



BE GINNINGS

A Study of the Book of Genesis

Sanctuary Bible Studies – Woodbury Lutheran Church

Session 14, "Three VIP Guests" (Genesis 18)

Chapter 17 ended with Abraham and every male in his household, including Ishmael, being circumcised in obedience to the LORD's command. God had renewed his covenant, renaming Abram Abraham and Sarai Sarah. Their new names expressed the newly extended covenant, which now included a promise that Abraham's son would be born to Sarah. That brought a laugh from Abraham, his laugh made ironic by God's command to name their son Isaac, which means laughter. Truly God put the "ha" in Abraham. Abraham was 99 years old at the time, Sarah 89. Now the LORD returns and restates his promise for Sarah to hear. She'll laugh as well, but the last laugh? It belongs to the LORD!

1. THE THREE VISITORS (18:1-15)

- Vss. 1-2: Moses, the writer of Genesis, makes clear that it was the LORD who visited Abraham early one afternoon as Abraham relaxed at the entrance of his tent. The encounter happens at Hebron, near the great trees of Mamre (a place of shade and probably a former place of pagan worship), where Abraham had earlier established his camp (13:18). The appearance of the three "men" is sudden. What follows is a study in ancient middle-eastern etiquette toward strangers. Hospitality to guests was one of the most important social functions of the ancient east. Hebrews 13:2 likely refers to the hospitality shown here. For hospitality as a spiritual gift see 1 Peter 4:9 and Rom 12:13.
- Vss. 2-9: Abraham shows hospitality to the strangers in the following ways, many still in practice in the villages of the middle east today:
 - Vs. 2, He bows low to the ground.
 - Vs. 3, He calls one of them "lord" and himself "servant"
 - VS. 3, He encourages them to stay
 - Vs. 4, He offers them water for foot-washing and rest in the shade of the great trees
 - Vss. 5-8, He prepared a lavish meal of freshly baked bread, veal, curds, and milk
 - Vs. 8, He stood by like a servant ready to meet any need (vs. 22).
 - Vs. 9 Sarah appropriately remained inside the tent
- Vss. 10-15: Notice that "the LORD" speaks here. One of the three "men" is the LORD Himself in human form; the other two are angels (vs. 22). Since the earliest days of the church (Justin Martyr in 150 AD, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian), "the LORD" here has been seen to be the pre-incarnate Christ. Martin Luther agreed. See also 16:7-14; 21:17-18; 22:11-18; 31:10-13. Billy Graham writes,

"There are no grounds for questioning the very early and traditional interpretation that in these cases there is a pre-

incarnation manifestation of the second person of the Trinity, whether he is called the LORD or the angel of the LORD.”¹

Within earshot of Sarah, God restates His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age. Vs. 11 indicates that Sarah is past menopause. She laughs just as Abraham laughed, but perhaps for another reason. Hers was the laughter of incredulity. (See vs. 14.) The LORD repeats His intention and promises to return in a year “at the appointed time.” Embarrassed, Sarah denies her laughter, but the LORD confronts her straight on.

2. PRAYERS FOR SODOM (18:16-33)

- Vss. 16-19: Abraham, like Christians today, was privileged both to know the plans and purposes of God and to have access to the throne of God. He was in both these senses God’s friend (James 2:23; 2 Chron. 20:7).
- Vss. 20-22. The LORD’s intention to investigate Sodom shows that His judgment and redemption are not capricious. Actually the two angels head over to Sodom. The LORD and Abraham walk a while with them and stay back together as Abraham pleads for the city.
- Vss. 23-25. Abraham bases his plea for the righteous in Sodom on God’s justice, righteousness, and authority. Christians today who make an appeal to God’s do so honoring the nature, attributes, and past action of God.
- Note that throughout Abraham’s appeal he maintains humility before God’s sovereignty (vs. 27; also vs. 32).
- Vss. 24-33: From 50 to 45, 45 to 40, 40 to 30, 30 to 20, and 30 to 10, Abraham adjusts his plea for Sodom’s righteous, down to what was probably the number in his nephew Lot’s family – 2 sons (19:12), 2 married daughters, their husbands (19:14), two unmarried daughters (19:8), Lot, and his wife. That’s 10! On the Lord’s promise to save ten righteous, He leaves. Abraham returns to Mamre, and early the next morning, from the place where he had pleased with the LORD, he sees the smoke over Sodom and Gomorrah (19:27).
- Abraham’s pleading for Sodom’s righteous citizens and God’s gracious response affirm the following:
 - The deep compassion of both Abraham and God
 - The efficacy or power of prayer offered from the platform of faith and righteous motives
 - Judgment as God’s “strange side”

BEGINNINGS

1. Hospitality toward strangers is an identifying mark of God’s people.
2. Christ often comes to us as strangers in need. (Matthew 25).
3. God’s judgment is never capricious.
4. Prayer offered in faith and from good motives impacts and even changes history.
5. Much of the Christian life is a matter of staying open to God’s serendipities.

¹Billy Graham, *Angels, God’s Secret Agents* (Doubleday, 1975), 33