

ABRAHAM: ONE NOMAD'S AMAZING JOURNEY OF FAITH

One of Those Upper-Downer Days

Genesis 18:1–5, 9–16, 20–22



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Genesis 18 opens with a familiar phrase, “The LORD appeared again to Abraham” (Genesis 18:1). This is the sixth account of God appearing or speaking to Abraham. Can you recall the previous five? Fill in the blanks, and if you need help find the answer in the references with each statement.

- *Ur of the _____.* God gave Abraham the initial covenant (12:1–3; 15:7).
- *Beside the oak of _____.* God promised to give land to Abraham’s descendants (12:6–7).
- *Between _____ and Ai.* God restated the promises of land and descendants (13:3, 14–16).
- *After rescuing _____.* God reaffirmed His promises through the ceremony of “cutting” the covenant (14:14–16; 15:9–21).
- *When Abraham was _____ years old.* God reaffirmed the covenant, instituting the rite of circumcision (17:1–14).

Either through vision or voice God conversed with Abraham as a close companion, for the Lord knew Abraham as “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8). However, the appearance in Genesis 18 was the most intimate of them all. In this instance, the Lord donned flesh and bone and came to Abraham and Sarah in the form of a man—a divine manifestation known as a *theophany*. Accompanying Him were two angels also dressed in human garb (Genesis 18:22; 19:1). Let’s take a closer look at this most amazing event.

Quotable

Be confident that nothing is too difficult for the Lord. Please keep that in mind! It’ll boost your attitude through life.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

The scene unfolded in three parts: an unexpected visit (Genesis 18:1–8); a surprising promise (18:9–15); and a judgment revealed (18:16–33). Pause to pray, and then read each section. As you enter the scene, open your heart to worship. Take in the wonder of our God who took on human form and stepped onto the arid landscape of Abraham's world to share a Bedouin's meal under the shade of an oak tree.



Searching the Scriptures Method

The goal of Bible study is to spiritually nourish ourselves. We become self-sustaining physically when we fix our own meals and feed ourselves. Sustaining ourselves spiritually requires a similar process. By following the *Searching the Scriptures* method, we feed ourselves on the Word of God. And then as we live out what we've learned from the Bible, the Spirit of God empowers and changes us. With this goal in mind, let's follow the steps of Bible study: observation, interpretation, correlation, and the all-important final step of application.

The scene displays the heart of God who yearns to fellowship with His beloved creation on our level. Let's follow the action as it unfolded, with three strangers arriving without warning.

Unexpected Visit — Genesis 18:1–8

Read again Genesis 18:1–8, and look closely at the characters in the story. In the first verse, the author of Genesis whispers in the reader's ear the secret identity of one of the three men: "The LORD," in Hebrew, *Yahweh* (Genesis 18:1). Abraham, however, didn't recognize his divine Friend; he saw only three strangers "standing nearby" (18:2).

Observation

In the following space, write down *where* the action took place, *when*, and *what* happened.



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Even though Abraham didn't recognize the heavenly luminaries, still, he rolled out the red carpet. He offered his guests water to wash their feet, fresh-baked bread, a choice calf, and yogurt and milk. And he waited on them, most likely standing while they ate—a sign of highest honor. This was no ordinary afternoon lunch!

Interpretation

Why did the author of Genesis go to such great lengths to describe this meal? A clue to the meaning might be in the contrast between the graciousness of Abraham and the disgracefulness of the Sodomites. Read ahead to the scene when the two angels arrived in Sodom later that night (Genesis 19:4–5).

Abraham's hospitality models proper fellowship with God. What qualities do you see that we can emulate?

What does the contrast between Abraham's decency and the Sodomites' indecency, along with God's response to both, communicate about God our Judge?

Surprising Promise for Sarah—Genesis 18:9–15

After the meal, the visitors came right to the crux of their visit, asking Abraham, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" (Genesis 18:9). Read again this section, and look for the climactic moment when God revealed His name.

Observation

What hints suggest that the guest foretelling future events was the Lord?



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Correlation: The Pre-Incarnate Son in the Old Testament

Dig a little deeper into other Old Testament passages that describe appearances of the Lord by reading the online article, “*The Pre-Incarnate Son*.” Write down what you discover.

What a marvel! The Son of God appeared to personally foretell the birth of Isaac, who would continue the line of descendants leading up to Jesus’ own birth as a baby in Bethlehem.

Observe a significant repetition in this section (Genesis 18:10 and 14). What made it necessary for the Lord to repeat Himself?

The Lord’s prediction of a son seemed so impossible to 89-year-old Sarah, it was laughable! And yet, *stirring* life within Sarah’s dead womb was far from impossible for the One who *created* all life with just a word. “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” asked the mysterious guest (18:14).

God confronted Sarah for her laughter not to shame her but to expose the cynicism that had supplanted her faith. The mother of Isaac—through whom Christ the Redeemer would come—needed a touch of grace. Before God could spark life in Sarah’s womb, He had to spark hope in her heart and restore her trust in Him.



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Interpretation

The prediction of Isaac's birth reveals the real purpose for the meal: to reaffirm the covenant in the most personal way. Commentator Allen P. Ross explains the significance of God sharing a meal with Abraham:

To eat together was important for fellowship, peace offerings, and treaties. When the Lord was ready to specify the fulfillment of the covenantal promise, He came in person and ate in Abraham's tent. Nothing could more significantly communicate their close relationship.¹

What insight into the nature of God does this episode with Abraham and Sarah teach you?

Judgment Revealed to Abraham—Genesis 18:16–33

On the heels of hearing God's reassuring promise that he and Sarah will have a son, Abraham learned news that plummeted him from an "upper" day to a "downer" day—from the thrill of receiving God's blessing to the dread of foreseeing God's judgment on Sodom, the city of Lot and his family. Read this section again, looking for evidence of Abraham's role as an intercessor.

Observation

Just as the blood of innocent Abel cried out to the Lord (Genesis 4:10) and, later, the Hebrew slaves under the taskmasters' whips cried out to Him (Exodus 3:7), so also the "outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah" reverberated through the throne room of the King of heaven (Genesis 18:20). The screams of the violated victims had reached the ear of our just God, and He came to see for Himself whether the actions of the abusers were as wicked as He had heard (18:21).

What were Abraham's reasons for asking the Lord to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah? For added insight, read 2 Peter 3:9.



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Interpretation

What is the point of God agreeing to spare the cities if he found 50 . . . 45 . . . 30 . . . 20 . . . 10 righteous people (Genesis 18:26–33)? What does this sequence teach about intercession, compassion, and justice?

Genesis 18 is full of contrasts: Abraham's respectful welcome versus Sodom's disrespectful welcome; God's initial message of love and blessing versus His message of doom; the delightful daylight meal versus the judgment clouds gathering over Sodom. Light and darkness appear side by side, an upper and downer in the same day. What can we learn?

Application: Principles to Remember

Chuck Swindoll lists four principles to apply.

- *Receive others as if they are angels.* The writer to the Hebrews makes this point: Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! (Hebrews 13:2)
- *Be confident that nothing is too difficult with God.* This truth broke through Sarah's cynicism and restored her hope, and it can restore yours as well.
- *Stay sensitive to the Lord.* Remember, God is not only your Creator and Savior, He's also your Friend.
- *Stay passionate in prayer.* For whom are you interceding? Don't give up pleading with the Lord! When we focus on others by praying for the lost and encouraging the hopeless, our hearts will be softened and we'll experience joy that transcends upper-downer days.

Do you find other principles to apply? Write them down.



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What can you put into practice today?

Just as Abraham saw God standing nearby, look for God in everyday settings. Listen for His voice and look for His fingerprints in creation around you. Pause to hear Him as you read Scripture and sing spiritual songs. Such common occurrences reveal the Lord's plans for you. Keep your eyes, ears, and heart open to the One who steps into your world for the sole purpose of being with you.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for entering my world and giving me a fresh script to follow. Guard me from being cynical and thinking that I know everything about what can and cannot happen. I need Your perspective. I need Your presence in the ordinary events of eating a meal. Keep me soft, sensitive, open, and aware that You're doing a work in my life. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Allen P. Ross, "Genesis," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament ed.*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, SP Publications, 1985), 59.



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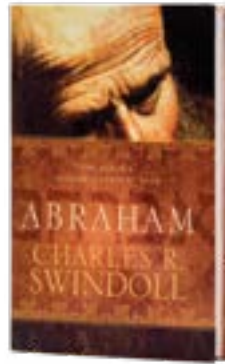
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For the 2017–2018 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Searching the Scriptures Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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