

When Darkness Turns to Light

by Dennis Kinlaw

Dennis Kinlaw's sermon explores the profound simplicity of knowing God through biblical narratives and the importance of personal relationship over mere knowledge.

Duration: 1:06:27

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 19:1-29, Genesis 27:1-45, Genesis 37, Isaiah 6:1-7, Matthew 13:12, John 18:1-14

Topics: "Light"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding and obeying the stories in the Bible. He explains that these stories can either harden our hearts if we don't heed them, or open us up to a new dimension of life and service if we embrace them. The speaker encourages the audience to listen attentively to God rather than just to him, as it is crucial to hear God's voice. He also highlights the significance of simplicity in understanding the stories of Abraham and how they serve as a model for knowing and following God.

Transcript

Shall we pray again? Our Father, we are aware that of all material objects, your word is the most valuable, the most precious. Of all the intellectual gifts that you've given us, there is none to compare with this. But with all of our gifts, we do not have the capacity to see the fullness of what you have to say to us there.

Thank you that you've promised to give us your spirit to help us see and to understand and to interpret and to bear witness. So let the light, your light, you who are the light, shine upon your truth today and make it come alive for us. And we will give you praise in Christ's name.

Amen. In these mornings that we've had together, we've been talking a little about what I speak of as the beauty of these narratives. They really are amazing literature.

I had the privilege when I was in graduate school of something very few people ever get. I had the chance to read a chunk of the literature from the period in which these chapters originated. I remember when I got to Brandeis, the first year I was there, we read the book of Judges in Hebrew and we read Homer's Iliad in classical Greek because they're the same kind of literature except one is Hebrew and the other is pagan.

We read Hamierophis' Code, which is legal literature in Babylonian, and then we read the book of Exodus and the Pentateuch in Hebrew because the Hamierophis' Code is 400 years older at least than Moses, but

it's from that second millennium B.C. We read the Joseph story in Hebrew and we read short stories from Egypt in Egyptian from 1900 B.C. So you had a chance to see and compare the literature, these stories with the best that the world had to offer in the same day. And with that background, the longer I've lived with them, the more beautiful and the more powerful they have become to me. You will notice that in these stories so simply told, the New Testament finds the model for you and me.

As we said, Paul, Romans, Galatians, James, writer of the book of Hebrews, the rest of the Bible looks upon Abraham as the model for us all. And yet you read these stories, these 13 chapters about him, how simple they are. Incredibly simple and you think of the detail and the explanation that is not given.

But, you know, sometimes I think we have a misunderstanding about what simplicity really means. Sometimes we say, well, that was so simple, as if there is a value in something being complex. Now, I think one of the reasons we like to say, well, I'm more interested in something that's complex is because the implication is I've got to be half bright to understand it.

But, do you know, the real brightness is when you can see things simply. There was an article, I'm glad you're here, Ken, I may need you before this is over with. I'm talking about an area I don't know anything about, but we've got an MIT mathematician down here so he'll save me.

There was an article in Time Magazine a week or two ago on Fermats. What is it, Ken? His what kind of theorem? Fermats' last theorem. See, you already have lost me with that.

Because Fermats was a French mathematician and apparently he'd solved all the other problems, but there was one he couldn't handle. And so this is his last theorem. Now, I may have that stated wrong.

You get the Ken afterwards. He'll straighten out the way it's supposed to be stated. Well, this is one that the mathematicians have wrestled with.

When did Fermats live, Ken? Fermats lived 350 years ago. Now, am I right in that the mathematicians have wrestled with that for 350 years? Well, there is a guy at Princeton, I think, he's a Britisher, his name Wiles? His name is Wiles, who took 220-some pages of formulae, you know, mathematical formulae, and then took those 220-some pages and met with the best mathematicians in the world for three solid hours. And at the end of the three hours, he put on the board $x^2 + y^2 = z^2$, and the place erupted in applause.

It was better than a victory in the Super Bowl because a problem had been solved, and when it was solved, all he had to put on the board was $x^2 + y^2 = z^2$. Now, I come to these stories differently because of that. There is depth here because of the origin of them.

You will not find the fullness expressed here unless you know the rest of the New Testament, the rest of the Bible. So there is a sense in which these help us read the rest of the Bible, but there is a sense in which the rest of the Bible give us the beauty and the sanctity and the richness of these stories. Now, let me see if I can illustrate that before the morning is out.

We don't want to make them say more than they say, but I don't want to let them say to me a whit less than they're supposed to say. So that's where we need to watch. Now, what is it that God wants in us if He's the model, Abraham? Well, He wants us to know Him.

And you will remember that when Jesus came, that was what He wanted. And it's not easy to get people to know you. Jesus wanted them to know that He was the eternal Son of God, that He was God.

One thing He couldn't do was tell them, because if He told them, going around saying, now boys, I'm God, they'd have looked for the counterpart to an insane asylum to have put Him in. You certainly wouldn't believe it if anybody came up and said, I'm God. So He couldn't tell them who He was.

And He wanted them to trust Him. And the surest way to keep anybody from trusting you is to look at them and say, you can really trust me. Because when I tell you that, you reach for your left hip pocket and hold it, or wherever it is, you keep your wallet.

So what He wants is something that has to be given. And do you know that can only develop as you come to know a person. And God wanted Abraham to know Him.

God wants you and me to know Him. Isn't that incredible? You know, it'd be interesting if, I don't know whether this is the best illustration these days or not, but if you got a phone call and the voice said, this is Bill. And you say, Bill who? Though the voice has a little familiar ring to it.

Well, you say, this is Bill Clinton, your president. You'd think. And when you collected yourself, he'd say, Dennis, I've heard about you and I want to get to know you.

I'd say, this is one big joke. But the reality is, there is not a human being in existence. There's not a drug addict on the streets of New York.

There's not an orphan kid in the city streets and the jungles of the cities of South America. There's not a peasant on a Chinese farm that the eternal God doesn't want to know. And so he says, how are you going to get to know Him? You're going to have to live with me.

That's the only way you get to know anybody. Isn't it interesting we use the word know to express the most intimate relationship between a husband and a wife? God wants to know us and wants to know us intimately, personally. And so he says, you need to walk with me.

Now, I can't walk in your way because that would destroy us all. But if you walk in my way, you'll find it's a way of righteousness and of truth and of joy. So you're going to have to walk my way because I'm the truth and you're not.

So if we walk your way, we've lost the truth. And I'm the Holy One and you're not. So if we walk your way, we've lost holiness.

And you can keep on with that. So he says, I want you to walk with me. Now, he says, you're going to have to trust me.

And if you do, I will reward you and give you good things. Now, let me make another comment about the character of these narratives. You will notice how straightforward they are and how little detail.

And then one thing that is very significant. Do you know there's no preaching in Genesis? There's not a single preacher that I can locate in Genesis. And there's no preaching.

Do you know there's not a single line where the Genesis says you're supposed to be like this? There's not a line in Genesis where you're supposed to be like Abraham, you're not supposed to flirt with the world the

way Lot did? You remember he lives so close to Sodom and Gomorrah that he got in deep trouble? There's not a line that says you're not supposed to lie and deceive the way Jacob did? There's not a line about you're not supposed to envy and resent your brothers the way Joseph's brothers resented him? There's no moralizing in the book of Genesis. Now, why is there no moralizing there if this is the way of salvation? I think it's because what God wants us to have is personal knowledge of Him. And do you know there's a lot of difference between personal knowledge and scientific knowledge? Do you know the scientist gets his instruments and looks at the world, the universe, or microbes or whatever it is out there, and it is extremely... the premium is on objectivity.

It doesn't matter whether the scientist got drunk the night before or whether he committed adultery or not. All that's necessary is the right ability, and he can describe what he sees. And it doesn't necessarily make one whit of difference in him.

So when we use scientific knowledge and scientific truth as a paradigm for biblical knowledge and biblical truth, we've just wiped out the genius and the uniqueness of biblical truth. Because, you see, it takes personal involvement. You know, it's one thing to know a table of mathematics, and it's another thing to know your neighbor.

And the same approach won't receive the same results in the two different cases. Now, what God is after here is for us to know not about Him, but to know Him. Now, let me see if I can make plain something that I lived a long time before I understood.

Do you remember there's a passage in Isaiah? You may want to look at it, or you may not. Our time will go so quickly, I'm tempted not to let you look at it. But if you remember, the 6th chapter of Isaiah is Isaiah's vision where he sees the holiness of God, the Holy One, and he hears the creature, heavenly creature singing, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of His glory.

And he in the presence of God is aware of his sinfulness, and he cries out, Woe is me, because I am undone, I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. And then one of the seraphim takes a coal from the altar and puts it on his lips and purges him, and his guilt is taken away and his sin atoned for. And then God says, Now let me get down to business, why I've done all this.

I've got a job for you to do. I want you to go and tell this people. Now one of the most difficult passages in Scripture is what follows, because the prophet is now called to preach.

And what's he supposed to do with his preaching? Go tell this people. I want you to be ever hearing, but never understanding. I want you to be ever seeing, but never perceiving.

I want you to make the heart of this people calloused, make their ears dull, and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. Then I said, How long do I have that kind of assignment? He says, Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitants, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged.

Until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tent remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the future.

The holy seed will be the stump in the land and there will be the future. You've got to get away the false stuff. Now it's interesting that Jesus was interested in that passage too, because if you'll turn to Matthew

13, you will find him, as he looked at the crowd that he was dealing with, you will find him speaking about it.

Verse 11 of chapter 13 of Matthew. Jesus replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. It's almost as if God's got favorites, but that's not biblical.

So you've got to keep a question mark over that interpretation. The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance.

Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to you in parables. Now you know I said there was no preaching in Genesis.

You remember that Jesus, after he'd given a parable, never interpreted it. The disciples on occasion would get him to one side and say, Lord, what did you mean? And then he'd explain to his disciples, but he never explained to the public. Now I think he used parables because he was doing what God told Isaiah to do.

Now is it that God doesn't want us to understand and God doesn't want us to know? Of course. But do you know that the knowledge that he's after is the kind that you can't learn by observation or just listening? You've got to participate. You've got to give yourself if you're going to know in a biblical sense.

Now I think there's a reason for that. Let me see if I can make it clear. The relationship that we have with God and the relationship that we have with all persons is different from our relationship to non-persons.

Whether it's our family dog or the neighbor's lousy dog or whether it's material things, our relationship to them is different. Personal relationships are always moral. Did you know the minute you use a person the way you would use an object, you had sinned? Personal relationships are always moral.

And do you know you never have a moral relationship where there isn't some volition in it, where there is not some consent, where there is not some choice? If lightning strikes you dead, there's nothing moral about it. But if you kill yourself, it is an immoral act because you did it by choice. Now the knowledge that God wants has to have our participation and our choice.

And so the interesting thing is He always gives us only part of the case to see if we'll provide the rest. Now let me see if I can make myself clear on that. You know, I always wanted to build a case in my early days, a logical argument for God and prove that He existed and prove to the skeptics, the agnostics, the unbelievers of the world that Christianity is a true religion.

But do you know nobody ever really succeeds at that? And it would be a great tragedy if we did because if I can prove to you then you've learned it the way you know your neighbor has a dog and that two plus two makes four and the thief may be a better mathematician than you are. So God puts the data out there and says, Now what are you going to do with it? And He puts enough to tantalize you and puts enough to convict you but He doesn't put enough to prove. And that's the reason it's by faith.

That means you've got to act. Take a deliberate step if you're going to know in the biblical sense of know. Now the Bible has got a lot of that stuff in it where simply the story is told and then it's up to you.

What do you mean by that? And that's the first step toward faith. What do you mean by that? Now let me give you an illustration. This may seem wild but hold on.

I was working on the story of the arrest of Jesus once. I wanted to preach. I wanted to deal with that story and so I was studying it.

I read it in John first and then I went and read it in Matthew and read it in Mark and read it in Luke. Just a few verses, eight to fourteen verses covers the whole thing in any one of the four Gospels. So I just kept looking at it and studying and I began to notice something.

There is an absolute plethora of detail in the story of the arrest of Jesus. When you get to thinking about it it's astounding how much you know. Now when you come to the sacrifice of Isaac the only thing you know about is that it was on Mount Moriah.

When God comes to Abraham you're never told where he comes from. Think of the stories in the life of Jesus. The rich ruler, you don't know his name.

So many of these stories are not given the detail that our curiosities would like or a modern novelist would give. But when you come to the arrest of Jesus you know where it was, in the garden, in what city, you know what time of day it was, you know who was there, a whole bunch of the personal names. You know the personal names of at least 14 people there.

You know the conversation, you know the different kinds of authority representatives were there. There were the temple police and there were the Roman soldiers. There were the spiritual authority representatives.

There were the representatives of the priests. You remember Malchus was the servant of the chief priest. He was a servant of kind.

You know what instruments they brought. They're described. You know that they brought torches.

Could it be that we're told that the temple took torches to find the light of the world? Is that part of what's being said to us, that our darkness and our dullness is so complete that we need candles to find the light of the world? Okay. We know they had torches. We know the conversation.

You will remember that Jesus said, Whom do you seek? And they said, We seek Jesus of Nazareth. He said, I am he. Now the Greek of that is egō ēgō me.

But if you read the Greek in the Old Testament, that is one of the most common expressions of Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. Except in Hebrew it's anēhu. I am he.

You read Isaiah 40 to 60 and notice how many times God says at the end of a section, anūhi or anēhihu. I'm he. I'm he.

Anūhi. Who? I am he. And Jesus speaks.

Do you think maybe the priests that were there said, Wait a minute, I've heard that before. Do you know what John says? It says, They staggered back and fell to the ground. I accept it is literally written.

That's the normal reaction to the appearance of God. And then Jesus says, Whom is it you seek? And they said, We seek Jesus of Nazareth. He says, I am he.

And so he climbs up in their lap and says, Take me to your mouth. And Peter says, It will never do. And he pulls the sword and he chops off a fellow's ear.

Now what intrigues me is we know which ear it was. It was his right ear. Do you know if a guy is right-handed and he's facing a fellow in a sword fight, the only accessible ear is the guy's left ear.

So? But he got his right ear. Fascinating the detail. But what's interesting is we know the name of the guy he hit.

His name was Malcolm. And we know what his job was. He was a servant.

And we know what his boss's name was. It was Caiaphas. And do you know where they were taking Jesus? They were taking him to Malthus' boss.

Can you see Malthus? He's Caiaphas' representative there. As they take Jesus in, and Caiaphas looks down from his bench and says, Malthus, how did it go? And Malthus says, well, we got him. Well, he says, did you have any trouble? Well, not too much.

Well, what kind of trouble did you have? Well, you know that big fisherman? He said, yeah, you mean Peter. They knew all about him. Yeah, he said, you know, he gave us a little problem.

Well, what did he do? Well, he pulled his sword in. He clipped my ear. And Caiaphas says, your ear looks all right to me.

And Malthus says, yes, sir, my lord. That's the problem. Do you think we got the right man? Now, do you know what my question is? Is Malthus' ear God's last love note to old Caiaphas? Saying, Caiaphas, do you want to be responsible as the chief priest, the head of the house of Israel, the descendant of Aaron? Do you want to be responsible for the death of the Messiah that you've waited all these years for? But it's interesting, John isn't going to tell you a word of that.

He's just going to tell you, Peter pulled his sword and clipped Malthus' ear. But you're not going to tell me that Caiaphas didn't have a problem from that point on. I think every time Malthus walked into Caiaphas' presence there was only one thing in the room, and that was Malthus' ear.

And I suspect along about the middle of the next week he reassigned him to another job. And do you know that's what we do? God puts his witnesses in our lives. And we say, oh, that's just an unusual event.

But somebody else says, you know, I believe I detect something more than us. And that person begins to find his life replete with the blessings of God. Same event, same circumstances, same story, same truth.

And one person will find eternal life, and another person will say, what next? Do you know that happens every Sunday morning in church? And that happens in every one of these services because, you see, he's trying to redeem us. And he's not going to. Pascal, who was one of the great Christians of human history, was a very brilliant mathematician, easily one of the half a dozen most brilliant mathematical minds that ever existed.

If you've never read about him, he's one you ought to read about. But he decided to make an apologetic for the Christian faith. He had a lot of agnostic friends and he wanted to reach them.

And do you know what his ultimate argument was? It was not that I can prove to you that Christianity is true, but it's what is called the argument of the wager. And basically, as I understand it, is there's enough data in everybody's life to raise the question. And if the person will entertain the question, there is enough data to put the presumption on God's side.

And there is enough data that the person who takes the presumption and acts on it will begin to find in his life confirmation that this is the way and that it is eternal truth. But the person who takes that bit of data that is there enough just to raise the question, but not to convince, and says, Oh, I've got a lot of arguments against that. The door closes on truth.

And that person has made his decision. Now, if you understood what I'm saying, there's hardly a person in this crowd who can't look back in his own life somewhere where the witness was given and you chose not to see it. And so you found darkness and disillusionment and despair.

But there were other days when the witness was there and you said, Maybe I'd better pay attention to that. And you did. And as you did, a way began to open.

And you noticed darkness was turning to light. And then you found in the middle of it the living God himself. So the end result is every one of us will stand guilty.

If we do not know him, but not one of us will be able to say, I caught on because what we'll say is, He came and in His goodness, when I gave Him a chance, He let me know Him. Now, because of that, I think it is fair to look at these stories in Genesis that way. Now, let me go back to Genesis.

Yesterday we were talking about the fact that He calls us to walk with Him in His way and that as we walk with Him, a key word in that walk is wait. Now, I think it is there to keep me from doing what I want to do and wait to find out what He wants to do. The Hagar story.

Abraham said, We've waited ten years. That's long enough. And so he said, Let's solve God's problem.

We've got to do something. Always beware when somebody says, We've got to do something. Something's got to be done.

But as you wait, the magnificent thing is that in the waiting you learn things that you didn't care whether you learned them or not because you didn't know they were important. Because, you see, we know what we want, but we need a lot of things we don't know we want. And so it is in that waiting period if we believe that God begins to teach us pricelessly precious things.

Now, as an illustration of that, I want you to look with me at chapter 18 of Genesis. Abraham is now 99 years of age. God has appeared to him in chapter 17 and said, I am God Almighty.

Walk before me and be perfect. Be blameless. And he says, Let me confirm my covenant with you.

And he does. Now you come to, God says, next year this time Sarah will have a child. So now the waiting period is almost over.

But you get chapter 18 stuck in before we get to Isaac. The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre when he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. The Lord appeared.

The Hebrew word is Yahweh, Jehovah. It's a personal name of God. God appeared to Abraham.

And he says, Abraham looked up and saw three persons. There is no explanation in the chapter as to why there are three of them. Now, all the chapter says is there were three.

But if you read Genesis carefully, you will find that there seems to be a multiplicity in the nature of deity as well as a unity. At least there are texts that can be interpreted that way. You will remember that when God decided to create man, he said, Let us make man in our own image.

Now it's interesting, the scholars, what they have to do with that if they don't believe in any kind of predictive prophecy. We talk about plurals of majesty and this kind of thing, all sorts of things. Now, don't make too much of it, but recognize it.

Recognize that it's there. When Abraham saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, If I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by.

Let me get a little water for your feet and wash your feet. And you rest under the tree and let me get you something to eat. So you can be refreshed and then go on your way now that you have come to your servant.

I'm so flattered that you came. You notice, Genesis is his coming to us, not our going to him. The only altars that are built in Genesis are after God has appeared.

The initiative is always with him. He is the one seeking us first. Now, very well, they answered.

Do as you say. So Abraham hurried into the tent to say, Oh, quick, get three seals of fine flour and eat it and bake some bread. He ran to the herd and selected a choice tender calf and gave it to a servant who hurried to prepare it.

He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. Where is your wife, Sarah? they asked him.

There in the tent. Then the Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son. Now, Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent which was behind her.

Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure? And the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Well, I really have a child now that I am old. Is anything too hard for Yahweh? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.

Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, I did not laugh. But he said, Yes, you did laugh. Now, it's interesting that a key part of that is the story of a meal in which God eats with his friend.

Did I ring any bells for you? Was it the same God who broke five loaves and two steaks and ate with 5,000 people and seven who ate with 4,000? Is this the same one who on the last night of his life sat down with his closest friend and ate with him? Is this the one who in Revelation 3.20 says, You know, I missed this for years. Had it memorized but never thought of it. Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If any man will hear my voice and will open the door, I will come in to him and will. Now, my translation said sup, and I was not sure what sup was, but one day I learned it meant eat. Isn't that an astounding

thing? The eternal God says, If you'll open your heart to me, I'll come in to you.

And when I come in, what will we do? We will eat together. Now, stick with me a minute. The one you eat with is a good shepherd.

Isn't he? And the good shepherd says, I'm different from other shepherds. Do you know why shepherds keep sheep? Shepherds keep sheep to eat and to wear or to sell so somebody else can eat and wear. But the good shepherd says, I don't keep sheep to eat and wear.

I keep sheep so they can eat and wear me. Is Christianity different from all the other religions of the world? All the other religions of the world are looking for an acceptable sacrifice to give to their God. The biblical God is looking for a chance to sacrifice himself to us and give himself to us.

There's nothing like it in any of the religious literature of the world. And so he said that night, This is my body which is broken for you, and this is my blood which is shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. He wants to be in us to where his life becomes our life.

Do you understand why we believe that a woman is supposed to be holy? Because the one who sells us is holy. That's what he is. So he's eating with his friend.

Now he says, I've come to tell you good news. A year from now, that promise is going to be fulfilled. And Sarah laughs.

Now, there's a fascinating play on laughter in the Abraham story. Because if you look at chapter 17, when God came to him in chapter 17 and told him, he said, As for Sarah, your wife, you're no longer to call her Sarah. Her name will be Sarah.

I will bless her, and I will surely give you a son by her. This comes after the Hagar event. Abe, you missed it.

I meant Sarah all along. You tried to do it your way. Now he says, You're no longer to call her by her old name.

She's got a new name. I will bless her. Father of nations, kings of peoples will come from her.

Abraham fell face down and laughed and said to himself, Now what was this laugh? I believe it was different from Sarah's laugh. I believe it was sort of a laugh of amazement. Now we know about Sarah's laugh.

The text tells us it was a laugh of unbelief. This is impossible. But you will notice that God says, I want you to name him Isaac.

And you know, many of you know, the word Isaac is just simply a Hebrew verb. And the Hebrew verb is he laughed. No, it's he laughs.

It's present tense. He laughed. Now you know, for years I thought that that meant God said, You didn't believe me.

When I told you you were going to have a son, you laughed in almost derision. Impossible. So when your son comes, name him after your sin.

So you'll never doubt me again. Your son will be a perpetual witness that you shouldn't doubt me when I speak. But you know, there's a problem with that.

I got an assignment for a doctoral dissertation on personal names in the ancient Near East. So I spent three and a half years working on names in a place called Ugarit. And you know what I found out about names in the Middle East, in that ancient world? They're all religious.

There's no atheists in that ancient world. You usually have to have about 150 years of Christianity to produce a good atheist. Because it takes about that long to get the fears out of us to wear a phallus and faith life without it.

So most of our atheism is the child of Christianity. Communism, you'll remember, was born. Karl Marx was a theology student.

But anyway, these names, all of them are religious. And the typical name has in it the name of the God. And in the typical name, it is God who is the actor, not the person.

Like Eliezer, God is my help. You can take Michael, magnificent Hebrew, Mikah, El, is who is like unto God, who is like unto El. Jonathan, Yahweh has given.

So when you come to a name like Abigail, we have a granddaughter, Abigail. The Adi is my father, and the Gael is joy. Now you know, for a long time I thought that meant she's her father's joy.

Oh no, my father is the joy. And it is not the earthly father that is referred to in Abigail. It is the heavenly father.

So do you know who got the most laughter out of the birth of Isaac? It wasn't Abraham or Sarah, the eternal God. Now why did he laugh? He said, I've got a way to redeem the world. Because who was Isaac? He was the first step towards salvation.

So you see, while Abraham is waiting, he's beginning to learn who this man is, that he's the redeemer. He doesn't want to be the judge. He's not the one who wants to remind her of her unbelief.

He wants to remind her of the joy that he has in giving her that child and in giving away for the world to be redeemed. Our God is a redeeming God. Now, what do you get in the rest of the story? Don't look at the text.

We don't have enough time. But privately look at the rest of the chapter. Let me tell you what it is.

They finish the meal. And as they finish the meal, God says, I have to be on my way. So Abraham says, well, I'll walk with you partway.

Good Eastern custom. And so they walk to the edge of the camp. And between the meal and the edge of the camp, God says to himself, now he's my friend.

Should I tell him about my problem? Yeah, if he's my friend, I have to tell him about my problem. That's what friends are. So he says, Abe, I've got a problem.

My understanding is that these cities down here, Sodom and Gomorrah, are incredibly wicked. Significant that one of the sins, the one most central, was homosexuality. But he says, these cities down here, I

understand, are very wicked.

And I've got to go down and check it out. And if they're as wicked as they tell me, I'll have to destroy them. Cancers have to be removed.

Now what went on in Abe's mind? First thing that went on in his mind, I've got a nephew down there. And a wife and two daughters. And two son-in-laws.

Now at that point, your translation says, and Abraham stood yet before the Lord. As much as to say, wait a minute, now Lord, what if there's some good people down there? Are you going to destroy the good people with the bad? He says, if there were 50 righteous people down there, would you destroy them with all the rest? And God says, Abe, if there are 50 down there, we will not destroy the city. Well, he said, if there are like 5? Well, he said, if there are 45.

If there are 40, if there are 30. And he got it down to 10. Now let me tell you one of the advantages of being an academic self.

There are occasionally few of them. I was reading this story in Hebrew, and the Hebrew text that we study with has footnotes. So I noticed when I got to that passage that said, and Abraham stood yet before the Lord, there was a footnote.

So I looked and I noticed T-I-Q-S-O-P, abbreviation for Tikkun Hasofarim. I thought, for heaven's sakes, that's interesting. Now, hear me on this.

The Hebrews had an incredibly high opinion of the sacredness of the biblical text. Do you know how sacred they felt the text was? A scribe couldn't touch the manuscript until he'd washed his hands. Then he could touch it.

And when he finished copying it, before he could touch anything else, he had to wash his hands again because they had holiness on them. Now, you didn't put holiness on unholy things. Now, they felt the text was so sacred, and you know, they didn't have coffee in those days.

And if you're copying a manuscript eight hours a day and the light isn't too good, any possibility of mistake? There's not a Hebrew manuscript in the world that doesn't have misspelled words in it. And sometimes there'll be lapses where he skipped a line and didn't know he skipped it. And sometimes there'll be repetitions where he wrote the same line twice, this kind of thing.

But now here's a scribe copying a manuscript for his synagogue. Do you know when he found a mistake, he had no right to correct it? He copied exactly what was there. And if he thought he knew that it was a mistake, he knew what it should be, in the margin he wrote the correction.

No scribe was worthy to correct the Word of God. Wouldn't it be interesting if we had that attitude towards Christians? But do you know there are about 18 places in the Old Testament where they did correct it? Those are called the tekunei hasofarim, the corrections of the scribe. And do you know what those corrections were? They were corrections that would make the kids laugh if it were read in synagogue publicly, like somebody going to the bathroom, you know.

So you get some euphemisms, this kind of stuff. But there are one or two places where the scribe said, that can't be right, and so they corrected the text. This is one of those.

Because do you know what the Hebrew tradition says was originally here? God says to Abe, I've got a promise. It's those cities down there. They tell me they're so evil I'm going to have to destroy them.

If they're as evil as they tell me, I have no option. And they get to the edge of the camp. And the best tradition is that the text says, and Yahweh stood yet before Abraham.

And the scribe said, can't be. No king ever stands in the presence of one of his subjects. It's the subject that stands before the king.

The king of heaven? He's not going to stand in front of a man. The man's going to stand and recognize who he is. So they change it to pay respect to the holiness and distance and majesty of God.

But you know, that's a perversion of the text. Because if you read the end of the story, the end of the chapter, you will find they didn't change that. Because what it says is, and when Yahweh had finished talking with Abraham, he went on his way.

Now do you know what I think the real picture is? God told Abraham what he was going to do. And the next step is to head for Sodom. And Abraham stands silent.

And God says, hey, aren't you going to say anything? Aren't you going to say anything? I'm getting ready to wipe out two cities. Aren't you going to say a word? And as he pauses, Abe says, now Lord, if there are fifty good people down there, because you know that's the way all intercession begins. No intercession ever begins with you.

It begins when he comes to us and says, hey, don't you care whether what's happening in the world? Aren't you going to say anything to me? Because you see, the God who stood in front of Abraham is the Redeemer. His purpose is to redeem, not to judge. So he says, Abe, aren't you going to say anything? Now let me ask you a question.

Is the eternal God above standing in front of one of his subjects? How far will God go to redeem you? He'll not only stand in front of you, he'll get on his knees in front of you. You remember the last supper? And Peter was like the scribe. He said, Lord, get off your knees.

We're supposed to be on our knees to you. And he said, Peter, you've never learned. I'm not only going to get on my knees for you.

How far will God go to redeem you? And all of that is implicit in these things. Now, there's a lot of questions we can ask. You can ask that I can't answer.

But one thing is very clear. We're beginning to get a picture of a different kind of God. You can read all the rest of the literature of the world, religious literature, and you will find that the gods want proper attention, proper respect.

But the God that's pictured here, the groundwork is being laid for, let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who being God himself in the form of God, thought it not a thing to be prized to be in that position, but emptied himself of all of that and gave himself so that we might be redeemed. Now, of course, the catch is, he's the one who looks at us and says, follow me. And what does he want me to follow him in? Climbing the ladder? No, making the descent.

And I'm convinced that that is the heart of the holiness experience. When we get to the place where we're ready to follow him in total self-sacrifice. And when we do, the astounding thing is, we find that we haven't lost anything.

We find then that we've gained everything that counts. Now, I don't know about you, but I pray he'll help me to see what's under my nose in these stories, because they're priceless treasures. But they're not just priceless treasures so that we can marvel at them.

Though he doesn't preach, they're part of that wager. We've got them. And God says, I've given them to you.

And they'll do one of two things to you if you know these stories. They'll either be the means of hardening of your heart, if you don't hear and obey, or else they will be the means of opening you into a new dimension of life and service. Now, what does that mean for you? That's the purpose of these four days.

For you and for me to find out what it means to follow this kind of God. We'll bow our heads together. You've listened to me so attentively, and I thank you for that.

What a difference it makes when an audience listens and gives themselves. But it's not important that you hear me, but it's incredibly important that you hear him. You have a half hour between now and the next session.

I wonder if you need to take a little silence, let him speak to you. And maybe somehow you should just sit where you are, let others go. Maybe somebody says, I know a place where I can go and be still, and maybe hear better even in here.

At Asbury, we've got a long tradition of the use of the altar. It's a very sacred thing for us. There are some of us that feel best when we're kneeling at it and feel closest.

I remember in the centennial celebration three years ago, we gave an invitation. A man came down the aisle, walked across the front, and I noticed he was looking as if he were looking for something he'd lost. And then he suddenly turned right angles and knelt at the altar, and I realized he was looking for the place where he had knelt before when he was a student here, and God had touched and transformed his life.

Maybe some of you would like to use the altar this morning and just kneel at it. But don't just let what we've seen in the text today, don't just let it be information. Let it be information that brings you to know him, to trust him, to walk with him, to believe him, to follow him.

Lord, you spoke to Abraham. Now speak to us, and we'll give you praise in Christ's name. Amen.

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