

## Genesis 18:1-19

Now, in the following verses, Abraham offers these three visitors something to drink and something to eat. He gives *them* something to eat, and he gives *them* something to drink. Then, in Genesis 18:9, they ask, "Where is thy wife?" In verse 10, he said, "I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of thy life. And lo, Sarah, thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. They were very old in verse 11. In verse 12, she laughs. And then verse 13, who is one of the strangers? *The Lord himself*, whom Abraham has given food to eat and water to drink. And the Lord said to Abraham, Why did your wife laugh? And then she denied it, of course, but the Lord said, "You did laugh. Nonetheless, you shall have a son."

Now then, in verse 16, I'm moving very quickly. The men rose up and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him."

Alright, now turn over to Acts 12:1. *Now, about that time, Herod the king stretched forth his hand to vex certain people in the church.* Here is a king who has decided to vex the children of God in the church of God. And he killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. Then, in verse three, he took Peter as well. And he put him in prison, and he surrounded him at this Easter time, at the resurrection time, with soldiers to keep him. Verse 5, Peter went to sleep. What's happening in verse 5? That prayer was made, without sleeping, of the church unto God for him. Well, you know the story so beautifully. An angel of the Lord came and woke up Peter, and Peter didn't even know he was awake until he got outside. He thought he had been dreaming all of this.

Verse 12. And when he had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together, praying. And of course, Peter knocks on the door. A little girl named Rhoda comes out and opens the door. She comes back and says, "It's Peter." And what do they say to the little girl? Huh? You're mad. You're crazy. Little girl, just be still. You're crazy. Alright, was it, Peter? Praise the Lord. It was Peter.

Thirdly, brethren, in Acts 13:1. Now there were in the church that was in Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

Okay, three passages of Scripture. The first one is speaking of an individual experience. The second one is speaking of a church experience. And the third one is speaking of a small-group experience. I want to go through them because each one of them has a real message for the Lord's children. The first one is an individual experience in prayer. The second one is

an experience of the church in prayer. And the third one is the experience of a small group of brothers in the church in prayer. The first one is a single brother. The second one is the whole church. The third one is a group of brothers. I won't say this is exactly repeated. We will look at it. We will behold.

Whenever the Lord comes to a man and is with him, whatever fellowship that is, that is something of a man in contact with the Lord. Abraham saw three men coming and prepared something for them to eat and drink. The Lord himself can receive food and drink. *The Lord can be ministered unto*. Now, after they came there with Abraham and sat down, they began to have fellowship together, and something took place. After the Lord Himself had received from Abraham, the Lord gave Abraham something. What did he do? What did he give him? He gave him a promise. Brothers and sisters, the Lord gave him an answer to a prayer. Abraham and Sarah wanted a son, and God had also promised them that they would have a son. So, who gave Abraham the prayer?

The Lord gave the prayer. So the Lord gives the prayer. The prayer is prayed, and then the Lord answers the prayer. The prayer begins with the Lord, and the prayer ends with the Lord, and Abraham is simply the instrument of the prayer. Now that is the full experience of prayer. The Lord himself is within us supplicating, and we enter into His prayer. We pray the prayer He wants us to pray. We are that instrument. Then the Lord gives the answer.

Brother, when Abraham was very young...not young, but certainly not as old as he was then...God said, "I will give you a son." Then He let him live 30 years without a son. Then 40 years. Then 50. Yet Abraham kept on by faith, believing that even though he was old and his body could no longer produce the seed, nor could Sarah, God nevertheless heard his prayer. Now, there is no record that at this moment the prayer was offered by Abraham, but Abraham knew with whom he was speaking; it was the Lord. He called him Lord at the very beginning; he knows the greatest thing that is on his heart. God gave him a prayer that he had prayed throughout the ages. No, there's no record of it here, but nonetheless, we know he prayed it. It is at this moment that the prayer is answered, for right after this, Sarah conceived and bore the child.

Now, I'm only saying this, that God gives the prayer. We pray the prayer. The time comes when the Lord answers the prayer. When you come to the Lord, you may have a sense of what you need to pray. At that very moment, the Lord may answer the prayer. He may wait for a year. Now, when I say He may answer, you don't look into heaven, and suddenly the Lord has dropped a \$20 bill into your hand. It may simply be that some of the struggle within you about a matter has been dropped. The Lord gives the prayer. You pray the prayer, and the day comes, as you fellowship with Him, and you face Him, and you feed Him, and you give Him drink, and you minister to Him, He answers.

But, brothers, this is not the point I'm working toward. The point is, a man has come and fellowshiped with the Lord, and heard the Lord, and spoken to the Lord, and the Lord has spoken to him, and the Lord has given a promise and answered it. What would you normally do at that moment? What would be your normal reaction? What would you do? You say,

"Praise the Lord." What would you do? Do you know what we do? We say, " Praise the Lord," and we go about our way. What did Abraham do? He did something so wisely. The Lord got up to go, and Abraham followed Him. The Lord got up to go, and Abraham said, "Wait a minute; you may be through, but I'm not." He went with him. He went with him. All the purpose and work of the Lord was over for that hour, but Abraham got up and went with Him.

Now, you don't have to get up. I'm saying, brethren, that sometimes we miss the great work of the Lord, and let us now learn the lesson today. When the Lord comes and touches us, don't be too quick to leave His presence, even if you realize it's over; it's done. Because Abraham, in that moment, did not want the fellowship to be broken, he walked on with the Lord, and the Lord looked back and saw the heart of Abraham. He sees someone who wants to go with Him, even further than necessary. He turned, and what does the Lord say? He asked himself a question. Well, will I hold back from Abraham that which I'm going to do?" Abraham didn't need to know, and He just turned around and said, "Will I hold back from Abraham that which I need to know?" He said, "No, I will not." He said, "Abraham, come here, I want to tell you what I'm going to do," and the Lord revealed to Abraham some of his ways...some of the things that He would do soon. Why? Because Abraham followed the Lord in this way, the other two angels even went ahead to Sodom to carry out the destructive work there, but the Lord stayed and fellowshiped with Abraham and held nothing back from him; that which He would do.

Now, this is an experience of ONE MAN in prayer. I heard this morning in fellowship that one of the brothers got up and exhorted the brothers and sisters to spend time alone with the Lord. I really stand with that. I do not know how you can do everything you need to do here in Goleta. You need to have time with three or four brothers or sisters. You also need time alone. You also need time together, all of you. I don't know when you're going to do that. I honestly don't know. You work it out. Maybe it means going to bed an hour earlier. There needs to be time alone, but brothers and sisters, don't miss the Lord's blessing. Sometimes we might call it the twilight blessing, after He has shown Himself in brightness, and the glory begins to fade; don't be so quick to run off. Stay there before the Lord, and even as He goes, don't let Him go so quickly. Follow him. Pursue him. "Lord, I realize you've given me the victory. Praise the Lord, I could jump up and go tell my wife, but Lord, I wish to just stay here and fellowship with you some more.

Brothers, it will be times like this...I testify it to you personally... that the Lord will really reveal things to you. I can't explain to you what I mean. I can only say to you that there will be times when you're simply quietly before the Lord, and suddenly the Lord will open things up to you. I know that you, brothers and sisters, are probably quite burdened about this matter of getting up and sharing things in the meeting. What are you going to do, read a book on "My 12 favorite sermons" and share them with the brothers and sisters here? Here is a way. When you have touched the Lord, stay there for a while. And while you are quietly before Him, just out of nowhere, the Lord will give you something utterly new of Himself that you have never considered, and He will open Himself up to you. He may take the last

two or three years and tie a ribbon around them, making it all clear to you, and then you'll see something of the mighty workings of the Lord.

There are times when I'm just before the Lord, and suddenly things of years past that I have just had to hold in obedience to the Lord...I don't understand...but the Lord makes it so clear, and I see something of the ways of God. Be Alone with the Lord in prayer, and don't be quick to run off. Stay, and if He goes to leave, pursue Him, and He will share with you some of His ways.

Number two. In Acts 12:5, *Peter therefore was kept in prison, but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.* Verse 12, the last part. *Where many were gathered together, praying.* Brother Peter had been thrown into jail, and now the church comes together to pray. How do you figure they came together to pray? Let's say the word got out. Peter's been thrown in jail; James has been killed. The dear brother who wrote the book of James is dead. Now, how did the word get out? Well, we don't know. Do you have the feeling that an announcement was made that the church should pray? I don't. I have the feeling that the church knew it should get together to pray. By the way, I also appreciate that the verse says, "where many were gathered unto prayer." There was nothing legal about it, not everybody. It didn't say "everybody." Where *many* were gathered to pray. There is a church sense of when to pray. There is a time when you know the church has got to come together for prayer, and I would like to leave it that way forever. I am afraid of Wednesday night prayer meetings. I really am. Prayer must never be on a certain night in the church. May the Lord be merciful to me. I said never - I don't mean "never." It may be that the church has to, but I would say the church has a sense of crisis and knows when it has to pray. "And they came together, and they prayed without ceasing." Well, how long did they pray? An hour? Two hours?

Undoubtedly, when they came together, they prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed. Some went, some came, some went, some came. Maybe they all stayed there constantly, but they had practice in the matter of praying, and it was not difficult to pray without ceasing. When a crisis arises, you will know how to pray, and you will know how to do it without ceasing.

The church felt the need of coming together and praying, and it did. And every time I read this, I have that sense of divinity and humanity. That here is the church of the living God doing battle with a king. Herod the king, who has all earthly authority in Judea, has quickly slain one of the brothers without any notice of anyone knowing he was slain. But he made a mistake. He put Peter in jail, and that loosed the church. The church sicked the crisis. It came together, and it prayed. Brothers and sisters, two worlds are in collision. You know, in a real way, there are three worlds in collision. The first two worlds are right there in the church. It's man, and God must come together, and over here, Satan's instrument is in opposition. These two worlds have mingled together, and this one is bound to lose. When God's people, with God, come together without ceasing, Satan is going to lose. Now, that is probably the most outstanding miracle in the Scripture, outside of the resurrection itself, recorded. I mean, as far as its propensity and the unusualness of it. Peter walked through

several locked doors. He got off the chains and the pins on his feet, walked past several centurions, some of them standing even, and through a jail door, then the iron prison door. And then he came to the church.

Brother, the church must pray, and when it prays, it must not fear. I say to you to take the full liberty of God when you come together. Don't hesitate to pray for anything...if there is an anointing. If Satan comes to the church and brings a crisis, then God opens the very gates of heaven and says, "Take what you will." It is one thing to sense the Lord's anointing in the church to pray in that direction; it's another thing for Satan to attack the church, for when Satan attacks the church, then God opens the storehouse. And He says, "Take what you will. Take whatever it is; there are no limitations. What you bind, I'll bind; what you loose, I will loose." Don't hesitate to come together as a church and claim everything. Now, I am moving towards something, brothers and sisters. I don't know how to say this. You should come in the morning and pray alone. You should come together in a little group and pray. You should come together as a church to pray. In each one of these, there is a different relationship to the Lord and a different experience. You see it progressing here, but I want to come to a final word.

Let's now go to the third group: this precious, precious Acts 13. *Now there were in the church that was in Antioch certain prophets and teachers.* That part of the scripture will wreck 20th-century Christianity. *There were in the church in Antioch certain prophets and teachers...*and it lists them. This passage of scripture is diametrically opposed to everything we understand about Christianity. I believe it is even diametrically opposed, at this very moment, to some of your own understanding of the church.

What happened in this prayer meeting? They did this every day. What came out of it? Barnabas and Paul. In that meeting, God raised up two apostles. The first two we clearly see past the twelve. Now, listen to this: Who are they? Who are they? Prophets and teachers, in a little old church, just another church down the road, a church in Antioch. By now, Judea was full of churches. Why did the five come together? Why did they come together? To minister to the Lord. Why did they minister to the Lord? This isn't there, but I believe we know why they came together. They came together. It was interesting that they were neither deacons nor elders. What were they? Prophets and teachers. And they came together to do what? Minister to the Lord.

Well, brothers and sisters, when you minister to the Lord, what happens to you? When you minister to the Lord, you yourself are ministered to. And what do we minister? We minister Christ. What did these brothers do? They prophesied, and they taught. How? By going to seminary and getting a master's degree in theology? By going out and getting "My twelve favorite sermons and how to preach them?" No. They were able to minister Christ to others by ministering to Him. You only minister what you yourself have experienced. You can only impart that which you have. The church can never be any bigger than you are, and life can never be any greater than you are. Now, that's not totally true. Sometimes the Lord will, you know, He's got to have an instrument, and he uses it, but generally, you need to minister to the church. You really do. You are concerned about whether you should study the Bible,

what to do when the meeting comes together, and what you could do in terms of sharing. I think that's so healthy for you to feel that way and not be religious. Don't feel you should do nothing. Go ahead and do something. Don't ever sit there and do nothing.

How is the proper way to prepare yourselves for ministering Christ to the church? How? By coming together and ministering to the Lord. How do you do that? I'm going to tell you how: go find out for yourself. That's how. Go find out. Go find out. I don't remember anyone who does this, or I would give you some help. I can give you some pointers. You are going to have to find out.

There were five brothers: Lucius, Manaen, Niger, Paul, and Barnabas, who were prophets and teachers in the church in Antioch. Do you figure that was *all* the prophets and teachers? I went back to my scriptures this morning in the Greek, and as I read it again, it is so difficult to say. There's a word that could be translated "both", or it could be translated "among those who were." It's hard to say. If it's "both," Barnabas, Saul, Lucius, Manaen, and Niger, then it means five people. But if it translated "among whom were", then that means that there were probably many, many more. Brothers and sisters, my own heart is at rest. I am absolutely certain there were many, many more. I can't prove it, though. I have no scripture for that. I just believe it. Here were five men who had a burden for the church. The church was four years old. I don't want any of you to get the idea that you are now a prophet or a teacher. When this church is four years old, there should be some discernment.

Let's say the Lord gives Brother Mike something. Praise the Lord, it's rich. Mike is ministering to the Lord, and the Lord ministers to Mike, and he is touched by life. Mike shares this with about 15 brothers and sisters. There is a sense of enlightenment. One of the brothers says that the whole church needs to hear this. Oh, praise the Lord. What does Mike do? He has his choice. Mike may wait until the whole church is together, or go and share it with one of the other groups meeting. You may go around...I know these brothers went around Antioch ministering to the church, even when it did not meet all together. And I know that they also ministered when they all came together.

But Mike, I want to ask you something: Just because the Lord gives you the gift of teaching or prophecy, do we have to put up with listening to you every time we meet? No. That's the only balance I would like to say. Brothers, if the Lord gives you something, don't go hog-wild with it. Don't grab it and run with it. It's what he gives you. Nonetheless, these brothers lived in a church, now matured with prophets and teachers, and they were not sitting down studying the word of God. They were not working out sermon outlines. They were not preparing one-hour and 15-minute messages. What were they doing? They were ministering to the Lord.

Alright, brothers and sisters, I put on you today the burden of coming together. And I'm now talking about something utterly new. I put on you the burden of seeking out ministering to the Lord. Maybe a whole Saturday afternoon. How are you going to do that? I don't have the vaguest idea. Yeah. Praise the Lord. I don't know. Praise the Lord. Maybe if some of us come together, we'll minister to the Lord, and the Lord will give us something. Praise the Lord.

Well, what else were they doing besides ministering to the Lord? Well, praise the Lord. Are you still so excited? They were ministering to the Lord and fasting. What is the point? They were taking this seriously. They were taking the business of ministering to their Lord *seriously*. Have you ever fasted? Yes, I missed breakfast once. Have you ever gone all day without eating for the Lord? Have you gone two days without eating for the Lord? Have you gone three days without eating for the Lord? I don't know how long the Lord might put it on you to fast, and I'm not saying you could begin fasting right now. I really am not. But the more the Lord puts on you ministering to Him, and the more you see the need of coming to Him, and opening yourself to Him with a group of brothers or sisters, that you might bear the burden of life in the church.

These brothers were bearing the burden of life in the church. Not teaching, not doctrine, not sermons; they were bearing the burden of life in the church. What an awesome responsibility for any men. And all we know is that in Antioch (and it didn't have to be true in any other church), on an occasion after the church was four years old, quite matured, something brought five men together who were prophets and teachers. They put aside everything and fasted to give themselves totally to the matter of life. Totally to the matter of touching the Lord and offering to the Lord His Son in praise, in prayer, in thanksgiving, and in whatever way came out of their fellowship together. They met the need of the Lord. When you feed the Lord, He always feeds you. When you minister to Him, He always ministers to you. I have watched Christianity for many years. I have never seen a group of prophets and teachers come together and minister to the Lord.

But that's not the point. The point is: what came out? They were ministering to the Lord and fasting. Not praying. It doesn't say that. That's very fascinating, isn't it? It does not, does it? Verse 1, they're ministering to the Lord and fasting. Verse 2? Okay. What did the Lord do? You know what God did? I'll tell you what he did. He changed the course of human history. In that prayer meeting, God changed the course of human history. One of the most distinct changes in the course of human history that man has ever known, or history has ever recorded, began in that meeting of brothers fasting and ministering to the Lord. And the Lord went before, and He raised up two new apostles to begin an utterly new work on the earth. Praise the Lord. This is what came out of a small group ministering to the Lord and fasting.

What did they do after the Lord said this to them? Then they prayed and fasted. In verse 3, they prayed and fasted, then they laid hands on them. I want to stop here and get off on another subject.

Let us say that there were 500 people meeting in Goleta. And four or five or six brothers had come together to give a day (as they probably frequently did) to praying, fasting, and ministering to the Lord. Tell me something. Here's where some of our concepts have got to go. Normal, naturally, who do you think those five men should have been to have such authority? The elders. Now that's a religious concept. You think about it for a second. If that happened in a mature church, wouldn't somebody get up and say, " Did you consult the elders?" There wasn't an elder in the bunch. Why? Let me tell you why. One reason is that

elders aren't the greatest thing on earth. I mean, praise the Lord, Father, forgive me. They are the greatest thing on earth. In the church, they hold the highest position. In a local church, they hold the highest position, but that position is primarily administrative. Handling the matters of funds, handling the needs of people, but do not think (I know that you will meet together as brothers to pray and bear the burden in the weight of the church, that you should do), but remember that ministry is not in the hands of the elders. The ministry of life is *not* in the hands of elders. Now, it's very possible that some of those brothers in that meeting were elders, but they were not acting as elders. I don't know whether they were elders or not; the Lord doesn't tell us. They could have been elders, but *there*, they were prophets.

Do you know what this passage says to me? This passage says, "that church was in unity." For five brothers to get up and say, "Brothers and sisters, God just separated Barnabas and Paul for preaching the gospel in unknown lands." There was an immediate endorsement by the church that God had spoken to five men. Can you, brothers and sisters, see such liberality in the church? Such uniqueness, such love and faith and trust, that five brothers can be praying, who have no authority, and they come to say the Lord has spoken...and the church responds without question. But how could they have such trust? Because these men were the kind of men they were. And what kind of men were they? They were men who gave themselves to minister. Not to the church, but to the Lord. That's the only ministry we have. Any other ministry comes out of that. And if it doesn't come out of that, it's not really ministry.

Do not think that I have said to you that the only way that you should minister here in the church, and to the brothers and sisters, and speak to them, is for five brothers to get off in a corner somewhere, praying and fasting. But there is a spirit here, there is a principle here. Brothers and sisters, look what God did to some brothers who are gathering together to really, really, touch the Lord. You already know more than you realize. Pray as the church, and you will see what authority the Lord gives you. Brothers, in the matter of ministering to the church, take the burden of ministering to Christ, and you don't know, you don't know what will come out. Praise God, you don't know what will come out.

I trust some of you brothers will really, really take the burden of meeting together, to just minister to the Lord. And out of that will come the ministry to the church. It will also come by meeting alone, it will also come as the whole church meets, but brothers and sisters, there's something here of the Lord having some brothers who bear the real burden of life and ministry in the church. And out of it, the church is greatly blessed. Out of it, in this case, the whole earth was blessed.

Now, brothers, when you pray, stay before the Lord a little while. He may have something new and marvelous to tell you. When you come together as a church, don't be afraid to ask the Lord for anything. Brothers and sisters, come together and minister to the Lord.

Now, when you have come alone, when you have come as a church, and when you have come together in small groups, to minister to the Lord, out of these three experiences, you

will learn how to pray. I cannot teach you. This is where you will learn. Go alone, in the church, and in groups, and begin learning now, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, how to live before the Lord.