

The Family of Abraham - Part 8—The Visitation of the Angels

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the eighth of my series on the story of Abraham. We've arrived at chapter 18. Abraham is about to be visited by three figures. The setting of this chapter is significant.

It occurs shortly after the events of the preceding chapter. It occurs within the 99th year of Abraham's life. And there is a setting of the scene provided in the first verse.

It's by the oak of the terebinth trees of Mamre. Mamre is an important site. Abraham has already built an altar there at Mamre near Hebron.

And there are two other details that are given to us. He's sitting in the tent door. The tent door is associated with the boundary, the liminal realm.

The realm where you cross over from one realm to another. So it's associated with birth. It's also associated with death. Important things happen at the door. It's where transitions occur. Later on we'll see Sarah is also at the door of her tent.

[0 : 59] What happens at the tent door elsewhere? We'll see that Jephthah's daughter comes out the door of the house first. Jephthah's vow is associated with the doors of his house.

It's what first comes out of the body of the house. And the body and the house or the tent are very closely associated with each other. This is something that we'll see at various points in scripture.

The symbolism of the body is associated with the symbolism of the tent and the door. And we'll see our bodies described as like tents or tabernacles. Later on we'll see the body described as a temple.

These things, those connections help us to understand the significance of the door. The child opens the doors of the womb as we see within Exodus and chapter 13 and the law of the firstborn.

We'll see the way that at significant points when there is prophecy concerning birth or death, there will often be a setting of the person hearing that prophecy in the doorway.

[2 : 02] The liminal realm that crosses between two different realms. Liminal realms are important within scripture. Another example of liminal realms are water crossings.

The river crossing, the crossing of the Red Sea between Egypt and slavery within Egypt and the time within the wilderness. Or the crossing of the Jordan into the land.

The crossing of the Ford of the Jabbok where Jacob's name is confused and he receives a new name. The letters of his name mixed up and he gets a new name. And his new name of Israel is received at that point.

Later on we'll see the descriptions of Israel having crossed over the river, worshipped other gods on the other side of the river. These liminal realms are like the borders that define, or literally the borders that define the land of Israel.

But they are also the borders that help Israel to define its identity over against other identities. And those crossing points are the liminal regions where Israel's identity transitions.

[3 : 03] This is a realm of transition that is significant from the death of the womb, of Sarah's womb, and of Abraham's body, and entering into the life that occurs after that.

It happens at the heat of the day. This is the middle of the day. This is something I got wrong in the previous one of these talks where I talked about the darkness setting being symbolically present for the whole of the period until the sun rises over Sodom.

That's not actually the case. There is bright sunlight here. And that is contrasted with the darkness of the events in Sodom, which occur later in the evening and at night. What happens here is during the middle of the day.

And so the visitors arrive. Abraham sees them. The emphasis upon sight is noteworthy. He lifts up his eyes and he looks and behold.

So three references to sight. The three men are before him. And he ran from his tent door to meet them, bows himself towards the ground.

[4 : 12] And he begs them to stay and receive his hospitality. The theme of hospitality here is very important. Entertaining angels unawares, the theme that we find in the book of Hebrews, is here expressed in very literal form.

What Abraham is doing in showing great hospitality here is juxtaposed with what we see in the story of Sodom. Sodom is a place that is devoid of hospitality. Indeed, quite the opposite of hospitality. They're characterized by hostility and violence to the people who visit. Whether that's the sojourner of Lot or whether it's the visitors of the angelic visitors who come that they seek to rape.

In both of those instances, what we see is something that stands in a stark contrast to what Abraham displays here. Elsewhere in the story of Ezekiel, we'll see the way that Sodom's sin is described as this lack of hospitality.

As this treatment of the visitors, as this committing of abomination. And this is not excluding their sexual sin. It's associated with that in various ways.

[5 : 19] But it's a more general society of violence, inhospitality and hostility. And that's characterizing them in juxtaposition with Abraham, who's shown to be a person of great excessive hospitality.

The measures of flour that he calls Sarah to bake cakes with. Those are huge measures of flour. This is something very big that he's creating. Likewise, the great, the calf that he brings forth and all these other things that he provides for them.

He's giving them a bountiful feast. He's showing them the very utmost hospitality. We'll see hospitality being shown later on in the story of Sodom and Lot.

But that's hospitality is of a very different type. And it's hospitality that has some sort of resonances of a very different sort of meal.

We'll get to that in my next talk on this next week. Who are these figures? It's not entirely clear that Abraham knows who these figures are until later on.

[6 : 25] At this point, he may just think that they are figures who are human figures who are walking and needing some sort of sustenance.

But no, later on, we'll see that they are angelic figures. And I'll get to that in a moment. But at this point, maybe the identity is revealed as they ask for Sarah by name.

Has he actually told them Sarah's name? Presumably they've heard it, but he may not know. But when he is asked about the presence of Sarah, she is in the tent and she's in the tent door.

And then there's a shift. It says, and they said to him, where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, here in the tent. And then it says, and he said, I will certainly return to you according to the time of life. And behold, Sarah, your wife, shall have a son. And Sarah was listening in the tent door, which was behind him. So the shift from they to he, that shift is a significant one.

[7 : 32] There is a suggestion here that one of the visitors is the Lord himself, the angel of the Lord, the angel of God who has come to declare the promise.

And so this is something that will help us to read that later passage that occurs. We have two angels and we have the angel of the Lord or God himself has come to declare this promise.

Later on, we'll see Abraham stays and talks with the Lord while the visitors go on. And there are two angels that arrive at Sodom.

So there are three visitors. One is the angel of the Lord, we are to presume. And he tarries with Abraham and talks with Abraham concerning Sodom, while the other two angels go on to Sodom. This helps us to understand that contrary to Rublev's icon and other accounts of this particular narrative, the three visitors are not, in fact, the Trinity.

[8 : 38] What we have here are two angels and the angel of the Lord. What happens at this point is Sarah laughs when she hears the declaration that she will have a child.

She laughs and she says to herself, After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my Lord being old also? She is post-menopausal.

She is someone who is not expecting to find pleasure in sexual relations with her husband. Her husband is old too. He's not expecting to have children. And this is something that's a cause of laughter.

Now, this can easily be read just as an example of unbelief. I don't think it's just that. I don't think that Sarah is being rebuked for unbelief here. I think that she's fearful.

She recognises that this is not just a human visitor. But her response is, the response of the visitor, the angel of the Lord, is to say, but you did laugh.

[9 : 45] To insist, own the fact, you did laugh. And it's not inappropriate to laugh. You shall call, the name of the child will be called laughter.

Because there's something appropriate about that laughter. His life will be defined by a sort of laughter. A turning of the tables. An unexpected surprise. This is not what Sarah was expecting. And laughter is appropriate. She should own that laughter. She should recognise that that is the way that she should respond to that news. Not a laughter of disbelief, but a laughter of surprise and astonishment that this should be the case.

That someone in her condition, someone who was completely beyond hope of bearing a child, should be rendered fruitful. This is a cause of laughter indeed. And she should own that laughter. And indeed, when she names the child Isaac, she does own that laughter. That laughter becomes the name of her child. The defining characteristic that marks his story in what follows.

[10 : 51] It occurs, the promises that according to the time of life, that she will have a son.

This is a significant expression. It's something that we also have with Annunciation event in the story of 2 Kings chapter 4, where the Shunammite woman is told that she will have a son.

And the story of that is very similar to the story of Isaac. Within a year, she will have a son. The child dies ultimately. The expression is used in the same way in these two chapters, repeated in both of them on two occasions.

And that helps us, I think, to see a very important connection between these stories and the way that the figure of the woman becomes more prominent within the story of the Shunammite son.

There's a lot going on there. I might get into that in a later video when we talk about the binding of Isaac. But Isaac and the Shunammite son are very closely related figures.

[11 : 54] Both miraculous children and both children that in some sense are brought back from the dead. After there has been this announcement of the birth of the child, the laughter that will be associated with that, the men rise and look towards Sodom and they move towards Sodom and Abraham goes with them to send them on their way.

But then, God has an internal dialogue, as it were, at this point. And the Lord said, as a saying to himself, shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing? Since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.

For I have known him in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him.

This is very, very significant passage. It's a passage that explains the reasons for God calling Abraham and the particular ways that Abraham will receive the promise that God has designed for him.

For I have known him in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him.

[13 : 14] So the means by which God will fulfil his promise to Abraham is through Abraham's ministering and keeping the way of the Lord and ministering to his children afterwards and his raising of a faithful family.

This is the means by which God will fulfil his purpose, to make Abraham a blessing. Abraham is going to be an influence. Abraham is going to raise a faithful family.

And as he raises a faithful family, God will bring to pass what he has promised concerning Abraham. And all the nations of the world will be blessed in him.

That significance that God, the fact that God is going to bless the nations of the world in Abraham is also something that gives some sense of why God talks to him concerning the fate of Sodom.

If Abraham is going to be a blessing to all the nations of the world, then Abraham can intercede for Sodom. He can be a blessing by speaking on behalf of this city that seems to be about to be destroyed.

[14 : 18] Is he able to be a blessing in this situation? What will it mean to be a blessing? Can he influence this situation, this situation that seems to be lost? There's also other things going on here.

God is conferring with Abraham concerning what he is planning to do. Elsewhere in scripture we'll say, see that God does not do these things without conferring with his prophets.

Abraham is a seer. He's also a prophet. He's someone who's part of the divine council that God deliberates with Abraham. And that deliberation with Abraham is a sign that Abraham is part of God's purposes, that he's a participant in God's plan.

He's not just someone who's at the receiving end of God's purposes, but he's someone who is part of deliberation concerning what God is about to do. Other things to note, he's to keep the way of the Lord.

Where else have we seen an expression similar to this? The cherubim who keep the way to the tree of life. Could there be a connection here? There may just be.

[15 : 22] That there is the significance of keeping the way, keeping the way to the tree of life. And if Abraham keeps the way, there is an entrance back to the tree of life.

There is a return to that realm that mankind has been kept from. And there are themes associated with the garden in the chapter that follows.

Sodom is associated with the Garden of Eden elsewhere, as we see Lot choosing this in chapter 13. Maybe there's something there. I don't know. But it's worth registering.

There may be something else that you notice that I don't. If there is, please leave it in the comments below this video or this talk. I'd love to hear it. That God says, the outcry against Solomon and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grievous.

I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to me. And if not, I will know. This expression is similar to that which we find in chapter 11 concerning the Tower of Babel.

[16 : 25] Let us go down and confuse their language. This going down and inspecting this city. Now, what do we notice elsewhere in Scripture?

Two visitors to a city. This is something that we find elsewhere in Scripture. The angel of the Lord meets with Moses and Aaron or meets with Moses in the wilderness and Moses and Aaron go to Egypt to test that place to see what will happen.

Will they respond? Will they show hospitality? Will they let God's people go? Or will they be judged and destroyed as a result of their unfaithfulness? We see it in the story of Rahab.

Two visitors sent to the city. What happens? Will they show hospitality? Two visitors sent to each of the villages and cities of Israel as Christ sends out his apostles and he sends out his disciples two by two to these various locations.

Again, I think there's a testing theme there. They test hospitality. Will they be received? That is the important theme that Christ brings out in his instructions concerning the disciples that he sends.

[17 : 38] Will they be received? And if they are received, then they will bring a blessing. If they are not received, then they should shake the dust off their feet and it will be a better outcome for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that city.

There's a testing of hospitality. And here I think we've seen Abraham really showing the extent of his hospitality and here his response is that he has entered into God's presence now.

There's a shift of the dynamics and there are significant parallels but also contrasts in the way that he approaches God. God has, along with the angelic visitors, the angel of the Lord and the two angels, Abraham begs them to stay and to receive his hospitality and now he's begging for the favour of God's hearing.

Will God actually hear his prayer concerning or concern concerning Sodom? What we see here is a bargaining, a passage that describes Abraham bargaining with the Lord but yet it's an unusual sort of bargaining.

When you bargain, you usually set a figure and the person says no and then you raise the figure and then the person says no and then they maybe present a counter figure that you gradually converge on something and you both compromise and oh, I couldn't sell it for that much.

[19 : 10] That would be, I'll be robbing myself and then, well, oh, you're forcing me five dollars less or whatever and then eventually they give in and you feel that you've won this great coup, you've got this object and they're pleased with themselves, they've made slightly more than they expected but there's a negotiation, a haggling, down to a particular price and that haggling is where one party goes up and one party goes down.

That's not actually what we see here. It's not a, it's not a typical bargaining event. What we have is Abraham just going lower and God saying one price as it were, one number of people and God says yes and then a lower number and God says yes and lower number, God says yes, lower and all the way down to ten people and God says yes and Abraham stops at that point.

Now that is, I think, is interesting. That suggests to me that there is, that there is a sign of God's grace here, that God is not, God is not seeking to destroy.

God is not a God who relishes the act of destruction. God is not a God who is in the business of just bringing death and destruction upon places.

He wants to see them thrive and he will save them just for ten people. Now why ten people? I think because these ten people will be an influence, that they will, there's a sign of hope as long as there's the seed there, as long as that seed has not died, as long as there is still the hope of influence, then that city will not be destroyed.

[20 : 55] Now it's interesting that there is an ending of this bargaining process, the so-called bargaining process, but without a complete resolution.

There's not a lower number set. Why ten? Maybe Abraham is thinking about the fact that Lot has at least, it seems, two sons and presumably they have wives and he has at least two daughters and the daughters in law have husbands or at least fiancés and so you have eight people represented there and then Lot and his wife, ten people.

Maybe he's thinking that here you've got Lot's family, ten people, that should be enough. I've interceded enough for this place and ten people, they have ten people, it's enough.

God will save this place. And is there an end to the negotiation? In some sense it sets things up for the chapter that follows because the angels go to the city and there's a testing.

Is there in fact ten? Is there in fact a possibility that Lot's family is enough of a seed to influence others? Does Lot have influence here?

[22 : 11] Does Lot even have influence within his own family? Or is this city doomed to destruction? Has the seed as it were died in the ground or been in stony ground that has not received it?

This is the question that's being asked. And so I think this chapter moves into the next one quite naturally. What we see in the next chapter is the testing of is there in fact ten?

Is Lot's family enough? Is Lot's influence, is his witness enough to save this place? Has he influenced the people around him? Or is he in fact doomed to destruction?

Or is he in fact someone who's going to be brought out of it, plucked out and rescued, but the city being doomed to destruction? Other things to notice that there is an emphasis upon the familial dynamics here.

Again, that will contrast with the story of Sodom where you have another vision of the wild sexuality, of an unrestrained sexuality, a sexuality that is rapacious and cruel and evil.

[23 : 19] Now, these are ugly words, but this is a society where people are either fucked or they fuck other people. It's a cruel, vicious society where sexuality is used as a means of violence.

And it's important that we use those words on occasions just to recognise how ugly such a society is. Abraham, by contrast, is called to be a faithful father.

He's called to tame that sexuality, that power of creation. So it would not be a means of violence and a source of domination over others, but a means of building up a family, to raise a family after him and to teach and to guide that family, to lead that family towards that which is good.

We'll see throughout the story of Abraham and his seed, that sexuality in its wildness expresses itself on many occasions, that Abraham and his seed express their sexual desires in ways that are cruel, in ways that lead to wildness, that lead to disorder within the family and lead to death in certain occasions.

But God is pruning this family, God is preparing this family to raise faithful offspring. And this contrast between the way of life and the way of sexuality represented by Abraham and that represented by Sodom is a very important contrast.

[24 : 51] Here we have a form of sexuality that is defined by commitment to raising a family, by commitment to his wife, and that relationship between Sarah and Abraham is a very important one.

That God opens the womb of Sarah and God prunes the sexuality of Abraham. And that is part of the means by which God brings the fruitfulness by which a faithful family will be brought into the world.

There is something happening here that stands out starkly against the background of the society of the cities of the plain, of Sodom, Gomorrah, and all these other places within the plain.

Something is very different in Abraham's family. And God is establishing this family not just for its own sake, but in order that it might be a blessing to these nations, that there might be something of an influence exerted through this faithful family that other people might be changed.

That he might command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord might bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him.

[26 : 09] You would not be mistaken to hear echoes of the later giving of the law there. Abraham is to be someone who establishes the law within his house. And later on we'll see that God speaks of Abraham as someone who has kept his law, his statutes, his judgments, etc.

That Abraham, as it were, is the prototypical keeper of the law. He's someone who obeys the commandments and establishes those commandments within his household as a source of delight. His raising of a faithful family, his commitment to that family, his being a father, his very name is defined by his being a father, that that is the means by which God will bring to pass what he has promised concerning him.

This is a very significant pruning of sexuality. sexuality. It's a tempering of man's nature towards an end that is good, that is constructive, that constructs in a very different way from the tower builders of Babel, that is building people up in a very different way from the rapacious sexuality of Sodom. It's very different from the waywardness and the going down into death that we'll see in the story of Lot. This is a building up of a family. Sarah is going to be built up.

[27 : 27] This is a story of laughter following death. This is a story of God reversing and turning the tables. God bringing life from death. God bringing something new to pass.

And as we read this story I think these themes will become more pronounced. But Lord willing we'll get back to that next week. If you have any questions over the next few days I'll be answering more general issues, addressing issues and maybe giving some book review or something like that.

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God bless.■■■