

# GENESIS

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<sup>1</sup> The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. <sup>5</sup> Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." <sup>6</sup> So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread." <sup>7</sup> Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. <sup>9</sup> "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. <sup>10</sup> Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'" <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." <sup>15</sup> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Genesis 18:1-15 [NIV]

## The Three Visitors

This lesson examines one of the most remarkable chapters in Genesis, Chapter 18. This chapter describes the visit of three angels appearing as men, the promise to Sarah that she would have a son, and the judgment pronounced on Sodom and Gomorrah. There is a lot to unpack here, as we gain a greater perspective on Abraham, and, more importantly, on God and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I have traveled quite a bit through Jordan and Israel, and I can tell you from personal experience that hospitality is an integral part of the regional culture and lifestyle. Anyone who has been to Jordan, for example, knows that even a shopkeeper who has never met you will quickly offer you a cup of mint tea, or some other refreshment. Welcoming a stranger with warmth and hospitality is a way of life. We see this illustrated in Genesis 18, as Abraham welcomes three strangers to his home and family. It also reminds us of what the writer of Hebrews cautions us about in Hebrews 13:2, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." However, in the example described in our scriptural text for this lesson, Abraham knew exactly who these three men were.

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**Read the verses listed below and respond to the following question:**

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1. How do we know that these three men are heavenly beings?
  - a. Genesis 18:2-5, 13-14, 17, 20-33; Genesis 19:1
    - i. ANSWER: One of the three men is the Lord, and Abraham knows it. In Genesis 18:22, the other two men head for Sodom. (They are introduced as angels in Genesis 19.)
  - b. Genesis 19:1-15
    - i. ANSWER: The two men who had been visiting Abraham with the Lord are referred to in verse 1 as angels as they enter the city. We will see the label men and angels interlaced throughout the text, with angels again be used in verse 15.

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As we have observed and mentioned in previous lessons, here in Chapter 18 we find another example of a theophany: Jesus, the Lord, manifesting himself in human form. Similarly, we discover that angels can exhibit similar manifestations in order to accomplish God's will. Another example involving an angel manifesting himself as a man (to Daniel) can be found in Daniel 10:5-21.

As mentioned earlier, hospitality is a central part of life in the Holy Land, and Abraham sets a good example of it in this text. During my dissertation research, I searched the book of Genesis to identify all of the food mentioned in scripture in order to see if it synchronized with what we have learned through archaeology regarding the diet of the Middle Bronze Age—and it did. In the process, I learned a lot about what they ate, how it was butchered and cooked, and what a typical meal was like. In general, they had a very simple diet—today we would say it was all organic: meat, grain, and vegetables. What we sometimes do not realize is that in addition to vegetables, lamb, beef, and wild animals, they had dairy.

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**Identify from the passage below some of the elements of the meal arranged by Abraham for his guests.**

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2. What does Abraham serve his guests for dinner? See Genesis 18:6-8.
  - a. ANSWER 1: First note that he had Sarah knead the finest flour and bake bread. This implies that they had grain already stored in the kitchen in large storage pots. Typically, after each grain harvest—there were two a year—the grain was winnowed and stored in large pots in the house until the next harvest. So, in this meal, whole grain bread was served, made from either wheat or barley.
  - b. ANSWER 2: He also had a servant prepare a calf—beef. It has been my experience in Israel that they have the finest beef in the world there. As Bible students, we often focus on the lamb while ignoring that fact that beef, i.e., cattle, is an integral part of the Israeli diet. Psalm 50:10 recounts that, "...every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills."
  - c. ANSWER 3: The other dish that Abraham served, along with the bread and beef, was "curds and milk." Today we call this dish cottage cheese. I think that most students are often surprised to learn that they had cottage cheese, cheese curds, and yogurt, during the time of Abraham. In point-of-fact, the process of making yogurt goes back thousands of years. By Abraham's time, they had developed a process of making excellent yogurt in the belly of a goat by turning, or rotating, it over and over again. I have seen Bedouins in Jordan still doing it this way today. Milk, from sheep and goats initially, in ancient times was often transported in bags or pouches made from the animal's belly (or stomach). It turns out that goat's milk makes some of the best and healthiest yogurt, but they did not know that at the time. On warm days and long journeys, the milk would sour so plant products were added to make the warm sour milk more palatable—which also unknowingly added the healthy bacteria that yogurt is full of when it is ready for consumption. Yogurt and cottage cheese were key parts of their diet, so see that they were actually eating a healthy diet of organic vegetables, meat, and dairy.

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With this knowledge, it is easy to picture hospitable Abraham standing under his tree, or perhaps his tent. Just to his left or right, the men are seated in front of him, enjoying the shade of the tree as he serves them a good meal of whole grain bread, beef, and cottage cheese.

## **Sarah is Promised a Son**

At some point during the meal, the men ask Abraham, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" This is an interesting question, as they obviously knew that she would not be joining them—if for no other reason than the fact that women did not eat with the men, and they would normally stay out of sight unless beckoned. We know as well that these men did not accidentally drop in on

Abraham—they were on a mission and they knew he and Sarah are both there. Note in Genesis 18:10 where Sarah was—in the tent, well behind Abraham and his guests, at the entrance to the tent listening to the conversation.

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*Refer to the referenced scripture as you answer the question below.*

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3. One of the men makes a promise and prophecy about Sarah: that in one year, she will have a son. Sarah laughs to herself at the man's statement. Why does she do that? Shouldn't she be excited? She is finally going to have a baby—and a son at that. See Genesis 18:11-12.
- ANSWER 1: Sarah is so old that she is beyond childbearing. She simply knows the real truth that she is physically unable to have a child at her advanced age.
  - ANSWER 2: Further, Abraham is also very old, and likely unable to even father a child.

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Having laughed to herself about the prophecy, Sarah is once again being human—and you or I would probably react in the same way. We think like humans and we limit God's power accordingly. We don't see that God thinks and acts differently than we do. In Isaiah 55:8, God makes this distinction clear: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord."

God shows us through Sarah how marvelous His plan is for each of us, and how important it is for each of us to wait patiently on God's timing. Sarah was judging herself and her capabilities by the standards of the world and the ways of mankind, but God's timing is always perfect, and it is often very different from what we can envision.

Sarah's lack of faith and her reaction to God's promise stands in contrast to that of Abraham. As recorded in Genesis 15:5-6, Abraham heard the Lord tell him that his offspring would be too numerous to count—like the stars in the sky—and Abraham believed the Lord, and this was credited to Abraham as righteousness.

As we close out this lesson, let's pray that we can exhibit the faith of Abraham; and that in all we say, do, and think, our faith will be as strong and confident as Abraham's.

In the next lesson, we wrap up our study of Genesis 18 and we observe God pronouncing judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, while Abraham tries to intercede.

Have a blessed week!

In Christ,

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