

God Visits Abraham

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[0 : 00] Now if you turn with me to the passage we read in Genesis chapter 18, we're going to look at verses 1 to 15 of this chapter as we continue looking at the life of Abraham and the way that God led him through these various circumstances to establish and to reconfirm his covenant and how that fits into our own understanding too of God's dealings with us in covenant.

The arrangement of scripture is significant for us. When you look at the way that the different passages of scripture are arranged even that itself is significant as you read your Bible. Because as God has caused the scriptures to be written down through many years the passages of scripture are arranged very deliberately together and you find that's the case in this instance as well when you take chapter 18 and chapter 19. It's very interesting that chapter 18 is something that happens in the heat of the day that's at the brightest time of day in the middle of the day. Whereas chapter 19 has much that happens at night.

And that's significant because in each of these chapters you have something associated with light and then contrasting that with darkness. You have the wonderful light in chapter 18 of God coming to visit Abraham God coming to reconfirm his covenant with Abraham and bringing Sarah into the arrangement as well very tellingly and very clearly for Abraham and for Sarah herself.

And you find God then reaffirming in verse 19 there how he has chosen and come to know and enter into a relationship with Abraham for the benefit of his children after him and generations after that.

The whole chapter is really one of great light and confirmation and blessing. You go to chapter 19 and it's all about dark things.

[2 : 04] It's about Sodom and Gomorrah and the goings on in these towns. It's debauchery, it's sin, it's depravity. And it ends really with Lot's own sad spectacle of him as the chapter ends with that awful scene of himself and his daughters.

It's a chapter that's just filled with these horrible things and yet the Bible doesn't shirk from telling us these things because we need to know them. And therefore you have this arrangement of light and promise and salvation against the darkness of sin and debauchery and the judgment of God of that. And the two chapters you could say are really arranged around two visits. Two visits from God. A visit to Abraham and Sarah in chapter 18 and a visit to Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain in chapter 19.

It is God visiting that really brings the results that you find in each chapter. Everything about what's described in the chapter is to do with the visit of God.

A visit for blessing and a visit for condemnation. God is active in both visits. Let's look at this visit of God to Abraham down as far as verse 15 today.

[3 : 36] First of all, you find Abraham welcoming visitors. We'll see something of the significance of that. And then you'll find in verses 9 to 15 that God in this visit rebukes doubt as that doubt is seen in Sarah's reaction to what she overheard in the conversation between these visitors and Abraham.

So these are the two things. Visitors welcomed and doubt rebuked. Now here are three strangers. We're told this happened in the heat of the day at what you would call siesta time when people usually rested in the heat of the day.

The Lord appeared to Abraham at that particular moment. That's the introduction to the chapter. And then you have this reference to three men standing before him, three strangers, three visitors. And he, in the way that was proper at that time, and still is, he gave them a welcome and he gave them hospitality. He dealt with them as was required of him as a man who owned this household. And whenever strangers came, this was the custom. This was what you were required to do, to show hospitality, to welcome them genuinely. But when you put it all together, and then when you

go on to read down through the chapter, it becomes obvious that these are no ordinary human visitors.

[4 : 59] One of them is the Lord. And again, that fits in with, though it's not called that here, we understand it to be the angel of the Lord, the angel of the covenant, as he's referred to elsewhere in the Bible and in the history of Abraham as well.

So that you can see the way that one of these three visitors speaks to Abraham, that it is God himself who is present. He says, I will return to you. And then, I will visit you again at this time next year.

I will bless you. I will, the Lord said, shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? So there's one of these three, that is the Lord, and the other two, we take it to have been angels.

And he appeared there in human form. There's a mystery about this. There's things about this that we can't quite understand. But the lesson is that this is God visiting Abraham. This is God coming again to speak with Abraham.

God himself in his relationship with Abraham coming to divulge more to him about what that relationship means and what it's going to lead to. Now it wasn't immediately obvious to Abraham that this was the Lord, but it became obvious pretty soon after the conversation had begun.

[6 : 17] But just dwell for a moment on the importance of hospitality and of Abraham's welcome as he welcomed these three strangers. He didn't know at the beginning who they were, but he dealt with them in the way that the Lord required him to deal with any visitor to his house.

He dealt with them hospitably. He gave them a welcome. He provided food for them. He went out of his way, in fact, as you read in the chapter, to make sure that the hospitality was 100% as it should be.

Now the Bible does emphasize the importance of welcome, of hospitality to strangers, of bringing people that we don't know to be made hospitable and welcome, whether it's in our homes or in our congregations, wherever the circumstances are.

Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 2 puts it, looking back to this incident, interestingly, this is how Hebrews 13 and verse 2 puts it, don't be neglectful of entertaining strangers because by that some entertained angels unawares.

In other words, Abraham didn't know, hey, these are angels. I really have to make absolutely sure that they have a special welcome. Abraham, to begin with, just saw three men and as soon as he saw three men coming to his house, his first thought was, I must make them welcome.

[7 : 50] They must be shown hospitality. I must deal with them as the Lord requires me. And the benefits from that, of course, were obvious. So what the Bible is saying to us is, it's not simply a matter of engaging in hospitality and being hospitable and being welcoming.

There are also results of that. Through that, God is assuring us that our lives will know of benefits from himself, that he will bless such a thing to us, that he will make that to lead to further blessings and further experiences of his own goodness in our lives.

That is why Hebrews 13, verse 2, puts it that way. It's one of the practical points that Hebrews 13 is drawing from the fact that we're related to God in covenant.

This is part of the lifestyle, part of the attitude, part of the way by which we have to be as Christians and behave as Christians in the world.

It was very interesting. While we were on holiday, we met with people who had come to the congregation here as visitors on a Sunday evening.

[9 : 04] And when we met with them, one of the first things they said was, what a wonderful welcome we got. how welcome we were made by a congregation. And they were contrasting that with somewhere else they'd been, where hardly anybody spoke to them and they found it very cold and very off-putting.

Of course, I was delighted to hear that, as you would be delighted to hear that. And the reason I'm mentioning it is that it's encouraging to yourselves that that's how people coming into your midst as a congregation are actually welcomed and made to feel welcome.

And that's so important to ourselves as a congregation. It's so important to us collectively. It's so important to us congregationally and individually as well.

That we are indeed concerned that people will find us as a welcoming family who are concerned to embrace and welcome strangers and say that they are welcome to be with us.

And of course, in the New Testament you find this, of course, in the New Testament age was something that was important because of the danger of travelling about as a Christian. And of course, you'll find that in the world today as we mention in our prayer, the Christians in the northern part of Iraq or in Syria where they are being hounded out of their homes, where they are persecuted to the extent of being exterminated.

[10:25] Really, that's the intention of those who are seeking to kill them. It's extremely dangerous to be a Christian, to give hospitality to other Christians in parts of our world today.

And it was like that in the days of the early New Testament church when the church was being looked at as a threat to the authority of Caesar, of the Roman Empire, of the Jewish authorities, to give hospitality to Christians.

Could actually mean the difference between them being safe or being put to death. and you have to even go further than that because in Matthew chapter 25 the Lord remember is talking there about the day of judgment, about how he is going to come and separate between the sheep as he calls it and the goats, those who will be on his right hand and be led into salvation, those on his left hand who will be sent away to condemnation.

And it's interesting and it's important we notice how he actually defines these two different groups of people. Because in chapter 25 there at verse 34 this is what he says to those on his right hand come you who are blessed by my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him saying Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink, when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you, when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?

[12:17] And the king will answer them truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

In other words, we don't exercise welcome and hospitality so that we will get some reward out of doing it. We do it because it's the right thing to do.

But the great thing is when we do what is the right thing to do, the blessing of God follows. And even the blessing of being led into eternal life is not detached from the business of hospitality and welcome in the name of Christ to those who are needy of that welcome.

And that brings us in this welcome to think about welcoming God. As Jesus said there, in as much as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me, you welcomed me.

me. I was in prison, you visited me. I was hungry, you gave me food, and so on. It's really all about Christ. It's about welcoming God.

[13:28] It's about God actually being the one that we see as being welcomed in his people. And when you think about this passage and what's happening here, it really is a matter, as it turns out, of Abraham welcoming God into his family circle.

When it becomes obvious that this is God, that's really you'd say the theme of the passage. God has appeared to him and Abraham welcomes him.

And the more it becomes obvious that it is God, the more concerned Abraham is to treat him as God deserves to be treated, to welcome him as only God can be welcomed.

Now there's the challenge for yourself and for myself as well. The need to welcome God when he comes is not just to recognize God in the various events of our lives, in the various providences that come our way, it's not simply to recognize that God is there, that God is presiding over this, that he's sovereignly in control of this, that's one thing, that's good, that's something that we need to recognize, but this is taking us deeper into it, it's taking us into a relationship with God where you really need to welcome God where it's about giving a welcome to God as he appears to us, as he comes to us, as he visits us.

That's much easier to do when the visit is one for your comfort, rather than a visit in providence that hurts, that causes pain, that causes distress, that leaves you feeling that this is something you can't understand and can't really appreciate why it's happened, but it's still an opportunity, despite the fact that it's difficult, that it's challenging, that it's not obvious why it's happened, it is for us to know that this is actually God visiting us, an opportunity to get to know him better, to draw from him what we need for that particular moment, so in other words, when you are distressed, when you are feeling down, when you are feeling let down, when you have problems that you can't understand in

the providence of God, when you have challenges that have come your way that you didn't expect, when you have developments that have taken you by surprise, when you have people that have come to disappoint you or let you down as far as you see it, whatever kind of difficulty it is, think of it as

[16:07] God visiting you, in such a way that you will welcome the fact that he is available to you and you will welcome his help and welcome his strength and welcome his comfort and welcome his reassurance and welcome the ability that he has to take you through, to place you above that, to benefit from it, to strengthen your faith, to deepen your love, to enlarge your commitment, whatever it is, it's a situation for welcoming God because God is always to be welcomed, whatever our circumstances may be.

And if we finish the point by thinking ahead, because after all this chapter and the next chapter really is about Sodom and Gomorrah and God coming down to visit Sodom and to come to destroy Sodom and his judgment, there is one great visit that the world still hasn't seen.

It is the visit of Jesus Christ on the day of judgment. And the question that arises for you and for me from this passage is it is not simply a matter of welcoming God as you see it in Abraham and seeking to welcome God in the circumstances of life, but when Jesus Christ appears in his glory as the judge, as the king, as the one who demands an account of what we've done with his gospel and with himself, will we then be able to welcome him?

Or will we be cringing like others? We will want to hide from his presence and yet know we can't. Think about that and ask yourself today.

Am I now in a position, do I have such a relationship with God that will enable me when Jesus Christ comes as the judge to say, Lord welcome.

[18:16] I was waiting for this day, the day of my crowning, the day of my glorifying, the day of my being finally taken with all of God's people with you into your glory.

welcome Lord Jesus. So you need to welcome him into your heart now in this life before you're going to, if you're going to be enabled to welcome, able to welcome him as he comes on the day of judgment.

So here is God coming to visit Abraham. Here is Abraham welcoming these strangers and in it welcoming God. and here is so much for ourselves to think of in the way of welcome.

The way we welcome people, the way we welcome strangers, the way we are given to be given to hospitality, to our homes and to our possessions and to our goods to be available to others as Christians to show them the love with which we have been welcomed in the love of God.

And how it also reminds us of the most solemn things of judgment as we look ahead to that time and that day and that great moment when the Lord will appear in the heat of the day of the final day of judgment.

[19:35] So, visitors welcome, but then that brings us to doubt rebuked. They said to him, where is Sarah, your wife? In verse 9, 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. This is a word specially for Sarah. The Lord knew where Sarah was, although he asked here, where is Sarah, your wife?

You see, what he is saying to Abraham is, Sarah must, as far as you are concerned and as far as she is concerned, you must both know together that you are involved in the carrying out of my plan, of my purpose.

you are going to have a child by Sarah. Sarah herself must be incorporated believingly into that plan. And Hebrews 11 does assure us that from this moment onwards, Sarah fully believed that this was what was going to happen.

She placed her faith, and through faith she received strength to conceive a child. And through faith she received strength.

[20:49] She didn't exercise that faith here. She was doubting, she was dismissive, she 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? The Lord's plan was to visit Sarah, that she would conceive and bear a child.

And when Sarah overheard that to begin with, she was dismissive of it. Now the laughter here reminds us of the laughter of Abraham. We saw that last time when Isaac's birth was promised, in verse 17 of chapter 17, Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child

be born to a man who is a hundred years old and shall Sarah who is ninety years old bear a child? Now, God did not rebuke him here as he rebuked Sarah. Abraham's laughter had in it a tinge of uncertainty, certainly, as we saw, but it was more to do with the laughter of amazement, the laughter of being overwhelmed with this great promise and astonished that this, in fact, was indeed going to happen.

But when you come to Sarah's laughter, it's much more to do with the laughter of disbelief, the laughter of dismissing such a thing, the laughter of not accepting the word that has just come to her that she has heard.

[22 : 22] And that's why the Lord rebuked her, why he went specifically to say, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

At the appointed time I will return. Then Sarah, being afraid, she denied this. She said, I didn't laugh. But then the Lord said, No, you did laugh.

He wanted to make it clear to her that what she did was an act of disbelief. And he was holding her accountable. And yet that's as far as it went.

From that moment onwards, Sarah believed, Sarah fully accepted, Sarah received strength to conceive of a child. What is that saying to ourselves?

Well, it's saying to us, of course, that we must always be ready to receive the word of God. To receive the word of God as it is given to us, especially in the Scriptures.

[23 : 27] God never speaks out of accordance with the Scriptures. God always speaks in accordance with, in line with what you have in the Scriptures and speaks to us through the Scriptures.

That's why it's so important that we dismiss the idea that somehow we can take the word of the Bible and adapt it in some way to the circumstances of our day.

In other words, that we can take the word of God and dismiss it as it is, as some evangelicals even will say to you, and turn it round so that it seems more suitable and better put for our age.

Now, this is not about translation. I'm not talking about different translations of the Bible. I'm talking about people who say that certain parts of the Bible are no longer relevant or relevant in the way that they were conveyed to those who wrote it under the direction of God and we need to realize that our minds nowadays know better than sometimes what you find written in the Bible.

For example, Genesis 3 and the story of the fall of man and so on. Here is God speaking to us. We either take his word or we don't.

[24 : 42] We either accept it or we don't. We either believe it or we disbelieve or we dismiss it. And it's saying to us that God whenever he speaks to us whenever we have the word of God speaking to us that is God saying receive this, believe this, accept this.

It's true. It's for you. And this is how you must have it. But there's something else to you. Notice this great question in verse 14. A question which was used later by some of the prophets the likes of Jeremiah chapter 13, 32 and verses 17 and 27.

Jeremiah given by God before 70 years exile as a judgment of God upon the people of Judah as they went to exile in Babylon to captivity in Babylon God was saying through Jeremiah that's not the end of it.

After all of that is over people will return to Jerusalem they will rebuild the sound of boys and girls and laughter in the streets will once again be heard.

Now that was so so difficult for Jeremiah and his day for the people of Jeremiah's day to actually receive that as the word of God and believe it and accept it.

[25 : 57] And that's why Jeremiah took this question that had been put before Sarah and Abraham by the Lord himself is anything too hard for the Lord?

What a great question! What a thing to take with you what a question to take with you into your own life as an individual. What a thing to put before ourselves as a congregation as we seek further blessing and direction from the Lord as we seek more of the blessings of the gospel among ourselves and beyond in our districts as we seek the gospel to have effect.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Well you know the answer to the question the answer to the question is no. That's clear enough.

But do we act accordingly? When we pray do we pray with the conviction that nothing is too hard for the Lord?

When we pray for conversions are we really praying with the kind of spirit with the kind of conviction that has this question at the back of our minds and puts the matter to the Lord with such constraint with such belief with such acceptance that nothing is too hard for the Lord and that what we are putting before him he is perfectly capable of doing and shall we not say will he not do it?

[27 : 29] when we come to think of what we hope to see in evangelistic work what we are praying for in our own lives for our own progress as Christians for our place in the world for our influence in the world is anything too hard for the Lord?

Think of the things that you have in your own mind today as an individual whether you have come yet to profess the Lord or openly follow the Lord or not whatever it is with us there will always be things in our mind that make us hesitant that make us wonder should I or should I not?

Will I or will I not? Take this question into your life take the answer to it into your life should I indeed come out on the Lord's side?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? What's going to happen to me if I do this? What's going to happen to my relationship with other people? What other people are going to make it?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Is he not going to deal with that for you? And what about my work of witnessing? What about what I'm asked to do as a Christian if I make profession of my faith?

[28 : 50] If I do indeed take these steps that I know I really should be taken but I'm hesitant about things and I'm afraid maybe that I let the Lord down or let his people down is anything too hard for the Lord?

Will he not take care of that? Is this not his speciality? That nothing is too hard for him? You see this is there today to strengthen your faith and to dispel disbelief to actually come to give you added strength to your conviction to what you know best in your heart and what you have not yet done so that you will say well of course I should do it but I will do it because I know nothing is too hard for the Lord.

when Isaac was born Abraham called him Isaac as God had commanded him you shall call his name Isaac and as we saw last time Isaac in Hebrew means he laughs it's to do with laughter and it's really interesting if we can just conclude with this when you think of what Isaac brought into the life of Abraham and Sarah the joy and the thrill of Sarah actually at last having a child more than twenty years since the promise was given to Abraham and to Sarah if you think of the delight the comfort the joy that that brought into their lives it was indeed the laughter of joy the laughter of rejoicing but it's also interesting that it dealt with both the laughter of

Abraham and the laughter of Sarah in their own way Isaac he laughs it's the fulfillment of Abraham's laughter of astonished hope astonished faith that God was going to indeed fulfill his promise and give him a child through Sarah and at the same time as that answer of God as the birth of Isaac the laughter that his name bears at the same time as that was the fulfillment and the actual bringing to realization of the astonished hope of Abraham so it was at the same time what killed the disbelief of Sarah the laughter of disbelief is actually killed by God fulfilling his promises in other words when you find that God has fulfilled his promise that God has made real to you in your own life the things that he promises to his people to whatever extent when you know in your heart the thrill that God has actually come into your life and has fulfilled his promise as far as you can understand it of his being your

God and you being one of his people how that really strengthens that laughter of astonished faith and at the same time kills the laughter of your disbelief so today let's welcome God into our lives let's enjoy his promises and let's kill disbelief from our hearts let's pray oh gracious God make us thankful that we have your word to instill in our hearts all of these great things that we have been thinking of this morning we pray that through your word and through our understanding of this part of it today we may welcome you more and more into our lives into every aspect of our lives that we may indeed come to enjoy your promises promises that are held in communion with you the promise that you will give us to know joy and gladness and comfort and assurance in our hearts help us we pray at the same time to be thankful that you are the

[33 : 27] God who by your grace comes to destroy our unbelief and our disbelief and our reluctance to be overtaken by faith grant that this may be our experience Lord today and each and every day that we live help us to carry into our lives into our thoughts and actions how great is the Lord that nothing is too great for him here as we pray for Jesus sake Amen