

GENESIS—WEEK 14

THE ENCOUNTERS



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is God and the Angels visit Abraham by Arent de Gelder (1645 – 1727)
On display at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam*

This section begins with Abraham hosting three “men” who are anything but just men (and Abraham knows it). Sarah laughs at their announcement of her impending pregnancy, but they let it slide.

The three “men” head down to Sodom, where they have to rescue Lot from the mob. This time, it’s Lot’s sons-in-law that laugh at what the three men are saying. This time, that’s going to be a fatal error.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

Genesis 18:9–19:14— The Encounters
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1 Genesis 18:9–15 (ESV)

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 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? 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.”

Sarah’s laughter isn’t a major offense—Abraham laughed too when he heard the same news—but her lying about it seems more serious. Yet after the visitors correct her on it, they just leave as if it’s not worth any more discussion. Why?

One clue is that the men are referring to her as Sarah, not Sarai. Her name change came when God promised that Sarah will have a son. Sarah has to be aware of God’s promise. Her laughter cannot be of surprise; the three men are confirming what she has already been told.

Also, Sarah’s words show that she is seeing this as joyful, even pleasurable. Of course, Sarah’s exact state of mind cannot be known (or even imagined!) In any case, the men correct her.

But notice that they just declare the truth and then drop the whole thing. They only want to get her attention. Sarah was embarrassed about her laughter and failed to own up to it. So what? They don’t need to pound the truth into her at this time; events to come will do that in spades.

This is a magnificent portrait of how God, in His infinite providence, puts up with our sin.

This is the kind of patience parents often have with their children. “That was wrong, but you’re learning.” It’s also the kind of patience Christians are called to have with everyone.

But it isn’t just patience; it’s leadership. When somebody makes a mistake—or even commits a wrong—our goal should be to see the potential for a teachable moment. After all, we shouldn’t be surprised; we know the doctrines of fallen human nature. So, what’s the point of displaying pique?

Easier said than done, right?

Exactly. These “teachable moments” can be teachable for us too. Growing in Christ includes growing in patience and leadership. Over time we learn more about sin—including our own sin. It doesn’t surprise us the way it did when we were new to Christianity. You might even say that we get used to it. But this is an immense challenge that we must try to stay mindful of “in the heat of the moment.” Being a Christian means being a teacher—not just sharing the gospel. That’s the point of Matthew 5:13a.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” (ESV)

2 Genesis 18:16–23 (ESV)

Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward 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. And if not, I will know.”

So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. Then Abraham drew near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”

This passage doesn't tell us exactly how Abraham figures out that the LORD is about to destroy Sodom. Instead we hear the LORD discussing out loud (presumably with the other two “men”) whether he should tell Abraham what he's about to do to Sodom and Gomorrah.

So, we learn more about the backstory than the “frontstory.” The LORD explains, *“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.”*

In other words, this is all about teaching righteousness and justice to Abraham.

And Abraham catches on fast. He understands that if God is going there, in person, to check out the reports that *their sin is very grave*, they're in big trouble. While God promised to never again destroy the whole earth, He didn't say anything about not destroying one valley.

So Abraham, knowing that Lot is down there, starts to negotiate.

But notice where this leads. The lesson gets deeper. Abraham isn't just going to learn by watching the obliteration of two wicked towns. He's getting schooled in the finer points of righteousness and justice. That's God's signature style.

He is always using sophisticated methods to pursue education and growth.

Notice that this negotiation doesn't offend God (though some kinds of negotiations do).

You shall not put the LORD your God to the test. — Deuteronomy 6:16a (ESV)

Abraham isn't trying to test God, nor cut a deal (“If you do this, I'll do that.”) He's simply asking questions. They're tough questions, but fair ones.

God actually likes tough questions—if they're honest and from the heart.

3 Genesis 18:23-35 (ESV)

Then 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?” 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.

This is a classic example of how we miss the point in what God is doing and even in what we’re doing. Abraham is worried about his nephew Lot, so he nudges God down to just ten righteous people to spare the city. But he’s “praying” about the wrong thing. He’s not interested in saving the city—he calls them *the wicked*—he just wants to save Lot and his family. So why doesn’t he just ask God to spare them?

He doesn’t think of it. He’s under stress. He realizes what God is planning to do and his mind is screaming, “Nooooo!”

He just wants to stop the nightmare.

I do this all the time. God’s plans are simply way over my head. It’s easy to miss a potential solution to a dilemma. For this and other reasons, I often find that I have prayed about the wrong thing. That’s not as bad as it sounds. God knows what I really need, and He knows my heart. God blesses “prayer blunders.”

There’s a lesson in this. By seeing His great creativity, and our lack of it, we learn.

But there’s a catch. To learn from our prayer blunders, we have to notice them—even study them. Mistaken prayers aren’t shameful. If they were, God wouldn’t bless them.

But we’re not going to learn anything if we don’t notice, or don’t remember them.

Thus, I cannot recommend too highly recording prayers.

Reviewing old prayer notes is one of the most instructive (and entertaining) things I’ve done.

4 Genesis 19:1-8 (ESV)

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed himself with his face to the earth and said, “My lords, please turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet. Then you may rise up early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the town square.” But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” Lot went out to the men at the entrance, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known any man. Let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.”

This passage shows the words “men” and “angels” being used interchangeably. No explanation seems necessary; these are just normal ways of describing them. Obviously, they look like men, and just as obviously, they are actually angels, with great powers. This is an important lesson in how the Old Testament uses words. We shouldn't split hairs in interpreting terms like these.

But the big lesson in this passage comes from analyzing Lot's offer of his virgin daughters to the men who want to rape the angels. This seems insane, but it isn't. Note:

- 1) Lot is instantly aware of his guests' stature. Everything else is less important—everything.
- 2) The offer is shocking and is offered in that spirit. It shows Lot's absolute resolve.
- 3) They're not going to be interested in his daughters anyway.
- 4) Given who Lot's guests are, he's embarrassed but not afraid. He knows their power. Otherwise, he would never have gone outside and shut the door.

So, Lot's over-the-top bluster is really just that. He's being as hospitable as possible in a totally insane situation. He'll talk a good game, and if need be, the angels will take over. (This will happen.)

Lot's predicament looks dangerous on the surface but not when you know the whole situation. Then again, great danger lurks. The whole valley is about to be wiped out.

This is a great example of how spiritual vision changes everything. There are many examples of how Christians perceive things differently—such as our understanding of sin—but spiritual vision can be so much more.

There's a useful workbook that teaches this concept in 24 lessons. Titled “The Landscape of Unseen Things”, it can be found [here](#) (under Books).

5 Genesis 19:9-14 (NKJV)

And they said, “Stand back!” Then they said, “This one came in to stay here, and he keeps acting as a judge; now we will deal worse with you than with them.” So they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near to break down the door. But the men reached out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they became weary trying to find the door.

Then the men said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, your sons, your daughters, and whomever you have in the city—take them out of this place! For we will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it.”

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, “Get up, get out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city!” But to his sons-in-law he seemed to be joking.

This passage shows two vastly different paths to destruction. The men of Sodom are acting amazingly evil. The angels miraculously rescue Lot from them and then strike them blind.

So, what’s their reaction? Leave? Seek medical care? No, they continue to grope for the door of Lot’s house until they are worn out. That’s nuts. They seem to deserve what’s coming.

But the sons-in-law are something else entirely. They do not seem so deserving. Sure they ignore the warning, even laugh at it, but is that so wrong?

Absolutely. Does, “*Up! Get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city!*” sound like a joke? Consider just how unreasonable their laughter is. Obviously, they’re aware of the depravity going on all around them. So, how come they don’t see the prospect of the LORD destroying the city as a real possibility instead of a joke?

Apparently, all that depravity isn’t offensive to them—not in the least. They’re amused by it. While they aren’t active participants in the evil, they tacitly approve of it.

That’s their fatal error.

The sins of Sodom aren’t all that special. Everyone has a heart of sin and needs transformation. It’s nice that we feed people, or house them, or help them with addiction, but those are just warm-ups to real help.

The gospel is real help. We need to connect the windup to the pitch. But how?

We need God’s direction. Should we have an evangelism training program? Should we invite more people to worship? Should we hand out tracts? Pray that God will direct us. Ask the Lord to inspire us.

Pray for revival.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's an example of teaching instead of condemning?
2. Ever had a tough question for God that got answered?
3. Ever prayed for the wrong thing, and then learned something later by looking back at the whole situation?
4. Have you ever had something suddenly open your eyes, so that you could see things from a completely different perspective?
5. How can we better integrate charity with evangelism?