



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Genesis 18: 1-33

“The Intimacies of Divine Fellowship”

TRANSCRIPT

Will you turn with me to Genesis chapter 18 and will you listen as I read this 18th chapter. Genesis chapter 18, verse 1 through verse 33. You will remember that in chapter 17, the Lord appeared to Abraham, confirmed the covenant, and gave him the sign of the covenant, the rite of circumcision, and also announced that it would be Sarah who would be the mother of the Promised Seed. So now, still speaking about Abram or Abraham, we read in chapter 18, verse 1,

“Now the Lord appeared to him by the Oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by.’ Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.’ And they said, ‘So do, as you have said.’”

The word translated "since" in verse 5, may not be accurately translated by "since" and I do not want to get into the details of it, but it appears that he recognizes this, at least as a providential visit. Whether, however, he recognized the beings as being

supernatural beings, that of course, is something but it is really, probably impossible for us to be certain about. Verse 6,

"So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.' Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant. (Some of the commentators, in fact, some of the Jewish commentators, Rashi, for example, has said that the word *na'ar* which is used here for servant, that word also means "youth" in Hebrew is probably a reference to Ishmael and was one of the means by which Abraham trained him.) Gave it to the servant or to the youth and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf, which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. Then they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'Behold, in the tent.' He said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also?'

"And the Lord said to Abraham." (Now notice it is the Lord now, and not simply the man, but the Lord, so this is a theophany, an appearance of God) And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.' Sarah denied it, however, saying, 'I did not laugh,' for she was afraid. And He said, 'No, but you did laugh.' Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him.'"

Now, if you have a Bible with marginal notes, you will notice that the word translated "chosen" is really the word that normally is translated in most of its occurrences "know." So literally it is "For I have known him." But now this is a correct rendering because the force of this "know" is the knowledge of intimate choice. We will talk about that in a moment when we get to this in the exposition. But notice "For I have known him." Of course God knows everybody, but there is a special sense in which he "knows," when he chooses. So,

"For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, in order that Lord may bring upon Abraham what he has spoken about him. And the Lord said, 'The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which is come to Me, and if not, I will know.' (Now this is anthropocentric language; that is, language according to human doings. Because, of course, he did not have to go down to see what was happening there to know what was happening there, ut the desire of this is to show that when the Lord acts, he acts in justice and so he goes down to take a good look. And the impression you get is that he is very careful before he determines to do what he is going to do.) Thenn the men turned away from there and went towards Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord."

The Masorites, who are responsible for the vocalization of the Hebrew text, have noted that this point that they found the text reading, not "and Abraham was standing before the Lord," but "and the Lord was standing before Abraham." But that seem to be rather improper thing for them and so to correct that untidy-looking clause, the Lord standing before Abram, they transferred it, they transferred the subjects and objects and

so, we read, "While Abraham was still standing before the Lord," which seems more proper.

"And Abraham came near and said, 'Will Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will Thou indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of 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 and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee, shall not the judge of the all the earth deal justly?'

So the Lord said, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.' And Abraham answered and said, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes.' (That is an interesting expression because, you see, he is expressing the humanity of a person. We are dust in the beginning and we are ashes in the end and so we are not very much before the Lord.) 'Although I am but dust and ashes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will thou destroy the whole city because of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' And he spoke to him yet again and said, 'Suppose forty are found there?' And he said, 'I will not do it on account of the forty.' Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall I speak; suppose thirty are found there?' And he said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.' And he said, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?' (This sounds like haggling, doesn't it? [Laughter] But it really is not, as one of the commentators says, It is exploring, exploring God's attitude toward the situation. So,) 'Suppose thirty are found there?' and He said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.' And he said, 'Now behold I have ventured to speak to the Lord, suppose twenty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.' Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once.' (That was his mistake, I guess.) 'Suppose ten are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy on account of the ten.' (And I just wonder what might have happened if he had

said "Suppose two or one", for Lot was there and Lot, of course, was upon his heart, no doubt. But we read that the interview ended, and you will notice the Lord ended it too.) As soon as he had finished speaking to Abraham, the Lord departed and Abraham returned to his place."

May God bless this reading of his word.

Our subject for this morning in the exposition of the Book of Genesis is "Abraham Visited by his Friend or the Intimacies of Divine Fellowship." We have just had one marvelous theophany in the 17th chapter and now in the 18th chapter that is followed by another. But it is of a slightly different kind, for in chapter 17, the Lord appeared evidently in glorious form but here in human form.

What we are seeing is really a measure of the fulfillment of John, chapter 1 and verse 18 even in Old Testament times. In the prologue to the gospel, John wrote, you will remember, "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father -- he has declared Him." Now we are certain, of course, that the primary reference of that is to the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, but in the light of these appearances of the angel of Jehovah and the identification of the angel with the Lord Jesus, it is clear that there was a declaration of the eternal God in the Old Testament through these theophanies.

Micah may be referring to that when he writes his famous Christmas prophecy, "Thou Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah yet out of these shall he come forth to Me, who shall be ruler in Israel. Whose goings forth have been from of all, from everlasting." The root translated "out of this shall He come forth," is the same as "the root of goings forth, whose goings forth have been from of all, from everlasting" and it has been the opinion of a number of Bible students that Micah alludes to the fact that while there is one great coming forth, when our Lord was born in the manger in Bethlehem; nevertheless, there were anticipations of it in the Old Testament

times. It is an event, of course, of wide appeal and we are, therefore, not surprised that we find it in the word of God, for the visits of sovereigns to citizens' homes is of quite a bit of interest, even in 1979, when little sovereigns visit homes even in the United States of America. This one of course is one of the most surprising because the God of heaven is the guest of the Patriarch Abraham.

The Lord Jesus was delighted to visit homes incognito. He told, "Zaccheus, Zaccheus come down from the tree. I've got to lodge in your house today." And then of course he lodged with the disciples on the Emmaus road, after the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

So here is one of the events in which the eternal God sits at the table with human beings and in this case, Abraham and his family. I think as we look over Genesis, chapter 18, probably, the part of it that stands out most of all in our minds is the latter part that great intercessory prayer which Abraham prays on behalf of Sodom. This is surely one of the great biblical passages on prayer. We like to think of theology as the queen of the sciences, that's what it has been called down through the years. Well, if that is true, then prayer is the queen of the experiences. It is certainly is a royal experience.

John Calvin regarded prayer as the true proof of the fact that one was a genuine Christian. He has some words; concerning prayer as a proof of faith. He says the principal exercise which the children of God have is to pray, for in this way, they give a true proof of their faith. When a person has been converted, one of the first things that he does, in fact, the very first thing that he does, for when the work of regeneration takes place in his heart and then he turns to the Lord and receives the Lord Jesus as his own savior, that is an act of petition as a general rule. So the first act of the new life is to turn to the Lord in faith and in prayer.

I think one of the most interesting things in the Book of Acts to me is the way in which the apostle Paul was identified for Ananias by the angel. Ananias got the message that he was to contact Paul. He was not too happy over that because Paul was a noted

persecutor of the faithful, but he was to be identified by the fact that as the Book of Acts says, "Behold he prayeth." So that's the sign of a true Christian, one who prays. It is one of the evidences that there is genuine life; prayer.

Now, prayer, persistently, of course, is the force of this passage but prayer is one of those experiences of the Christian. It's like breathing which marked him out as being alive. A prayerful life is a powerful life, someone has said, and the prayer-less life is always a powerless life. Mary, Queen of Scots said, "I fear John Knox's prayers more than an army of 10,000 men." One of our modern liberal men has said, "Our generation, with pride shattered and body bruised, longs for sanctuary, for fruitfulness, for an abiding home." Prayer is the true mesa. Why jibe at prayer as an escape? The jibe foolishly assumes that we are self-sufficient. In a world where microbes are stronger than men, where sorrow waits, death stalks with violence and an aroused conscience as a cave of furies to pretend that we need no refuge, is only a pretense. So those who make fun of prayer are really the ones that are to be pitied."

Stonewall Jackson -- have you heard of Stonewall Jackson? [Laughter] Well General Jackson said this, "I have so-fixed the habit of prayer in my mind that I never raise a glass of water to my lips without asking God's blessing. Never seal a letter without putting a word of prayer under the seal. Never take a letter from the post without a brief sending of my thoughts heavenward. Never change my classes in the lecture room without a minute's petition for the cadets who go out and for those who come in. And of course, one of the great things about prayer is that God hears our petitions and answers them on both odd and even days." [Laughter]

Now, let's turn Genesis chapter 18 and I want you to notice the visit of this heavenly company. First, we will spend a little time on the first eight verses. We could treat this incident in several different ways. We could look at it simply as a historical incident because it has some importance for the history of the development of the divine

revelation. It holds a place in the history of the life of Abraham. It is a further step on the way to the accomplishment of the promised seed, the birth of Isaac.

Or we could treat it morally, that is the characteristic of modern theology and of popular preaching in our liberal Protestant churches. The tendency is to take Old Testament passages and treat them as simply passages that have moral application. Now, that is a valid way to treat the passages of holy Scripture because we do have the lessons of patience, the lessons of reverence, the lessons of humility, the lessons of truthfulness, the lessons of faith, and other lessons, even the lesson of what a wife should call her husband as we see in a moment or two.

So that is a valid approach, but of course it misses often the major point that we want to be sure to talk about in the study of the word of God, and that is the spiritual or theological significance of the passages, and then as we look at this passage in that way, we will see that it is a passage that points on to the Messiah by virtue of the theophany even intimating such doctrines as the incarnation, the atonement, the prophetic, priestly ministries of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, we will try to combine some of these things as we go through the passage.

It was siesta time. It was noontime and Abraham was resting under a tree near the opening of his tent. And no doubt he was thinking about those promises that have been given him and specifically perhaps about the promise that has now been elaborated to include Sarah as the mother of the seed, just in the last chapter that was given. And suddenly he looks up and there are three men standing before him. The text does not say he saw them coming down the road and watched them. It does not say a thing about how they arrived there. And that in itself is rather striking. Suddenly they were there. And we must also point out that while it says that they were there, and that there were three men there, we are not to think of this as a reference to the trinity. For we learn in chapter 19 and verse 1, and we'll take this up in our next study next week, the Lord willing, that two of these men were angels but they are in angelic form. Remember in the

New Testament there is exaltation given that we should exercise hospitality before some have entertained angels unawares, well this is the occasion of that New Testament comment. So the New Testament, use of the Old Testament gives us an idea of the meaning of this passage also.

So he looks up and he sees the three standing there, and in true Eastern fashion, he feels it absolutely necessary to give them the greatest of hospitality, and he does it in such a way that one wonders if there may not have been some feeling at least that these men were sort of special. For notice what we read in verse 2, "He looked and he saw them," two different Hebrew words there, the second one meaning more he saw and understood something about them, but he ran from the tent door to meet them. Verse 6, Abraham hurried into the tent and he told Sarah, "Quickly prepare three measures of fine flour." And then in verse 7, "Abraham ran to the herd." He is a man 100 years of age now and you see this old man running around with his garments flowing in the sun around noon, it's something special, and he hurried to prepare it. So there is a great deal of hurried activity suggested.

Now in spite of all this, however, we do not have any evidence that Abraham realized at this point that these men were more than human beings, so we will just attribute it to the Bedouin hospitality. One of the ancient men who has written about Bedouin hospitality described Arabs as dining at their tent doors in order to invite passersby. So the result is that Abraham prepares, he calls it "just a little piece of bread," but as you can see it is a very sumptuous repast that he provides for the three men, that is, Sarah provides for them and then they agree that they will partake of the piece of bread, that modest description.

Let's look now at the challenge to Sarah's faith that proceeds out of the incident in verse 9 through verse 15. Someone has said, "God never leaves us in his debt," that is, "He always gives us more." So then, he is always giving more and more, and of course, that is what happens here and the opening of the 9th chapter signals something that is

going to be new for Sarah, at least. Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" Now that's, that must have aroused Abraham's suspicions because, how did they know he had a wife? And how did they know her name?

Well, he doesn't say anything about the effect that question had upon him but it must have been at least a surprise to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" and he said, "Behold, in the tent." And then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year and behold Sarah, your wife, shall have a son," and Sarah was listening at the tent door which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age. Sarah was past childbearing. A great deal of stress is laid upon these. Abraham is 100, Sarah is 90. She is past the time of childbearing. She had already had her change of life, but even then, she had been barren during the age in which it might have been thought that she would be able to bear children. So this is emphasized in order to stress that Isaac is a child of promise, a supernatural child.

Well, we can all sympathize with Sarah. We read, "And Sarah laughed within herself." "After I become old, shall I have pleasure, my Lord, being old also?" Now there is something I think rather interesting about this because, I have no doubt in my mind, that when Abraham, in the preceding chapter in that experience of that theophany, heard that Sarah was to be the mother of the seed, the long promised seed, the first thing that he must have said when he came back to the tent was, "Sarah, you're to be the mother of the seed, not Hagar." And evidently the time lapsed between the first theophany and this theophany has not been enough for this great man of faith to convince his wife of the truth of that promise. She's still doubtful.

Now any man who has not been able to convince his wife of something can surely empathize with Abraham. In fact, it may well be that he was sitting out at siesta time thinking of how he could possibly bring Sarah to the place of faith. Now, when I used to preach the word of God in the presence of my wife, I frequently got a similar kind of response. And, in fact, occasionally she would tell others that I think she liked to

do that. She liked to say that, "Well, he may be convinced of it, but he has not convinced me yet." She always said that with a rather superior kind of attitude too, I thought.

[Laughter] So, I empathize with Abraham. He has tried to bring home this message of Sarah as the mother of the seed, but Sarah has not been responsive.

Now, she laughs. I think that's mingled doubt and delight. In fact, she refers to the relationship in a purely sensual way. We read here, "Shall I have pleasure?" Incidentally, that is an acknowledgement of the fact that the life of sex between two people is properly a pleasurable thing. The Old Testament is not puritanical as the modern age thinks wrongly, incidentally, of the Puritans. But she said, "Shall I have pleasure?"

Now, you can see that while she is correct, so far as that is concerned, nevertheless, the depth of her penetration at this point is very shallow and superficial. She does not; it appears to me, has any great interest in the covenant. It is purely the sensual side of the thing that impresses her. And so she says, "Shall I have pleasure, my lord, being old also?" It is not a rejoicing in the fact that she is to be the mother of the promised covenantal seed. So, Sarah is a person who evidently has, at this point, a rather shallow understanding of spiritual things.

But yet, men noticed this, noticed what she calls Abraham. "Shall I have pleasure, my Lord, being old, also?" Now, wives, that's what you ought to call your husband, "my Lord." Now, I know what you are going to think, you say, "Well, that is what Sarah did." But what I do is something else and furthermore, we are living in New Testament times and in New Testament times, we are living in the age of equality, the idea of calling my husband 'lord;' well, that is absurd, it is absurd.

I wonder if you would have been happy around the apostles because the Apostle Peter read this passage and I am going to read it for you. No need to look it up but it is in the 3rd chapter, I Peter in which we read, the 5th verse, "For in this way in former times, the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being

submissive to their own husbands." Thus, Sarah obeyed Abraham calling him lord. And you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. I must confess I was never able to obtain my wife's address of me as 'lord.' But it is an ideal for which we look, men. [Laughter, Johnson laughs]

It is, however, a true illustration of the proper relationship that exists between a man and wife. Submission on the one hand, reverential submission, and on the other hand, the kind of love that Christ had for the Church. So, "my Lord being old" and the Lord replies, he said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?" Now, Sarah laughed within herself, the text says. He didn't hear any audible laughing. And so, when we read, "Why did Sarah laugh" saying, shall I indeed bear a child when I am so old?" He not only heard the laugh, that inward laugh in Sarah's heart, but he even knew the tenor and the purpose of that laugh. In other words, it was not only an audible laugh to the Lord, but he also knew the intelligence that was lying back of it, the things that she was thinking. Now that must have meant something to Sarah and I wonder if it challenged her at this point, to have a faith that was much deeper than the superficial faith that she possessed at the moment. One thing we can say, that this superficiality of Sarah elicited from the Lord, one of the great sayings of the word of God for we read on the 14th verse, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?"

Now, let me stop and just point out one thing that I think is rather interesting. The word translated "difficult" is the translation of a Hebrew root, which means "wonderful", wonderful. It is the same root that is used for the name of the Messiah in Isaiah chapter 9 and verse 6. "His name shall be called Wonderful." So what he said was "Is anything too Wonderful?" That is, "Is there anything that provokes too much wonder for the Lord?" All of his actions are wonder provoking and there is nothing that is too wonder provoking for him. He can do anything. So this is really one of the great sayings of the word of God and does not have any answer at all in the Bible, except possibly the answer that Jeremiah gave when he, reasoning about this in the Book of Jeremiah,

answered by saying or made a positive statement, "There is nothing too difficult for the Lord." So the idea that God is able to produce a seed out of a woman who is past the age of childbearing and an old man, 100 years, that is not beyond him. The wonders that he performs encompass something so contrary to nature is that for he controls nature.

Now, we read that Sarah, she must have pulled the flap back at this point, and she denied that she had laughed. She denied that that was in her mind, and we read that she said, "I did not laugh." For she was afraid and He said, "No, but you did laugh." Now, I think that's rather interesting too because the first impulse of guilt with us is often deception. That's the very first thing that we try to do – deceive those with whom we are dealing. In the Garden of Eden, when God came down into the garden in the cool of the day and asked, "Where art thou, Adam?" And then a little conversation ensued and the Lord asked, "Why they had done what they had done?" He quickly turned and laid the blame at the feet of the woman. And the woman laid the blame at the feet or at the body of the serpent. So the tendency of all of us when we are caught in our sin is to try to deceive. That's characteristic of human nature. So she said, "I did not," but He said, "You did."

Well, there follows then the passage in which we have the intercession of Abraham for Sodom. The Lord said that he would not destroy the land because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full. He would not yet give it to Israel, but it is clear that the cities of the fair Pentapolis or the five cities around the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, their iniquity was full. Sodom and Gomorrah had seen the power of the Lord in Abraham's victory over those kings and so they had little excuse for not believing in Jehovah.

And so we go on to read now the circumstances of this great intercessory prayer, "Well, the men rose up from there and looked down towards Sodom and Abraham was walking with them to send them off." And the Lord then spoke and he said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do." Abraham had been promoted to a very

distinguished position and in the light of this distinguished position of relationship to the Lord, it was proper in the mind of God for the purposes of God to be revealed to him. The Psalmist, remember, said, "The secret of the Lord is with him that fear Him and He will show them his covenant." Those who are the friends of our Lord Jesus Christ, or those who do his will, the believers who do his will, but it is to the friends of our Lord that He reveals himself. Now, that is a very important and of course, a very privileged place, to be a friend of our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore the recipient of the revelation or illumination that comes from one who is a friend of God.

So Abraham is a friend of God. And God said, "Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am to do?" Since Abraham is going to become a great nation, all the nations are going to be blessed in him. "For I have chosen him. For I have known him." I'd like to stop for just a moment and say a word about that because you may have a version which says, "For I have known him." but the New American Standard Bible is undoubtedly correct in rendering this, "For I have chosen him." If it had been rendered, "For I have known him," it still would mean the same thing because it is clear that the knowledge of which He is speaking is not the knowledge simply of the existence of someone for He knows the existence of all. It is a special sense in which this knowledge is in the heart and mind of God. "For I have known him."

Now in the Old Testament, this word *Yahweh* is a word that more than once means the knowledge of intimate relationship based upon a choice. Let me give you a text. Amos chapter 3, verse 2. The Lord speaking to the children of Israel, "You only have I known, of all the nations on the earth." Now God knows all nations but he says, "You only have I known." So it is in a special sense that he speaks and of course, the context makes it plain that he is speaking of his choice of Israel. It is only Israel whom he has chosen of all the nations of the earth. In other words, it is a word that refers to his distinguishing grace in his election. He has chosen them alone.

Now when we say in the Bible that we believe in the doctrine of election, we do not really tell anybody much at all. We only tell them that we read the Bible and so we must ask a second question. If you believe in election, what kind of election do you believe in? What do you mean by your election? Because there are many ways in which we may understand election but two primary ones. There are those who, seeking to escape the idea that God sovereignly elects, have said that God looks down through the years and out of His foreknowledge determines to choose those who will believe in Him. In other words, He sees down through the ages of time those who will believe, such as I, and selects them and they say, "Yes, I believe in the doctrine of election." And their election is the conditional doctrine of election according to foreseen faith.

That's very popular. That's the general idea of election in evangelical churches and most of the evangelical churches in this area of Dallas that exists. People say, "Yes, we believe in the doctrine of election but if you ask them, what do you mean?, out will come conditional election. The Bible teaches, however, election as unconditional. That is, an election based upon the sovereign mercy of God, His sovereign good pleasure. He elects some, passes by others because He elects according to His good pleasure. That is unconditional election. Now that is what the Bible teaches. It is clear the other doctrine is a very bad doctrine because it is a doctrine based on an inferior view of God.

Let me show you how. It in effect says that God does not know something until He looks down through the years to determine it. In other words, he looked down through the years and he saw that Lewis Johnson would believe and having come to the knowledge of that, he said, "Goodie. I will choose him. I will love him." Well now, we have then a God who has gained in knowledge and if he has gained in knowledge, then it is clear he was not omniscient. And if he was not omniscient, then he is not the God of Scripture. He is a more limited kind of God. Thus, the idea that you have concerning election affects your idea of God. People think this is only a theological point. It is not only a theological point. It is something that affects your relationship to the Lord because

it affects the way in which you look at God. You will have an entirely different view of God if you believe in sovereign electing grace from the view that you have of God when you think of him as a God who does His work conditionally. So it is important. He says, "For I have chosen him."

In the New Testament, when we read, "Whom he foreknew, he predestinated." How then are we to understand foreknowledge there? Notice it does not say, he foreknew what we would do, but he foreknew us. Well, it is clear then that that foreknowledge is the foreknowledge of intimate choice. It means to enter into the relationship so intimate that what emerges is an election based upon his good pleasure. To know someone in the physical sense in scripture is to enter into the closest of physical relationships. Adam knew Eve, his wife, the intimacy of personal relationship. So, in the Bible when we read a foreknowledge we do not mean that God looked down through the years and saw who would believe and then acted accordingly, but He foreknew an individual. That is, he entered into a relationship of election, selecting them because of his sovereign good pleasure. And so we are elect as a result of that and we should be grateful that the love of God has been set upon us in that way, I have chosen him. So, friendship, the friendship between Abraham and the Lord is the product of sovereign electing grace.

Now, I want you to notice another thing, it says, "I have chosen him in order that he may command his children and his household after him." You thought, perhaps, not thinking, you thought that God elected people simply to stir up the minds of his enemies and make them mad at him. You thought that perhaps he elected us in this way in order that we might simply sit down and do nothing about it. Oh, no. He elected Abraham. He chose him in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord. This is a very revealing word on parental responsibility and it suggests to us an important point about the purpose of God's divine electing choice or

divine electing grace. So, he was chosen in order to train up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

This past week, I received a very concerned call from someone in the congregation at Believers Chapel, and I was very grateful for it. And in this call, I was told that the elders did not understand the condition of many of the young people in Believers Chapel, which of course I would grant, that's entirely possible. It is not something that we like. And what I'm going to say is not in any way to be understood as an attempt to avoid some responsibility but I do want to say this, that if, as I was told, there is a great deal of alcoholism, drug addiction, or trafficking drugs, some sexual immorality among young people in some ways attached to Believers Chapel, and of course, if the elders know about specific cases, they will do their best to deal scripturally with those things, and we do acknowledge that we have made many errors and mistakes and no doubt have sinned greatly in our own responsibilities to the congregation, but I want to suggest to you, that the ultimate responsibility rests with the father of the children.

Now, you can see that he says, "I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord." The reason that we do have these problems in our congregation is because our fathers, we as fathers, have not assumed our responsibility. It is not our wife's responsibility to train up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord primarily. Of course, we want godly women to train up children, but it is the father's responsibility. It is his responsibility to be the Bible teacher of his children. As Mr. Prier often says, great statement, it is almost inspired; [laughter] he said, "The best Bible teacher than anyone will ever have is his own father." How true that is! And the responsibility lies right there and so I want to exhort you, men, who may have neglected your responsibilities. There is hope as you turn to the Lord and begin to assume responsibility and begin to study the word of God and assume the

headship of the house. Your wife may even call you 'lord' one of these days if you do your part.

So Abraham is chosen with a view to a very practical kind of relationship. He is to train up Isaac and let me assure you that on a human level, had he not done his job, the work of God would have suffered. Isaac comes along and it's Abraham who trains Isaac into becoming the meditative kind of man that he did and it's Isaac who trained Jacob and so on down the way until finally, the promised seed did come.

The content of the prayer, I can only allude to. It's a very interesting thing. I'm sure that you know about all that I would want to say about it. It is the most remarkable example of intercessory prayer in the Bible, some have said, prompted no doubt by an anxiety for Lot and also a concern for the name of the Lord because he knew that some, if God destroyed these cities would say, "The God of Abraham is a very harsh God. He is not a just God because he punishes by this extraordinary kind of judgment and it doesn't seem to make any difference whether there are righteous people there or not. He just punishes," so he has a sense of regard for the honor of the name of God.

The appeal is not the covenant grace, as you can see, but the judicial equity. So he doesn't haggle with God. He is exploring the nature of God and trying to put together the mercy of God and the justice of God. He prays six times. It is interesting; it's six, that's the number of man. He ceased asking before God stopped giving. I cannot help but contrast this with Elijah's prayer in 1 Kings, chapter 18, after the great victory on Mount Carmel.

He had already announced that it was going to rain soon. He went up on the mountain. He told Ahab to eat and get ready because there was a big shower coming. He got down on his knees. Elijah put his head between his knees and he told his servant, "Go out and take a look." He was on the top of the mountain. The servant went out, came back and he said he didn't see a thing. Elijah said, "Go again." He went and looked the second time, he came back. "There's nothing there." He said, "Go again." And he

came back and he said, "Go again." And he came back again and he said, "Go again" for until seven times, the text of Scriptures says, seven. That's the number of perfection. That's the number that signifies a persistent, a prayer of importunity that received its answer. And finally, the servant came back and said, "There's a little cloud out there about the size of a man's hand." Elijah said, "Get ready and let's go. It is going to be a downpour." And that, of course, is what happened. Now, we do not read that Abraham prayed that seventh time. I wonder what would have happened if he had prayed the seventh time, of course. But he did not. We leave it at this. His prayers were answered to some extent because Lot and some of his family were saved.

P.T. Forsythe was one of the great theologians of the earlier part of the 20th Century. He once said, "It is the will of God that we should bend his will to ours through prayer." That, of course, is not true. We do not bend God's will to our will through prayer. As a matter of fact, speaking from the divine standpoint, prayer does not change things. Prayer only changes things from the human standpoint. God is not changed by our persuasiveness in prayer. We do not move him to change his mind.

And so when we use the expression, "Prayer changes things", that's a very, very misleading expression. It is best that we not use it at all, in my opinion. Because, you see, answers are not wrenched from a reluctant God by importunity. As a matter of fact, promises and divine purposes antedate the praying by the sovereign will of God. Prayer, however, is the means by which we lay hold of blessings already promised to us and already determined to be ours. That's why we pray in confidence and with assurance that we're going to be blessed by God because it is by means of prayer that we receive the promises that have been given to us. We don't change his mind. We simply receive what he has already promised and determine what shall be ours through the experience of prayer by which we enter into relationship to the Lord.

Well, our time is up. I must stop. It is remarkable, the influence that one man or a minority has on the Lord from the human standpoint and it's also remarkable how

much the ungodly owe to the presence of saints in the world. But this passage most of all is a great incentive to persistent prayer. Persistent prayer is proper when we have received a delay in answer or that is, when God has not answered our prayer either by a yes or a no. They are the seed of our discipline and they deepen the channel of our natures and enable us to grow in the relationship that we have to the Lord.

I'm afraid many of us don't know anything more about prayer than the evening prayer of that sleepy little girl who prayed, "Now, I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep and when he hollows let him go, inny minnie miny moe." [Laughter] Praying Hyde was one of the great prayer warriors, American missionary of the earlier part of the 20th Century. Wilbur Chapman, one of the best known of the evangelists, had a contact with him in Britain. He was on a meeting and someone said, "Praying Hyde is going to be praying." And he said there was a tremendous transformation in the meeting so far as he could tell and a number of people responded. And he said afterwards to Mr. Hyde that he would like to have Mr. Hyde pray for him. And so, shortly after the meeting, Mr. Hyde came by his room, walked in, locked the door, dropped down on his knees by the side of Mr. Chapman and he said for five minutes he didn't say a word. He said, "I could hear my own heart thumping and I could hear his heart beating and I felt hot tears running down my face. I knew I was with God," he said.

And then, finally, Mr. Hyde spoke and all he said was, "Oh, God." And then he said he was silent for five more minutes and then it seemed as if they both realized that they were in the presence of the Lord and he began to pray with petitions that were, petitions such as he had never heard before. Mr. Chapman said he rose from his knees realizing for the first time what real prayer was like. The best prayers often have more groans than words and I would think that we Christians have a tremendous need for that kind of prayer. May God give us the experience of persistent, importunate prayer for the glory of God.

If you are here this morning and you have never believed in Jesus Christ, you don't even have the right to come and receive from him until you have come through the Lord Jesus to receive the forgiveness of sins. May God so bring you to the conviction of your sin and the conviction that Christ has died for sin that you receive as a free gift, the forgiveness of sins, and offer the first prayer, the movement of the soul out to God in thanksgiving from regeneration for the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. May today, may this morning be the time that you take that step by the grace of God. So if you're here this morning, come to Christ. Put your trust in Him. Turn from your sin and iniquity. Come to repentance and faith and know the forgiveness of sins and the wonderful privilege of approaching the Lord God through Jesus Christ. Let us stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these wonderful stories which have such important, spiritual truth for us. We thank Thee that we are able to study the words that the apostles studied and learned some of the lessons that the apostles were taught. Enable us, O God, to respond truly. The sins that have plagued us, O God, bring us to confession and forgiveness and purification and then enable us by Thy grace to please Thee in our lives.

For those here who are lost, O God, work mightily in them to bring them to him who to know is life eternal. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.