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Designed by Jenny Destree

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CONTENTS

**ONE ABRAHAM: The Day God
Grew Larger 1**

Abraham's Guests

God's Confidant

God, How Could You Be Like That?

**TWO JACOB: A Crippling in the
Chasm 17**

The Struggle Begins

Neither Peace nor Protection

The Wolf's Bared Throat

Conquered by Dependency

THREE MOSES: Shining Faces 35

Two Loves

Reflecting God's Heart

Reflecting God's Glory

**FOUR DAVID: Fellowship
Restored 51**

A Leader without Focus

Natural Consequences

Two-Dimensional Justice

Where the Blame Lies

Changing the Leopard's Spots
The Acceptable Sacrifice

**FIVE DANIEL: The Man Who Was
Greatly Beloved 71**

Between the Word and the World
Expectation and Agitation
No We/They Dichotomy
Crippling Fears
The Opinion of Ants
Beyond Self

**SIX HANNAH: Whispers in
Pleasure, Shouts in Pain 93**

Beloved but Barren
Purpose in Pain
Spiritual Surgery
Longing Shot like an Arrow

**SEVEN JOB: The Man Who Covered
His Mouth 109**

Intimacy's Counterfeit
Celestial Buddy
Death-Wish Road
Small Is Healthy
Sounds of Silence
A Richness Greater than Riches

**EIGHT DAVID: The Lord and
the Dance 127**

God's Portable Shrine
Rejoicing Turned to Terror

Death and Good Fortune
The End of a Marriage
Spiritual Pornography

NINE PAUL: Praying for Others 145

The Fuel and the Flame
Praise Where Praise Is Due
Smashing Carnival Mirrors
Jack Is God's Treasure
The Seal of Power
The Hands of Love Reach Down

TEN JESUS: The Last Battle 167

A Yearning for Companionship
Storm Subsides
"Father, Forgive Them"
Forsaken
The Last Prayer

GENESIS 18:9-33

THEY SAID
They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The LORD said, "I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah

denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh."

Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, 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 to Abraham what he has promised him." Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know."

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the LORD. Then Abraham drew near, and said, "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their

sake.” Abraham answered, “Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” Again he spoke to him, and said, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.” Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.” He said, “Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.” Then he said, “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

ONE ABRAHAM

The Day God Grew Larger

Unlike many of us, Abraham had no problem making contact with heaven. He never needed to try. Throughout his long life it was God who made contact with Abraham.

We are not always told exactly how God did so. Often we read, “The Lord said to Abraham, . . .” with no explanation whether God spoke in an audible voice or in the stillness of Abraham’s heart. One time God spoke in a vision (Genesis 15:1); on another occasion he “appeared” to Abraham (Genesis 17:1). The important point to grasp is that each time communion between the two is mentioned, God took the initiative. God spoke, and Abraham responded. Our prayer life will be much simpler if the same proves true for us.

And why should it not be so? We think of praying as talking, and certainly talking is involved. But the quality of a conversation may well be determined by the person who initiates it. Indeed, our whole reaction to a conversation often depends on who first started it. It is comforting in a group of strangers for somebody to greet us and show a friendly interest. It may, on the other hand, be difficult for us to start a

conversation, and it becomes doubly so when our attempt is met with a cold stare.

God is always speaking. To hear his voice is not usually a mystical experience. It consists merely of a willingness to pay heed to the God who lays a claim on our life. It is, as O. Hallesby once pointed out, “to let Jesus come into our heart.” For the word *hear* in the New Testament does not commonly refer to an auditory experience. More often it means “to pay heed.” “There’s none so deaf,” we used to say in the north of England, “as them as *won’t* hear.”

Abraham, then, was not unique. God approaches all of us in the same way. To hear him involves no exercise in “tuning in to the right frequency” so much as a humble recognition that it is his prerogative to speak and our responsibility to respond. We may not have such dramatic experiences as Abraham, but remember that Abraham had no knowledge of God from Scripture. He had never read a chapter of the Bible.

ABRAHAM'S GUESTS

We are given a vivid picture of what happened when God appeared to him. Three men, probably dressed like Bedouin tribesmen, approached Abraham’s encampment during the shimmering noon-day heat. Abraham watched their approach, rose to his feet, and went forward to greet them.

There is no indication in the narrative that at that point he suspected who his guests were. As the men sat down in the shade of the terebinth trees, Abraham hurried to give orders for water to wash his guests’

feet and for a large meal to be prepared for them. He was showing them the deferential welcome that desert custom demanded. This same eagerness to please would have been shown to any visitor.

Later, again according to custom, Abraham himself waited on them. When did he first begin to suspect their identity? It is hard to know. Did they converse during the meal? Did Abraham tell them about his wife, Sarah, and about her barrenness? The narrative does not tell us. Yet it is unlikely that he would have shared his highest hopes and deepest shame with men he did not know. Who would? Sarah herself had little faith in Abraham's contact with God or in any promise of an heir.

So if Abraham had not mentioned Sarah's name, it would have been startling to hear his guests demand, "Where is Sarah your wife?" His heart would have leaped suffocatingly as one of the three, who is identified as "the stranger," said, "About this time next year I will be sure to come back to you, and Sarah will have a son."

His legs would have shaken and he would have caught his breath. All his life he had longed for a son and had believed God for one. He had struggled for years against a sense of hopelessness that all but extinguished his faith. And then again the promise came.

Then from the tent sounded Sarah's mocking laughter. What followed must have been frightening to Sarah and Abraham alike. "The stranger" (now referred to in the narrative as "the Lord") rebuked Sarah for her laughter. From behind the sheltering

curtains Sarah quickly denied that she had laughed. “No, but you did laugh,” came the stern reply.

The embarrassment of the succeeding moments is left to our imaginations. In a dreamlike sequence, “the men” are described as starting toward Sodom with Abraham accompanying them at the beginning of their journey. (Exactly who are they? One of them clearly represents God revealed in the flesh. Do we here see the members of the Trinity? No. The Holy Spirit is never represented in human form. Moreover, the two “men” are later described as angelic beings.)

GOD’S CONFIDANT

Then, in one of the most astonishing passages of Scripture, we overhear a divine soliloquy. God is depicted as walking and thinking as a man walks and thinks. We know, of course, that God’s thought processes are beyond human comprehension. The God who in the same instant upholds galaxies by his controlling power, who numbers the hairs on our head, and who watches every sparrow fall, does not “think” in the limited sense that we do. Yet it is as if his whole attention was for the moment absorbed with Abraham. “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” he asked himself.

Evidently the Lord was about to destroy Sodom in a stroke of catastrophic judgment. Though the evil of the little city trumpeted its challenge throughout God’s universe, he assured Abraham that his personal and intimate acquaintance with the situation was a prerequisite of justice.

Why should God have bothered to take Abraham into his confidence? He seemed to feel a sense of obligation toward Abraham. Why? If you think about it for a moment, you will realize the stupendous implication of the story. The Lord of far-flung galaxies, the creator of life and of all that exists, the All-Powerful, the All-Knowing, the Inscrutable, the judge of angels, demons, and people took the trouble to explain his actions to an individual and talked to him without condescension, but in terms that he could understand. In this soliloquy he gave his reason for doing so.

God knew Abraham. He knew that Abraham would order his household in a godly fashion. He knew Abraham would instruct his children properly. Was God then selecting a superior human, one with whom he could have dealings, as distinct from the rest of us? The question is an important one. If we answer yes, then we must face a long struggle to upgrade our life enough so God will feel it worth his while to share things with us.

“For I know [Abraham]” (KJV). The Hebrew word for *know* can also be translated “chose” or “made . . . my friend.” In saying he knows Abraham, God is saying, “I chose Abraham to be my friend. I have changed the relationship of Creator to creature, of Judge to sinner and have added a new dimension to it. I have selected this man to be my friend. I also want him as a partner. He will have a role in my plans. Moreover, though I know he will keep my precepts and teach them to his children, I want him to be more than a yes-man. I want him to be a true

partner, sharing fully in those projects he will have a part in.”

It may seem inconceivable that the same God wants such a relationship with you. You are a creature he made. You are a sinner he redeemed. You are even his child by adoption and by supernatural new birth. Yet he calls you to a higher dignity—to that of friend and partner. “No longer do I call you servants,” Jesus told his disciples, “for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). He *chose* you to be such.

Two facts necessarily follow. If you are his friend, he will share his thoughts and plans with you. If you are his partner, he will be concerned about your views on his plans and projects. Whatever else prayer may be, it is intended to be a sharing and a taking counsel with God on matters of importance to him. God has called you to attend a celestial board meeting to deliberate with him on matters of destiny.

You can see at once how this raises the whole level of prayer. It is not intended primarily to be centered on my petty needs and woes. To be sure, God is interested in them. They have a place on his agenda. But the agenda itself has been drawn up in heaven and deals with matters of greatest consequence.

God then was taking counsel with Abraham about the destiny of Sodom. No longer were they discussing a son for Abraham. That matter had already been dismissed summarily. “About this time next year . . .” God had settled the issue, and nothing remained to

be said. Then he moved on to a matter that was beyond the scope of Abraham's personal concerns, and as Abraham looked at the agenda, he was flooded with dismay.

For one thing, the stupendous horror of the coming judgment sickened him. To us Sodom means nothing—a city lost in remote history. But to Abraham it meant living people, warm of flesh and quick of movement. It meant slaves and their masters, tradesmen, craftsmen, parents, children, merchants, animals, provisions, houses, gardens. It was in Sodom that his relative Lot lived. He knew Sodom. He had met its king. He had personally rescued many of its citizens when disaster in war had overtaken them (Genesis 14). God had enabled him to deliver the city from the ravages of defeat, yet now he was proposing to obliterate the city and all its inhabitants.

It could not have been only his concern for Lot that sparked the intensity of Abraham's prayer. Had his concern been only for Lot and his family, Abraham would not have stopped short of pleading that the city be saved if ten righteous people could be found in it. No. Abraham had wider concerns than his own family. He was concerned for other people in Sodom.

People differ. Not everyone in Sodom was equally corrupt. There were presumably merciful people there, people of reasonably good will. Abraham's heart reached out in pleading for them. Was God planning to destroy *everybody*?

A strange blend of terror and boldness character-

izes his prayer. It was not the “Save-Sodom-if-it-be-your-will. Amen” kind. Whatever else we may say about it, it was a real-issues, facts-and-figures kind of prayer. Abraham knew God meant what he said. Abraham also sensed that if God could be induced to make a promise, God would keep that promise. His whole life had been devoted to learning such a lesson. Yet it was his first board meeting, and he was terrified of the chairman.

What about our “if-it-be-your-will” prayers? Are they biblical? “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” we repeat in absentminded solemnity. Prayer does indeed have to do with accomplishing God’s will. You are called into prayer either that you might collaborate with him in bringing his will to pass or that you might get a larger vision of what he is like. The phrase “if it be thy will” is more often than not a cop-out. It means I don’t have to come to grips with God. I need not bother to find out what God’s will is. Nor do I have to exercise faith in the character of the Invisible One who works miraculously in the face of impossible odds. “If it be thy will” is lazy pseudoreverence, which, when translated into Spanish, comes out “*que será, será.*”

Terrified though he might have been, Abraham wanted to get the facts straight. Yet his prayer was not, as some scholars suggest, a mere reflection of bargaining practices among traders in the East. Abraham had nothing to offer in trade with God. Moreover, the stakes were too high. He was not haggling with God. He was desperate to understand.

God stood before Abraham, waiting for his re-

sponse. (There is good evidence that such was the original order of words at the end of verse 22.) And as Abraham stepped forward to speak, we see that his perplexity lay not only with the horror of God's judgment, but also with the apparent injustice of it.

GOD, HOW COULD YOU BE LIKE THAT?

"Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? . . . Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The foundation of Abraham's very life was being destroyed. If there was one thing he had built his life on, it was the justice and the faithfulness of the God he had learned to serve. With dismay he saw standing before him a God he no longer understood. God had become alien to him. The change in their relationship threatened to destroy it altogether. It would have been more comfortable to go on as God's servant and not as his friend. Who would have thought that God would turn out to be a monster?

Struggling inside him were painfully conflicting emotions—his terror of the Almighty and his yearning that the same Almighty be all Abraham longed for him to be. In the end, it was his yearning that God be just that won out over his terror. "Suppose there are fifty righteous. . . ."

You cannot have a relationship with God without standing, at one time or another, precisely where Abraham stood. I stood there late one night as I grappled with the apparent injustice of a God who chose Jacob and rejected Esau. I stood there another time as in my morning devotions I read of God's

deadly anger against Uzzah whose only fault had been to reach out to prevent the ark of the covenant from tumbling off a cart (2 Samuel 6:6). I was in the middle of a student evangelistic campaign at the time. I remember kneeling on the boards of an old church hall, begging God to show me that he was not the God of 2 Samuel 6. How could I preach of his saving mercy if he were in fact a petulant tyrant?

God has never defended himself when I have come to him in my perplexity. I can well understand Abraham's torment, for it is a torment I have felt. I loved God and wanted him to go on being the God I had always known. I was frightened both by what I seemed to be seeing, and by my own temerity in daring to question the judge of the universe. Yet with tears and sweat the question had to come, "Lord, how could you *be* like that?" And his answer has always been to show me more of himself than I had seen before, so that my tears and perplexity gave place to awe and to worship.

The same process was taking place between God and Abraham. It was not the fate of Sodom that was the issue in Abraham's prayer, but the character of God. It is easy enough to plead for the doomed and the lost, but it is another matter altogether to question God about his own integrity.

"Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes." Abraham was painfully aware of the incongruity, the total inappropriateness of what he was doing. Yet without such an awareness, what is prayer but a parroting of words? If we close our mind to everything about

God that makes us uncomfortable, we are going through empty motions when we pray. We pray to a god we have ourselves fashioned for our comfort and not to God as he is. True prayer is to respond to the true God as he reveals more of himself by his Spirit in his Word. Prayer defined in such terms can be a terrifying experience. “Woe is me! For I am lost,” cried Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5) as the true God showed through the smoke before him.

So far Abraham had not dared to ask what he really wanted to know. The apparent haggling, the step-by-step descent in fives and tens was the terrified progress of one who feared lest every step forward should prove his last. “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak.” His fear and his longing are equally apparent. “Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. . . .”

Why did Abraham stop at ten? We may never know. One thing is certain. He was reassured. As each response came back at him, “For the sake of forty I will not do it. . . . I will not do it, if I find thirty there. . . . For the sake of ten I will not destroy it, . . .” the image of God was changing in Abraham’s eyes. It was no monster that faced him but the familiar God of the covenant. Yet somehow God was larger. He was less comprehensible. And, paradoxically, he was a God Abraham understood better than ever before. A familiar God whom yet he scarcely knew. A righteous God whose judgments were past finding out.

Abraham was satisfied. He did not need to drop his figure any lower. Whether Sodom was con-

sumed or not, the universe was on a solid footing. The storm might be terrible and its havoc beyond belief. Yet all was well.

Abraham had grown into a larger man with a greater God. Prayer had changed him. God's purpose of inviting him to the board meeting had been accomplished. The chairman himself drew the meeting to a close and left Abraham to the wonder of his new discovery.