great,

so that you will be a blessing. . . .

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1a, 2, 3b).

God will bless Sarai and Abram, but not for the purpose of making them famous, or rich, or comfortable. God will bless them, but not because they are smart, or beautiful, or charming. No, God will bless them because they have important work to do. The purpose blessing them is to equip them for the ministry of blessing others in the world. God will show them the blessing of unmerited grace, so that they in turn can show others the blessings of that same unmerited grace.

As the years rolled by, God did indeed bless Sarai and Abram abundantly. They acquired gold and silver and livestock in abundance (13:2). They received wide expanses of land (13:14-15). They were given new names to mark their new identity as blessed people (17:5, 15). And most wondrously of all, they were granted a child when they had no right to even hope for a child (18:9-14).

Mind you, they deserved none of it. They were not great financial wizards with MBAs from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School; yet they still became rich in material possessions. They did nothing outstanding or noteworthy that would merit new names and new identities; yet God gave them new names anyway just for fun. They did nothing to deserve a son; yet God gave them one anyway simply because God wanted to. In other words, God patiently demonstrated to them what grace looks like and feels like. Grace—something good that happens to you or is given to you, which you do not deserve.

Therefore the first thing we are invited to ponder when reading these stories about Sarah and Abraham is how, and when, grace has come to us. The quickest way of spotting God's grace is by asking yourself a simple question: what good things do I have that I don't deserve? They might be material possessions; but never assume God's grace is limited to your material possessions. If you define grace by the number of your possessions, you will end up with a very limited understanding of God and a very small understanding of Christian faith. Don't do it. Instead think of grace more expansively, more robustly. Who are the friends and companions, the colleagues and co-workers, who enrich your life but you didn't deserve? Those people are God's grace. What experiences and events have improved your life that you didn't deserve? They are instances of God's grace.

II

To reiterate, God never intended that Sarah and Abraham would hoard the blessings of God's grace. God does not want us to lock grace away in a safe, like some diamond, only to be taken out on special occasions, polished, admired, and then put back into the safe, locked away into the darkness. No, the graces in our lives are something to share, to pass on, to give away.

And so we come to the 18th chapter of Genesis. By this point in time, Sarah and Abraham have seen and tasted and smelled the graces of God in abundance. So far so good, but that was only ever the first step in God's two-part plan. The next step in this two-part plan is to nudge Sarah and Abraham to start giving away these graces to other people.

Before we get to the second step God takes in teaching Sarah and Abraham about the contours of grace, remember that Sarah and Abraham never had the benefit of Sunday school. They had no educational and inspirational materials printed up by their denominational publishing house. Heck, they didn't even have a denomination. They didn't have a church. They lived in a tent surrounded by sheep and goats. The only family they had was their nephew, Lot, who was basically a self-centered rascal, hardly someone you'd want to learn ethical behavior from. They had no Bible yet, not even a scrap of sacred scripture. Sarah and Abraham had almost none of the opportunities for religious formation which you and I take for granted.

That meant God had to step in and supply the religious formation they couldn't get anywhere else. Step one was to shower them with grace upon grace, to teach them by experience what the mercy of God is all about. The next step is to teach them how to extend that fragrant grace, that delicious mercy, to other people.

III

Here's how it happens. God Almighty, along with two men, appears one day in Abraham and Sarah's campground. God informs Abraham that since people have been

complaining loudly about the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, God has come to investigate the charges. God says: “I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me” (v. 21). This detail indicates God has not yet decided to do anything except to conduct an investigation. The people oppressed by Sodom and Gomorrah are crying out for justice. They want God to stop it. But God has not yet decided what, if anything, will be done. However, God will look into the matter. God will collect evidence. Then, and only then, will God decide whether the great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah has merit.

At this point you need to know something about verse 22. In the NRSV and the NIV, it says that after hearing this Abraham “remained standing before the LORD” (NRSV). That is almost certainly not the best translation. An older version of Genesis says it the other way around, that “the LORD remained standing before Abraham” (NRSV). In biblical scholarship, the older version of the text is almost always closer to the original. This older version of the text has God pausing before Abraham, waiting to see how Abraham will respond to the news about Sodom and Gomorrah.

In other words, God is pausing to conduct a test. How will Abraham respond to this news? What moral fiber is this man actually made of? God has rained a shower of graces down on Abraham and Sarah, none of which they deserved. So what will Abraham now do with those lavish demonstrations of grace? Is he going to hoard his grace and remain self-centered like his nephew Lot? Or will Abraham give away some of his grace? Will he show some compassion for other people? God pauses, waiting for Abraham to respond, waiting to take the measure of this man.

You know the story. Abraham argues and pleads. No, God, do not destroy Sodom! First, you are not acting like a God of justice if you destroy righteous people along with wicked people (v. 23). Second, you should pardon the entire city for the sake of a small community of righteous people who might be living there (v. 25a). Third, you are the judge of the world and you should do what is just (v. 25b), but to destroy everyone if there are even a few righteous simply would not be just. Abraham then bargains God down to

ten people. God agrees that if Sodom has ten righteous people, the city will not be destroyed.

I want you to notice how quickly God agrees to every number Abraham proposes. God never protests, never objects. Each time Abraham names a lower number, God willingly accepts. God is acting a bit like a pushover who values mercy much more than punishment. But then God is not the one being evaluated here. The person being evaluated is Abraham.

Abraham passes the test with an A. He proves he is not narcissistic. He will not keep grace to himself, but will share it with others. In his bargaining with God he thinks not of himself but of the people in Sodom. Abraham demonstrates that he has a compassionate heart, that he values mercy and wants God to value mercy too. Abraham shows that mercy is more important to him than punishment, just as mercy is more important to God.

IV

Abraham is the Bible's first great intercessor, and this story is the first great example of intercessory prayer. In the coming Sundays we will look at other great examples of intercessory prayer in the Bible.

We begin with this story because it frames intercessory prayer as a response to grace. One way you and I can respond to the graces of God in our lives is to pivot and pray for other people. Intercessory prayer pulls us out of ourselves and makes us more attentive to the needs of the world. In a sense, intercessory prayer is a test of how willing we are to extend grace to others. By praying for others, we generously live compassion; we willingly show mercy. We bless in response to the ways God has blessed us.

This story invites us to ponder not only how grace is flowing into us, but also how grace is flowing out of us. When, where, and in what ways do you pray for others? What role does intercession play in your larger ministry to the world?