



Genesis - Chapter Eighteen

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eighteen

Abraham receives strangers into his camp and offers remarkable hospitality, serving them personally with food and drink. These guests turn out to be the Lord and two of his angels who are on their way to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in order to deal with the gross sin of the people there.

While dining, the Lord reveals to Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son in about one year's time. Although she was inside the tent, Sarah overheard this claim and laughed silently at the idea that such an old woman could bear a child. Yet her laughter was known by the Lord and he comments upon it.

Following the meal, the Lord and his servants set off. Abraham accompanies the Lord and remarkably bargains for the lives of any righteous people that the Lord may encounter in Sodom. The bargaining started with the pardoning of all people if just fifty righteous could be found and continued until agreement was reached in the case of only ten righteous persons being found in the city.

II.a.x Genesis 18:1-19:29 - The Destruction of Sodom

Genesis Chapters 18-19 form a unified narrative that divides into a number of distinct episodes, coalescing around the rescue of Lot from the divine destruction of Sodom. There are three main sections:

18:1-15 the Lord appears to Abraham at Mamre.

18:16-33 Abraham intercedes on behalf of Lot's family.

19:1-29 Lot is rescued from Sodom.

II.a.x.1 Genesis 18:1-15 - A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah

This passage, unlike some other biblical texts that recount divine appearances, provides a detailed description of how the Lord appears to Abraham. In doing so it highlights the generous nature of Abraham as he shows hospitality to three men. This theme of generous hospitality reappears in Chapter Nineteen in connection with Lot.

¹ The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.

Genesis 18:1

The LORD appeared to Abraham. Apparently, this happened a short time later. In Genesis 17:21, God said Sarah would give birth one year later, and at this time, she is not yet pregnant. So this couldn't be more than three months after the events in Genesis Seventeen.

Although 13:18 reports that Abram settled at the oaks of Mamre many years earlier, this verse indicates he remains in the region and is still dwelling in a tent: *<<By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise>>* (Hebrews 11:9).

² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.

Genesis 18:2

Three men. Abraham's actions suggest that he may have viewed the men as exceptionally important, although such gracious hospitality was part of the culture at that time.

He ran. In the Middle East, an elderly man of some social standing would not normally respond in this way to visitors or even for a family member, as was the case in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: *<<So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him>>* (Luke 15:20).

Bowed down to the ground. While this may have been a common mode of greeting others (19:1), it shows that Abraham regards the visitors as worthy of great respect.

³ He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant.’

Genesis 18:3

My Lord. The term here, Hebrew ‘*Adonay*, is a distinctive one for God in the OT, e.g. 20:4. The polite term of respect **my lord**, Hebrew ‘*adoni*, has a slight difference of spelling, affecting the last vowel, e.g. 23:6. If the spelling in the Hebrew text is correct – and there is no reason to doubt it – then Abraham recognises that one of his visitors is a divine manifestation. This explains Abraham’s part in the conversation of vv.22-33.

If I find favour with you. Favour is the Hebrew word *chen* and generally means grace or acceptance, especially by someone who is considered to be superior to the object of such favour. It is a familiar phrase in the Bible, e.g. <<***Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, ‘Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?’***>> (Ruth 2:10), <<***And she said, ‘Let your servant find favour in your sight.’ Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer***>> (1 Samuel 1:18).

⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’

Genesis 18:4-5

Although Abraham speaks of **a little water** and **a little bread**, he proceeds to prepare a substantial meal for these strangers.

Refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on. Abraham’s hospitality was unconditional; he wanted nothing in return for the meal he offered them.

You have come to your servant. Abraham was a man of wealth and great social standing, yet he places himself as the servant of these strangers. Verse 3 indicates that he had some notion of the divine presence and it is therefore right that he should acknowledge his place as the Lord’s servant. This was the position taken by those who follow Jesus: <<***Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness***>> (Titus 1:1), <<***James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings***>> (James 1:1), and: <<***Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ***>> (Jude 1).

⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.'
⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Genesis 18:6-8

These verses detail the preparations of the meal, underlining the expense to which Abraham goes in order to cater lavishly to his visitors.

Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah; Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf; gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. These three statements further illuminate Abraham's desire to serve these three visitors and to show his hospitality. On the cultural significance of such haste, especially the idea of such a man running, was discussed in comments on v.2.

Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes. This was a traditional role for a woman to undertake, for example: <<*So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes*>> (2 Samuel 13:8).

Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. This continues to demonstrate that this was a lavish meal that was being prepared for these guests: <<*Now the woman had a fattened calf in the house. She quickly slaughtered it, and she took flour, kneaded it, and baked unleavened cakes*>> (1 Samuel 28:24), <<*And get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate*>> (Luke 15:23).

Then he took curds and milk. The theme continues and the image is captured by the prophet: <<*On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey*>> (Isaiah 7:21-22).

He stood by them. Abraham does not eat with the men but, like a servant, he waits on them. The events of vv.2-8 and 19:1-3 are probably alluded to in: <<*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it*>> (Hebrews 13:2).

Introduction to Genesis 18:9-15

These verses centre on Sarah and the promise that she will have a son about twelve months after this visitation.

⁹ They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ ¹⁰ Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Genesis 18:9-10

I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.

It may be wondered why God repeated the promise again so close to the time when he said it previously. After all, it seems God was silent about the promise for more than 13 years. Now he came personally to repeat it twice probably within a three month period. This story is not unique for God repeated it in the time of Elisha when he gave the childless Shunammite couple a son: <<**He said, ‘At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.’ She replied, ‘No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant’**>> (2 Kings 4:16); on that occasion it was Elisha who brought the news on behalf of God. Later, when the boy died, Elisha was enabled by God to restore his life.

Your wife Sarah shall have a son. God’s promises sometimes need to be heard many times in order for faith to be encouraged and to grow: <<**So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ**>> (Romans 10:17).

Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. This should not be seen as Sarah eavesdropping on the conversations of the men. Her rightful place was to remain out of sight but in a position to serve the men should she be required to do so. Therefore, she would naturally remain within hearing distance.

¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

Genesis 18:11

It had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Focusing on Sarah’s age, this comment underlines that she has now ceased to have menstrual cycles, indicating that her reproductive years have ended. Both Abraham and Sarah were fully aware of this, as Paul records: <<**He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb**>> (Romans 4:19).

¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?”’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I

will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.’¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’

Genesis 18:12-15

So Sarah laughed to herself. Given her personal circumstances, Sarah laughs in disbelief at the idea of bearing a son to Abraham. Her reaction mirrors her husband’s in 17:17. Although Sarah was hidden from the men, her response does not go unnoticed by the Lord, who asks: Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? Although it is accepted that Abraham and Sarah produced Isaac through normal sexual intercourse, his birth is no less miraculous than was the virgin birth.

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? This theme is repeated throughout Scripture: <<*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted*>> (Job 42:2), <<*Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you*>> (Jeremiah 32:17), <<*But Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible’*>> (Matthew 19:26) and Abraham’s own response to the current situation: <<*No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*>> (Romans 4:20-21).

Some translations translate the Hebrew ‘*adoni*’ as ‘my lord’ rather than as ‘my husband’, e.g. <<*So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”*>> (v.12 NIV), which was commented on at v.3. Accepting this as the correct translation, and despite Sarah’s negative situation, she still honours Abraham by using this title of dignity and respect. First Peter 3:6 notes this as indicating her pattern of submitting to and obeying her husband: <<*Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you*>>.

II.a.x.2 Genesis 18:16-33 - Judgement Pronounced on Sodom

In this passage the prospect of Sodom’s destruction is revealed by the Lord to Abraham. Out of concern for Lot, Abraham intercedes with God regarding his nephew and his family. The ensuing conversation underlines that the destruction of Sodom and the other cities of the plain is fully justified because of the inhabitants’ overwhelming wickedness, refer also to Genesis 13:13. Had there been as few as ten righteous people in Sodom, the city would have been spared. Abraham’s intercession for the Gentile cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is in line with his calling to be the vehicle of blessing to the whole world.

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked towards Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.’

Genesis 18:16-19

Abraham went with them to set them on their way. As was customary with the hospitality he had just shown, Abraham accompanied his guests on the first part of their journey.

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do. God chooses to disclose to Abraham what he is about to do, on the grounds that Abraham has a unique role to fulfil regarding his own descendants and all the nations of the earth. This point is vital; God’s purpose in this is not gossip with Abraham about what he will do, nor is it to satisfy Abraham’s curiosity. God wanted to do something in Abraham’s life through what he will reveal to him. This principle is something that God has maintained with many other servants: *<<Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets>>* (Amos 3:7).

²⁰ Then the LORD said, ‘How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.’

Genesis 18:20-21

How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! God goes on to tell Abraham he will see if Sodom and Gomorrah are worthy of judgement. The prophets used this situation to remind the people that there is a cost to apostasy and evil: *<<Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!>>* (Isaiah 1:10), *<<But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah>>* (Jeremiah 23:14), and: *<<Your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters>>* (Ezekiel 16:46).

I must go down and see. These words reveal that the decision to destroy the cities of the plain was undertaken with careful scrutiny of the evidence. This remark should not be interpreted as indicating limited knowledge on the part of God, any more than do the similar and ironic words in 11:5. All that is implied is God's direct attention to the matter.

²² So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?'

Genesis 18:22-25

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. It is revealed that the two men are actually the angels who visited Sodom in Genesis Chapter Nineteen. The third man in the party is actually the Lord himself.

Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Abraham's response to God's revelation is probably prompted by his concern for Lot, although Lot is not mentioned specifically. However, the main issue for Abraham is: 'will God destroy the righteous alongside the wicked?' Knowing that God must be true to his nature, Abraham poses the question: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

This theme is repeated throughout Scripture, for example: <<Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty>> (Exodus 23:7), <<They fell on their faces, and said, 'O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one person sin and you become angry with the whole congregation?'>> (Numbers 16:22), and: <<The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven. His eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind. The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and his soul hates the lover of violence. On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face>> (Psalm 11:4-7).

²⁶ And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' ²⁷ Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD, I who am but dust and ashes. ²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' ²⁹ Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' ³⁰ Then he said, 'Oh do not let the LORD be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' ³¹ He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' ³² Then he said, 'Oh do not let the LORD be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Genesis 18:26-33

As Abraham engages with God on the fate of the righteous in Sodom, different scenarios are presented whereby the hypothetical number of righteous in the city is gradually reduced from **fifty** to **ten**. God eventually affirms that: **For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.** The principle has been established that God will not punish the righteous along with the wicked. As the next chapter reveals, only Lot and two of his children are actually rescued from the destruction of Sodom. This passage establishes the importance in persistent prayer and the trust that the believer must place in God. It is not that God needs to be persuaded to act but that he desires his people to interact with him in doing so.

And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. Many have pondered whether Abraham should have continued with his bold petitioning. Had he asked God to spare the lives of the wicked in Sodom for the sake of one righteous man then it seems likely that he may have done just that, waiting until the Day of Judgement to punish those who fail to repent. The apostle describes it in this way: *<<and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement – especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority>>* (2 Peter 2:6-10a).