

PM Genesis 18:1-33

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[0 : 00] from the Holy Bible, from the book of Genesis, chapter 18. So Genesis is the first book in the Bible.

It begins with the account of creation of God creating the heavens and the earth, the universe and all that is in them. And including in that the creation of human beings.

And then it goes on to speak about how the first humans rebelled against God, their maker. And the following chapters of Genesis describe just a sort of descent into violence and corruption in the human race.

God in judgment destroys the world at the time of Noah. And then after the flood, Noah's offspring, they develop into many different nations.

And that's described in Genesis 10 and 11. And then out of all those nations, God chooses one man, Abraham. And God chooses Abraham. He tells him, well I'll read for you just verses 1 to 3 of chapter 12.

[1 : 14] Where it says, That's kind of a turning point in the whole of the Bible.

There's this, I suppose, the curse of human sinfulness and violence and corruption. And the effects of that. And then we come to this sort of turning point.

From all the nations that develop, God chooses this one man. And promises that in him, all the families of the earth will be blessed. And the following chapters we sort of follow the life of Abraham.

And we come to chapter 18. I should maybe just say, well again, sorry, going back to chapter 12. In verse 7 we read that Abraham obeys God and goes to the land, the land of Canaan.

And chapter 12 verse 7 says, The Lord appeared to Abraham and said, To your offspring I will give this land. So that was the promise there early on.

[2 : 46] Now this is about 25 or so years later. And so we're going to read chapter 18. And it's on page 15 of the church Bible.

And the Lord appeared to him, that's to Abraham, by the oaks of Marmora, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.

He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, O Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on, since you have come to your servant.

So they said, Do as you have said. And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah, and said, Quick, three seers of fine flour, knead it and make cakes.

[4 : 01] And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them.

And he stood by them under the tree, while they ate. They said to him, Where is Sarah, your wife? And he said, She is in the tent.

The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, shall have a son. 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 this 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?

[5 : 07] 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. 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 to see whether they have done altogether, according to the outcry that has come to me.

[6 : 19] And if not, I will know. So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord.

And 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. 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?

[7 : 28] 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, Oh, 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. Then he said, Oh, 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.

May God bless to us that reading from his word. Let's turn back to Genesis chapter 18, and we're looking at really the first part of that, verses one to fifteen.

[8 : 40] I expect you've all seen a trailer, and by that I don't mean the thing that goes in the back of a tractor, but a trailer for a film or a TV programme. If there's a new film coming out, the filmmakers will often release trailers, and a trailer just gives a brief glimpse of the action of the film, maybe thirty or sixty seconds, to whet your appetite, to give you an idea about what the film's about, and to make you want to go and see the whole film.

Well, God does something a bit like that in many of the events that are recorded in the Bible.

The climax of the Bible, of God's revelation, is Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, we read that in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God dwells in bodily form.

And also in the events of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, God saves the world through those events.

The drama of redemption is played out and achieved and accomplished in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it doesn't just all happen suddenly, out of the blue, out of nowhere.

[10 : 08] God prepares for that event. It's as if God releases trailers. And so much of the Old Testament, what we read in the Old Testament, is trailers of the coming of Jesus Christ and what he would do.

And that is true, very much, of Genesis chapter 18. So I want to look at this passage under four headings.

First of all, the Lord's appearance. Second, Abraham's hospitality. Third, Sarah's unbelief. And fourth, the Lord's powerful plan. And if by the end of the first point, you're getting worried that you're going to be here a long time, don't worry, that's the longest point.

So let's go, first of all, in the Lord's appearance. In verse one, we read that, we read that the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Marmrah as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.

In Genesis, Genesis presents a God who, for most of the time, is invisible and yet who sometimes appears. We read at the beginning of the reading, Genesis 12, 7, which was about 24 years before Genesis chapter 18.

[11 : 39] There we read that the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, to your offspring I will give this land. So Abraham built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

But we're not given any details about how God appeared or in what form God appeared. We're just told that the Lord appeared. And then, sometime later, about 13 years before this, in Genesis chapter 16, Hagar, who is Sarah's slave, she's been made pregnant by Abraham, and she's running away because of the ill treatment that Sarah is meeting out to her.

And she's fleeing. And she encounters by a well the angel of the Lord, who's a mysterious figure who sometimes speaks about the Lord in the third person, but also sometimes speaks as the Lord in the first person.

But again, we're not told in what form the angel of the Lord appeared. Later on, the angel of the Lord appears in the Old Testament. Sometimes in human form, but not always.

At the burning bush, the angel of the Lord appears in the flames of fire burning in the bush. And then, in chapter 17, which is only just a very short time before chapter 18, at the beginning of that chapter, we read in verse 1 that when Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him.

[13 : 08] And then, most of that chapter is a conversation between the Lord and Abraham. And then, at the end of that, in verse 22, we read that when he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

But again, no details about how or in what form the Lord appeared. But then we come to chapter 18, and we have another appearance.

In verse 1, the Lord appeared. We're told where? At the oaks of, the great oaks of Marmara, which is near Hebron today.

And, it's in the middle of the day. And we give him much more detail. In verse 2, it tells us how the Lord appeared. We're told that, we're told that Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.

So the Lord appears in human form. Now, Abraham at the beginning, it seems, doesn't recognize the identity of his guests.

[14 : 20] And, certainly, the book of Hebrews in the New Testament reads it that way. It says, this is Hebrews 13, verse 2, Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers. For by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

That seems to refer to this event here. And even before the Lord, even though the Lord has appeared to Abraham just very shortly before in chapter 17, Abraham doesn't seem to recognize the Lord on this occasion.

And perhaps the realization of his visitor's identity dawns gradually through the encounter. chapter. But when, in verse 10, one of the guests says, I will certainly return to you next spring, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son, it's clear that this is no ordinary guest.

In verse 13, the narrative says, the Lord said to Abraham, and it seems that that's one of the men there who's speaking, but he's identified here as the Lord.

And that happens later on again in verse 16 in the next scene. We read that the men set out from there and they looked down towards Sodom and Abraham went with them to set them on their way.

[15 : 40] The Lord said to Abraham and the Lord speaks to Abraham. And then in verse 22, we read that the men turned from there and went towards Sodom. and that's two of them.

And in the beginning of chapter 19, we read that two angels came to Sodom. So that tells us the identity of two of the men. But the third man, the other man, remains standing before, standing with Abraham.

And it's clear that the identity of this one man who remains standing with Abraham, is the Lord himself. So the Lord appears as a human being, as a man to Abraham.

Now I want us to just briefly move forward, to get into our time machine and move forward from this point about 2,000 years later to roughly the same region of the world to a group of men and women who are disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

And some of these disciples have spent three years with Jesus, witnessing the amazing things that he did and the enormous claims that he made about himself. They've also just seen him brutally crucified by the Roman Empire.

[17 : 12] And then this amazing occurrence that that death sentence that he had been given, being turned on its head by Jesus rising from the dead and appearing to them.

And so they're kind of reeling with that, they're filled with joy, but there's questions that they are grappling with, that they're facing. And one of the biggest questions that they're grappling with is the question, who is Jesus?

You see, they'd spent about three years with him, and during that time Jesus had claimed that he had authority to forgive sins, which, as the Jewish scribes had said, was something that only God had the right, the authority to do.

Jesus had also calmed the wind and the waters in a wild storm on the lake of Galilee with a mere word, something which they read in their Psalms that God does, and only God can do.

And Jesus healed and raised the dead by his own authority, not as earlier prophets had done through prayer, praying to God. Jesus, by contrast, just told dead men to get up, and they did get up.

[18 : 34] And now Jesus himself had been raised from the dead, which vindicated all the claims that he made about himself. And yet, at the same time, Jesus spoke about God as a distinct other, as his father in heaven.

Jesus prayed, Jesus worshipped, and they all knew that there is only one God. That was, as Jews, that was their most fundamental basic belief.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. That was something that many Jews repeated every morning and every evening. It was their most fundamental belief that God is one.

There is only one God. And also, Jesus was so very human. He ate with them, he drank with them, he grew tired, he slept.

And of course, they knew that the Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps. And Jesus, more than that, he had died. How could he be God?

[19 : 39] How could they make sense of Jesus? Well, as Jews, the obvious place to go was the scriptures, the Bible, the Jewish, what we call the Old Testament.

And as they went to the Old Testament, they would find, and we don't know exactly all the passages they looked at, but Genesis 18 is a likely candidate for a passage they looked at, and that would have helped them understand and make sense of who Jesus is.

Because here in Genesis 18, the Lord had appeared as a man. He had been a guest of their ancestor, Abraham, and eaten with and conversed with Abraham.

Abraham. And also while appearing to Abraham, while being in that particular location, in and around Marmara, at the same time, the Lord was still governing the universe.

Or as we sang from the Psalm, Psalm 139, that he is everywhere present. And Abraham seems to recognize that when he's later on pleading with the Lord to spare Sodom.

[20 : 48] He appeals to the Lord as the judge of all the earth. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? In verse 25 he says.

How could the judge of all the earth abdicate the throne of the universe for even a brief moment? Of course he couldn't. He's the ruler. He's the judge of the universe.

And that suggests a distinction within the Lord himself. On the one hand he's everywhere present governing the whole universe. And at the same time he's there standing with Abraham as a man before Abraham.

And so perhaps for those earliest disciples this would help them to make sense of Jesus. To understand who Jesus is. That Jesus is the Lord who has appeared among us.

This time not just a brief appearance but one who was born among us and lived a full human life with all its varied experiences. And yet Jesus does not encompass the Lord in his entirety.

[22 : 03] God is still in heaven. God is still everywhere present. That is why Jesus prayed to God and worshipped God. And later on these disciples would also experience the Holy Spirit.

that is another story. At the end of Luke's gospel in Luke chapter 24 which narrates events after Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus opens the scriptures to his disciples and also opens their hearts to understand the scriptures. And the outcome at the end of that chapter and indeed it is the climax of the whole of Luke's gospel is that the disciples worship.

They bow down in worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the second thing we see is Abraham's hospitality.

We've referred to Hebrews chapter 13 verse 2. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers. For by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

[23 : 17] And the most likely candidate for what Hebrews is referring to is this event here in Genesis 18. And in this chapter we get a wonderful insight, a wonderful window into aspects of that culture and what hospitality involved.

You know, the politeness, Abraham going and bowing down before them and pressing them to come. And of course it's not a quick, it's not fast food, it's not a microwave meal.

They have to select a calf and slaughter it and break the bread from scratch. And you know, it's time consuming, it's leisurely. But in the sort of forms, the modes of that culture, Abraham pulls out the stops and entertains these strangers.

others. Well, in our culture today, the specific demands of hospitality are very different, but the basic principles are the same.

And we as God's people are called to be hospitable. And not only towards our family and friends, but to people that we maybe hardly know at all, or people who are maybe very different from us.

[24 : 34] And we can do that in our own homes, families, but also as a church. And here in this church, you have a drop-in every Wednesday, and that's a great way of offering hospitality to the local community and people who you don't know, people you don't have a connection with.

You invite them in, and that is a great thing to do. It doesn't have to be as elaborate as Abraham's meal here. It might be just offering a cup of tea. A place to sit and relax and chat for a while.

But Jesus, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, lists feeding the hungry and giving water to the thirsty, and says that in as much as you did or did not do this to the least of his brothers and sisters, you did or did not do it to Jesus himself.

But Abraham gave hospitality to strangers and discovered that he had entertained angels. Indeed, he had entertained the Lord himself.

Third, we come to Sarah's unbelief. This is, as we've seen, an appearance of the Lord, a visit to this earth. And there are two purposes of this visit.

[25 : 56] The first is to announce to Sarah the birth of her son. And the second is to bring judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, which maybe we'll look at that another time.

But we're looking at the first purpose. Now in Genesis chapter 17, the previous chapter, God has already announced to Abraham that Sarah would bear a son.

Why does God need to say this again? I think the answer is that it's for Sarah's benefit. You see, in chapter 17, God spoke to Abraham about Sarah having a son.

And I'm sure Abraham would have told Sarah about that word from God. But it seems that Sarah just didn't believe it. In fact, even after this visit, she doesn't believe it.

She's old. She's past the menopause. Abraham, her husband, is also very old. And so Sarah just doesn't believe it. And so God comes a second time, specifically for Sarah, to announce to Sarah that she will have a son.

[27 : 04] That's why in verse 9, Abraham is asked, where is Sarah, your wife? And it's only when it's established that Sarah is within earshot that the Lord announces that Sarah will have a son.

It's announced in terms of, I will return to you. Sarah's bearing a son is the Lord's own work. He would enable her to conceive. He would perform that miracle within her.

And we see here the grace of God to Sarah. And it reminds me of another occasion when the risen Lord Jesus appears to his disciples in the end of John's Gospel.

and they're amazed, they're filled with joy, but one of them, Thomas, is not there. And later that week, when they see Thomas, the other disciples say, we've seen the Lord.

And Thomas just doesn't believe it. He says, I don't believe it. Unless I see with my own eyes, unless I touch with my own hand, then I will not believe it.

[28 : 13] And so the next Sunday, the Lord Jesus appears a second time. And this time it's specifically for Thomas' benefit. And Thomas sees and believes.

But here, it's the same Lord visiting and announcing the birth of a son, and he's doing it for Sarah's benefit. And we see the grace of the Lord, even when our faith in him is weak and when it fails. We see the grace of the Lord. Then fourthly, we see the Lord's powerful plan. Sarah still doesn't believe.

She laughs to herself and says, after I am worn out, will I have this pleasure? And my Lord also, that's Abraham, is also so old. The Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh and say, will I really have a child now that I am old?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time, I will return to you next spring and Sarah will have a son. Sarah denies it, saying, I did not laugh, but he said, you did laugh.

[29 : 30] And the Lord's rebuke of Sarah is gentle. Sarah's unbelief is born of just her bitter experience of growing into old age and not having a child.

But it is still a rebuke and the rebuke comes in the form of a question. Is anything too hard for the Lord? In verse 14. Now Sarah's cynicism is matched by many people today.

Many people today, they might read or hear of miracles in the Bible, the parting of the sea, the time of Moses, or the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And they just don't believe it. They think these things just, they don't happen. They can't happen. And they see the universe as a closed system, as an unbreakable chain of cause and effect and cause and effect and nothing can break into that.

But the Bible's starting point is God. The God who created everything, who created this vast, wonderful, complex, amazing universe, and who created what we call the laws of nature, cause and effect, who designed and made human beings including our reproductive systems, which is what's in view here.

[30 : 56] But these laws of nature, laws of cause and effect, are simply God's norms, God's usual way of working and governing the universe.

But God is free. He's free to do things that are out of the ordinary. And sometimes he does do things that are out of the ordinary.

And usually when God does that, it's connected with his great plan of salvation, which the whole of the Bible is about. The Bible is about God saving the world, blessing the world, through, and it's through this family, through Abraham and his family.

In fact, it would be strange if God put into effect his plan of saving the world without anything extraordinary happening, without miracles taking place, without God doing what is remarkable and unique.

God's plan of God's plan of salvation. Isaac is the child of promise to Abraham and Sarah, and he's also to be the ancestor of God's people in the Old Testament era, the Israelites.

[32 : 17] And indeed, it is from Isaac that the Messiah, Jesus, the Savior of the world, would eventually come. In verse 18 of chapter 18, when the Lord is speaking to Abraham, or going to speak to Abraham, verse 17, the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham what I'm 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.

God is there repeating what he said at the beginning of the Abraham story in chapter 12, that through Abraham, all the families, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

And that is God's great vision statement, mission statement, that is worked out in the whole of the rest of the Bible. That is God's great plan, that all nations will be blessed, and they'll be blessed through Abraham, through Abraham's offspring.

And so Isaac is absolutely key and crucial for that. And that is why this miracle takes place at the birth of Isaac, that this old, post-menopausal woman conceives and bears a son.

Isaac's birth is marked by the unusual, by the utterly extraordinary, the out of the ordinary. But this miracle is also a trailer.

[33 : 51] We started off with trailers. This is a trailer of an even more miraculous conception and birth, that of Jesus Christ through the Virgin Mary.

There's something that even more miraculous takes place, marking the entrance of God himself, of God's son, into the world to be the saviour. God's son.

In Luke's account of that, of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she would have a child, though she is still a virgin, Gabriel kind of answers the question that's asked in verse 14 here. Verse 14 asks the question, is anything too hard for the Lord? And Gabriel says to Mary that nothing is impossible with God. God. And so, I want to conclude in that note and just make a couple of applications.

First, on an individual level, maybe this evening, you, like Sarah, you feel you're in a hopeless situation, that hope for you is long gone.

[35 : 00] You feel you're in a dead end and there's no way out. Remember that nothing is too difficult for God. Nothing is too hard for the Lord.

And that should encourage us to prayer and to putting our hope in God, whatever your situation this evening. Nothing is impossible for him. Nothing is too hard for him.

And so go to him with your difficulty, with your hopelessness, with your problem. Go to God. Go to the Lord in prayer and bring your situation to him.

No situation is too hard for him. God has this great plan, this great purpose that all nations will be blessed through Abraham, through Abraham's offspring.

Sometimes we may get discouraged. We may be discouraged about the church, about how weak, how small it seems. We may feel that the kingdom of God is not really advancing.

[36 : 08] Maybe even we feel it's going backwards. Well, God is working out his plan, his purpose. He was doing that in Abraham's time and for Abraham and Sarah, it didn't happen quickly.

They'd waited 25 years for this and they'd given up hope. But now God speaks and announces that now is the time that I'm going to fulfill my promise and you're going to have your son Isaac.

God is still working out his plan and purpose now. He is bringing the nations in. He's bringing a harvest from the nations, bringing people from all the nations to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

And one day he will bring that to fulfillment and completion when Jesus Christ returns and when the whole of creation will be renewed by him and restored and healed and when all nations of the world will be brought fully into that blessing that comes through Jesus Christ.

Let's conclude with prayer. Lord we thank you for that amazing plan, that wonderful plan and purpose that we read of throughout the whole of scripture of your plan to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's offspring, through Jesus Christ.

[37 : 32] Christ, we thank you that we have come into that blessing and that we will come fully into that blessing in the future. And we pray that you would help us as your people, your people made up of people across the nations to proclaim this good news to new tribes, to new nations who do not yet know this and that they may come to experience that blessing.

blessing. And so may we live in this week ahead in the hope of your great plan and purpose. We may live in trust in you, that you are working out your purpose and that we would rejoice in the glory, the wonder of the good news of Christ, that Christ is the Lord himself.

Come among us, come to save us, come to redeem us, to rescue us and to make us his own. So we pray in his name, Amen. So we conclude singing from Psalm 96 in Sing Psalms.

It's version A of the Psalm on page 126, sorry, 127. And it begins with a call to all the nations, all nations to the Lord ascribe the glory that is due, glory and strength ascribe to God and praise his name anew.

And then in the last verse it speaks of the, at that time, future prospect of the Lord coming. They all will sing before the Lord who comes to judge the earth.

[39 : 24] He'll judge the earth, the world in righteousness, the peoples in his truth. faith. So if you're able to please stand to sing verses 7 to 13 of this psalm.

all nations to the Lord ascribe the glory that is due, glory and strength ascribe to God and praise his name anew.

Dort. Thank you.