

Friendship with God

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[0 : 0 0] special thing. It's one of God's very special gifts to us. Our young folk have been away in our broth this weekend, and the weekend away no doubt has different purposes that we could list, but one of them surely is that it provides a space for fostering, for cultivating, and simply for enjoying friendship. Of course, there are many other opportunities to do that, and it is a good thing to do. This is God's good gift, one of His good gifts, that we can enjoy a friendship. So, I think we would agree it's not a very controversial claim or statement that friendship is a gift from God, but can it also be our experience of God? Yes, God can give us friendship among ourselves, and we can enjoy that, but can it also be our experience of God? Can we be friends with God?

As believers, as Christians, the Bible presents our relationship with God in a very rich way, and it can be described in different ways, different complementary ways. It is described as a father-son or father-daughter relationship. We pray to our Father in heaven. It's also described as a master-servant relationship, a teacher-disciple relationship. But what about friends? Is that a step too far to consider or to imagine that we can be friends with God? Well, what does the Bible say? That ultimately has got to be where we turn in answering the question. This evening, I want to examine three verses that speak of Abraham as God's friend. I don't know if you noticed the link there in the three passages that we read. All of them describe Abraham as God's friend. And as we look at each verse, and we're going to do so in a very overview kind of way. It's my intention to be brief this evening. Well, it's often my intention, seldom what happens. But I think on this occasion, I'm going to make a particular effort. I suspect that some in the congregation, without looking at anybody in particular, haven't slept much, and I don't want to have nodding heads left, right, and center. So,

I have a particular motivation to be brief this evening. But we'll look at each of these verses and see how each of them, in their own way, can enrich our understanding of what friendship with God is and what it looks like. Now, let's move on then swiftly to the first passage that we read in Isaiah.

And in that first verse, Isaiah, God is speaking. And I began with that passage, even though chronologically, 2 Chronicles would have been the obvious one to begin. But I begin with Isaiah because God is speaking, and it's God who declares concerning this friendship that He enjoys with Abraham. And so, we'll think of that passage first and what God declares concerning friendship with Himself. In the second verse, in 2 Chronicles, we've read it, King Jehoshaphat is speaking, and we'll notice how the king admires, recognizes, admires Abraham's friendship with God.

I was looking for what the best verb would be, and I came up with admires. But we'll think about that in due course. And then finally, in James, we'll notice how James explains, taking Abraham as his example, how friendship with God is demonstrated and evidenced in the life of the believer, in the life of the one who is a friend of God. So, God declares, and Jehoshaphat admires, and James explains.

[4 : 2 2] First of all, then, Isaiah chapter 41 and verse 8. We'll just read again that verse. But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend.

Now, what can we draw from the language that God uses concerning Abraham? Abraham, my friend. I want to suggest at least three things that we can draw from what God says. The first thing is maybe very obvious, but it's so wonderful that it's worth just highlighting, and it is this, that friendship with God is possible. As I say, it's a very simple thing to conclude. It's a very obvious inference from the language that God uses, but it merits being highlighted. God is speaking, and we stress this, God is speaking, and He declares that a man can be His friend. In this case, He gives, or He makes reference to one particular man, to Abraham, God experienced friendship with Abraham. To speak of friendship with God is not the stuff of groundless aspiration or frothy religiosity. It is to echo

God's own testimony on the matter. But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, you descendants of Abraham, my friend. The second thing that we can draw from what God declares here is that friendship with God is grounded in love. The word that God uses and that is translated quite legitimately, quite rightly as friend means literally loved of me, the one loved of me. It could be translated, though no doubt it wouldn't be the most appropriate language, but it could be translated, Abraham, my lover, the one who loves me, the one whom I love.

Indeed, the language that is used can go in both directions in the sense of the one who loves me or the one who loves me, Abraham, my friend. Abraham who loves me, Abraham who I love.

And of course, both are true in the case of this relationship between God and Abraham. But though both are true, that Abraham loved God and that God loved Abraham, there is no doubt as to where the initiative lies. Indeed, in this very verse there is a stress on where the initiative lies in any relationship between God and man. What does the verse say? And it's at the beginning, but you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen. There the initiative of God is so evident, and that initiative also follows through into what God says concerning Abraham, my friend.

[7 : 37] Just as Jacob had been chosen by God, so Abraham had been loved by God. God chose Abraham as his friend.

God chose to love Abraham. Abraham responded to that love. But to paraphrase the apostle John, we can say that Abraham loved God because God first loved Abraham. So, what God declares here in this verse makes it very clear that friendship with God is possible, that friendship with God is grounded in love and grounded fundamentally in God's love. But the third thing I think we can also say is this, that friendship with God is a privilege of the covenant. Given that the Bible uses somewhat sparingly the language of friendship in connection with God, or the relationship between God and man, we might be tempted or we might be led to imagine that friendship with God was unique to Abraham, or in any case, the experience of a select few in God's inner circle. Some of you may be bringing to mind the reference that there is in Exodus to Moses and how it speaks of how God spoke to Moses as a man speaks to his friend.

But there are very few references where we have very explicitly stated that God enjoys friendship with a man. And so, as I say, we might think, well, yes, okay, it's possible, but it is the experience, it's the privilege of a select few, not for the rest of us. But if we were to come to that conclusion, we would be making a big mistake. Remember that in this passage where God declares the friendship that he enjoyed with Abraham, God is reassuring his people, and he's doing so by reminding them of who they are. In the midst of their trouble, it's so important for the people of God to remember that that is who they are. They are the people of God. And so, when he speaks of his relationship with Jacob, when he speaks of his relationship with Abraham, this isn't just some history lesson. No, this is the manner in which God is reminding the people who are listening, who are living long past the time of

Jacob and Abraham, reminding them of who they are. In choosing Jacob, God chose Jacob's descendants.

And in choosing Abraham, in loving Abraham, he was loving Abraham's descendants. Both Abraham and Jacob are representative figures. You know, the very name Abraham means father of many.

[10 : 39] And the very people God is speaking to through Isaiah are among the many that Abraham is the father of. And the implication, I think, is clear. If you are a descendant of Abraham, you also are God's friend.

It's inconceivable that the love or friendship of God towards the children of Abraham would be any less rich and tender than his love to Abraham himself. You know, God doesn't love some of his children more than others. Friendship with God is a privilege of the covenant. It is our birthright as those who belong to God's covenant family. Now, having said that, having recognized that, I'm not saying that we can make no distinctions in terms of the nature of the friendship that God might have or had with Abraham and that he has with us or with anybody else for that matter, because friendship is a two-way street. And Abraham certainly responded to God's love in a manner that makes him particularly suited to the description that God himself employs of being a friend of God. But from God's side of things, to put it that way, all descendants of Abraham are equally loved, equally befriended by God.

So, God here declares concerning this matter of friendship with himself. He speaks of Abraham, my friend, and by so doing, we can draw, I think, the legitimate conclusion that we too are viewed in that light by God. That opportunity to enjoy friendship with him is also available to us.

But let's move on to the second passage, and that's the one in 2 Chronicles, where it's King Jehoshaphat who is speaking, he's praying, and in the prayer, he also speaks of Abraham in these same terms. So, if we turn to 2 Chronicles 20, and just remind ourselves of what Jehoshaphat says there in verse 7, O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? Now, just to comment again very briefly on the context of Jehoshaphat's prayer, within which he uses this same language of Abraham as God's friend.

Jehoshaphat's reign as King of Judah dates to the 9th century B.C. This is before Isaiah ministered, and before God used the language of Abraham as his friend that we've just noticed. And his reign was largely a faithful one. The chronicler certainly presents him in very positive terms, though that's what the chronicler tends to do, to look at things in a very positive light. But his reign was largely a faithful reign, and yet he finds himself here, and Judah, in real danger. There's a real crisis.

[14 : 10] There is this vast army that we've read of in the passage, this vast army that has gathered, and it is about to come to invade and to overrun Judah. And it's very clear from the prayer that Jehoshaphat prays that he sees no prospect of them being able to withstand this attack.

There in the very end of his prayer, he is brutally honest, for we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. So, that's the situation that they find themselves in. And what does Jehoshaphat do? Well, very wisely, an evidence of his piety, of his devotion, he calls the people to prayer that they might seek God's help and protection in the midst of this crisis. And he then, in representation of the people, prays to God. And in this prayer, as we've noticed, he acknowledges that Abraham was God's friend. It's exactly the same language that we find in Isaiah. And I want to just comment on that, and just notice how this is, let's call it intriguing, on a number of fronts. The first thing that I find intriguing is where Jehoshaphat draws the language from. In many ways, it's quite daring language to speak of a man, of any man, but to speak of Abraham as God's friend. You know, where had this language, this idea come from? How did Jehoshaphat know that that was the case? I don't know the answer to that question. As I say, if he had been praying after God had spoken in the manner that he did through Isaiah, then we could maybe draw a reasonable connection. It's intriguing on that front, but that's of minor importance. Much more important is why. Why does Jehoshaphat use this language in speaking of Abraham? It seems that Jehoshaphat is grounding his cry for help. That's the purpose of his prayer. He's seeking help from God, and he's grounding his cry for help in the relationship that exists between the people of Judah and Abraham. They are, he very clearly declares, the descendants of Abraham. And he also reminds God of the promise made to Abraham concerning the land. So, he's praying to God, he's seeking God's help, and he's saying, listen, God, we're descendants of Abraham. That's who we are. We're descendants of Abraham. We are the ones who are praying. And to Abraham, you promised the land forever, and yet here we have this army that it would appear is going to take the land from us.

That cannot be. Remember who we are. We are descendants of Abraham. Throughout the prayer, he grounds his petition in other ways also, but this is the one that we are interested in.

Why should God help them? I suppose is the question. And Jehoshaphat's answer is, we are the descendants of Abraham. And it's a legitimate, a ground on which to make his cry. But he goes a little further in intensifying his cry for help. And he does that by reminding God that Abraham, their father, is God's friend. And the appeal is a powerful one. We could paraphrase it. What Jehoshaphat is saying to God is this, help us, help us, for we are the sons of your friend, Abraham. We're sons of Abraham, and Abraham is your friend.

How could you not help us, given who we are, the descendants of your friend, Abraham? That's why he uses, it seems to me, the language that he uses. Now, why do I say that Jehoshaphat, and I said this just as we were introducing the discussion or the message, why do I say that Jehoshaphat admires this relationship between God and Abraham, this relationship of friendship?

[18:31] I suppose my question really is this, does Jehoshaphat presume to enjoy the same relationship with God, that of friendship, that Abraham enjoyed? He recognizes that Abraham was God's friend.

He clearly identifies himself as a descendant of Abraham. He's grounding his appeal to God for help on that basis, that he is a descendant of Abraham. But does Jehoshaphat imagine that he's a friend of God? Well, I don't know, but I would suggest not. Is this humility that he wouldn't imagine, that he enjoys such a relationship with God, or is it a failure to claim and cultivate what was his covenant privilege? And I'm really, I suppose, posing the question as one that is an intriguing one.

But what I would draw from it for ourselves, as something I hope very practical, and what I would draw from it is this, let's be careful not to be content with only admiring the relationship with God that others may enjoy, be it others that we know, or others in history, or people like Abraham who are described to us in the Bible. This is a relationship that God is ready and willing to share with us. We too can enjoy God's friendship. We don't just admire, well, what an amazing thing, that that's possible, and it must be amazing. No, this is something that God would have us enjoy ourselves. So, God declares, Jehoshaphat admires, but finally we turn to James, and in James we have what I'm calling an explanation. An explanation not of the big picture of the reality of friendship with God, but one aspect of that picture, which is how do those who are friends of God demonstrate that they are friends of God? What is the evidence that would lead us to conclude that a believer is in friendship with God? That is what James does, or that is the way in which James helps us in this matter. Now, we turn to James, James chapter 2, and the verse where he uses this language is verse 23.

James chapter 2 and verse 23, and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend.

The context in which James speaks of Abraham in this way is the context of his memorable statement of the unbreakable bond that must exist between genuine faith and accompanying works. This is the matter that he's dealing with. Now, our concern is not to consider all that James says on this matter, but simply to highlight that in making his case, he points to the example of Abraham. Abraham, James demonstrates in this letter, in this passage, had both faith, he believed in God, he trusted in God, and he also had works. He obeyed God. The specific piece of evidence is Abraham's response to God's call to sacrifice Isaac. Then in verse 21, was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, here we see, and this is why this was so useful to

[22 : 31] James in making the argument that he is making, here we see faith and works not only both present, but inextricably intertwined. The radical obedience of Abraham in being willing to offer his own son Isaac was only possible given his faith and trust in God. See, these are not two separate things. Well, he's got faith and he's got works. The two are intertwined. It seems to me that it would not have been possible for Abraham to have obeyed God in this matter had he not trusted in God. How could he have done that had there not been this trust in God? So, his radical obedience was only possible given his faith and trust in God, but it also in turn served to demonstrate his faith and trust in God. His obedience demonstrates that he trusts in God, that he has faith in God. Now, what has this got to do with what we're interested in, this idea or this reality of friendship with God? Well, in making his argument, James clinches his argument or reinforces his argument by reminding his readers that the one who illustrates so powerfully the necessary place of faith and works is the very one who is described in such remarkable terms as a friend of God. James says he was called God's friend, and as we've seen, called God's friend by God himself. Turning this around, we could say this is what friends of God do. They trust in God, and they obey God. Now, does this not sound remarkably like something Jesus said in John's gospel and in chapter 15 and in verse 14 addressing his disciples? What does Jesus say to them? You are my friends if you do what I command. It's very important in hearing what Jesus says there to understand that Jesus is not laying down a condition for a potential friendship. He's not saying, you're not my friends, but if you obey me, you can be my friends. That's not what he's saying. That's how it could be misunderstood.

What Jesus is doing is explaining that it is obedience that serves to demonstrate actual friendship. You are my friends if you do what I command. How will people know that you are my friends? They'll know you are my friends by doing what I command. Obedience demonstrates an existing friendship. It's not a condition that we might enjoy a potential friendship. Just like Abraham.

Abraham was God's friend. He demonstrates his friendship with God in the obedience that he renders to God, in the trust that he renders to God, in the trust that he deposits in God.

And so, as we just draw these truths together from these three passages where in each of them there is this common thread of Abraham being described as God's friend, we can conclude that friendship with God is indeed possible. We have that on good authority. We have that on God's authority. Friendship with God is part of our inheritance as members of God's covenant family. And friendship with God can and must be evidenced or demonstrated by our trust in and obedience to God. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to you and we stand in wonder at the reality that we have been pondering on, that you, the altogether glorious and majestic, the altogether holy, the altogether sovereign and powerful God of the universe, would be prepared to enter into a relationship of friendship with the likes of us. And yet we thank you that it is so. We thank you that you are indeed the one who took the initiative in the life of Abraham, calling him to be part of your family, to be the father of many, to be your friend. And we thank you that the privilege that was Abraham's is a privilege that we inherit as Abraham's descendants, as Abraham's spiritual descendants. And we pray that we would not only stand in wonder that this could be so, but that in our own lives we might experience something of this friendship that we have been looking at and considering in your Word this evening. And we pray also that in our lives we would, with Abraham, demonstrate who we are, demonstrate that relationship that we enjoy with you as we trust in you and as we render obedience to you. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name, amen. Now, we're going to close our service this evening by singing from Psalm 145 in the Scottish Psalter. It's on page 444. Psalm 145, the second version of the Psalm, we'll sing verses 1 to 6, 1 to 6, and we'll sing to the tune at Duke Street. O Lord, thou art my God and King, thee will I magnify and praise. I will thee bless and gladly sing, and to thy holy name always. Psalm 145, verses 1 to 6, 1 to 6, and to thy holy name always.

[28 : 44] O Lord, thou art my God and King, thee will I magnify and praise. O Lord, thou art my God and King, thee will I magnify and praise. I will thee bless and gladly sing, and to thy holy name always.

to thy holy name always. These day I rise, I will be blessed and praise thy name time without end.

Much to be praised and great God is. This greatness none can comprehend.

Praise shall thy words praise unto grace the mighty acts shown done by thee.

I will speak of the glorious praise and over all thy majesty.

[30 : 18] Thy wondrous words I will record. Thy men the might shall be exult.

Of all thy dreadful acts, O Lord, and I thy greatness will unfold.

Thy love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always.

Amen.