

“A Divine Encounter” (Genesis 18:1-15)

In a recent survey of a very large congregation in North America, the question was asked, “What do you fear the most?” The primary answer from the pew was a bit startling: “intimacy with God.” It’s possible that many Christians might give this same response. Why is this?

Let me pose another question: What would happen if God came to Thurston County? What if He came to your front door? How would you feel? What would you do? What would you not do? When God visits, people’s priorities are quickly laid bare. Lives change...for the better!

In Genesis 18:1-15, Abraham experiences intimacy with God and once again discovers that God is a loving and patient God that reaffirms His covenant. We will learn from Abraham and Sarah’s reactions the proper way to react to God. First...

1. Respond to God’s intimate care (18:1-8). Our passage begins with the following account: “**Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre [13:18; 14:13],¹ while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three² men [18:10, 13, 16-17, 33; 19:1] were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by’**” (18:1-3). In chapter 17, the Lord had appeared to Abraham for the first time in thirteen years (17:1).³ Now, just a short time later, God appears again.⁴ The Lord is encouraging Abraham with His presence and friendship. The text says that the Lord (*Yahweh*) appeared to Abraham “**in the heat of the day.**” It was siesta time in the hot East and Abraham was resting at the door of his tent. Abraham did not see his three guests walking from a distance, they just appeared.

Many Bible students don’t believe that Abraham recognized the identity of the three men. Personally, I believe he did recognize the identity of the visitors. Abraham responded by running to meet them and bowing himself to the earth (18:2). Even though the ancient Middle East was known for its hospitality, I’m not sure that the 100-year-old Abraham would have responded with such fervor. The clues intensify. Abraham addresses one of the men as “**my lord.**” Unfortunately, this translation “my lord” is misleading, since the Hebrew text refers to a title for God (cf. 18:27, 31). The Hebrew reads *adonay* (“LORD”) not *adoni* (“lord” or “sir”).⁵ The ESV, NKJV, and KJV translate this title correctly. Finally, Abraham says, “**if now I have found favor in your sight.**” In the Scriptures, this is always spoken to one of a higher rank.⁶ These clues all point to the fact that Abraham recognized the Lord (cf. 12:7, 17:1).

We can assume that this was God, in the person of Jesus Christ, appearing to Abraham before He took on flesh and was born at Bethlehem. The Bible teaches that no man has ever seen God the Father (John 1:18; 1 Tim 6:16). Therefore, if God appeared to someone in human form in the Old Testament, it makes sense that it was the second person of the Trinity, the God-man that we know as Jesus Christ.

Abraham responds with one of the greatest lines in Scripture: “**My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by**” (18:3). He was eager to encounter and experience God. He wanted God to remain with him so he said, “**Please do not pass your servant by.**” This is precisely how the church should respond when Jesus knocks to be invited in for fellowship (Matt 25:31-46; John 6:53-58; Rev 3:20; 19:7).⁷ We ought to be receptive and responsive to His visitation. God is sovereign. He does visit His people. He fulfills His plan and program. The only question is: Will He pass us by or will He come down and visit us? Typically, God only stays where He is wanted. He is not like a visiting in-law that forces his way into our home and then wears out his welcome. He wants to visit those that seek Him and desire Him. Today, can you honestly say that you long for God’s appearing?

In 18:4-8, Abraham responds to the Lord with great zeal. He says, **“Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.’ And they said, ‘So do, as you have said.’ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.’ Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds [yogurt] and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate.”** Abraham jumps to provide service and care for his guests. He prepares a basin for them to wash their feet and he promises them that he will bring **“a piece of bread”** (18:5). The Hebrew word translated **“bread”** (*lehem*) can refer either to bread specifically or to food in general. Based on Abraham’s directions to Sarah in 18:6, bread was certainly involved, but 18:7 indicates that Abraham had a more elaborate meal in mind.⁸

As this section unfolds, there is a striking emphasis on worship. [These principles are also relevant to hospitality.] Abraham demonstrates worship in three ways: (1) speed, (2) selection, and (3) service. First, we will look at **speed**. When Abraham saw the men, **“he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth”** (18:2). The text goes on to say that Abraham **“hurried”** into the tent to delegate the orders to Sarah (18:6). I love this verse because it is so realistic. Abraham is a lot like most husbands. He makes commitments without talking to his wife. Men, are you guilty of this? At one time or another, I think every one of us has been. In effect, Abraham says, “Come on in, I’ll wash your feet. I’ll feed you a meal. Rest with us. I will take care of you.” But he has nothing prepared for these unexpected guests. So Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, **“Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.”** “Don’t ask me any questions, Sarah,” he might have said. “Don’t give me the old lecture that I always over commit myself. Let’s not have a family discussion. I’m in a bind. Bail me out!” Like a wonderful, loving wife, she does just that.⁹ In the very next verse, Abraham **“ran”** to his servant to have the best meal possible prepared (18:7). Good old Abraham definitely got his fair share of exercise when company came into town. The man took worship and hospitality seriously.

Not only was Abraham a man of speed but also he was a man of **selection**. Abraham prepared the best available food for his guests (18:6-8). He didn’t hold back his first fruits for his family; rather he gave of his wealth to others. He was a man of great generosity. The feast that Abraham had prepared could have fed a small army.¹⁰ The ingredients for the bread cakes, **“three measures of fine flour,”** are equivalent to about thirty quarts of flour, which would make a lot of bread.¹¹ Depending on the breed of cow, the calf butchered for the meal could produce up to 100 pounds or more of tender veal.¹² I call this “Abe’s All You Can Eat Steakhouse.”

Lastly, Abraham was willing to provide **service**. We know Abraham had 318 men in his household who were his servants (14:14), but here he himself becomes personally involved. He does not “pass the buck,”—he hastens to do this himself. Abraham sought the rest and refreshment of his company (18:4-5). He was after their best interests. So much so that Abraham was willing to make himself available to these men as a waiter/busser (**“and he was standing by them¹³ under the tree as they ate,”** 18:8).

Throughout their encounter, the Lord treated Abraham as His friend. He shared an intimate occasion with him—a common meal. This was a unique privilege for Abraham. It was the only case before the incarnation in which Jesus ate food set before Him. There were certainly many other occasions on which the Lord appeared to people and they offered Him food. However, on all those occasions He turned the food into a sacrifice. But with Abraham, He enjoyed a special relationship. He sat down at the table and ate with him.¹⁴ God reveals Himself to those who desire Him.

[We are encouraged to respond to God's intimate care. Additionally, we are encouraged to...]

2. Rely on God's infinite resources (18:9-15). In the next seven verses, the narrative pans in on Sarah, Abraham's wife. Moses records: **"Then they [the guests] said to him [Abraham], 'Where is Sarah your wife?'"**¹⁵ **And he [Abraham] said, 'There, in the tent.'** **He [the LORD] said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son'"** (18:9-10a). Again the narrative confirms that Abraham's guests were not ordinary men. They had used the new, divinely given name of his wife (17:15). Furthermore, the Lord affirmed His promise that Sarah would have a child the following year (cf. 17:21). He even promised that He would show up for the birth.

In 18:10b, we learn that **"Sarah was listening at the tent door,"** behind Abraham. It was customary in Abraham's day, as in some cultures today, for women to be neither seen nor heard while male guests were entertained. Sarah thus prepared the bread out of the sight of the men (cf. 18:6), and now she remains inside the tent as they ate. While she carefully kept out of sight, her curiosity got the best of her. She may have peeped through the folds of the tent. At the least, she had her ear to the door, anxious to hear the conversation outside. I doubt that any of us could have avoided such temptation either.¹⁶

In 18:11-12, the narrator gives us the inside scoop: **"Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'"**¹⁷ Sarah had been infertile her entire life (cf. 11:30). She was now 90 years old and has been through menopause. So she was doubly dead in respect to childbearing.¹⁸ The promise that she would be a mother next year was absurd.¹⁹ In human terms it was impossible. So **"Sarah laughed to herself."** Here, laughter was not the result of stubborn resistance to God's will, but of hopelessness and years of disappointment.²⁰

Many of you have read the comic strip *Peanuts* by Charles Schultz. For many years there has been a recurring story line in which Lucy holds a football for Charlie Brown to kick. Each time she pulls it away at the last second, causing him to fall on his backside. One year Lucy solemnly promised Charlie Brown that this time she wouldn't pull the ball away. Thus encouraged he took a long run at the ball only to have her pull it away at the last second. As he lay on his back with a dazed look on his face, Lucy peered down at him and said, "Charlie Brown, your faith in human nature is an inspiration to all young people." Sarah became cynical. She won't try to kick that football again! God has pulled it away one too many times.²¹

Ladies, before we move on, I'd like you to notice something very important. Even in her unbelief, Sarah calls Abraham **"my lord"** exhibiting respect for her husband (1 Pet 3:6). Is this your response? Not that you need to call your husband "lord," but do you respect him? This is a challenging example for every wife to respect her husband (Eph 5:22-24). Sarah, however, needs to see beyond her lord (Abraham) and see her Lord.²² Wives, this word is also applicable to you.

In 18:13-14, the Lord turned and said to Abraham, **"Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult²³ for the LORD?²⁴ At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son."** I find it interesting that God confronts Abraham for Sarah's lack of faith. Had Abraham deliberately kept God's promise from her? Was his faith so weak that he could not convince his wife? Somehow he must give account for his wife's response. Abraham was the head of the home and was responsible for the spiritual instruction in the home. Sarah's response of disbelief had mirrored Abraham's (17:17). Sarah saw unbelief in Abraham and she responded in kind.

Husbands, are you modeling a life of faith to your wife? Fathers, what are you modeling for your family? When you're under pressure? Tired? In crisis? Discouraged? Do those that know you best and love you most see you as an exemplary man of faith?

Although the announcement of the birth of a son is made to Abraham, the focus of the narrative is clearly on Sarah's response. Sarah receives the same promise of a son. It must sound like a broken record. It's not nice to laugh at God! Laugh at me?²⁵ I'll find another couple that will take me seriously. Even when we doubt His Word and laugh at His promises, God remains faithful (2 Tim 2:13). We might think God would say, "I gave you this promise twice and twice you laughed at it. That's it! No more promise. I'll take it to someone who will appreciate it." Instead, God responded by dealing with her sin of unbelief, but not by taking away the promise. Instead, He reaffirms His promises to Abraham and Sarah. This is interesting. The underlying issue is the physical impossibility of the fulfillment of the promise through Sarah. Once the physical impossibility of Sarah's giving birth was clearly established, the Lord repeated His promise to Abraham.

God is sovereign over history. God prepares people by waiting. We want everything to change but we won't change. God waits so long because He's in it for His glory. Here is the bedrock issue. The only reason for such unbelief is a failure to comprehend the extent of God's ability to work in and through us. While it may not be reasonable to believe in resurrection, faith transcends reason.²⁶

The Lord had already told Abraham that Sarah would have son **"at this time next year"** (17:15-21). What, then, was the purpose of returning to repeat the announcement? We need to hear God's promises over and over again in order to strengthen and develop our faith. This is why we must assemble together for the teaching of God's Word. We desperately need instruction, whether we realize it or not.

The fact that the Lord knew Sarah had laughed and knew her thoughts demonstrated His supernatural knowledge to Abraham and Sarah (Ps 139:1-2, 4; Heb 4:13; 1 John 3:20). The Lord's rhetorical question, one of the great statements of Scripture, reminded the elderly couple of His supernatural power and further fortified their faith (cf. Jer 32:17, 27; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37).

The words of our Lord speak as loudly to Christians today as they did to Abraham, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (18:14a). What problems are you facing in life? Addictions? God can deliver you! Discouragement over an unbelieving spouse? God is faithful! A wayward child? Nothing is too hard for Him! Despair over debt or marital problems? Nothing is impossible for God. Do you see the importance of this passage for your everyday living? It applies to those with families and those without them. It applies to anyone who feels they are in an impossible situation.

- Those facing infertility...is your problem too hard for the Lord?
- Those facing an overwhelming illness...God is able to meet your needs.
- Those who look at their rebellious children and feel they are "hopeless"...The problem may seem beyond you...it is not too hard for the Lord.
- Those who face old wounds that seem impossible to overcome...is this beyond God's power to mend?
- Those raised in dysfunctional homes...God can unravel the mess and heal the pain.
- Those who look at the costs of a college education and say, "It is impossible." Do you really think it is impossible for the God of the Universe?
- Those who feel that their marriage is hopelessly over...the God who made you one can renew the love.

The list could go on. I suspect I've given enough examples to help you see your own need in the light of these words. The simple laughter of Abraham and Sarah reminds us that we often laugh when we should trust. We often throw our hands up in the air when we should be putting them together in prayer. We are too prone to focus on our lack of strength instead of His sufficient strength.

A question arises as to why the Lord is angry with Sarah's laughter at hearing that she would give birth to a son the following year; but the Lord does not appear to be angry with Abraham who earlier (17:17) also laughed at hearing that he and Sarah would have a child. It is clear that both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the news that they would have a son so late in life. The question, then, is this: Why was Sarah the only one who was rebuked? The fact that Abraham immediately posed the issue of Ishmael and how he would fit into the promised seed if another son were born shows that he too spoke out of unbelief, just as much as did Sarah. The issue was not just Ishmael's person, but his posterity as well. The promise of another son, Abraham feared, would destroy all hope that he had placed in the one already given. So Abraham was equally guilty of unbelief. So why the rebuke on Sarah?

It is true that Sarah only laughed to herself but so did Abraham. Nevertheless, the Lord saw what transpired in her inner being and openly spoke of His displeasure of the same. And since the principle from which both of their inward laughing sprang was the same (that is, unbelief, and not that one was a laugh of admiration and joy whereas the other was a laugh of disbelief and distrust), the unbelief of both of them was the main basis for the rebuke.

Does this mean that Abraham's unbelief was without blame, but Sarah's was? No, for the condemnation of one was equally a condemnation of the other. The text focuses on Sarah's unbelief because she went on to deny it (thereby making the issue memorable and newsworthy) and because, when the whole matter was ended, it also became the basis for the naming of Isaac, which is associated with the word "he laughs" or "laughter" (21:3, 6).²⁷

Our passage closes with these words: "**Sarah denied it however, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. And He [the Lord] said, 'No, but you did laugh'**" (18:15). Poor Sarah. When confronted about her laughter, she denies it. I would too. It's not nice to laugh at God!²⁸ The Bible does not gloss over the sins of its heroes and heroines of faith (cf. 12:13).²⁹ This is yet another indication that the Bible is God's Word. What other book would expose the failures of its heroes?

If this were the entire story, we would be tempted to say that this woman is no example to follow. But over in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, we get the rest of the story. There, in that wonderful eleventh chapter, the hall of fame of the heroes of faith, Sarah's name appears: "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised (Heb 11:11). Now we begin to see what must have happened. After the guests left, Sarah was still thinking about what she had heard, and the words of the Lord came home to her heart in peculiar power, especially the question God had asked, "**Is anything too difficult for the Lord?**" (18:14) As Sarah thought about it, she had to face that question. Is there? Is anything too hard for the Lord? As Sarah began to think of the One who had said these words, she looked beyond the contrary facts of her own life and beyond the contrary feelings of her own heart and said, "Of course not. Nothing is too difficult for the Lord. If He has promised, then it shall be done." Through faith she received power to conceive when she was past age because she counted Him faithful who had promised.³⁰

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Notes

¹ Sailhamer writes, “The author pinpoints Abraham’s location as ‘by the oaks of Mamre’ (18:1). Why would the author bother to mention of this? To simply establish Abraham’s location during the events of this chapter. It seems that the author wants us to note that Abraham had not moved since he first settled his tents at this landmark (13:18). In the context of chapter 13, Abraham was dwelling in the land that God had promised to him and Lot had turned away and ‘moved his tents as far as Sodom’ (13:12). In the following verse, we are then informed of the condition of Sodom: ‘Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD’ (13:13). So as we anticipate the events of 18:16-33, we are reminded that Abraham acted in faith and Lot did not.” John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

² The number “three” should not be pressed for any trinitarian significance as some commentators have suggested.

³ Baze writes, “On three separate occasions the Lord ‘appeared’ to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1) and to others as well—Isaac (twice, Gen. 26:2, 24); Jacob (twice, Gen. 35:1, 9; cp. 48:3); Moses (twice, Ex. 3:16; cp. 4:1, 5; Deut. 31:15); Samuel (once, 1 Sam. 3:21); David (once, 2 Chron. 3:1); and Solomon (twice, 1 Kings 3:5; 9:2, cp. 11:9). John M. Baze, Jr., “The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament: Part I,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 1:3 (Dec 1997), 273.

⁴ Though we do not know the exact time lapse between Genesis 17 and 18, it could not have been more than a few weeks or months. In Gen 17:21, God said Sarah would give birth one year later, and at this time she is not yet pregnant.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 267. See also HALOT.

⁶ Waltke, *Genesis*, 267.

⁷ Waltke, *Genesis*, 271.

⁸ Thus, the NET Bible translates the phrase “a bit of food” instead of “a piece of bread” (see also the NIV and NLT).

⁹ Ed Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993), 112.

¹⁰ In the ancient world, a person’s hospitality was often determined by the ability to provide such extravagant hospitality. See Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 100.

¹¹ See NET Bible and Waltke, *Genesis*, 267.

¹² Elmer Towns, *History Makers of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 118.

¹³ The idiom “stand by” (*madh ‘al*), implies to stand by to be of service, and could even be rendered “and he served them” (cf. 1 Sam 16:22; 1 Kgs 1:2; 17:1 in the expression “stand before”).

¹⁴ Ian M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1999), 87.

¹⁵ “Where is Sarah?” recalls God’s earlier questions about Adam (Gen 3:9) and Abel (4:9).

¹⁶ Robert Deffinbaugh, *Genesis: From Paradise to Patriarchs*. Lesson 19: Marks of Maturity Genesis 18:1-33 (www.bible.org, 1997), 3-4.

¹⁷ Perhaps Abraham and Sarah needed this visit to be an encouragement for them to do what they needed to do in bringing God’s promise to pass—to have sexual relations.

¹⁸ This is the same dilemma that Zechariah and Elizabeth faced when the angel promised them John the Baptist in their old age (Luke 1:18-37).

¹⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 256.

²⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 48.

²¹ Ray Pritchard,

²² Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), Electronic ed.

²³ The word translated “difficult” (*pala*) is from a root that means “wonderful.” The root is used for one of the names of the Lord in Isaiah 9:6, “His name shall be called Wonderful.” The point is this: There is nothing too wonderful for Him whose very name is Wonderful.

²⁴ This rhetorical question is taken up by Jeremiah in his discourse on God’s sovereignty (Jer 32:17, 27) and again in Zech 8:6. See Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, 211, note 4.

²⁵ We might live very differently if we remembered that God hears and knows everything we think and say.

²⁶ Waltke, *Genesis*, 272.

²⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic ed. Davis writes, “On the surface, both Sarah and Abraham seem to be guilty of the same attitude of disbelief. Both laugh—Abraham perhaps outside, whereas Sarah keeps her laughter inside. Abraham even boldly offers a solution to the dilemma of Abraham’s and Sarah’s childlessness that is different than the one that God proposes. So, if anything, Abraham appears to be more deserving of being at the receiving end of God’s displeasure than does Sarah.

Furthermore, when Abraham laughs, he is fully aware that the Lord God Almighty is the one who is speaking to him (17:1); Sarah, by contrast, apparently does not know who the stranger is that is speaking with her husband Abraham (18:2-8). Thus, once again, if anyone should be berated for laughing, Abraham more than Sarah should receive the force of God's anger. Yet, the Lord does not rebuke Abraham for his laughter, whereas He criticizes Sarah for hers. Perhaps the answer for this puzzling question is bound up in the different reactions of the two people when they hear the Lord's promise of a son. On each of the previous times when God declares to Abraham that he will have offspring, Abraham expresses belief or worshipful amazement. In 17:17, Abraham falls on his face—an action that typically (within the Hebrew Scriptures) shows a sign of respect or of worship. Furthermore, although his internalized words in 17:17 and his expressed words in 17:18 suggest that he is having difficulty believing in the promise of God that he would have a son, Abraham immediately thereafter performs an act (i.e., he circumcises himself, his son Ishmael, and his servants) that shows that he is obedient to God, even in relationship to the promise of a son that God made. Sarah never once (up to this point in the story), however, is seen to exhibit an attitude (or action) of worship toward the Lord. Even here (18:12-15), Sarah's reaction subsequent to her laughing is not one of worship—she does not fall on her face before the Lord—but one of denial based on fear. Ultimately, the answer may simply lie in God's ability to understand what was transpiring in Abraham and Sarah's hearts. Apparently, in Abraham's heart, God saw belief; in Sarah's heart, He saw disbelief. This latter heart attitude may be the cause for God's strong statement of rebuke to Sarah: "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?"—a rebuke that God never issues to Abraham." Barry C. Davis, *Genesis* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

²⁸ See also Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide*, 114.

²⁹ Waltke, *Genesis*, 268.

³⁰ Ray C. Stedman, "When God Comes to Dinner" (Genesis 18:1-15): <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/genesis/3665.html> (7/13/05).