

# MEALING AND DEALING

GENESIS 18:1-33    JANUARY 19, 2022

I thought I must've drifted onto *The Onion*, but, no, it was *Condé Nast Traveler*, ranking Chicago, Illinois as the best city in the United States.<sup>1</sup> That article is not some leftover from yesteryear - they posted it in October! They left out the fact that the city saw more than 800 murders last year alone,<sup>2</sup> and about 10 people were shot each day. The *Chicago Tribune* called the violence in 2021 "unrelenting."<sup>3</sup> In December, a cry went out from Mayor Lori Lightfoot's office, imploring the federal government to step in and help stem the tide - to bring some justice to the beleaguered city.

In Genesis 18, the Lord sets out from heaven to go and investigate the cries of injustice that rise from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He brings two angels with Him. But before executing judgment, the Lord pays a surprise visit to Abraham, sharing a meal and two talks with him.

**Genesis 18:1-5 - The Lord appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent during the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> He looked up, and he saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them, bowed to the ground, <sup>3</sup> and said, "My lord, if I have found favor with you, please do not go on past your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, that you may wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> I will bring a bit of bread so that you may strengthen yourselves. This is why you have passed your servant's way. Later, you can continue on." "Yes," they replied, "do as you have said."**

We get to see Abraham serve the Lord in a very passionate, very personal, very effective way. It's an inspiration to watch this 99 year old man hustling around, making sure his guests were attended to.

We don't know when Abraham realized that he was dining with the Lord. Maybe right away, maybe later. But, right from the outset, he shows us how to serve God in the proper way.

From the start, we see that he was *ready* to serve. As one commentator points out, Abraham wasn't inconvenienced by the Lord's arrival.<sup>4</sup> His heart was ready to serve when the moment came. That was his standby mode. The 'moment' was a very ordinary one. There was nothing unusual going on. It was just the hot afternoon of an unremarkable day. But God can make any unremarkable day remarkable with His presence.

Abraham says in verse 3: "please do no go on past your servant." This baseline readiness kept Abraham from missing a precious opportunity to serve God and grow in his faith. Paul instructs us on how to live out our lives in 1 Corinthians 7, saying, "I'm not trying to put a leash on you. I'm

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cntraveler.com/gallery/best-cities-us>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/criminal-justice/ct-2021-homicides-final-20220103-lrpzuh5nsjhspmos3edrzu2ei-story.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-aud-cb-daywatch-newsletter-dec24-20211224-5dkv4ekslrd3tav5s5vetpwqu-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

trying to help you serve the Lord without distraction.”<sup>5</sup> We want to condition our hearts to be ready to serve - ready to recognize an opening or an opportunity. That’s not always our *natural* default, but the Lord wants it to become our *supernatural* default.

Abraham made the Lord his honored guest. The Lord loves that. It’s an amazing thing that - in *that* moment - God would rather be hanging out in the front yard of some dusty tent than stay in the courts of heaven! Why? Because His *friend* was there. He didn’t *need* the rest Abraham offered, but He wanted to spend time with His friend. This is the heart that God has toward you, too.

**Genesis 18:6-8 - <sup>6</sup>So Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, “Quick! Knead three measures of fine flour and make bread.” <sup>7</sup>Abraham ran to the herd and got a tender, choice calf. He gave it to a young man, who hurried to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>Then Abraham took curds and milk, as well as the calf that he had prepared, and set them before the men. He served them as they ate under the tree.**

Abraham is getting his cardio in that day! As we watch him serve the Lord, we see he does so with urgency, earnestness, and generosity. He didn’t use the regular barley, he used the *fine* flour (and a lot of it). He had a calf prepared - a rare thing to do. He pulled in these other ingredients, and they made a feast. It took time and effort and was costly, but he was excited to offer this to the Lord. He doesn’t spend his time complaining that they didn’t have dates on hand or the finest of wine. He gave what he had, but he did so without holding back. And here’s an important facet of his heart that we get a glimpse of, pointed out by lots of Bible commentators: *He served them personally*. This was a powerful, wealthy sheik, who had *hundreds* of servants. But *he*, the master of the house, served them.<sup>6</sup> It was *his* honor and *his* duty to present himself before the Lord as a servant.

As we serve the Lord, it is never meant to be a chore or an obligation. It’s not meant to be something we do begrudgingly or tight-fistedly. If that is how we feel when it’s time to worship the Lord or serve Him or obey Him or give something to Him, we need to stop and get a little heart work done. Remember - as someone pointed out - the Lord *wanted* to be Abraham’s guest.<sup>7</sup> That’s why they came by his tent. He wanted to spend time with this son of His and tell him all the wonderful things He was going to do in his life. Serve the Lord with gladness.

**Genesis 18:9-10 - <sup>9</sup>“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There, in the tent,” he answered. <sup>10</sup>The Lord said, “I will certainly come back to you in about a year’s time, and your wife Sarah will have a son!” Now Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent behind him.**

In our culture, the wife is typically the hostess in a situation like this. But in this era, the woman would not eat with these fellows. Naturally, Sarah is interested in what is going on. And so, she *eavesdrops* on the conversation.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:35

<sup>6</sup> Jamieson, Fausset & Brown *Commentary Critical & Explanatory On The Whole Bible*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

These strangers reveal the fact that they aren't run-of-the-mill travelers. They know Sarah's name. And then the Lord explicitly states that He has the power to give life to her womb. And, I imagine He did so in a nice, loud voice, knowing that Sarah was, in fact, listening in on their table talk.

**Genesis 18:11-15** - <sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were old and getting on in years. Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So she laughed to herself: "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I have delight?" <sup>13</sup> But the Lord asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Can I really have a baby when I'm old?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything impossible for the Lord? At the appointed time I will come back to you, and in about a year she will have a son." <sup>15</sup> Sarah denied it. "I did not laugh," she said, because she was afraid. But he replied, "No, you did laugh."

On film, this would be a funny scene, but it wouldn't have been fun at all for Sarah and Abraham. One source explains that, linguistically, the Lord said, "*Why on earth did Sarah laugh?*"<sup>8</sup> She's been caught scoffing by the Lord. Have you ever been at a dinner where someone says something they shouldn't have and the party is effectively over? Politicians will be on the campaign trail and might say *one* wrong phrase which completely ends their prospects. We can sense the tension and Sarah's fear, pushing her to lie. Then Lord has to correct her a *second* time. But, notice: In this interaction, the Lord isn't counting strikes against Sarah and Abraham. Sometimes I think we talk too much in these stories about how this was a "test" of their faith. But, the Lord isn't deciding whether to disqualify them here. This is a teachable moment. When you were in school, *test* times weren't *teaching* times. They were meant to measure whether you were ready to move on. Certainly, there is a testing of faith, but in the Biblical sense, the testing of faith isn't to decide whether you pass or fail, it's to refine you - to bring for the gold of God's glory in your life, to *produce* heavenly attributes like endurance and maturity.

Jesus doesn't say, "Sarah, you're close to striking out." Rather, He shows uses her misstep as a teachable moment. Psalm 37 promises us that the Lord watches over us all our days and that we will *not* be disgraced. It says, "Though [a believer] falls, he will not be overwhelmed, because the *Lord* supports him with His hand."<sup>9</sup> Here, God supports Sarah's sagging faith by reminding her of the reality that *nothing* is impossible for the Lord. And it's a reminder to us. Our faith should not be rooted in our feelings, or in what we think is possible, or in conventional wisdom, or religious tradition. Our faith is built upon the *Person* of Jesus Christ and *nothing* is impossible for Him.

**Genesis 18:16-21** - <sup>16</sup> The men got up from there and looked out over Sodom, and Abraham was walking with them to see them off. <sup>17</sup> Then the Lord said, "Should I hide what I am about to do from Abraham? <sup>18</sup> Abraham is to become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him so that he will command his children and his house after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just. This is how the Lord will fulfill to Abraham what he promised him." <sup>20</sup> Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is immense, and their sin is extremely

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<sup>8</sup> NET Study Bible Notes

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 37:24

**serious. <sup>21</sup> I will go down to see if what they have done justifies the cry that has come up to me. If not, I will find out."**

God may not be visible to us, but He loves to *reveal* Himself. He wants to show believers who He is, what He does, and what He's *doing*. Remember: God considers Abraham His *friend*. You're His friend too, according to John 15, and the Lord makes things known to His friends.

Abraham did not have a Bible to read. He had very few examples to analyze. It could be a jarring thing to have God promise you a son today but then destroy your nephew's family tomorrow. God wants Abraham to understand He is a God of power, and of justice, and mercy, and long-suffering.

Notice also, despite the awkwardness at the door of the tent, God isn't leaving early or in a huff. He's still full of grace toward this family. I'm sure Abraham and Sarah were embarrassed, but we see the Lord immediately moves on. *He's* thinking about Abraham's future. Friends, God is *thinking* thoughts about you! They are a great and precious sum. When's the last time you thought about your wife's cousin? In normal circumstances, they're just not all that important to us. But God is *thinking* about you and your future and His excitement to accomplish His good work in your life.

There is a key point in verse 19 that we need to take to heart. Abraham will "keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right...*this is how* the Lord will fulfill what He has promised." As we've seen before and will see again, a living faith is defined by obedience and *through* obedience the Lord is able to shape us and use us in the best possible ways. Through obedience we're able to learn what the will of God is and enjoy the benefits of the "blessed" life that we read about in Psalm 1.

The polar opposite of faithful obedience was Sodom and Gomorrah. We know there was testimony about the One True God in their region. There was Lot. There was Abraham and Melchizedek. These people had personally *experienced* the mercy of God when He sent Abraham to save them from Chedorlaomer. And yet, they did not turn toward the Lord, they did not turn from their sin. They delved *deeper* into their rebellion and debauchery and wickedness.

What was their sin which was so serious? The Bible explains that they had several fatal issues - sort of a spiritual Flurona. First, these cities were rotten with sexual immorality. In the next passage we'll see that the entire male population of Sodom were roving the streets looking for men to gang rape. Isaiah tells us they *flaunted* their sin.<sup>10</sup> They took *pride* in it. But in addition to their sexual sin and their blasphemous pride, we're told that these cities crushed the poor and needy. They had plenty of supplies and security to spread around, but instead of helping, they spent their time on detestable acts of perversion<sup>11</sup> and oppressing the weak in their midst.

Their sin rose like a cry up to heaven. We recall Abel's blood cried out from the ground. Injustice and oppression and corruption ring out as beacons inviting God's wrath and vengeance. And God *will* visit wrath upon the unrighteousness and godlessness of this world. His wrath is the proper

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 3:9

<sup>11</sup> Ezekiel 16:49-50

response to the sin of mankind. We have worked sin and the wages for that work is *death*. Praise God that “the one who believes in the Son has eternal life, *but* the one who rejects the Son will not see life; instead, the wrath of God remains on him.”<sup>12</sup> If you are not a believer, you are under God’s wrath and His judgment is coming for you, as sure as it came for Sodom and Gomorrah.

**Genesis 18:22-25** - <sup>22</sup>The men turned from there and went toward Sodom while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. <sup>23</sup>Abraham stepped forward and said, “Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup>What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away instead of sparing the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people who are in it? <sup>25</sup>You could not possibly do such a thing: to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. You could not possibly do that! Won’t the Judge of the whole earth do what is just?”

Justice must include judgment. If God does not judge sin, He cannot be God because He would not be just or good. But, Abraham knows that Lot has put his roots down in Sodom and we can hear the desperation in his voice. *Of course* God would not destroy the righteous with the wicked. But, that does not mean bad things never happen to God’s people. In fact, this scene makes a case for rejecting the idea of meticulous determinism. One popular reformed pastor once called deadly Midwest tornados the fingers of God dragging across the land. But God specifically shows here that He does *not* judge the righteous with the wicked. Natural disasters are a result of sin and its effect on creation, not some demonstration of God’s cruel power. We’re talking about *judgment* here and God is just. Justice demands the guilty be punished and the righteous go free. And God has made believers righteous when they turn to him and are saved by grace through faith.

Dr. McGee notes, this is also a quiet hint at a Pre-Tribulation rapture. That period of fierce judgment will not begin until God’s Church is removed, as Lot was removed before Sodom was destroyed.

**Genesis 18:26-33** - <sup>26</sup>The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” <sup>27</sup>Then Abraham answered, “Since I have ventured to speak to my lord—even though I am dust and ashes—<sup>28</sup>suppose the fifty righteous lack five. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” He replied, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.” <sup>29</sup>Then he spoke to him again, “Suppose forty are found there?” He answered, “I will not do it on account of forty.” <sup>30</sup>Then he said, “Let my lord not be angry, and I will speak further. Suppose thirty are found there?” He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” <sup>31</sup>Then he said, “Since I have ventured to speak to my lord, suppose twenty are found there?” He replied, “I will not destroy it on account of twenty.” <sup>32</sup>Then he said, “Let my lord not be angry, and I will speak one more time. Suppose ten are found there?” He answered, “I will not destroy it on account of ten.” <sup>33</sup>When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he departed, and Abraham returned to his place.

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<sup>12</sup>John 3:36

Abraham had rescued Sodom once before, but that was when they were facing a different kind of reckoning. Abraham wasn't about to strap on a sword and fight against his Lord. So what could he do? He could plead for them. Now, Abraham was not "convincing" God. No, this was, in fact, another *opportunity* that Abraham was able to step into. Remember: The Lord had said, "through Abraham all the nations will be blessed." And God is giving Abraham a chance to serve in that capacity right here. He interceded and appealed for these people. He's being a salty believer, trying to be a preserving influence on his world.

This would have been a bittersweet moment for our Lord. On the one hand, He gets to see heavenly grace and compassion in glorious operation in Abraham's life. On the other hand, the Lord knew there *weren't* even 10 righteous in those two cities.

I've heard it said that Abraham was whittling the number down to get to the size of Lot's family, but there's really no indication there was more than Lot, his wife, and his two daughters.

There's something very important to acknowledge here: The *best* thing we can do for our city or for our nation is *not* to vote for a certain candidate or support NGOs or buy local. The *best* thing you can do for your city and for your nation is to *be righteous!* Righteousness exalts a nation. The fruit of righteousness is peace.<sup>13</sup> If we're hungry for righteousness we will be satisfied. What a difference a little righteousness would have made for Sodom and Gomorrah!

So we've seen how wonderful it is to be ready to serve God. We've seen the way we can intercede with compassion, even for the undeserving. We've seen how important justice and mercy are to the Lord. But, as we close, let's consider again how *gracious* this God is.

From one vantage point we're seeing people eavesdropping on the Lord, lying to Him, scoffing at His word, disbelieving His promises, maybe even trying to manipulate Him. And His response? Grace! Loving, correcting, compassionate grace. He is kind and generous. He is just and true. And He brings His people along, even when we're, frankly, dead weight. This astonishing grace is yours and mine to enjoy *and* exercise as we walk with God and live to serve Him. Let's prepare for it, watch for it, and jump at the chance to operate in it.

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<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 32:17