

Our Covenant God – Part Nine

Abraham's Sixth Encounter with God

There is a progressive revelation of God in all six of the encounters that we have seen between God and Abraham. In the first three encounters, Abraham did not see God. Instead, he heard His Word. In the fourth encounter, things changed. That encounter started with the word of the Lord coming to Abraham in a vision and progressed to Abraham actually seeing God the Father and God the Son cutting covenant with each other, although he was in a semi-unconscious state at the time. In Abraham's fifth encounter with the Lord, God Himself appeared to Abraham. This was the first time that Abraham really saw God. His response was to fall on his face! (See Genesis 17:3). In Abraham's sixth encounter with God, which is the one that we are looking at now, God and two of His angels not only appeared to Abraham, but they allowed Abraham to prepare a feast for them which they ate while Abraham waited on them.

We read about this in Genesis 18 where God and two of His angels visit Abraham on their way to inspect Sodom and Gomorrah. This is where we see Sarah laughing at the thought of having a son in her old age. Once again, just as when Abraham laughed at the same news in Genesis 17:17, we see that there is nothing hidden from God – not even our thoughts!

Genesis 18:9-15 (NKJV) Then they [The Lord God and the two angels with Him] said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" So he [Abraham] said, "Here, in the tent." And He [The Lord God] said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.)

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; *and* Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a *child*, since I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied *it*, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

God tells Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah

After this conversation, the topic and atmosphere becomes serious as the focus changes to the issue of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 18:16-21 (NKJV) Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way. And the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him." And the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know."

A great outcry had been heard by God against the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. God mentions it twice and the angels mention it once as being the reason for God destroying these cities in Genesis 19. The words translated as 'outcry' in Genesis 18 and 19 do not refer to a third party's accusations against these cities. Instead, it is the shrieks and cries of the oppressed victims that reached God's ears and caught His attention.

It is the same context as in Exodus 3:7-9 where God told Moses that He had heard the cries (shrieks) of His people in Egyptian slavery as they were oppressed by their taskmasters.

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Homework Question #1: Have you ever felt like God wasn't listening to your cries? Have you ever seen oppression and felt vexed and wondered why God didn't seem to be doing anything to change it? In light of this account of Sodom and Gomorrah and drawing from other Scriptures, what is God's response to the cries of the hurt and oppressed?

Homework Question #2: God asked "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?" Take note of how God chose His words very carefully as He specifically mentioned two of His covenant promises to Abraham. What are those two covenant promises and why would He mention them as a reason for Him to not hide His plans from Abraham?

After the two angels left to go to Sodom, God and Abraham had a discussion.

In verse 22 the NKJV says "Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD." However, in *The Five Books of Moses*, Robert Alter translates this verse as "and the men turned from there and went on toward Sodom while the Lord was still standing before Abraham." Alter's commentary notes state: "The Masoretic Text has Abraham standing before the Lord, but this reading is avowedly a scribal euphemism, what the Talmud calls a 'tiqu sofirim', introduced because the original formulation smacked of lèse majesté. (According to Wikipedia, the Online Encyclopedia, lèse majesté is the crime of violating majesty, an offence against the dignity of a reigning sovereign or against a state.) Thus, the scribes did not want it to seem offensive that God would stand before Abraham instead of Abraham being the one to stand before God and thus, they 'fixed the book' by changing the wording.

And so, we see that once the two angels left, God stayed and He stood before Abraham. Abraham's response was to step forward like an attorney would stand before a judge and plead the case of the accused, which in this case was Sodom. From verse 23 to 33, Abraham pleaded for the city and God agreed to not destroy Sodom if at least ten righteous people could be found in her.

Why did Abraham stop pleading at 10? We don't know. What we do know is that Lot lived in Sodom and his family consisted of at least eight people: Lot, his wife, his two virgin daughters, a minimum of two married daughters with an equal number of son-in-laws. We don't know if Lot had any sons.

Nevertheless, God agreed not to destroy the city of Sodom if at least ten righteous people could be found in the city.

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Lot's rescue

Genesis 19 details the events that transpired in Sodom when the angels reached the city. In summary, Lot insisted that they stay in his house that night and before they lay down to sleep the men of the city surrounded Lot's home, demanding that the men (the angels) be brought out to them. Their intent was to commit homosexual gang-rape. Lot tried to protect his guests but in the end the angels had to strike the men of the city with blindness. The angels then took Lot, his wife, and his two virgin daughters (his son-in-laws refused to leave with their families) and they escaped to a small city called Zoar. Lot's wife never made it, though, because she looked back at Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt. Shortly after sunrise, Lot and his family entered Zoar, and God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with brimstone and fire.

What is fire and brimstone?

Genesis 19:23-24 (NKJV) The sun had risen upon the earth when Lot entered Zoar. Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens.

According to Rami G. Khouri, author of *Antiquities of The Jordan Rift Valley*, fire and brimstone is formed when sulfur in its natural state ignites. Considering the large deposits of sulfur and petroleum found in the area, all that God had to do in order to rain fire and brimstone down was to send down a few lightning bolts to set everything ablaze.

Two cities in Jordan, Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, are two Bronze Age cities whose burned remains have been discovered and excavated. They are believed to be Sodom and Gomorrah, respectively.

Bab edh-Dhra (bāb al-dhrā') is the site of an Early Bronze Age city, located near the Dead Sea, in Wadi Araba, forwarded as a candidate for the location of Biblical Sodom.

Bitumen and petroleum deposits have been found in the area, which contain sulfur and natural gas (as such deposits normally do), and one theory suggests that a pocket of natural gas led to the incineration of the city.

Numeira is the candidate site for Gomorrah

Source: Wikipedia, the Online Encyclopedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

Abraham's pleadings for the city of Sodom would have saved the city if there had been ten righteous people there. Only four people were able to leave and only three survived the flight. That number fell far short of ten. Lot and his family were not saved because of Abraham's bargaining with God.

Abraham saw the smoke rising

Genesis 19:27-28 (NKJV) And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. Then he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace.

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Homework Question #3: Put yourself in Abraham's shoes as he gazed across the plain towards Sodom and Gomorrah. What do you think he was thinking and feeling? How did that sight affect him?

Because the focus of this study is covenant, a summary of these events is more than sufficient for our purposes. If you wish to read it in detail, please do so. We will discuss Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction in a later study about the effects of sin. For now, the key point to take note of is that God rescued Lot because of His devotion to His covenant partner, Abraham!

Why did God save Lot? Because of His Chesed!

Genesis 19:29 (NKJV) And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that **God remembered Abraham**, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot had dwelt.

Genesis 19:19 (NKJV) Indeed now, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have increased your **chesed** which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, lest some evil overtake me and I die.

This is actually the very first time that we find the word 'chesed' in the Bible.

Homework Question #4: Examine Genesis 19:19 and Genesis 19:29. In part two of this study we looked at the word 'chesed' and learned that it means 'covenant devotion'. Bearing that in mind, in your own words explain why God saved Lot and his family?
