

CHAPTER 18

We have an account in this chapter of another interview between God and Abraham, probably within a few days after the former, as the reward of his cheerful obedience to the law of circumcision. Here is,

I. The kind visit which God made him, and the kind entertainment which he gave to that visit (v. 1-8).

II. The matters discoursed of between them.

1. The purposes of God's love concerning Sarah (v. 9-15).
2. The purposes of God's wrath concerning Sodom.
 - (1.) The discovery God made to Abraham of his design to destroy Sodom (v. 16-22).
 - (2.) The intercession Abraham made for Sodom (v. 23, etc.).

~~GEN~~ GENESIS 18:1-8

ABRAHAM'S INTERVIEW WITH THE ANGELS

The appearance of God to Abraham seems to have had in it more of freedom and familiarity, and less of grandeur and majesty, than those we have hitherto read of; and therefore more resembles that great visit which, in the fullness of time, the Son of God was to make to the world, when the Word would be flesh, and appear as one of us. Observe here,

I. How Abraham expected strangers, and how richly his expectations were answered (v. 1): *He sat in the tent-door, in the heat of the day*; not so much to repose or divert himself as to seek an opportunity of doing good, by giving entertainment to strangers and travellers, there being perhaps no inns to accommodate them. Note, 1. We are likely to have the most comfort of those good works to which we are most free and forward.

2. God graciously visits those in whom he has first raised the expectation of him, and manifests himself to those that wait for him. When Abraham was thus sitting, he saw three men coming towards him. These three men were three spiritual heavenly beings, now assuming human bodies, that they might be visible to Abraham, and conversable with him. Some think

that they were all created angels, others that one of them was the Son of God, the angel of the covenant, whom Abraham distinguished from the rest (v. 3), and who is called *Jehovah*, v. 13. The apostle improves this for the encouragement of hospitality, ^{<381D} Hebrews 13:2. Those that have been forward to entertain strangers have entertained angels, to their unspeakable honour and satisfaction. Where, upon a prudent and impartial judgment, we see no cause to suspect ill, charity teaches us to hope well and to show kindness accordingly. It is better to feed five drones, or wasps, than to starve one bee.

II. How Abraham entertained those strangers, and how kindly his entertainment was accepted. The Holy Ghost takes particular notice of the very free and affectionate welcome Abraham gave to the strangers.

1. He was very complaisant and respectful to them. Forgetting his age and gravity, he *ran to meet them* in the most obliging manner, and with all due courtesy *bowed himself towards the ground*, though as yet he knew nothing of them but that they appeared graceful respectable men. Note, Religion does not destroy, but improve, good manners, and teaches us to honour all men. Decent civility is a great ornament to piety.

2. He was very earnest and importunate for their stay, and took it as a great favour, v. 3, 4. Note,

(1.) It becomes those whom God has blessed with plenty to be liberal and open-hearted in their entertainments, according to their ability, and (not in compliment, but cordially) to bid their friends welcome. We should take a pleasure in showing kindness to any; for both God and man love a cheerful giver. Who would *eat the bread of him that has an evil eye?* ^{<381E6} Proverbs 23:6, 7.

(2.) Those that would have communion with God must earnestly desire it and pray for it. God is a guest worth entertaining.

3. His entertainment, though it was very free, was yet plain and homely, and there was nothing in it of the gaiety and niceness of our times. His dining-room was an arbour under a tree; no rich table-linen, no side-board set with plate. His feast was a joint or two of veal, and some cakes baked on the hearth, and both hastily dressed up. Here were no dainties, no varieties, no forced-meats, no sweet-meats, but good, plain, wholesome food, though Abraham was very rich and his guests were very honourable.

Note, We ought not to be curious in our diet. Let us be thankful for food convenient, though it be homely and common; and not be desirous of dainties, for they are deceitful meat to those that love them and set their hearts upon them.

4. He and his wife were both of them very attentive and busy, in accommodating their guests with the best they had. Sarah herself is cook and baker; Abraham runs to fetch the calf, brings out the milk and butter, and thinks it not below him to wait at table, that he might show how heartily welcome his guests were. Note,

(1.) Those that have real merit need not take state upon them, nor are their prudent condescensions any disparagement to them.

(2.) Hearty friendship will stoop to any thing but sin. Christ himself has taught us to wash one another's feet, in humble love. Those that thus abase themselves shall be exalted. Here Abraham's faith showed itself in good works; and so must ours, else it is dead, ^{<302>}James 2:21, 26. The father of the faithful was famous for charity, and generosity, and good house-keeping; and we must learn of him to *do good and to communicate*. Job did not eat his morsel alone, ^{<317>}Job 31:17.

<189> GENESIS 18:9-15

ABRAHAM'S INTERVIEW WITH THE ANGELS

These heavenly guests (being sent to confirm the promise lately made to Abraham, that he should have a son by Sarah), while they are receiving Abraham's kind entertainment, they return his kindness. He receives angels, and has angels' rewards, a gracious message from heaven, ^{<100>}Matthew 10:41.

I. Care is taken that Sarah should be within hearing. She must conceive by faith, and therefore the promise must be made to her, ^{<311>}Hebrews 11:11. It was the modest usage of that time that the women did not sit at meat with men, at least not with strangers, but confined themselves to their own apartments; therefore Sarah is here out of sight: but she must not be out of hearing. The angels enquire (v. 9), *Where is Sarah thy wife?* By naming her, they gave intimation enough to Abraham that, though they seemed

strangers, yet they very well knew him and his family. By enquiring after her, they showed a friendly kind concern for the family and relations of one whom they found respectful to them. It is a piece of common civility, which ought to proceed from a principle of Christian love, and then it is sanctified. And, by speaking of her (she over-hearing it), they drew her to listen to what was further to be said. *Where is Sarah thy wife?* say the angels. *“Behold in the tent,”* says Abraham. *“Where should she be else? There she is in her place, as she uses to be, and is now within call.”* Note,

1. The daughters of Sarah must learn of her to be *chaste, keepers at home*, ^{<400>}Titus 2:5. There is nothing got by gadding.

2. Those are most likely to receive comfort from God and his promises that are in their place and in the way of their duty, ^{<400>}Luke 2:8.

II. The promise is then renewed and ratified, that she should have a son (v. 10): *“I will certainly return unto thee, and visit thee next time with the performance, as now I do with the promise.”* God will return to those that bid him welcome, that entertain his visits: *“I will return thy kindness, Sarah thy wife shall have a son;”* it is repeated again, v. 14. Thus the promises of the Messiah were often repeated in the Old Testament, for the strengthening of the faith of God's people. We are slow of heart to believe, and therefore have need of line upon line to the same purport. This is that word of promise which the apostle quotes (^{<400>}Romans 9:9) as that by the virtue of which Isaac was born. Note,

1. The same blessings which others have from common providence believers have from the promise, which makes them very sweet and very sure.

2. The spiritual seed of Abraham owe their life, and joy, and hope, and all, to the promise. They are born by the word of God, ^{<400>}1 Peter 1:23.

III. Sarah thinks this too good news to be true, and therefore cannot as yet find in her heart to believe it: *Sarah laughed within herself*, v. 12. It was not a pleasing laughter of faith, like Abraham's (^{<400>}Genesis 17:17), but it was a laughter of doubting and mistrust. Note, The same thing may be done from very different principles, of which God only, who knows the heart, can judge. The great objection which Sarah could not get over was her age: *“I am waxed old, and past childbearing in the course of nature,*

especially having been hitherto barren, and (which magnifies the difficulty) *my lord is old also.*” Observe here,

1. Sarah calls Abraham her *lord*; it was the only good word in this saying, and the Holy Ghost takes notice of it to her honour, and recommends it to the imitation of all Christian wives. ^{<408>}1 Peter 3:6, *Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord*, in token of respect and subjection. Thus must the wife reverence her husband, ^{<409>}Ephesians 5:33. And thus must we be apt to take notice of what is spoken decently and well, to the honour of those that speak it, though it may be mixed with that which is amiss, over which we should cast a mantle of love.

2. Human improbability often sets up in contradiction to the divine promise. The objections of sense are very apt to stumble and puzzle the weak faith even of true believers. It is hard to cleave to the first Cause, when second causes frown.

3. Even where there is true faith, yet there are often sore conflicts with unbelief, Sarah could say, *Lord, I believe* (^{<410>}Hebrews 11:11), and yet must say, *Lord, help my unbelief.*

IV. The angel reproves the indecent expressions of her distrust, v. 13, 14. Observe,

1. Though Sarah was now most kindly and generously entertaining these angels, yet, when she did amiss, they reprov'd her for it, as Christ reprov'd Martha in her own house, ^{<411>}Luke 10:40, 41. If our friends be kind to us, we must not therefore be so unkind to them as to suffer sin upon them.

2. God gave this reproof to Sarah by Abraham her husband. To him he said, *Why did Sarah laugh?* perhaps because he had not told her of the promise which had been given him some time before to this purport, and which, if he had communicated it to her with its ratifications, would have prevented her from being so surprised now. Or Abraham was told of it that he might tell her of it. Mutual reproof, when there is occasion for it, is one of the duties of the conjugal relation.

3. The reproof itself is plain, and backed with a good reason: *Wherefore did Sarah laugh?* Note, It is good to enquire into the reason of our laughter, that it may not be the laughter of the fool, ^{<412>}Ecclesiastes 7:6. “Wherefore did I laugh?” Again, Our unbelief and distrust are a great

offence to the God of heaven. He justly takes it ill to have the objections of sense set up in contradiction to his promise, as ^{<418>}Luke 1:18.

4. Here is a question asked which is enough to answer all the cavils of flesh and blood: *Is any thing too hard for the Lord?* (Hebrews *too wonderful*), that is,

(1.) Is any thing so secret as to escape his cognizance? No, not Sarah's laughing, though it was only *within herself*. Or,

(2.) Is any thing so difficult as to exceed his power? No, not the giving of a child to Sarah in her old age.

V. Sarah foolishly endeavours to conceal her fault (v. 15): *She denied, saying, I did not laugh*, thinking nobody could contradict her: she told this lie, because *she was afraid*; but it was in vain to attempt concealing it from an all-seeing eye; she was told, to her shame, *Thou didst laugh*. Now,

1. There seems to be in Sarah a retraction of her distrust. Now she perceived, by laying circumstances together, that it was a divine promise which had been made concerning her, she renounced all doubting distrustful thoughts about it. But,

2. There was withal a sinful attempt to cover a sin with a lie. It is a shame to do amiss, but a greater shame to deny it; for thereby we add iniquity to our iniquity. Fear of a rebuke often betrays us into this snare. See ^{<2571>}Isaiah 57:11, *Whom hast thou feared, that thou hast lied?* But we deceive ourselves if we think to impose upon God; he can and will bring truth to light, to our shame. *He that covers his sin cannot prosper*, for the day is coming which will discover it.

^{<186>}GENESIS 18:16-22

ABRAHAM'S INTERVIEW WITH GOD

The messengers from heaven had now despatched one part of their business, which was an errand of grace to Abraham and Sarah, and which they delivered first; but now they have before them work of another nature. Sodom is to be destroyed, and they must do it, ^{<193>}Genesis 19:13.

Note, As with the Lord there is mercy, so he is the God to whom vengeance belongs. Pursuant to their commission, we here find,

1. That *they looked towards Sodom* (v. 16); they set their faces against it in wrath, as God is said to look unto the host of the Egyptians, ⁽²⁴⁾Exodus 14:24. Note, Though God has long seemed to connive at sinners, from which they have inferred that the Lord does not see, does not regard, yet, when the day of his wrath comes, he will look towards them.

2. That they *went towards Sodom* (v. 22), and accordingly we find two of them at Sodom, ⁽¹⁸⁾Genesis 19:1. Whether the third was the Lord, before whom Abraham yet stood, and to whom he drew near (v. 23), as most think, or whether the third left them before they came to Sodom, and the Lord before whom Abraham stood was the *shechinah*, or that appearance of the divine glory which Abraham had formerly seen and conversed with, is uncertain. However, we have here,

I. The honour Abraham did to his guests: *He went with them to bring them on the way*, as one that was loth to part with such good company, and was desirous to pay his utmost respects to them. This is a piece of civility proper to be shown to our friends; but it must be done as the apostle directs (⁽¹⁶⁾3 John 1:6), *after a godly sort*.

II. The honour they did to him; for those that honour God he will honour. God communicated to Abraham his purpose to destroy Sodom, and not only so, but entered into a free conference with him about it. Having taken him, more closely than before, into covenant with himself (Genesis 17), he here admits him into more intimate communion with himself than ever, as the man of his counsel. Observe here,

1. God's friendly thoughts concerning Abraham, v. 17-19, where we have his resolution to make known to Abraham his purpose concerning Sodom, with the reasons of it. If Abraham had not brought them on their way, perhaps he would not have been thus favoured; but he that loves to walk with wise men shall be wise, ⁽¹³⁾Proverbs 13:20. See how God is pleased to argue with himself: *Shall I hide from Abraham* (or, as some read it, *Am I concealing from Abraham*) *that thing which I do?* "Can I go about such a thing, and not tell Abraham?" Thus does God, in his counsels, express himself, after the manner of men, with deliberation. But why must Abraham be of the cabinet-council? The Jews suggest that because God had granted the land of Canaan to Abraham and his seed therefore he

would not destroy those cities which were a part of that land, without his knowledge and consent. But God here gives two other reasons: —

(1.) Abraham must know, for he is a friend and a favourite, and one that God has a particular kindness for and great things in store for. He is to become a great nation; and not only so, but in the Messiah, who is to come from his loins, *All nations of the earth shall be blessed*. Note, *The secret of the Lord is with those that fear him*, ^{<1934>}Psalm 25:14; ^{<1082>}Proverbs 3:32. Those who by faith live a life of communion with God cannot but know more of his mind than other people, though not with a prophetic, yet with a prudential practical knowledge. They have a better insight than others into what is present (^{<2849>}Hosea 14:9; ^{<1978>}Psalm 107:43), and a better foresight of what is to come, at least so much as suffices for their guidance and for their comfort.

(2.) Abraham must know, for he will teach his household: *I know Abraham very well, that he will command his children and his household after him*, v. 19. Consider this,

[1.] As a very bright part of Abraham's character and example. He not only prayed with his family, but he taught them as a man of knowledge, nay, he commanded them as a man in authority, and was prophet and king, as well as priest, in his own house. Observe, *First*, God having made the covenant with him and his seed, and his household being circumcised pursuant to that, he was very careful to teach and rule them well. Those that expect family blessings must make conscience of family duty. If our children be the Lord's, they must be nursed for him; if they wear his livery, they must be trained up in his work. *Secondly*, Abraham took care not only of his children, but of his household; his servants were catechized servants. Masters of families should instruct and inspect the manners of all under their roof. The poorest servants have precious souls that must be looked after. *Thirdly*, Abraham made it his care and business to promote practical religion in his family. He did not fill their heads with matters of nice speculation, or doubtful disputation; but he taught them to keep *the way of the Lord, and to do judgment and justice*, that is, to be serious and devout in the worship of God and to be honest in their dealings with all men. *Fourthly*, Abraham, herein, had an eye to posterity, and was in care not only that his household with him, but that his household after him, should keep the way of the Lord, that religion might flourish in his family when he was in his grave. *Fifthly*, His doing this was the fulfilling of the

conditions of the promises which God had made him. Those only can expect the benefit of the promises that make conscience of their duty.

[2.] As the reason why God would make known to him his purpose concerning Sodom, because he was communicative of his knowledge, and improved it for the benefit of those that were under his charge. Note, To him that hath shall be given, ^{<112>}Matthew 13:12; 25:29. Those that make a good use of their knowledge shall know more.

2. God's friendly talk with Abraham, in which he makes known to him purpose concerning Sodom, and allows him a liberty of application to him about the matter.

(1.) He tells him of the evidence there was against Sodom: *The cry of Sodom is great*, v. 20. Note, Some sins, and the sins of some sinners, cry aloud to heaven for vengeance. The iniquity of Sodom was crying iniquity, that is, it was so very provoking that it even urged God to punish.

(2.) The enquiry he would make upon this evidence: *I will go down now and see*, v. 21. Not as if there were any thing concerning which God is in doubt, or in the dark; but he is pleased thus to express himself after the manner of men,

[1.] To show the incontestable equity of all his judicial proceedings. Men are apt to suggest that his way is not equal; but let them know that his judgments are the result of an eternal counsel, and are never rash or sudden resolves. He never punishes upon report, or common fame, or the information of others, but upon his own certain and infallible knowledge.

[2.] To give example to magistrates, and those in authority, with the utmost care and diligence to enquire into the merits of a cause, before they give judgment upon it.

[3.] Perhaps the decree is here spoken of as not yet peremptory, that room and encouragement might be given to Abraham to make intercession for them. Thus God looked if there were any to intercede, ^{<28/6>}Isaiah 59:16.

GENESIS 18:23-33

ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION FOR SODOM

Communion with God is kept up by the word and by prayer. In the word God speaks to us; in prayer we speak to him. God had revealed to Abraham his purposes concerning Sodom; now from this Abraham takes occasion to speak to God on Sodom's behalf. Note, God's word then does us good when it furnishes us with matter for prayer and excites us to it. When God has spoken to us, we must consider what we have to say to him upon it. Observe,

I. The solemnity of Abraham's address to God on this occasion: *Abraham drew near*, v. 23. The expression intimates,

1. A holy concern: *He engaged his heart* to approach to God, Jer, ~~2421~~Jeremiah 30:21. "Shall Sodom be destroyed, and I not speak one good word for it?"

2. A holy confidence: He drew near *with an assurance of faith*, drew near *as a prince*, ~~1813~~Job 31:37. Note, When we address ourselves to the duty of prayer, we ought to remember that we are drawing near to God, that we may be filled with a reverence of him, ~~6103~~Leviticus 10:3.

II. The general scope of this prayer. It is the first solemn prayer we have upon record in the Bible; and it is a prayer for the sparing of Sodom. Abraham, no doubt, greatly abhorred the wickedness of the Sodomites; he would not have lived among them, as Lot did, if they would have given him the best estate in their country; and yet he prayed earnestly for them. Note, Though sin is to be hated, sinners are to be pitied and prayed for. God delights not in their death, nor should we desire, but deprecate, the woeful day.

1. He begins with a prayer that the righteous among them might be spared, and not involved in the common calamity, having an eye particularly to just Lot, whose disingenuous carriage towards him he had long since forgiven and forgotten, witness his friendly zeal to rescue him before by his sword and now by his prayers.

2. He improves this into a petition that all might be spared for the sake of the righteous that were among them, God himself countenancing this

request, and in effect putting him upon it by his answer to his first address, v. 26. Note, We must pray, not only for ourselves, but for others also; for we are members of the same body, at least of the same body of mankind. *All we are brethren.*

III. The particular graces eminent in this prayer.

1. Here is great faith; and it is the prayer of faith that is the prevailing prayer. His faith pleads with God, orders the cause, and fills his mouth with arguments. He acts faith especially upon the righteousness of God, and is very confident.

(1.) That God will not *destroy the righteous with the wicked*, v. 23. No, *that be far from thee*, v. 25. We must never entertain any thought that derogates from the honour of God's righteousness. See ^{}Romans 3:5, 6. Note,

[1.] The righteous are mingled with the wicked in this world. Among the best there are, commonly, some bad, and among the worst some good: even in Sodom, one Lot.

[2.] Though the righteous be among the wicked, yet the righteous God will not, certainly he will not, destroy the righteous with the wicked. Though in this world they may be involved in the same common calamities, yet in the great day a distinction will be made.

(2.) That the righteous shall not *be as the wicked*, v. 25. Though they may suffer with them, yet they do not suffer like them. Common calamities are quite another thing to the righteous than what they are to the wicked, ^{}Isaiah 27:7.

(3.) That *the Judge of all the earth will do right*; undoubtedly he will, because he is the Judge of all the earth; it is the apostle's argument, ^{}Romans 3:5, 6. Note,

[1.] God is the Judge of all the earth; he gives charge to all, takes cognizance of all, and will pass sentence upon all.

[2.] That God Almighty never did nor ever will do any wrong to any of the creatures, either by withholding that which is right or by exacting more than is right, ^{}Job 34:10, 11.

2. Here is great humility.

(1.) A deep sense of his own unworthiness (v. 27): *Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes*; and again, v. 31. He speaks as one amazed at his own boldness, and the liberty God graciously allowed him, considering God's greatness — he is *the Lord*; and his own meanness — *but dust and ashes*. Note,

[1.] The greatest of men, the most considerable and deserving, are but dust and ashes, mean and vile before God, despicable, frail, and dying.

[2.] Whenever we draw near to God, it becomes us reverently to acknowledge the vast distance that there is between us and God. He is the Lord of glory, we are worms of the earth.

[3.] The access we have to the throne of grace, and the freedom of speech allowed us, are just matter of humble wonder, ¹⁰⁷⁸2 Samuel 7:18.

(2.) An awful dread of God's displeasure: *O let not the Lord be angry* (v. 30), and again, v. 32. Note,

[1.] The importunity which believers use in their addresses to God is such that, if they were dealing with a man like themselves, they could not but fear that he would be angry with them. But he with whom we have to do is *God and not man*; and, whoever he may seem, is not really *angry with the prayers of the upright* (³⁸⁰⁴Psalm 80:4), for they are *his delight* (¹¹⁵⁸Proverbs 15:8), and he is pleased when he is wrestled with.

[2.] That even when we receive special tokens of the divine favour we ought to be jealous over ourselves, lest we make ourselves obnoxious to the divine displeasure; and therefore we must bring the Mediator with us in the arms of our faith, to atone for *the iniquity of our holy things*.

3. Here is great charity.

(1.) A charitable opinion of Sodom's character: as bad as it was, he thought there were several good people in it. It becomes us to hope the best of the worst places. Of the two it is better to err in that extreme.

(2.) A charitable desire of Sodom's welfare: he used all his interest at the throne of grace for mercy for them. We never find him thus earnest in pleading with God for himself and his family, as here for Sodom.

4. Here are great boldness and believing confidence.

(1.) He took the liberty to pitch upon a certain number of righteous ones which he supposed might be in Sodom. Suppose there be fifty, v. 24.

(2.) He advanced upon God's concessions, again and again. As God granted much, he still begged more, with the hope of gaining his point.

(3.) He brought the terms as low as he could for shame (having prevailed for mercy if there were but ten righteous ones in five cities), and perhaps so low that he concluded they would have been spared.

IV. The success of the prayer. He that thus wrestled prevailed wonderfully; as a prince he had power with God: it was but ask and have.

1. God's general good-will appears in this, that he consented to spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous. See how swift God is to show mercy; he even seeks a reason for it. See what great blessings good people are to any place, and how little those befriend themselves that hate and persecute them.

2. His particular favour to Abraham appeared in this, that he did not leave off granting till Abraham left off asking. Such is the power of prayer. Why then did Abraham leave off asking, when he had prevailed so far as to get the place spared if there were but ten righteous in it? Either,

(1.) Because he owned that it deserved to be destroyed if there were not so many; *as the dresser of the vineyard*, who consented that the barren tree should be cut down if one year's trial more did not make it fruitful,

^{<2130>}Luke 13:9. Or,

(2.) Because God restrained his spirit from asking any further. When God has determined the ruin of a place, he forbids it to be prayed for,

^{<2076>}Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11.

V. Here is the breaking up of the conference, v. 33.

1. *The Lord went his way*. The visions of God must not be constant in this world, where it is by faith only that we are to set God before us. God did not go away till Abraham had said all he had to say; for he is never weary of hearing prayer, ^{<2801>}Isaiah 59:1.

2. *Abraham returned unto his place*, not puffed up with the honour done him, nor by these extraordinary interviews taken off from the ordinary course of duty. He returned to his place to observe what that event would

be; and it proved that his prayer was heard, and yet Sodom was not spared, because there were not ten righteous in it. We cannot expect too little from man nor too much from God.