**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-024. BECAUSE OF HIS IMPORTUNITY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him! 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; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him. And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know. And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the Lord. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt Thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt Thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from Thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes: Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt Thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And He said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it. And he spake unto Him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And He said, I will not do it for forty's sake. And he said unto Him, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And He said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And He said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And He said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. And the Lord went His way, as soon as He had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place."*

*Genesis 18:16-33*

The first verse of this chapter says that the Lord appeared unto Abraham, and then proceeds to tell that three men stood over against him, thus indicating that these were, collectively, the manifestation of Jehovah. Two of the three subsequently went toward Sodom, and are called angels in chapter xix. **I.** One remained with Abraham, and is addressed by him as Lord, but the three are similarly addressed in verse 3. The inference is that Jehovah appeared, not only in the one man who spake with Abraham, but also in the two who went to Sodom.

In this incident we have, first, God's communication of His purpose to Abraham. He was called the friend of God, and friends confide in each other. The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and it is ever true that they who live in amity and communion with God thereby acquire insight into His purposes. Even in regard to public or so-called political events, a man who believes in God and His moral government will often be endowed with a terrible sagacity, which forecasts consequences more surely than do godless politicians. In regard to one's own history, it is still more evidently true that the one way to apprehend God's purposes in it is to keep in close friendship with Him. Then we shall see the meaning of the else bewildering whirl of events, and be able to say, He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God. But the reason assigned for intrusting Abraham with the knowledge of God's purpose is to be noted. It was because of his place as the medium of blessing to the nations, and as the lawgiver to his descendants. God had known him,--that is, had lovingly brought him into close relations with Himself, not for his own sake only, but, much more, that he might be a channel of grace to Israel and the world. His commandment to his descendants was to lead to their worship of Jehovah and their upright living, and these again to their possession of the blessings promised to Abraham. That purpose would be aided by the knowledge of the judgment on Sodom, its source, and its cause, and therefore Abraham was admitted into the council-chamber of Jehovah. The insight given to God's friends is given that they may more fully benefit men by leading them into paths of righteousness, on which alone they can be met by God's blessings.

The strongly figurative representation in verses 20, 21, according to which Jehovah goes down to ascertain whether the facts of Sodom's sin correspond to the report of it, belongs to the early stage of revelation, and need not surprise us, but should impress on us the gradual character of the divine Revelation, which would have been useless unless it had been accommodated to the mental and spiritual stature of its recipients. Nor should it hide from us the lofty conception of God's long-suffering justice, which is presented in so childlike a form. He does not judge after ...the hearing of His ears, nor smite without full knowledge of the sin. A later stage of revelation puts the same thought in language less strange to us, when it teaches that the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed, and in His balances many a false estimate, both of virtuous and vicious acts, is corrected, and retribution is always exactly adjusted to the deed.

But the main importance of the incident is in the wonderful picture of Abraham's intercession, which, in like manner, veils, under a strangely sensuous representation, lofty truths for all ages. It is to be noted that the divine purpose expressed in I will go down now, and see, is fulfilled in the going of the two (men or angels) towards Sodom; therefore Jehovah was in them. But He was also in the One before whom Abraham stood. The first great truth enshrined in this part of the story is that the friend of God is compassionate even of the sinful and degraded. Abraham did not intercede for Lot, but for the sinners in Sodom. He had perilled his life in warfare for them; he now pleads with God for them. Where had he learned this brave pity? Where but from the God with whom he lived by faith? How much more surely will real communion with Jesus lead us to look on all men, and especially on the vicious and outcast, with His eyes who saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, torn, panting, scattered, and lying exhausted and defenceless! Indifference to the miseries and impending dangers of Christless men is impossible for any whom He calls not servants, but friends.

Again, we are taught the boldness of pleading which is permitted to the friend of God, and is compatible with deepest reverence. Abraham is keenly conscious of his audacity, and yet, though he knows himself to be but dust and ashes, that does not stifle his petitions. His was the holy importunity which Jesus sent forth for our imitation. The word so rendered in Luke xi. 8, which is found in the New Testament there only, literally means shamelessness, and is exactly the disposition which Abraham showed here. Not only was he persistent, but he increased his expectations with each partial granting of his prayer. The more God gives, the more does the true suppliant expect and crave; and rightly so, for the gift to be given is infinite, and each degree of possession enlarges capacity so as to fit to receive more, and widens desire. What contented us to-day should not content us to-morrow.

Again, Abraham is bold in appealing to a law to which God is bound to conform. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? is often quoted with an application foreign to its true meaning. Abraham was not preaching to men trust that the most perplexing acts of God would be capable of full vindication if we knew all, but he was pleading with God that His acts should be plainly accordant with the idea of justice planted by Him in us. The phrase is often used to strengthen the struggling faith that

All is right which seems most wrong,

If it be His sweet will.

But it means not Such and such a thing must be right because God has done it, but Such and such a thing is right, therefore God must do it. Of course, our conceptions of right are not the absolute measure of the divine acts, and the very fact which Abraham thought contrary to justice is continually exemplified in Providence, that the righteous should be as the wicked in regard to earthly calamities affecting communities. So far Abraham was wrong, but the spirit of his remonstrance was wholly right.

Again, we learn the precious lesson that prayer for others is a real power, and does bring down blessings and avert evils. Abraham did not here pray for Lot, but yet God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow (chap. xix. 29), so that there had been unrecorded intercession for him too. The unselfish desires for others, that exhale from human hearts under the influence of the love which Christ plants in us, do come down in blessings on others, as the moisture drawn up by the sun may descend in fructifying rain on far-off pastures of the wilderness. We help one another when we pray for one another.

The last lesson taught is that righteous men are indeed the salt of the earth not only preserving cities and nations from further corruption, but procuring for them further existence and probation. God holds back His judgments so long as hope of amendment survives, and will not destroy for the ten's sake.