

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

God of all knowledge, love, understanding and compassion; give us an inward desire to know You more. Teach us Your perspective on the world in which we live, teach us to love our neighbours, teach us to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ, and teach us to care about truth, peace and harmony. Then, may we have confidence that You both can and will achieve Your purposes within the world. We praise You: ALLELUIA!

### Prayer Suggestions

**1. For yourself**

*Ask the Lord to bless you with spiritual health, and the wisdom to see things as He does*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Give thanks to God for the things you have learned from others over the years*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray for those who organise your church worship, and make sure that it is organised properly*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray for those who have responsibility for regulating the banks and the money markets. Pray that they will use their powers well and to the benefit of all people*

### Meditation

Open your heart to hear God's Word ...  
You cannot be sure what you will hear  
but keep yourself alert ...  
Listen for that precious moment ...  
Catch a glimpse of eternal truth ...  
Notice a hint of inspiration ...  
All within a conversation or read within a book  
standing out  
so easy to be missed  
something more than mere words  
yes  
that which opens up the very heart of God.

You will not know the where or when  
of what will happen  
when your heart comes close  
to touch the very heart of God ...  
There are no rules for mysteries revealed  
no accents of a spiritual voice ...  
But you will know it  
you will hear and you will find it.

Feel its touch, this revelation  
leaping up with joy within your heart  
let it flow from God into your spirit!

Praise and glory!  
Your heart will hear  
your mind will think  
your soul will understand and all else fade away!  
Rejoice to grasp the truth revealed  
The Word of God for you this very day!

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 18: 1-15

<sup>1</sup> The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent during the hottest part of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. <sup>3</sup> He said,

‘Accept my hospitality if you will, honoured guests, and do not pass me by. <sup>4</sup> Allow me to bring you some water to wash your feet, and you can rest under this tree; <sup>5</sup> and since you have come to me, allow me to bring you some bread to strengthen yourselves for the journey, and then you may continue.’

They accepted and said,

‘Do as you have said.’

<sup>6</sup> Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and told her,

‘Quick, get three bags of best flour, and bake some bread.’

<sup>7</sup> Then he ran to the herd, and selected a choice, tender steer, and gave it to a servant, who hurriedly prepared it. <sup>8</sup> He took some yoghurt and milk, and the prepared meat, and set it before them; then he stayed near them while they ate, under the tree.

<sup>9</sup> Then they said to him,

‘Where is Sarah, your wife?’

And he said,

‘She is there, in the tent.’

<sup>10</sup> Then the LORD said,

‘When I return to you next year, your wife Sarah will have a son.’

Now Sarah was listening at entrance of the tent, behind him. <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already old and getting older, and Sarah was well past her menopause; <sup>12</sup> so she laughed to herself and said,

‘Am I to enjoy sex now my husband and I are old and worn out?’

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD asked Abraham,

‘Why should Sarah laugh, and say “Can I bear a child now I am old?” <sup>14</sup> Is anything too difficult for the LORD? I will return as I said, next year, and Sarah will have a son.’

<sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied this because she was afraid, she said

‘I didn’t laugh.’

But the LORD said,

‘Oh yes, you did laugh!’

### Review

This is one of the most charming and tender stories within Genesis, and it tells of God’s visitation of Abraham and Sarah to confirm that they would have a son would fulfil all the promises they had received from the Lord. Reading through scripture, all of this has already been explained in the previous chapters, indeed, most of the story of Abraham and Sarah has been exclusively about their Covenant relationship with God and the child who would have to be born to them if the promises were to come true. Chapter 17 summarised all of this (as we saw yesterday) and the anticipation of the birth of the child is raised by God’s specific promises; but Abraham fell about laughing at the prospect of having a child by Sarah in their old age! So today’s story does not tell us anything significantly new about the birth of a son to Sarah, and because of this, many have concluded that our passage today comes from a different version of the ancient story of

Abraham and Sarah. Because of its lack of significance they pass over it quickly, but this would be to make a great mistake. If we were to do this we would miss out on one of scripture's most endearing and descriptive stories of Abraham and Sarah, and one which is highly descriptive of ancient Bedouin life.

Because this is an appealing story, Genesis 18:1-15 is reasonably well known, but there is one part of it that is often misunderstood. Isaac's birth is promised, but he is not named. He was named in the previous chapter (17:19), where the meaning of his name 'may he laugh' was connected to Abraham's incredulous laughter, not Sarah's. It is later on, in our passage today, that Sarah laughs at the news of her coming childbirth, just as her husband Abraham had done (17:17 and 18:12), but Isaac's name is not mentioned here at all. It is only later when Isaac is eventually born, that Sarah makes the connection between 'laughter' and the name of her child (21:6), at which point her laughter is of joy and not of disbelief. It is most appropriate that Sarah eventually connects her son's name with the joy of childbirth rather than her or her husband's disbelief in God's ways of doing things which are found in this chapter and in chapter 17!

Some people might say that it is odd for Abraham not to have told Sarah that God had promised them a child, leaving Sarah to be told this by the visiting strangers who we read about today. Frankly, we do not know what Abraham and Sarah did or did not share. Abraham could have shared everything with Sarah, in which case, this story offers her the same Godly experience of being told of the coming birth as that of Abraham. It could be that Abraham was embarrassed at his earlier laughter before God (17:15) and was biding his time before telling Sarah, in which case, the angelic and Godly visitation was the Lord's way of telling Sarah what her husband failed to pass on. We could invent a number of scenarios, but they would all play around the edges of this story in scripture, rather than deal with the real events which are described.

Our passage describes a simple and humble domestic scene with Abraham and Sarah getting on with their lives; but they are right at the centre of a powerful movement of God's Spirit which was about to change their lives forever. They had both learned previously about what God intended to do through them, and were coming to terms with the miracle He promised them of a son born to them in their old age. It was something which would change their lives utterly; and those of generations of people after them, indeed the whole world.

## Going Deeper

- The setting of the story
- Abraham's hospitality
- Sarah, and her laugh!

### ***The setting of the story***

The first fifteen verses of Genesis 18 are the first part of a collection of scriptures about Abraham and Lot which take up all of Genesis 18 and 19. They act like a counterbalance to the terrible stories which come next (Gen 18:16-19:38) which include the destruction of Sodom. Today's story of Abraham and Sarah tells us that God has blessed these two faithful people, even with their faults, not only with wealth and stability in their chosen lifestyle, but also a great future through their potential heir. The last few chapters have been about Abraham's and Sarah's relationship with God, rather than the 'wider picture' of the world in which they were set. The last time we heard much about this was when Abraham saved Lot from an army (Gen 14), after he had chosen to live near Sodom. You will recall that Lot and Abraham had previously separated (ch13), and a comparison was made there between Abraham's blessings and the self centred choices of Lot (13:10-13).

In Genesis 18 and 19, scripture makes a strong comparison between the paths of Abraham and of Lot, and this warm story of Abraham and Sarah's nomadic lifestyle is counterbalanced dramatically with what happens next to Sodom and Lot. In the second half of Genesis 18, Abraham pleads for the sinful city of Sodom before the terrible story of its downfall, and the depravity of Lot after his ruin. The comparison between our passage and all of this is not just thematic, for scripture makes a large number of small connections using words and phrases. Abraham 'sat at the entrance of his tent' (18:1) and Lot 'sat at the city gate' (19:1); Abraham 'hosted visitors' (18:2ff) and Lot 'received guests' (19:2ff); and if you look closely, there are numerous other similarities, particularly in the details of the hospitality offered. The difference is, however, that Abraham follows the Lord's path, and Lot follows his own.

It is a strong possibility that that these stories within Genesis 18 & 19 lie behind Jesus' words; *'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.'* (Matt 7:13)

### ***Abraham's hospitality***

Abraham is presented as the perfect host (18:2-8). He jumps up to meet his visitors and provides for their needs (18:2-8). When they first come, their identity is veiled and they appeared to be three men. This is not

surprising in the heat of the day and during the afternoon siesta, when Abraham is pictured as passing the time of day near the entrance to his tent. 'Standing nearby' is to this day the Bedouin equivalent of 'knocking on the door', and Abraham responds to their needs immediately with traditional hospitality; an invitation to stay, water for foot washing and the offer of 'a little' food (18:3,4).

What Abraham does next, however, is completely beyond what even generous Bedouin hospitality would have expected, and here, the comparisons with known rules of hospitality circumstances break down. Once the three visitors have accepted Abraham's hospitality, he proceeds with an untypical haste, and calls Sarah to prepare an enormous quantity of bread, *'three bags'* of flour (v6) being equivalent to a six gallon tank in size! He also chooses a whole young steer to prepare for one meal, where a goat or a sheep would have been normal and still provided far more than enough. The meal was set before the visitors complete with thick yoghurt (sometimes translated 'curds') and milk, whilst the host, Abraham, stood by to watch on the needs of his guests. Abraham had many servants who could do such a thing, but he did this himself.

It may be that Abraham recognised one of the visitors as the Lord Himself, for he had experienced many encounters with God before, and also realised that He was accompanied by two angelic visitors; but that is not said in the text. Abraham's actions however speak louder than any words. What he did was to prepare food sufficient for sacrificial worship, not just a meal, as a quick look in the first few chapters of Leviticus will verify. Abraham had learned to walk with God as commanded in the previous chapter (17:1) and now showed the evidence of this in what he did. This is the most likely explanation of Abraham's actions. Indeed, his humility is evident as he fades from the story; for having been asked about his wife Sarah by the guests (18:9), he responds but quickly leaves the 'centre stage' of the narrative.

### ***Sarah, and her laugh!***

Once Sarah has been called (18:9), we suddenly realise that one member of the party is the Lord Himself, for scripture identifies Him! He proceeds to say; 'When I return to you next year, your wife Sarah will have a son.' This is the same promise that God gave to Abraham in the previous chapter (17:15,19,21), but this time Sarah has been specifically included and addressed. In the male dominated society of ancient times, God spoke in this way to ensure that Abraham and Sarah were both told this important news directly by Him.

It is well known that Sarah laughed at what the Lord said, and less so that Abraham did this first (17:17). Her response was no different from that of her husband, which was incredulity at the Lord's plan, because of their age. Sarah spoke out through her laughter what was obvious to her, and is also obvious to anyone today who reads the story. We may be surprised by the large number of years Abraham and Sarah are recorded as living, but the fact of the matter is that we are talking about people who were far too old, as Sarah herself put it, for sexual pleasure, let alone the bearing of a child! This is one place in scripture where the response comes across as very genuine.

Despite this, we must remember that the promise of a child was one that both Abraham and Sarah had lived with for years. They had been through many trials because of it, including the worst moments of their marriage when Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham, and Ishmael was born. The consequences of that were still with them, and would continue to affect their plans, and God's plans. Now, however, they are more at peace, and although the Lord rebukes Sarah for laughing at the end of the story, it is a mild rebuke (18:15), which almost bears the marks of shared humour, and we are left with the feeling that Abraham and Sarah have finally accepted the prophecy of the birth of their son. Certainly, there is no more discussion of this long promised event from now until it comes to fruition in chapter 21.

One of the last things that the Lord said to Sarah and Abraham before departing was a phrase which has become widely known and quoted to this day; *'Is anything too difficult for the Lord?'* (v14). The power of this question is that it was asked of two people who were on the brink of realising that the impossible would come true through them. What God said was a joyous challenge which required as an answer, a resounding and happy 'No!' Hebrew indicates whether a 'yes' or a 'no' is the implied answer to any question, and the implied answer here is definitely 'No'; for nothing is impossible for God!

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

There are a number of points raised in this text; firstly the issue of hospitality. Whilst the main theme of the story is the maturing faith of Abraham and Sarah, and the confirmation of God's promise, it is set against the background of generous hospitality. The phrase which is often quoted and sums this up is 'entertaining angels unawares'. There is much more for us to learn about the great generosity expected of God's people within the rest of scriptures, but this passage is well known. Abraham's hospitality was given to strangers

through whom and in whom he eventually saw God, and his hospitality was supremely generous, surpassing the standards of the day. This teaches us important spiritual and practical truths.

Secondly, we should look carefully at the famous text *'is anything too difficult for the Lord?'* Too often we quote this hoping it will act as a 'pick-me-up' for people who are having difficulties with their faith. This great phrase was not used in scripture like this, and it is not the best way to use it now. If we say this to someone who is struggling to believe something, it may well confirm to them their problems rather than helping them forward, and the particular reasons for their struggles may need to be specifically addressed. This great text is one of joyous exhortation to the faithful, and it comes from the hearts of Abraham and Sarah, who had reached a point where they were able to believe that God could do the impossible.

Lastly, a Christian can read this passage of scripture and feel more at home than with many other passages in Genesis because of the familiarity within it between the two main characters and the Lord. It is a pointer towards the close 'friendship' we find with Jesus (John 15:13-15). It does not present Abraham and Sarah as perfect, far from it, but it does portray the two of them living happily together in a Godly way, and working through their personal feelings and doubts to a place of faith and trust in the promises of God. It is an inspiration.

## Questions for groups

1. Although angels are not mentioned, would you describe the visitors as 'angels', or 'angelic'? How else would you describe them?
2. What purpose does the food have in the story and why?
3. Which parts of the story do you find attractive or memorable, and how does it connect to the story of God's Covenant with His people?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Hospitality is important to God, for it is a Gospel expression of faith. Do you feel that your own hospitality measures up to the standards that Abraham shows here, given that Jesus asks us to see Him in any 'neighbour'?*
- *Are you willing to hear something from the Lord which would completely change the direction of your life; new work, a change in where you worship or in how you use your devotional time?*

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## Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the love we receive from others, even when we do not know it. Help us to respond well when people help us or show us love; and give us the grace to show love in return. In so doing, may we fulfil Your call, to 'love one another' both practically and spiritually. In Your name we ask this, Lord Jesus: AMEN

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