

Genesis 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 18 So they said, Do as you have said.

They said to him, And he said, She is in the tent. The Lord said, And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out and my Lord is old, shall I have pleasure?

The Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.

But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh. For she was afraid. He said, No, but you did laugh. Then the men set out from there, and they looked down towards Sodom.

[1 : 59] And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?

For I have chosen him that he may command 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 to Abraham what he has promised him.

Then the Lord said, Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grave, I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me.

And if not, I will know. So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom, that Abraham still stood before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said, Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked.

[3 : 08] Far be that from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just? And the Lord said, If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.

Abraham answered and said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 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. Again he spoke to him and said, Suppose forty are found there. He answered, For the sake of forty I will not do it.

Then he said, O let not the Lord be angry and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there. He answered, I will not do it if I find thirty there.

He said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there. He answered, For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.

[4 : 10] Then he said, O let not the Lord be angry and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there. He answered, For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.

And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. Genesis chapter 18 is a hugely important passage in the context of the story of Abraham. Abraham has just received the covenant of circumcision. His name has been changed. Sarah has had her name changed. She has been told that her womb will be opened, and that they will have a son, and that this son will be the heir, not Ishmael.

Chapter 18 is set by the oak of Mamre, or the terebinth tree. It's an important site. Abraham has already built an altar at this site, and now he's sitting by his tent door.

The tent door is an important location. It's a boundary. It's a liminal realm, a place that you must cross over from one realm to another. And as such, it's associated with birth.

[5 : 17] It's also associated with death. Important things happen at doorways, and we'll see this in chapters that follow. We'll see it in places like the book of Exodus, where there is a threat at the doorway, where there must be marks made on the doorway.

We see it at other places, where there are the threats of death, or the promises of birth associated with doorways. Jephthah's daughter comes out of the door of his house first, and there are other points in Scripture where we see those sorts of associations.

The child opens the doors of the womb, as we see in Exodus chapter 13. At significant points elsewhere in Scripture, birth and death are associated with the door, or with crossings of things, such as rivers.

These are borders that define identities, and this happens at the heat of the day. It's the middle of the day, and there is a situation where Abraham is resting, or sitting in the tent door, looking out, and some visitors arrive.

And there's an emphasis again upon sight here. He lifts up his eyes, he looks, and behold, there are three references to sight in succession. There are three men before him.

[6 : 33] He runs from the tent door to meet them, bows himself towards the ground, begs them to stay, and receive his hospitality. And the theme of hospitality within this chapter, and the chapter that follows, is very important.

In the book of Hebrews, we're told about Abraham and others entertaining angels unawares. This is the first time that we see something like that. And the sort of hospitality that he provides here is juxtaposed with what we see in the chapter that follows.

Sodom is a place that is devoid of true hospitality. It's a place where we see the exact opposite. Hostility and violence, and the assault upon the people who come to visit Lot, and upon Lot himself and his daughters.

In these cases, there is a very stark contrast to what we see in the case of Abraham. And whereas one story leads to the wife being made fruitful, the other story ends with the wife being turned into something as barren, as a pillar of salt.

In the book of Ezekiel, we're told that the sin of Sodom was one of lack of hospitality, and the treatment of the visitors is the committing of an abomination. It's not just about their sexual sin.

[7 : 44] It includes that. But there's a more general society of violent inhospitality and hostility. And this is contrasted very sharply with Abraham, who's shown to be a person of great and excessive hospitality.

He takes great measures of flour that are used to make cakes. He brings a great calf. And he brings all these other things to make a bountiful feast.

He's showing the utmost hospitality, extreme hospitality. Although we see hospitality being shown later on in the story of Sodom and Lot, it's hospitality of a very different type, and hospitality that goes awry.

The question of who the three visitors are is one that has sparked great speculation. It's not entirely clear that Abraham knows when he first encounters them. At first, he may think that they are merely human figures who are walking and needing some sort of sustenance.

The idea of entertaining angels unawares is important. But we do later see that they are angels. And two of those angels proceed to go to Sodom.

[8 : 52] We're told that they are angels at that point. But we're also informed that one of these characters is the Lord himself. And presumably, the angel of the Lord, or I believe Christ in a pre-incarnate manifestation, these angelic figures that accompany him will go on to inspect.

But there is an identity that becomes clearer of the third character. It's the Lord himself who continues to stay and talk with Abraham and addresses Sarah by name and tells of the birth to come.

There's a shift after the preparation and the eating of the meal. They say to him, Where is Sarah your wife? And he said, Here in the tent. And that statement, I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.

And that shift from they to he is interesting. There's a suggestion here that one of the visitors is not just an angel, but is the angel of the Lord.

The Lord himself. The angel of God who has come to declare the promise. And this is something that helps us to understand what happens later with the conversation between Abraham and the Lord.

[10:06] As the visitors go on, Abraham stays and talks with the Lord who remains there. Sarah laughs when she hears that she will have a child.

It's not necessarily to be taken as an example of unbelief. Even if there is an element of disbelief there, it's maybe more characterised by astonishment and surprise than anything else.

And perhaps what's being said is that she should own that response. That she should recognise that it's an appropriate response in some ways. The child is supposed to be called after that laughter.

There's something surprising and delightful and astonishing about what's taking place. Her laughter becomes the name of her child, the defining characteristic that marks his story and what follows. His life, his very existence, is a cause of laughter. Not just of the laughter of unbelief, but the laughter of astonishment and joy and surprise.

[11:06] The promise is that according to the time of life, she will have a son. It's a significant expression that we see elsewhere. For instance, in the Annunciation story of 2 Kings chapter 4, where the Shunammite woman is told that she will have a son.

And that story is very similar to the story of Isaac for a reason. We're told within a year she will have a son, the child in that story dies, and there are a great many parallels with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

We'll get to that later on, I think, when we discuss chapter 22 of Genesis. After the announcement of the birth of the child, and the laughter that will be associated with that, the men rise and look towards Sodom and move there.

Abraham goes with them to send them on the way, but God has an internal dialogue, as it were, at this point. The Lord said, as if speaking 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.

[12:17] Now this suggests the reason, or at least some of the reasons, for God's calling of Abraham, and the particular way in which Abraham will receive the promise that God has designed for him.

The means by which God will fulfill his promise to Abraham is through Abraham's ministering, and keeping the way of the Lord, and ministering to his children afterwards. His raising of a faithful family.

That's how God will fulfill his promise to make Abraham a blessing. Abraham is going to be an influence. He's going to raise a faithful family, and through that God will pass what he has promised concerning Abraham.

And all the nations will be blessed through this. The fact that God is going to bless the nations of the world in Abraham is also something that gives an understanding 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 a city that's about to be destroyed. Another thing to notice here is that God is conferring with Abraham concerning what he's planning to do.

[13:22] Elsewhere in scripture we're told that God does not do the things that he does without conferring with his prophets. Abraham is described as a seer, but also as a prophet. He's one who is privy to the divine council, who enters into God's presence, hears God's designs and purposes, and is able to deliberate with God concerning those things.

The deliberation with Abraham here is a sign that Abraham is part and a participant in the fulfillment of God's purposes and God's plan. He's not just someone at the receiving end of God's purposes, but someone who is part of deliberations concerning what God is about to do.

This is a very powerful image of what is involved in the church's prayer, as we, as the children of Abraham, commune with God and seek that his will would be enacted in the world in particular ways.

And we interact with him and we deliberate in some ways on these issues. He's supposed to keep the way of the Lord. Where else have we seen an expression similar to this?

In reference to the cherubim who keep the way to the tree of life. Perhaps there's some connection there. God says that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grievous. [14:42] I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to me. And if not, I will know. It's the expression of intent to go down and inspect the city, which the two angels do, which is similar to what we find in chapter 11 concerning the Tower of Babel.

Let us go down and confuse their language. Elsewhere in scripture, we'll see two visitors being sent to a nation or a city. The angel of the Lord meets with Moses in the wilderness and then Moses and Aaron go to Egypt to test that place to see what will happen.

Will they show hospitality? Will they respond? Will they let God's people go? We see in the story of Rahab a similar thing. Two visitors sent to a city. What will be the response?

Two visitors sent to the villages and cities of Israel as Christ sends out his disciples two by two. And this is a similar test to the one that Christ describes.

Will his disciples be received? If they are received, they will bring a blessing. If they are not received, then they 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.

[15:53] This passage describes what many people see as Abraham bargaining with the Lord. But it is a rather strange form 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 maybe you present a counter figure and you gradually converge on something and you both compromise.

And you'll have all these expressions like, I couldn't sell it for that much. I'll be robbing myself. And then others, you're twisting my arm and I'll maybe be able to give you this, but it's my lowest price I can go.

And eventually someone gives in and you feel like you've won a coup. But that is not what happens here. There's not haggling with one party going up and the other party going down.

It's a very atypical bargaining event. Abraham is steadily going lower. He presents God with a particular number of people and then God says yes. And then a lower number and God says yes.

[16:54] And then a lower number still to which God also says yes. Lower all the way down to 10 people. And he stops at that point. Now why does he stop at 10?

It's an interesting thing. First of all, it's notable that God is not seeking to destroy. God is not a God who relishes the act of destruction.

He's not in the business of bringing death and destruction upon places. He wants to see them thrive. And he will save it for just 10 people. Why 10 people?

Because those 10 people will be an influence. It's a sign of hope. As long as there is a seed of faithful people there and that seed has not died, that city may not be destroyed.

Something can happen. Why 10 again? Maybe because Lot has 10 people within his household. When you count his daughters and his sons and his daughter's husbands or at least fiancés, you have 8 people represented and then Lot and his wife.

[17:58] 10 people. Maybe he's thinking, Oh, I know Lot's family is good enough. 10 people. They have 10 people. That will be enough. God will save the place. And so it seems as if there's an end to negotiation, but it also sets up the story for the next chapter.

Will it be possible to bring 10 people together? Does Lot have influence within the city? Can he even influence his own family? Is there in fact 10? Is Lot's family enough?

And these are all key questions that drive us into the next chapter. One concluding question for reflection, largely because I don't have a clue what the answer is, but it seems significant to me. The ingredients for the meal that Abraham presents to the angels is given to us in detail. Three measures of meal, some butter, some milk and the calf.

Now, I can't remember what I ate this day last week, but yet we are told here about the specific ingredients of a meal that's presented to these three figures.

[19:02] What is the significance of the ingredients? If you find them out, if you can think of anything, please share them with the rest of us, because it would be very illuminating to know. It seems that the ingredients of the meal in the chapter that follows are important, and we'll get to that tomorrow. So, what might be the significance of these details?