

Two distinct narrative threads have gradually unfolded over the past several chapters of this great Biblical book. The first involved God's promise to provide Abraham with an heir. That promise appeared in chapters [thirteen](#), [fifteen](#), and [seventeen](#).

The second involved the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those references appeared in chapters [thirteen](#) and [fourteen](#). Each of these narratives will converge here in Genesis chapter eighteen, beginning with God's appearance to Abraham...

***“Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground”
(Genesis 18:1-2).***

As the leader of his people group, Abraham's tent was probably larger and set apart from everyone else. So when Abraham saw these men, he undoubtedly knew they must have come looking for him.

Whenever the word “LORD” appears in capital letters (as we see in the passage quoted above), it always refers to the eternal, all-powerful God of the Bible. However, the fact that Abraham saw the Lord seems to contradict another portion of Scripture from [1 John 4:12](#). That passage informs us that no one has seen God at any time. So can these seemingly divergent statements be accurate?

Well, many scholars believe this verse serves as another example of a Christophany, or pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. This term “pre-incarnate” is used to refer to Jesus' existence prior to His physical birth, or “incarnation.” So while no one has seen God at any time, this apparent conflict is resolved if we understand one of these “men” to be Christ (who is God according to [Titus 2:13](#)) in human form.

As for the other men, the following chapter will identify them as angels. So it appears that Abraham received a visit from three important guests- Jesus, and two angelic beings. This verse doesn't tell us how Abraham knew these men were more than they appeared; however, Abraham's response tells us that he clearly knew they were no ordinary strangers.

We should also note that visitors to Abraham's camp were expected to demonstrate respect to him, not the other way around. Nevertheless, when Abraham saw these men, “...***he ran to meet them, and he bowed with his face touching the ground***” (GW).

But Abraham's demonstration of respect didn't stop there...

“[He said] 'My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant.' They said, 'Do as you have said.'

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, 'Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes.' And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate” (Genesis 18:3-8).

So Abraham showed more than simple courtesy to these visitors. First, he arranged for Sarah to provide them with freshly baked bread. Then he personally selected the main course for their meal and arranged to have it prepared. Finally, Abraham served as their personal waiter by bringing them some curds (a type of yogurt) and milk.

Abraham also arranged to have his visitors' feet washed as well. This would have been a welcome courtesy for anyone wearing sandals in the hot, dusty climate of that area. While Abraham could have assigned these responsibilities to a servant, he personally took it upon himself to oversee everything that was involved in ministering to his guests.

However, Abraham's visitors didn't stop by to enjoy a nice meal and some hospitality. The real purpose of their visit is about to be revealed.

“Then they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' So he said, 'Here, in the tent.' And He said, 'I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.' (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.)

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing” (Genesis 18:9-11).

Consider the magnitude of this promise and its impact on Abraham and Sarah. The opportunity to have a child of their own was something that Abraham and Sarah had been longing for. They had already spent countless hours patiently waiting for God to fulfill that promise.

It is heartbreaking to imagine the pain they must have felt as they witnessed others experience the joy of parenthood while they longed for a child of their own. Then there was the ironic burden carried by Abraham, a man whose name meant “father of a multitude” as he and his wife struggled with the challenge of infertility.

So how did Sarah respond to this long-awaited announcement? Well, here is how she responded...

“Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' (Genesis 18:12).

This passage draws our attention to the fact that Sarah “...laughed to herself” (NIV). In other words, Sarah laughed silently as she reflected on what God had said. Sarah must have been under the impression that no one else could hear her- or so she thought...

“And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.'

But Sarah denied it, saying, 'I did not laugh,' for she was afraid. And He said, 'No, but you did laugh!'” (Genesis 18:13-15)

People can often get away with saying something completely different from what they truly think. While it may be possible to fool others in that manner, we can hide nothing from God. Sarah's experience reminds us that God knows exactly what we are thinking, even when no one else does.

It's also interesting to note that God questioned Abraham regarding Sarah's actions. Even though Sarah wasn't a part of their conversation, God asked *Abraham* why she laughed at His promise. We might ordinarily expect God to go to the place where Sarah was listening to this discussion and confront her. But that didn't happen; instead, God asked Abraham to explain his wife's behavior.

This serves as an important reminder for couples today. If God were to question us regarding our spouse's behavior, how would we respond? Could we honestly say that we are working to set the right example? This incident should thus encourage us to take a leadership role in maintaining a relationship that honors God. If we do so, we should be well-positioned to respond appropriately if God calls us to

account for our spouse's behavior.

So, in response, God reiterated His promise along with a question of His own...

“Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son” (Genesis 18:14).

God reminded Sarah and Abraham that He is able to accomplish anything that can be done, no matter how difficult. That included the power to bestow two nonagenarians with the ability to produce a child of their own.

“Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way ” (Genesis 18:16).

With their meal now complete, these mysterious visitors made their departure, with Abraham serving as their escort. But Abraham is about to find that his guests have not yet concluded their visit...

“And the Lord said, '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 may 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'” (Genesis 18:17-19).

In saying, ***“Should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (NET)***, it's clear that God elected to share some “off the record” information with Abraham. While God didn't have to share His plans, He willingly did so. This brief remark thus offers a great deal of insight into God's relationship with Abraham.

You see, people are generally reluctant to share information with those they don't know or trust. But God clearly trusted Abraham enough to share this information with him. The New Testament book of James touches upon this aspect of God's relationship with Abraham when it tells us, ***“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend” (James 2:23 NIV).***

Perhaps God may grant us similar insights if we share that same trust and belief in Him.

So here is the advance information that God had for Abraham...

“And the Lord said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, 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” (Genesis 18:20-21).

The extreme wickedness of Sodom's inhabitants was brought to our attention several chapters ago in [Genesis 13:12-13](#). Now God will conduct an official inquiry into these cities, just as we might do in a modern-day judicial system.

Like many trial proceedings, that process began with an indictment: ***“There are terrible accusations against Sodom and Gomorrah, and their sin is very great. I must go down to find out whether or not the accusations which I have heard are true” (GNB).***

This review will resemble a contemporary judicial inquiry in many ways. However, this complaint will not be assigned to a human court of law. Instead, God will personally oversee this process with His own investigators.

Of course, some may be tempted to ask, “*If God is all-knowing, then why would He need to conduct an investigation?*” The answer lies in the difference between a *choice* and an *obligation*. God was not obligated to investigate the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah in view of His omniscience ([Psalm 139:1-10](#), [Hebrews 4:13](#)). Since God is all-knowing, He had all the facts before that investigation began.

So why did God bother to conduct this investigation at all? Well, this visit didn’t enable God to secure information He didn’t already possess. Instead, this fact-finding mission was for our benefit in demonstrating that God is just and unbiased in gathering the facts ([Deuteronomy 32:4](#)). God also led by example in adhering to the judicial standard He established for humanity ([Deuteronomy 19:15](#), [Matthew 18:15-16](#)).

Genesis 18:22 then goes on to say, “...*the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD.*” That departure marked the opening stage of this investigation. However, Abraham had something to ask his divine visitor before their inquiry went any further.

“And Abraham came near and said, 'Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it?

Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?’” (Genesis 18:23-25).

Abraham's response to this investigation tells us something important. First, it implies that he was aware of God's holy character. It also implies that Abraham knew what life was like in Sodom. It seems that Abraham knew enough about God and enough about Sodom to predict what would happen when that investigation concluded.

That internal conversation may have gone like this: “*God is sending His representatives to the city of Sodom to conduct an investigation. When they get there, I know what they will find. God will surely execute a sentence against the people of that city when they complete that inquiry.*”

As we'll see, Abraham was right to be concerned. The following chapter reveals that his nephew Lot lived in Sodom, and Abraham certainly wanted to spare him from any judicial sentence that God might execute against the inhabitants of that city.

We should also remember that Abraham had earlier rescued the residents of Sodom, as recorded in [Genesis chapter fourteen](#). While a God-honoring man like Abraham would hold no affinity for their conduct, he surely had no desire to witness the destruction of those he once saved.

Finally, even though the people of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful, Abraham, like God, probably took no pleasure in the death of the wicked ([Ezekiel 33:11](#)).

So Abraham recognized that God, in His justice, would not punish the righteous for the sins of the wicked. Later, that principle was codified in the Biblical book of the prophet Malachi where we read that God makes a “...*distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not*” ([Malachi 3:18 NIV](#)).

So, in making this request, Abraham approached God in an attitude of humility with a request to act in accord with His principles and character. God then followed with a response of His own...

“So the Lord said, 'If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.'

Then Abraham answered and said, 'Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for lack of five?'

So He said, 'If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it.'

And he spoke to Him yet again and said, 'Suppose there should be forty found there?'

So He said, 'I will not do it for the sake of forty'” (Genesis 18:26-29).

Since God had already assured Abraham that He would not bring destruction upon the righteous along with the wicked, Abraham turned his attention to negotiating the numbers...

“Then he said, 'Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?'

So He said, 'I will not do it if I find thirty there.'

And he said, 'Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?'

So He said, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty'

Then he said, 'Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?'

And He said, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.'

So the Lord went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place” (Genesis 18:30-33).

So the mere presence of ten righteous people in Sodom would have been enough to spare the entire city. This serves to remind us that we should never underestimate the impact of a God-honoring life upon others.

For instance, the life of a man named Joseph will serve as the primary focus of the last third of the book of Genesis. As we'll see, the lives of countless individuals were spared because one man -Joseph- was determined to honor God. If there had been ten people with a similar mindset in Sodom, they would have dramatically altered the eventual course of events.