

# Faith and Frailty



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gen. 16:1–19:38.*

**Memory Text:** “Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son” (*Genesis 18:14*).

This week we still follow Abram and Sarai (soon to be Abraham and Sarah) as they proceed, not only on their geographical journey but on their spiritual one, as well. As they continue, we see their faith and their frailties contrasted against a world that, for the most part, had lost the knowledge of God and was steeped in sin and spiritual ignorance, a condition best exemplified in the seething cauldrons of Sodom and Gomorrah.

A famous French writer once wrote, “Your principal maladies are pride, which cuts you off from God, and sensuality, which binds you to the earth.”

How little changes; fortunately, God’s grace doesn’t either, for He loves even the proud and the sensual. This point will come through most poignantly as we, in following the story of the patriarch, encounter the sad and sordid tale of Sodom and Gomorrah, where—despite God’s love and willingness to forgive—pride and sensuality bring these folk to the point of no return.

As Scripture says, God is “not willing that any should perish” (*2 Pet. 3:9*); some, nevertheless, will. How unfortunate, when—because of the Cross and what Christ has done there—none need to. This week we’ll get a sad example of some who do.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 25.*

## Hagar and Ishmael *(Genesis 16)*

Read again the promises that God had so far made to Abram regarding the nation and seed that would spring from him (*Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:15, 16; 15:4-6, 13*). Notice something interesting. Abram is told, again and again, that he will father a great nation; that out of “‘your own body’” (*Gen. 15:4, NIV*) his heir will come. Something, though, is conspicuously absent from each of those promises: none mention Sarai, his wife. The promise is that Abram will father the nation; it says nothing about who the mother would be. Sarai was his wife, and so the natural and logical assumption would be that she’d bear the seed; yet all the promises—as they appear so far in the Scriptures—say nothing about whom the mother of that great nation would be.

**Read** Genesis 16. Considering how the promises were made to Abram, why is it easy to see how they could have resorted to the course they did? Why, though, was that course still wrong?

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Ten years had passed since Abram had entered Canaan, and still there was no sign of the promised seed. In typical human frustration, the patriarch listened to “reason”; how else, after all, could he have a child? Certainly not from old and barren Sarai. Again, considering that nothing specifically said that Sarai would be the mother, it’s not hard to understand the logic behind their actions. Although a man having more than one wife was compatible with the practices of the time, the commonality of the practice didn’t make it right, and both Abram and his wife—as followers of the true God—should have known better. How often even we, as followers of the true God, do the wrong thing because everyone else is doing it, even though we know better.

**When you read through Genesis 16, you can see an important principle unfold: that violation of God’s law will bear bitter fruit. What lessons can we learn from this story when we find ourselves tempted to violate what we know is right in order to achieve something that might even, in and of itself, be good (after all, Abram and Sarai were only trying to fulfill a promise God had made)?**

**Key Text:** *Genesis 16:1–19:29*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To discuss how taking matters into one's own hands can lead to trials and hardships.
2. To study Abraham's unique relationship with God.
3. To examine the wickedness and final destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. God's Plan Versus Humankind's Plan** (*Prov. 3:5, 6*)

- A. Abram decides to help God fulfill His promise to make him a great nation by begetting an heir through Sarai's handmaid, Hagar.
- B. When Hagar conceives, she despises Sarai and conflict arises.
- C. After changing their names to Abraham and Sarah, God promises Sarah will conceive.

#### **II. Judgment and Mercy** (*Gen. 18:17*)

- A. The Lord appears by the terebinth trees and tells Abraham of His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.
- B. Abraham pleads for the twin cities.
- C. God in His mercy agrees to spare the cities for as few as ten righteous people.

#### **III. The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah** (*Gen.19:1-13*)

- A. Two angels visit Lot to warn him of the impending destruction.
- B. The men of Sodom seek to defile Lot's visitors, who intervene and save Lot from the angry mob.
- C. The Lord destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with fire, sparing only Lot and his two daughters.

**Summary:** Abraham and Sarah take matters into their own hands when Sarah gives her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham. Strife, sorrow, and separation follow. Despite this, the Lord reassures Abraham of His covenant, in person, on the eve of His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

## COMMENTARY

In the previous lesson we studied how Abram defeats the kings of Elam, Shinar, and Ellasar in battle and rescues his nephew Lot, whom they had taken captive. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah also owe their freedom to Abram. Their deliverance at Abram's hand uniquely positions them to witness God's mercy and saving grace, an event that could have worked repentance and saved their cities from future destruction. Tragically, this does not happen. Underlying the tragedy, however, is a story of intercession and deliverance, one that shows God's longsuffering love toward sinners and His mediation on

## The Covenant Reiterated *(Genesis 17)*

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, God appeared to Abram and repeated in expanded form the covenant He had first made with the patriarch.

**Compare** the earlier promises that God made to Abram (*Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:15, 16; 15:4-6, 13*) with what God says to Abram here in Genesis 17:1-16. What points are added, or elaborated on, that didn't appear before?

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God tells Abram (soon to be Abraham, which means “father of many”) to be “perfect” before Him, a reminder that God’s mercy and grace don’t cancel the call to faithful obedience (*Rom. 5:20–6:2*). He then unfolds to him even more details of the same promise first made to him almost twenty-five years before, which included the need to circumcise all the infant males.

A great deal of speculation has occurred over the long centuries about why this specific rite would be the sign of the covenant. Considering, however, the promise made to Abram repeatedly about his “seed” (*Gen. 12:7; 13:15, 16; 15:3, 13, 18; 17:7-10*), circumcision apparently was to symbolize the national and generational relationship that the Lord wanted to have with His special covenant people, a relationship to be maintained by faith (*Rom. 4:11, 12*). It was through this nation, this people, over many generations, that the truth about God was to be spread to a world and through whom the Messiah would come. No doubt, too, it also symbolized the circumcision of the heart (*Deut. 30:6, Rom. 2:29*). With the advent of Jesus and the spreading of the gospel to the Gentiles, it was no longer required (*Gal. 5:6*).

Also, if it wasn’t clear before, it was now—Sarai (Sarah), old Sarah, would give birth to the promised seed (*Gen. 17:15-19*). If Abraham needed faith before, he surely needed it at this time.

**Compare Genesis 17:15-19, and Abraham’s reaction to the promise of the seed through his wife, with Romans 4:16-25. What can we learn from these texts (as well as *Gen. 15:2, 16:4*) about what righteousness by faith means? What hope can you draw from these texts about the faithfulness of God even when our own faith isn’t always as unflinching as it should be?**

our behalf. And it all begins with an act of hospitality so wonderful that God saw fit to record it for posterity.

### **I. Hosting the Lord of the Universe**

When the Lord and His angels come to Abraham's encampment, the patriarch demonstrates classical biblical hospitality. He invites his visitors to stop for a meal and to refresh themselves. Washing a guest's feet was also a standard practice. Abraham modestly offers them "a little bread" (*Gen. 18:5, NRSV*), but his culture expected that a host would be generous in what he served, which he was. Abraham personally brought the food instead of having a servant do it (*vs. 8*). Abraham honors God, and in turn, God does three remarkable things: He acknowledges Abraham's hospitality with a promise that Sarah will bear a son within a year (*vs. 10*). He also praises Abraham's righteousness and then takes Abraham into his confidence concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

### **II. A Tale of Two Cities**

When God tells Abraham what He is going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah, the patriarch pleads for Him to spare the cities of the plain if they have at least a minimum number of righteous people living in them. In typical Near Eastern fashion, Abraham bargains with God, bringing that number successively from 50 to 10. The Lord takes Abraham's intercession seriously. Although the doomed cities do not have the agreed upon minimum number of righteous—a fact that the Lord already knows—God respects Abraham's intervention for Sodom and Gomorrah. "Love for perishing souls inspired Abraham's prayer. . . . His deep interest for Sodom shows the anxiety that we should feel for the impenitent. . . ."

"The spirit of Abraham was the spirit of Christ."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 140. Though Abraham's intercession is not enough to spare Sodom, God provides a way of escape for Lot and his family.

### **III. Lot's Example**

Lot had wanted to go to the city so much that he turned his back on God's promise of Canaan to his uncle Abraham. Never in the biblical descriptions of the boundaries of the Promised Land do we find the region of Sodom included.

"Though Lot had become a dweller in Sodom, he did not partake in the iniquity of its inhabitants."—p. 139. However, once he began dwelling there, the city had a powerful influence on him and his family. When the angels came to warn them of Sodom's impending doom, he "lingered" (*Gen. 19:16, NRSV*). The divine messengers literally had to lead him, his wife, and his two daughters away by the hand. The biblical account regards such forceful action as "the Lord being merciful to him." Once the angels got the reluctant family outside the

## The Lord on Earth *(Genesis 18)*

In Genesis 18, the promise of a child is again made, this time specifically to Sarah (*vs. 10*)—a promise that seemed impossible to fulfill (*vs. 11*). Yet, we are shown the answer, “Is any thing too hard for the Lord?” (*vs. 14*), an answer that should stand even today as a stern rebuke against all unbelief and doubt, especially among professed worshippers of the Lord.

**Read** carefully verses 16-21. What is being contrasted here? How do we see here, in a small way, what is really the basic division of all humanity? See also *Matt. 25:32, 33; Rom. 11:26; 2 Pet. 2:6; Rev. 22:14, 15.*

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Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of this well-known story centers on just who was speaking to Abraham. The word translated “Lord” in some of the verses (*Gen. 18:1, 13, 17, 22, 26*) is the famous four-letter word often translated as “Jehovah” (YHVH), the sacred name for God the Father—the word used, for instance, in Genesis 4:1, 4; 6:5; Exodus 20:11; 1 Kings 9:1; Psalm 32:2, and, literally, thousands of other texts in direct reference to God.

Thus, we have here, many centuries before the incarnation of Jesus, the appearance of the Lord, on earth, in what is clearly a human form (*see Gen. 18:1-8*). We see, therefore, even way back here the incredibly close connection God, the Creator God, has with us, His fallen earthly creation. Considering the size of the universe, the vastness and complexity of all creation, at least the part that we can see, we are given here another example of the amazing love that God has for us, that He would manifest Himself here in human form and talk to Abraham, a sinful human being. This is, of course, only a precursor of what would happen centuries later in the life and ministry of Jesus, who not only became human but died for the sins of this fallen world. The point? God is closer to humanity than most of us even begin to realize.

**In what ways have you personally experienced the closeness of God? In what intimate and personal ways has He touched your life? What might you need to do in order to experience the reality of His presence in an even more intimate manner?**

city, they urged them, “ ‘Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed’ ” (*vs. 17, NRSV*).

But Lot protests. Pointing in the direction of a nearby town, Lot tries to make a deal with the angels. “ ‘Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one’ ” (*vs. 20, NRSV*). By implication he means that it is not as evil simply through not being as big as Sodom and Gomorrah and thus not as deserving of destruction. But size is never a criteria of good or evil in God’s eyes. “ ‘Let me escape there—is it not a little one? And my life will be saved!’ ” (*vs. 20, NRSV*). His dealings with the angels is a warped echo of Abram’s intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah. Intercession had been

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Genesis 16:1-12; 18:9-15, 20-33; 21:1-21; Matthew 5:48*

- 1** In his impatience with God’s timing, Abram takes it on himself to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise to make his descendants as innumerable as the stars. He bears a son, Ishmael, through his wife’s maidservant, Hagar. Interestingly enough, the Bible does not explicitly condemn him for doing so. The results, however, speak for themselves. What results of this course of action clearly indicate that Abram was wrong in pursuing it? Which was the greater offense: the action itself or Abram’s not trusting God to bring about His promise in His own way and time? Explain.
- 2** Genesis 18 has the Lord Himself appearing to Abraham and reiterating the promise to give him a child, this time specifying that Sarah would be the mother. Many believe that the Being spoken of here is Christ. What evidence do we have that this was the case? Do you agree? Why, or why not?
- 3** Why was God—in whatever manifestation—so free in appearing to Abraham as compared to the ways in which He communicated with His people later in the Old Testament? For example, while He spoke to Moses and the children of Israel directly, He did not appear to Moses for the most part. Later, He communicated almost entirely through prophets. What might be the causes of this development?
- 4** God in the Old Testament is often portrayed as being rather merciless. Does the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah support this perception? How did God’s patience and mercy in dealing with Sodom manifest itself? What do you think was really going on in Genesis 18:23-33, where Abraham appears to be attempting to change God’s mind?

## On the Eve of Doom *(Gen. 19:1-14)*

**Read** the first seven verses of Genesis 19. What kind of picture does it present regarding the moral state of Sodom? What significance is found in the fact that men, both the young and old, came from “every quarter” of the city? What does that remind us of, from a previous time in earth’s history? *Gen. 6:5.*

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Even by modern standards of immorality, which have sunk pretty low, the Sodomites were a wretched lot. How could a people become so degraded?

**Read** Ezekiel 16:49, 50. How do these verses help us understand what happened to that city? Why would these things lead to the kind of moral degradation that they did in Sodom? What lessons are in there for us?

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Though according to 2 Peter 2:7, 8 Lot was a righteous man who was pained by what he saw happening in the city, he probably couldn’t have avoided being influenced by his surroundings. Who wouldn’t? (John the Baptist had to live in the wilderness to escape the corruptions around him.) Perhaps that helps explain Lot’s willingness to give his virgin daughters to the mob in order to protect his guests (*Gen. 19:8*). However difficult it is for us to understand Lot’s response, it does show us how seriously he took the mob’s intent. He obviously knew what these people were capable of. As verses 9-14 show, it took the supernatural intervention of the two angels to save Lot from the mob, who had become angry at him, as well.

**The pride, the fullness of bread, the “prosperous ease” certainly didn’t at once turn the Sodomites into the raging mob seen in Genesis 19. The process takes time. Look at your own life and the direction you are moving in (toward the Holy City [*Heb. 12:22, Rev. 21:2*] or toward Sodom), and the standard you use to judge your progress.**



reduced to haggling. He could not grasp that God—not where he fled—was the determining factor in his salvation.

But God has greater patience than we do. The angel granted his audacious request, promising that nothing would harm Zoar (the name means “little”) (vs. 21, 22). The angel explained that he could not destroy Sodom until Lot reached safety (vs. 22). Lot should have known that if God had sent His angels to save him, He would not let anything harm him. Abraham’s nephew did not have to find his own protection and refuge.

Whereas Lot’s story teaches us not to cling too dearly to the world or it will destroy us, Abraham’s intercession on behalf of the doomed city mirrors Jesus’ loving mediation on behalf of sinners. “In the agonies of the crucifixion, Himself burdened with the awful

## Witnessing

God has given us the ability—through hard work, smart thinking, and often being in the right place at the right time—to prosper, which, in earthly terms, usually means acquiring a higher standard of living. Depending on our culture, our financial success can be demonstrated through position in the community, land ownership, larger and more fashionable housing, expensive clothing and cars, and other accomplishments. Is the very act of acquiring such wealth and status necessarily wrong? No, of course not. However, if we are left on our own, without the constant guidance and presence of our heavenly Father in our lives, what was once a blessing will become a curse.

It all depends on the value we place on our earthly status. It comes right down to whether we can walk away from all our possessions without a second thought or whether we will end up yearning for them more than we yearn for our heavenly Father and the life He has to offer us.

Take a personal inventory this week. Ask yourself some serious questions: Do you show others that material possessions matter more than relationships? Do you spend more time on acquiring than sharing? Can you honestly say you use the bounty that God has given you to better the lives of those you know or, maybe more importantly, those you don’t know? Are you successful in thanking God daily for all His blessings, and do you demonstrate by returning to Him a faithful tithe?

Remember, “God loves you. . . . He invites you to leave those things which hinder your spiritual advancement, and to find in him that strength and consolation which you need.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 112. Dedicate your influence, your wealth, your position in life to God. You, and those you touch, will be used abundantly by Him!

## Sodom Destroyed *(Genesis 19)*

**Read** Genesis 19:12-29. How do we see here even more examples of God seeking to save people despite themselves?

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Had Lot's inconsistent witness dulled the effect of his appeals? Not even the desperate visit at night could arouse his family. Lot's children "laughed at what they called his superstitious fears. His daughters were influenced by their husbands. They were well enough off where they were. They could see no evidence of danger. Everything was just as it had been. They had great possessions, and they could not believe it possible that beautiful Sodom would be destroyed."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 160.

**Read** carefully verse 15. What principle is revealed here regarding the destruction of sin? Focus specifically on the phrase "lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city." What message is in that for us?

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Jesus came in order to destroy sin, not sinners (*1 John 3:5*); Jesus came to save the world, not to destroy it (*John 3:17*); Jesus came to destroy the devil and the works of the devil, not human beings (*Heb. 2:14, 1 John 3:8*).

The whole plan of salvation centers on the eradication of sin, not the eradication of people. God in the story of Sodom was trying to spare Lot the destruction that will sooner or later fall upon all iniquity. And the only way for us to be spared that doom is to flee iniquity, to cling to Jesus our Savior in faith and obedience, claiming His sinlessness and perfection in our behalf, while, at the same time, putting away all sin in our lives (*Rom. 6:12; 1 Pet. 4:1, 2*). In the end, sin will be eradicated, once and for all. The good news of the gospel is that we don't have to be eradicated with it.

**Read Genesis 19:24-29. Notice the phrase "and God remembered Abraham" in the context of saving Lot. Write out a paragraph explaining how that is a symbol of the salvation and deliverance we have in Jesus and that only because of Him we can be saved in judgment day. Be prepared to share it with the class on Sabbath.**

weight of the sins of the whole world, He prayed for His revilers and murderers, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’ Luke 23:34.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 140.

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** If you have children (or pets), share their names and why you chose to give them those names. Do the names reflect character attributes that you hoped your children would have, or are they based on family history? In the midst of her rebellion and flight, Hagar encounters God. “Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees” (*Gen. 16:13, NKJV*). Choose and share a name you might use to describe God based on your personal experience with Him.

### Thought Questions:

**1** What makes you laugh? Did you laugh more easily as a child than you do now? What has made that difference? Read Genesis 17, trying to consider Abraham’s thoughts as God draws near to restate His covenant. Abraham is now ninety-nine. How does his age affect His response to God’s promise? How do you feel about the fact that Abraham “fell on his face and laughed” (*Gen. 17:17*)? What lessons can we learn from Abraham and this encounter? How would you explain them to a friend who is having difficulty trusting God’s promises?

**2** Take a few minutes to recall some of the guests you have had at your home. If you knew they were coming, what did you do to prepare for their arrival? Abraham offered his home and hospitality to unexpected guests. After reading Genesis 18:1-8, make a list of the things he did to provide for them. Finish reading the conclusion of the story in verses 9-15. Imagine how the story might have ended if Abraham had allowed the strangers to walk by. Plan to invite a work associate or neighbor to share a Friday evening meal so that he or she might be blessed by your hospitality.

### Application Question:

Consider the houses nearest your home. How many families profess faith in God? If you don’t know, what steps might you take to find out (borrow a tool or ask for advice from someone who has a beautiful lawn, etc.)? Abraham and Lot were given warning of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*see Gen. 18:20; 19:12, 13*). Since we know that Jesus’ return is imminent, how does that motivate our effort to meet others? Ask God to help you be more attentive to His Holy Spirit’s guidance in building saving relationships with those who do not know their danger.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 137–144, 156–170; *The SDA Bible Commentary* on Genesis 16–19.

Talking about Lot, Ellen White wrote: “Living in that wicked city, in the midst of unbelief, his faith had grown dim. The Prince of heaven was by his side, yet he pleaded for his own life as though God, who had manifested such care and love for him, would not still preserve him. He should have trusted himself wholly to the divine Messenger, giving his will and his life into the Lord’s hands without a doubt or a question.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 161.

“Our Saviour warned his disciples that just prior to his second coming a state of things would exist very similar to that which preceded the flood. Eating and drinking would be carried to excess, and the world would be given up to pleasure. This state of things does exist at the present time. The world is largely given up to the indulgence of appetite; and the disposition to follow worldly customs will bring us into bondage to perverted habits,—habits that will make us more and more like the doomed inhabitants of Sodom. I have wondered that the inhabitants of the earth were not destroyed, like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. I see reason enough for the present state of degeneracy and mortality in the world. Blind passion controls reason, and every high consideration is, with many, sacrificed to lust.”—Ellen G. White and James White, *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene*, p. 53.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read aloud the paragraphs you wrote for the question at the end of Thursday’s lesson. Discuss your answers.
- 2 What are some prevalent moral issues facing your society? How does your church react to these issues? How can we as Christians be a force for good, showing people a higher standard of morality?
- 3 Is there someone you know struggling with a sin that’s destroying their lives? What can you do as a class to lend help and support and encouragement as that person seeks victory?