

Sixth Revelation, Part 2 - Negotiating for Justice¹

Genesis 18:16-33

Before the Lesson: Have the poster (found at the end of this lesson plan) or the words from that poster written on a board for the Information session. Make copies of the handout, “Beginnings, Endings, and God” for the Transformational Exercise.

(Note to the teacher: This lesson series focuses on the seven revelations of God to Abraham. Thus, the focus of today’s lesson is on the strangers and on the conversation/negotiation that Abraham has with God. A challenge of this lesson may be to keep the focus on Abraham and not on the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom was an evil city, no doubt (Gen. 18:20). Contemporary scholars in the mainstream Christian tradition believe that Sodom’s sin was not homosexuality, but inhospitality, based on scriptural reflections such as Isaiah 1:9-11, 16-18; Jeremiah 23:13-14; Lamentations 4:2-6; Ezekiel 16:46-50; Zephaniah 2:8-10; Matthew 10:14-15; Matthew 11:20, 23-24; Luke 17:28-30; 2 Peter 2:4-9; and Jude 5-7. It is appropriate to have a class session on this topic alone, but the particular sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is not germane to the discussion of Abraham’s growing partnership with God. The topic of *hospitality* as a form of righteous living was addressed in the previous lesson about Abraham’s extravagant welcome to the three strangers. This lesson focuses on *negotiating for justice* as a form of righteous living.)

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

Tell us about a recent attempt of yours at negotiation. How did it go?

Is there a place you never want to return to (a city, a restaurant, etc.)? Where and why not?

Information

Let’s review the growth of Abram’s faith and his relationship with Yahweh.

1. In his first revelation, God speaks - “Go!”- and Abram goes toward a land he does not know.
2. In the second revelation, God shows Abram the land that he will occupy.
3. In the third revelation, God has Abram walk the land, claiming it for himself and his descendants.
4. In the fourth revelation, God reminds Abram that he will be the Father of a great nation – and Abram argues with God! Then God strengthens the promise by “cutting a covenant”

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(as Abram cuts a heifer, a goat, and a ram in half). Abram's journey of faith has involved listening, seeing, walking, and sacrificing.

5. In the fifth revelation, God tells Abram to walk with him – to walk in the way of mercy, justice, and humility. God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah. The newly named Abraham shows a new sense of partnership by laughing at God's plans and pointing out the impossibility of them.
6. In the sixth revelation, God appears as a man with two other men. Abraham and Sarah pull out all the stops to be hospitable to these visitors. God tells Abraham, again, that he will be the father of a great nation with his wife, Sarah – who is laughing on the other side of the tent flap.

In his relationship with God, Abram has been observant, obedient, and active, for the most part. He has also deferred, laughed, and argued. He is a real human being with limited faith, limited understanding, and limited time as he learns how to partner with the eternal God. Part of partnering is learning how to negotiate.

We are going to try a role-play. I need a volunteer to be the person the rest of us will try to negotiate with. [Someone volunteers or the teacher "voluntolds" them. They are called "V" in the following instructions.]

Here is the setting. We are all together on a class picnic at a park. Someone says, "Let's take a hike to the waterfall!" All of us think this is a great idea. Except for "V." V prefers to stay behind. Now, each of us gets one attempt to change V's mind. Before we begin, think about two or three methods you might use to persuade someone to do what you want. V, you are not absolutely opposed to going on a hike. Physically, you could do it. So, you are open to persuasion if the case made suits you. [Give a minute for class members to think. Then, have 5-6 class members present their case to V.]

What did we learn about negotiation in this exercise?

What happens next in the story of Abraham's faith journey is surprising. God confers with a human being about God's plans.

- Have a class member read Genesis 18:16-19.

Why did God decide to reveal to Abraham his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah?

What does this say about the evolution of the relationship between Abraham and God?

“God has promised blessing to all the tribes on earth and now intends to destroy two of them – but not without good cause...How can God *not* confide in his partner? ... The language reinforces the growing reciprocity of the relationship.”²

“*to do righteousness and justice*: This is the first time that the fulfillment of the covenantal promise is explicitly made contingent on moral performance. The two crucial Hebrew nouns, *tsedeq* and *mishpat*, will continue to reverberate literally and in cognate forms through Abraham’s pleas to God on behalf of the doomed cities.”³

- Have a class member read Genesis 18:20-21.

Why is God making a personal visit to Sodom and Gomorrah? (God has heard the cries of innocent victims; God has heard of Sodom's evil reputation, etc.)

“*outcry*: The Hebrew noun, or the verb from which it is derived, *tsa’aq* or *za’aq* is often associated in the Prophets and the Psalms with the shrieks of torment of the oppressed.”⁴

- Have a class member read Genesis 18:22-25.

How would you describe Abraham’s negotiating conversation with God? Is he being bold? foolish? Is this a rebuke? a word to the wise?

“*And Abraham stepped forward*: The verb, often used for someone about to deliver a legal plea, introduces an Abraham who is surprisingly audacious in the cause of justice, a stance that could scarcely have been predicted from the obedient and pious Abraham of the preceding episodes.”⁵

Is this disagreement with God’s plan a sign of deepening faith or a sign of weakening faith?

What is Abraham learning about God?

What is God learning about Abraham?

Genesis 18:22 says, “‘Abraham stood before the Lord,’ suggesting the subordination of Abraham to God. This is what we should expect. But a very early text note (not to be doubted its authority and authenticity) shows that the text before any translation originally said, ‘Yahweh stood before Abraham.’ ... It is as though Abraham were presiding over the meeting. But that bold image of Yahweh being accountable to Abraham for this theological idea was judged by the early scribes as irreverent and unacceptable. Therefore, the text was changed to read as we have it. But the earlier version suggests with remarkable candor what a bold posture Abraham assumes and how

² Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 79, 80.

³ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 80.

⁴ Alter, 80.

⁵ Alter, 81.

presumptuous is the issue he raises. Whether the textual change is accepted or not, this text reports that Yahweh must think a quite new theological thought. God is pressed by Abraham to consider an alternative.”⁶

“However prepared we are for the growing reciprocity between God and Abraham, the next two narrative details astonish us. God stands before Abraham, rather than Abraham standing in God’s presence. Then, the word of Abraham comes to God, rather than the word of God coming to Abraham.”⁷

“Abraham utters the boldest speech of man in all Scripture, more bold than anything said by Job in his dispute with God, greater than any, because it is the word of the intercessor who is moved by the purpose of his intercession to lose even the awe of God...Now the path to the status of prophet is accomplished; and now Abraham can be raised to the rank of a prophet.”⁸

Abraham “concludes, ‘Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?’ The word is strong, and clear, and challenging – the best sort of word to offer this God. Abraham appears ‘up to it’ in his growing partnership with God, just as God, in waiting before Abraham, displays growing confidence in the capacity of the chosen partner to choose well.”⁹

- Have a class member read Genesis 18:26-33.

“*ten*: Abraham realizes that he dare not go any lower than ten, the minimal administrative unit for communal organization in later Israelite life. In the event, Lot’s family, less than the requisite ten, will be the only innocent souls in Sodom.”¹⁰

“With all of Abraham’s haggling, albeit on behalf of mercy, God not only listens, but agrees. The partners see eye to eye. They have been face to face, friends of the noblest order. Abraham is learning to see more and more as God sees, to walk with God, to walk before God. In fact, he is challenging God to see things as he, Abraham, sees them. ... [I]n visit six, as a friend to God, Abraham discovers that the scales of mercy are tilted toward mercy as generous as is humanly possible to conceive.”¹¹

From our negotiating exercise a few minutes ago, what method(s) is Abraham using to negotiate with God?

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 168.

⁷ Borgman, 80.

⁸ Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 40.

⁹ Borgman, 81.

¹⁰ Alter, 83.

¹¹ Borgman, 82.

God's original commission to Abraham was that he would father a great nation. God also said that Abraham would be blessed so that he could be a blessing to all nations. How is Abraham fulfilling that commission as he negotiates with God?

How do you think Abraham's urge to negotiate for justice affects Abraham's spiritual life?

The text contrasts "Abraham's faithfulness to Sodom's unfaithfulness. Yet it is the faithful who plead for the unfaithful. Abraham understands that salvation, redemption, and grace are as much for the oppressor as they are for the oppressed."¹²

"Although Abraham is but 'dust and ashes' with no right or power to question God, he does so anyway, and God is neither frightened nor angered by his or our inquiring. Abraham demonstrates how to stretch God's capacity to offer grace.... God prefers to save than to punish!"¹³

"Here we have the oldest discussion known to us of the subject of the righteousness of God in the sphere of the Old Testament... for this Judge even a very few 'righteous' carry so much weight that for their sake the great mass of the 'wicked' go unpunished, instead of the reverse, namely that isolated 'righteous' people also would be drawn into a judgment inflicted upon the 'wicked.' Here again we are faced with the God whose purpose finally is not judgment and curse, but salvation and blessing."¹⁴

In spite of Abraham's successful negotiations, not even ten righteous persons were found in Sodom.

- Have a class member read Genesis 19:27-29.

What does "God remembered Abraham" mean? What does this say about the growing relationship between God and Abraham?

In later reflections on Abraham's role, the prophet Isaiah gives Abraham a new role.

- Have a class member read Isaiah 41:8.

What does it mean to be a friend with God?

Near the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus invited his disciples into this new role.

- Have a class member read John 15:13-17.

¹² Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 188.

¹³ De La Torre, 189.

¹⁴ Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernard W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 238-239.

God called Abraham his friend. Jesus called the disciples his friends. Are we friends of God? What does that mean?

Transformational Exercise

“The ‘strange men’ in Gen. 18:1-19:29 have two tasks. One is *to promise a beginning*. This is done in 18:1-15 with Sarah and Abraham. The other task is *to effect an ending*. This will be done in 19:1-28 [in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah] ...It is God’s singular power to cause beginnings and endings. Times of beginnings and endings are times when the mystery of life becomes most urgent and when the hardest theological questions must be asked.”¹⁵

Has this been true for you? How have beginnings or endings led you to theological questions?

[Distribute the handout, “Beginnings, Endings, and God” for the Transformational Exercise.]

In the next few minutes, think about changes that have happened in your life. Think about the theological questions that those changes made you ponder. There is room on the bottom of the page to make some notes. After a few minutes of silence, I’ll invite anyone who would like to share to do so.

[After time to ponder and write, invite any who would like to share about one beginning/ending reflection. If none choose to share, affirm their time of reflection this past few minutes. Encourage class members to continue reflecting on these situations and questions throughout the week.]

Close in a prayer something like this: *You are the God of beginnings and endings. You are the God of love and of justice. You are God, yet you invite us to be partners with you. Help us in times of transition to look to you, to talk with you, to negotiate with you, even. We trust that these prayerful conversations will strengthen our faith and our partnership with you, Amen.*

¹⁵ Brueggemann, 162.

Beginnings, Endings, and God

Suggested times of beginnings/endings

A birth	A new job	The loss of a relationship
An adoption	A new role in life	A new place to worship
An injury	A new place to live	A completed education
A death	A new hobby	A new “calling”
Job loss	A new friend	Other:

How did a beginning/ending bring these types of questions to mind?

Who am I?

Is God with me?

Does God know about and care about this situation?

Can God use this for good?

Other:

Notes

Abraham's Faith Journey

Belief

Trust

Obedience

Partnership

Intimacy

Righteousness

(A. Hospitality)

(B. Justice)

Stewardship