

OUR FRIEND IN HIGH PLACES, Part II (Genesis 18:1-17; John 15:12-15)

In 1995, my daughter celebrated her 3rd birthday, and my son turned 1. That year, the world's first computer animated feature film was released. The title of that film was *Toy Story*, and it was the highest grossing film of that year.

When Hollywood comes across something that sells, you can be sure they will go back to the well from which it was drawn. Sure enough, in 1999, *Toy Story 2* was released. My kids enjoyed both those movies.

Unexpectedly, *Toy Story 3* was released 15-years after the first movie. In those movies there is a boy named Andy who has a roomful of toys. When he is out of his room and no one is around, the toys come to life. In the third movie, Andy is now 18; so, he really doesn't play with his toys anymore, and he is going off to college. He must decide what to do with all his toys.

In the end, just before driving off to college, Andy stops by the house where an adorable neighborhood girl lives. He knows she will take care of his old toys and play with them; so, he carries a box of the beloved toys he grew up with to the little girl who is playing in her backyard while her mother is doing some gardening. One-by-one, Andy takes each toy out of the box and introduces each one to the girl. In a touching scene, we see Andy and the girl playing with the toys much as he had done when he was a little boy.

Andy walks to his car, he looks back and waves. There is the little girl, holding his toys in her arms. She holds the arm of Woody, a toy cowboy, Andy's oldest and most prized toy, and he sees Woody waving back at him.

That movie came out when my daughter was 18. I saw it days before she went off to college. I didn't know animated movies could make you cry, but that one sure did.

All the music for the *Toy Story* franchise, which now numbers four movies, was written by Randy Newman. His music was as important as any of the characters and helped make the franchise the success that it was. The theme song of the first movie was "You've Got a Friend in Me." It earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Song. Although Newman didn't win that year with that song, his theme song for *Toy Story 3* did win the Academy Award for Best Song. That song was entitled, "We Belong Together."

Although it was not intended, some of the lyrics of that song could apply to our relationship with God. In the words of the song, God could say to us:

Don't you turn your back on me
Don't you walk away
Don't you tell me I don't care, cause I do
Don't you tell me I'm not the one
Don't you tell me I ain't no fun
Just tell me you love me like I love you, you know you do

The chorus reads:

We belong together

We belong together
Yes, we do
You'll be mine forever
We belong together

We are told in Zephaniah 3:17, “[God] will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing.”

What does God sing? I don't know. Maybe He sings, “You'll be mine forever. We belong together.”

Last Sunday, we began a two-part message on our friendship with God. We are looking at the life of Abraham. Three times in Scripture, Abraham is called “the Friend of God.” Friendship with God is a two-way street. Last week, we examined what it means for us to be God's friend. We saw that **our friendship with God is to be practiced**. As His friend, we have several responsibilities. We are to **Welcome** Him. We are to **Believe** Him. We are to **Obey** Him.

Now, we need to look at God's friendship with us. The idea here is that **God's friendship with us is to be received**. We are going to look at several things that God does on our behalf that we are to accept from Him. These are also three in number.

Let us return to Genesis 18.

1. Let Us Receive God's Companionship.

Think for a moment with me about the experience that was Abraham's. He was born, grew up, and lived on the eastern side of the Fertile Crescent (southern Iraq, just north of the Persian Gulf). That was his home for three-quarters of a century. It was where his family lived, and presumably, Abraham had friends there. One day, God called Abraham (his name was Abram at the time) to leave this land and even to leave his extended family. He was to go to a land that God would show him.

Abraham and Sarah (her name was Sarai at the time) traveled with their belongings and with their servants for a long time. For whatever reason, Abraham's nephew traveled with them. To keep the peace, Lot and Abraham separated. There Abraham was in a strange land, living among a strange people. He didn't know their language or their customs, and they didn't know His God.

It must have been rather lonely for Abraham and for Sarah, too. All that and all who were familiar to them had been stripped away.

Put yourself in their position; imagine if you can what it would be like to move away from what is familiar to what is unfamiliar. You don't know anybody. They don't know you. You don't speak their language, and they don't speak yours. You have no music to listen to, no TV to watch, no Internet to browse or movies to stream, and not even any books to read. Do you think you might be lonely?

Last week we commented on the hospitality that Abraham extended to his three guests. He saw them outside his tent. Verse 2 says “he ran from the tent door to meet

them.” He certainly did show them hospitality, but maybe there was some mixed motives. Maybe he was desperate to have somebody with whom to talk.

In his three-volume commentary on Genesis, James Montgomery Boice wrote, “How wonderfully God meets Abraham’s need! He sits with Abraham, eats with Abraham, walks with Abraham. He is his companion and close friend.”

We live in a world of more than 8 billion people. We have every kind of diversion imaginable. Yet, one of the great problems that many people face is loneliness.

You may have heard that Golden Oaks on the north end of Enid is being bought by Oklahoma Baptists. It will become one of the 12 Baptist Village Communities that are owned and operated by Oklahoma Southern Baptists. Bill Pierce is the President of Baptist Village Communities. I read an article in which he stated, “The number one problem affecting senior adults in America is loneliness.” Loneliness is not just an issue or a challenge; it is a problem. And it is not merely one of many problems; loneliness is the number one problem that senior adults in our country face. In terms of numbers, it is a greater problem than healthcare or dwindling financial resources or housing. When your mate dies, when your family is busy with their own lives, and when many of your contemporaries and close friends have already passed on, loneliness becomes a real issue.

Friends aren’t just a luxury; they are essential for good mental and emotional health. Having a friendship with God is essential for spiritual health, but in the absence of our friends, God offers a companionship that will nurture us emotionally. God can and will be there for us at times our friends cannot be. He knows our secret sorrows and our private pains. We can talk to Him about things that we might not be able to share with others regardless of how close they are.

In order to deepen a friendship, you need to spend time with that person. It is no different with God.

In every community I have lived, there was a place in town where men, usually older men, gathered in the morning, drank coffee, and solved the world’s problems.

I encourage you to meet with God daily. It may be in the morning with the help of a highly caffeinated beverage. It might be in the night with a de-caffeinated tea. Regardless, meet with God regularly. If you will do that, if you will meet with God on a consistent basis, you and He may not solve the world’s problems, but I am quite confident you will make progress on your personal problems, your family concerns, and your pressing issues whatever they may be.

God offers His companionship; we are to receive it. There is a second thing we are to receive.

2. Let Us Receive God’s Communication.

One of the three figures that appeared to Abraham was God Himself. We know that from v. 1. Look also at the beginning of vv. 10, 13, 17, 20, 22. God Himself spoke to Abraham.

Most often in the OT, when God spoke to a prophet, a priest, a king, or some other individual, He spoke through a vision or a dream or an angel. God often used prophets to

convey His word to the people. Today, God speaks to us by His Holy Spirit through Scripture, through circumstances, and individuals. Sometimes He speaks in our inner beings, and we just know the Spirit of God is communicating to us.

There were times, however, when God Himself showed up. This was true in the ministry of Moses. We read in Exodus 33:11, “Inside the Tent of Meeting, YHWH would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (NLT). As with Moses, so with Abraham. There was clear, unhindered, unmistakable communication between the two. There was no need for an intermediary, or a spokesperson, or an interpreter.

The closer your friendship with God becomes, the more frequent and the deeper that communication will become.

You know that there are some things you can tell your best friends that you can't tell just anybody. Your best friends have earned your trust. You know they have your back. You know they are not going to go out and blab all over town the things you have told them in confidence.

Likewise, there are some things God tells His friends that He doesn't tell just anybody. The deeper we grow in our relationship with God, it is as if our security clearance gets bumped up and we are shown things that not everybody sees and hears. You know this to be true. When a lost person reads Scripture, they don't get it. Its meaning escapes them. You read the word of God, and it is profitable, but as you grow in the Lord, more and more truth comes jumping off the pages of Scripture at you. You see things you never saw before, and you learn things you never before knew.

Also, there are times you sense a need to tell your friends something that you don't want them to hear from another source. You feel they deserve and have earned the right to hear it right from you instead of hearing it through the grapevine or a third person. For instance, if another church called me to be their pastor, you wouldn't want to learn that news by reading that in the Baptist Messenger or the Enid News and Eagle. That wouldn't be good, and that isn't the case, by the way.

Since Abraham was God's close friend, He decided to let Abraham in on what God had planned. Abraham had a nephew who lived in the wicked city of Sodom. God planned to destroy that city, and He decided to communicate His plan to Abraham.

We will look at that conversation next week, but today, I just want to emphasize that God speaks and communicates to His friends.

Listen to this story told by Erwin McManus, a pastor in Los Angeles:

My son, Aaron, was five or six when he began asking me, “What does God's voice sound like?” I didn't know how to answer.

A few years later, Aaron went off to his first junior high camp. In the middle of the week, I went up with another pastor at Mosaic to see our kids. Aaron, I learned, had started to assault another kid but had been held back by his friends. He was unrepentant, wanted to leave camp, pulled together his stuff, and shoved it into the car.

I asked him for a last talk with me before we drove away. We sat on two large rocks in the middle of the woods. “Aaron,” I asked, “is there any voice inside you

telling you what you should do?”

“Yes,” he nodded.

“What’s the voice telling you?”

“That I should stay and work it out.”

“Can you identify that voice?”

“Yes,” he said immediately, “It’s God.” It was the moment I’d waited for.

“Aaron,” I said, “do you realize what just happened? You heard God’s voice. He spoke to you from within your soul. Forget everything else that’s happened. God spoke to you, and you were able to recognize him.”

I will never forget Aaron’s dug-in response: “Well, I’m still not doing what God said.”

I explained to him that that was his choice, but this is what would happen. If he rejected the voice of God coming from deep within and chose to disobey his guidance, his heart would become hardened, and his ears would become dull.

If he continued on this path, there would be a day when he would never again hear the voice of God. There would come a day when he would deny that God even speaks or has ever spoken to him.

But if he treasures God’s voice however it comes to him—through the Scriptures, through his conscience—and responds to him with obedience, then his heart would be softened, and his ears would always be able to hear the whisper of God into his soul.

Aaron chose to stay, I’m grateful to say. If he had chosen differently, he would have begun the path toward nominal discipleship. Perhaps he never would have rejected the faith overtly. He might have even chosen to be a faithful attender at a church and been by everyone else’s estimation a good man, but he would no longer be a close Jesus-follower.

It is up to you to determine whether God speaks often and how deep He gets. My encouragement and counsel to you is, “Don’t be content to stay on the surface. Go deep with God.”

3. Let Us Receive God’s Compassion.

As God’s friends, He gives to us His companionship, His communication, but He also extends His compassion. God looks upon those who are His with a tender eye, and He does for them what they cannot do for themselves.

This was the case with both Abraham and Sarah. God has promised them a son. He was 99, and she was nearing 90. God repeated His promise to give them a son one more time. Eight times God made this promise. Maybe He felt He needed to repeat Himself again and again because the promise was so outlandish. This last time, the promise comes with a time-stamp—“this time next year.” When it is fulfilled, Abraham is 100 and Sarah 90. Look at Genesis 21:1-2, 5.

James Montgomery Boice wrote: “The Lord always speaks to us at the point of our

need and shows mercy to us where we are hurting . . . If you have a need, you can be sure that God will speak to that need and show compassion.”

Where are you hurting? Where do you need healing? In what ways do you need God to help you?

The gospels contain 35 specific miracles that Jesus performed. In every instance, Jesus was meeting human need. He caused blind eyes to see, paralyzed limbs to move, deaf ears to hear, mute tongues to speak, and dead people to rise. He gave food to the hungry, hope to the hurting, and He caused the doubting to believe.

Mark’s gospel tells us what Jesus saw and felt before He fed the multitude. We read in Mark 6:34, “When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

If Jesus felt that way about complete strangers, how does He feel about you when He sees you and your need?

Let’s bring this message to a close by seeing how the truths we just covered are illustrated in the conversation Jesus had with His disciples on the night He was arrested, just hours before He was crucified. Look with me at John 15:12-15. Jesus clearly refers to His disciples as His friends.

Jesus gave them what He gave Abraham but only to a greater degree. God visited Abraham from time to time. Jesus walked with His disciples for three-plus years, and He promised them, “I am with you to the end of the age.” Jesus gave them His companionship.

Jesus spoke with Abraham periodically. The disciples had far greater revelation from God. You and I have both the Old and New Testaments, and we have the witness of the Spirit.

God had compassion on childless Abraham and Sarah. Jesus laid down His life for His friends. On the back of our church van is a bumper sticker that reads simply, “God loves you. Jesus proved it.”

As we conclude this message, let’s return to the story of *Toy Story*. In the first movie, two of Andy’s most important toys are missing from Andy’s room—Woody, the Cowboy and Buzz Lightyear, a space astronaut. They must work together to get back to where they belong. Buzz Lightyear is crushed because he has finally learned that he is not a real space ranger; he’s just a toy. He hangs his head and says despairingly, “I’m just a stupid, little, insignificant toy.”

Woody seeks to encourage him, “You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there’s a kid who thinks you’re the greatest, and it’s not because you’re a space ranger; it’s because you’re his.”

Buzz lifts his foot. He sees writing on the bottom of his shoe. In black, permanent ink he sees the name of the little boy to whom he belongs. Seeing the name of his owner, Buzz breaks into a smile and finds the determination to fulfill his mission of getting back to the One to which he belongs.

God love us. We are not only His friend; in Christ, we are His child. We matter to Him. Friend, get back to where you belong. Return to the Father’s house.