

"A Center That Holds"

Last month, November 2018 was the 100th anniversary of the end of WWI, and there were a lot of articles about how that war created huge psychological upheaval. The Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote a poem to express the feeling that humankind had lost its connection with everything once thought true, noble and worthwhile. The poem is titled *The Second Coming*. It pictures a nightmare scene that begins with a falcon flying above its falconer, but its flight path becomes a frantically widening spiral because it cannot hear the falconer. Then the poem talks about innocence lost, anarchy loosed upon the world, the best people losing all conviction and the worst filled with passionate intensity. One of the lines from the poem sums it up like this. *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.*

I've heard people talk almost just like this as recently as this week, not only about the world out there but about their personal lives. *"I feel like things are falling apart..."* When painful and confusing times come, personally or culturally, the crucial issue is do you have a center that holds so that, no matter what, things do not fall apart. *What would life look like? How might difficulties be faced and life be lived, if no matter what unfolds you have at the core, something so substantial that it holds you together so that you can never truly fall apart?*

The Bible speaks to this issue of a center for our lives, sometimes in powerful scriptures but sometimes in provocative stories. That's what happens here in **Genesis 18**. At this point, Abram and Sarai's names have been changed (Genesis 17) from Abram which means "great father" to Abraham which means "father of a multitude" and from Sarai, which means "my princess" to Sarah, which means "mother of nations". God had changed their names to fit the promise he had made them. Then something strange happened. Three mysterious beings show up in Abraham's camp. Two are angels. The third is the LORD himself appearing to Abraham in human form. In the story and dialogue that follows two truths are revealed. Each one emerges from a question. Curtis spoke about the first question last week, **verse 14**, *Is anything too hard for the LORD?* The answer to that question is "no." The

second question is in our reading today, in **verse 25**, “*Will not the judge of all the earth do right?*” The answer to this is, “yes”! *The importance of this truth is central to a life of faith...*

I. GOD IS RIGHTEOUS AND WHAT HE DOES IS RIGHT.

I’m using the *New International Version* here because it uses the word *right*. The *English Standard Version* uses the word, “just.” It says, “*Will not the judge of all the world do what is just?*” I prefer the word *right* here because to do what is “just” to modern people can sound formal. What is being pictured is the idea of a judge or a ruler who not only does what justice requires but who uses wisdom and good judgment to do the right thing in every case in light of all the factors and issues. The judge weighs the issues, considers mercy, and does what is wise and good. And what he does is right.

A. God does what is right because that’s who he is.

Deuteronomy 32:4 says of God: *He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.* What do you believe about God?

B. God does what is right and so the way he rules is right.

Psalms 89:14 says: *Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.*

C. Because God does what is right his words are right.

Psalms 19:8-9 says: *The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. 9 The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.*

Notice the righteousness of God is expressed in the perfection of His word. It is not just a cold owners manual. It is a radiant source of light in life that gives joy and light. God in his nature, his rule, and his revelation can give you a center that will hold no matter what happens historically or personally. To: “*the judge of all the earth will do what is right,*” means we need to adjust to him and not the other way around. But that is not a bad thing. It is a good thing.

Illustration: There is a story – I believe it is mythical although it is often told as if true – about a battleship that had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. At some point during the night, a sailor on lookout reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow." The captain turned to the signalman, "Signal that ship: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.'" The signal came back, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees." The captain said, "Send: 'I'm a US Navy captain, change course twenty degrees.'" The signal reply back, "I'm a seaman second-class, You had better change course twenty degrees." The captain was furious. He said: "Send: 'This is a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'" The reply came back, "This is a lighthouse." The ship changed course.¹

Maybe that story is old, but I like it still because I know I am and I believe that we are all often like that battleship captain. There is a verse in the Bible that says we are to *take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.*² There is another verse that says, *Let God be true and every man a liar.*³ What those Scriptures are telling us is that God doesn't adjust his positions to conform to us as if we are the center. We adjust to him. The life of faith is one of believing that the judge of all the earth is and says and does what is right and therefore we are continually repenting and believing and adjusting and conforming our passions and confusions to him.

Illustration: Have you heard about the missionary pastor from North Carolina recently released from prison in Turkey? Andrew Brunson, a graduate of Wheaton College and Erskine Theological Seminary was a pastor for in Turkey for twenty years. Then he was arrested on false charges. After days in solitary confinement, he was imprisoned for two years. A good part of that time he was locked up with twenty Islamic Terrorists in a room built for eight. It was not easy. He broke down at one point but what enabled him to recover and sustained him to the end was this: He said. "*I declared every day: 'God loves me. He's true. He's faithful. He has not abandoned me.'*" He had, in God, a center that held. He took his thoughts captive and made them obedient to this central truth about God. Isn't that something we all need? Not a superficial denial of the struggles of life but central core commitment to faith that the God of all the earth is, says and does right.

II. THIS TRUTH THAT GOD DOES WHAT IS RIGHT IS THE CENTER THAT HOLDS US IN A LIFE OF FAITH.

God had told Abraham that he was going to Sodom because an outcry had arisen about the wickedness of Sodom. The word *outcry* was a common expression for oppression and injustice. It was in anticipation of the coming judgment of Sodom that Abraham approached God. In his old commentary on Genesis, Matthew Henry comments on this and says: *“Though sin is to be hated, sinners are to be pitied and prayed for.”* That’s what Abraham does. He asks if God would spare the city if there were just fifty righteous people in it. The question in **verse 25** comes up as a dramatic statement of faith in the goodness of God. *Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”*

After God says; “Yes, I will spare the place for the sake of **fifty** righteous people.” **Verse 27** says; *Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?” “If I find **forty-five** there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”* It goes on like this: What about **forty? thirty? twenty? ten?** God says that if there are ten righteous people in the city, he will not destroy it. And they stop there and the LORD leaves. The point has been made

You could look at this and think that Abraham is sort of haggling with God for people like some shopper at the farmer's market haggling for melons. It is unlikely that is what is happening. What Abraham is saying to God is this: *“LORD, of course, you will do right. You are God, and you always do right but what I want to ask is this, could you love righteousness so much that you would spare the unrighteous many for the sake of a righteous few?”* Abraham is exploring the meaning of God's love for righteousness. He is not saying, God, please stop being righteousness so that you can spare the guilty. What Abraham is asking is if perhaps God could love righteousness *so much* that he would be willing to spare the unrighteous many for the sake of the righteous few. What is revealed as they go down from fifty to just ten people is this: God's desire to save is so much greater than His will to punish that he will withhold judgment from a whole community for the sake of a righteous few. I believe it stops at ten because the point has been made. Now faith must trust. God is

righteous, and he loves mercy and he will do what is truly right every time and always.

That truth – that is the center that can hold us – hold you together. Three things follow...

1. You can come honestly to God with your prayers. Twice in the passage Abraham says, *LORD, I know I'm being bold, I'm nothing but dust and ashes but let me ask you*, what if it is less than fifty, what if it is only thirty? God never rebukes this kind of humble but honest emotion. Sometimes people stuff their troubling questions and try to ignore them. The problem is spiritual healing and grace works most powerfully when we bring the issues of our hearts into the light of His truth and face them honestly in His presence. **Psalm 62:8** says, *O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge*. It is a false spirituality to act as if it is better to bottle up what God tells you to pour out to Him. So come honestly to God with your prayers trusting that he will do what is right.

2. You can trust God tenaciously even in life's mysteries.

Illustration: I love the story about the prayers of Monica the mother of St. Augustine. He wanted to go to Rome. She prayed he wouldn't. He wasn't a Christian and she was afraid the big city would lead him farther from faith in God. But, in spite of her prayers, at 16 he ran away to Rome. To her surprise and his it was in Rome that he came under the influence of some very persuasive Christians who lead him to faith in Jesus. Later Augustine wrote these words addressed to God. *"And what did she beg of you, my God, with all those tears, if not that you would prevent me from sailing? But you did not do as she asked you. Instead, in the depth of your wisdom, you granted the wish that was closest to her heart... You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer placed any hope in this world, but stood firmly upon the rule of faith. And you turned her sadness into rejoicing, into joy far fuller than her dearest wish."* ⁴ Think of what it must have been like for Monica to care so deeply and to pray so fervently, to pray, not for a Mercedes Benz but for her son's spiritual life, only to feel as if God didn't care or hear at all. How often are we faced with mysteries that test our faith?

When what we see, feel and understand only takes us so far and we don't have the answers we wish we had we are not without a remedy for our hearts. This is where faith begins – and finds its center: *"Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"* In John Walden's commentary on Genesis he writes: *"Of course he will. We do not have to worry*

*whether God is less fair, less just, less merciful, less loving, or less gracious than we would be. The 'If I were God . . .' option will always fall far short of the option of letting him be God. This is our faith."*⁵

Sometimes faith has to let that truth be the center that holds us even if our mysteries are not resolved on this side of eternity.

Illustration: Marshall Shelley, suffered the loss of two of his children. He wrote these words:

Even as a child, I loved to read, and I quickly learned that I would most likely be confused during the opening chapters of a novel.

New characters were introduced. Disparate, seemingly random events took place. Subplots were complicated and didn't seem to make any sense in relation to the main plot. But I learned to keep reading. Why? Because you know that the author if he or she is good, will weave them all together by the end of the book.

Eventually, each element will be meaningful. At times, such faith has to be a conscious choice. I choose to trust that before the book closes, the author will make things clear.

3. You can trust in the righteousness of Jesus for your salvation.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, which we commemorate in Communion, tells us that our sin or moral unrighteousness is so great that we can only be saved through the righteousness of Jesus. What we see in this story in seed form comes to its most beautiful expression in Jesus. Abraham approached God and said, *"Don't be angry, Lord, but would you save the wicked for the sake of the righteous?"* What Jesus does is so much greater. He says, "Father let your righteous anger fall on me. I will be the righteous one for the unrighteous. I will take the judicial anger on myself and absorb and satisfy the wrath of righteous judgment in my death on the cross." Jesus wasn't begging an unwilling God. He was God's mysterious and merciful plan. *God so loved the world that he gave his only son the whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* Jesus Christ can be our Savior because he *is* righteous for us. When we turn to him as Lord and trust in Him for our salvation, God saves us from the judgment we deserve for the sake of Christ and his righteousness. **2 Corinthians 5:21** says: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

CONCLUSION

The Judge of all the earth will do what is right. Put that truth at the center of your life. Hold onto it, and it will hold you together.

Amen.

¹ Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Word Publishing, 1991, p. 153.

² 2 Corinthians 10:5, *we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*

³ Romans 3:4, *Let God be true, and every human being a liar...*

⁴ John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Crossway Books, 2000); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky

⁵ Walton, John H.. Genesis (The NIV Application Commentary) (Sections from pp. 475-489). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.