

## Free online Bible commentary on Genesis 16-19

**Introduction:** In our last section God called Abram to leave his home and family and go to a land God would show him. God promised Abram to give him the land of Canaan, to make of him a great nation, and to bless all nations through him. Trusting God, Abram moved to Canaan. Later God promised that Abram's descendants would be countless. God made a solemn covenant with Abram renewing the land promise and foretelling that Abram's descendants would be slaves of a foreign king for four hundred years before going to possess the land. Now Abram and Sarai are growing older and still have not one descendant, much less a multitude. What are they to do?

### **Notes on Genesis 16-19:**

16:2 - Go, sleep with my maidservant - It was not unusual in those times for a man to seek an heir through a concubine or secondary wife if the first wife did not produce. The writer of these notes knew a couple in Africa who did this same thing. Abram and Sarai, growing impatient with God, decided to help God out with a plan of their own.

Does God need our help? This "running ahead of God" produced a lot of grief in the future, both in Abram's household, and among nations. Ishmael, the child born to Hagar by Abram, became the father of the Arab nations who have conflicted bitterly with the Israelites ever since.

Today singles are also tempted to "run ahead of God" instead of waiting in faith for God to supply the right companion. Time goes by and they don't see anything happening. They can see no possibilities and so they may compromise their standards to find someone.

16:4 - she began to despise her mistress - Polygamous households are almost always plagued by jealousy, envy and strife between the rival wives.

16:5 - you are responsible - In her pain Sarai is being irrational and unreasonable here. It was her idea first to send Abram to Hagar.

16:6 - Your servant is in your hands - We have to admire Abram's self-control when he is so unjustly accused by his wife.

16:7 - The angel of the LORD - An angel with this title appears a number of times in the Old Testament (Genesis 19:1,21; 31:11,13; Exodus 3:2,4; Judges 2:1-5; 6:11,12,14; 13:3,6,8-11,13,15-17,20-23; Zechariah 3:1-6; 12:8).

Many interpreters have believed that this angel is the preincarnate Christ. Reasons given for this belief:

1. The angel speaks for God in the first person and promises to do what Yahweh alone can do ("increase your descendants...")
2. Hagar considered the person to be God (Hebrew "El") and addressed him as in worship.
3. Moses, the writer, calls the angel Yahweh (16:13).
4. Things are attributed to this angel which can only be said of God, but God the Father has never been seen by anyone (John 1:8), and so it is supposed that this angel is God the Son.
5. Some identify this angel with "the angel who delivered" or "the redeeming angel" of Genesis 48:16; the angel of God's presence - Isaiah 63:9; the angel (messenger) of the covenant -

Malachi 3:1; and the "angel of the great counsel (or design) - Isaiah 9:6 Septuagint Version.

But this is all speculation. If the angel is a direct personal representative sent by Yahweh, it would fit the statements of scripture just as well. Indeed, this person is called an angel, meaning messenger. This seems to make the angel someone other than Yahweh.

One thing is certain: If the angel in these passages is Christ, he is not a created being as other angels are, and is only called an angel because he is a messenger.

There is no certainty that the "Angel of Yahweh" is Christ. The writer of these notes doubts that he is.

16:8 - Hagar - God cared about Hagar even though she was only a slave.

16:9 - Submit - Don't disrespect her as you have in the past by taunting her about being childless. The New Testament also teaches slaves to submit to their masters - Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18.

16:10 - increase your descendants - Hagar through Ishmael is the mother of the Arab nations.

16:11 - Ishmael means "God hears."

17:1 - ninety-nine years old - thirteen years later. Sometimes in reading the Old Testament stories we have the impression that God spoke personally to the patriarchs often. Yet this is only the third recorded appearance of the LORD to Abram since Abram moved to Canaan 23 years before.

17:2 - The LORD confirms his previous covenant with Abram. He had confirmed the land and nation promises in chapter 15 but here again underlines those two promises. Remember that many years have gone by and it is helpful to Abram to hear these things again from God, especially when Sarah's faith has faltered in the matter of Hagar.

17:5 - your name will be Abraham which means "father of a multitude" or "father of many." First of all, Abraham is the father of the Israelite nation, God's chosen people of the Old Testament. Beyond that, he is the father of the Edomites through Esau, of the Arabs through Ishmael, and of several other nations through his later wife Keturah, Genesis 25. Paul says Abraham is also the spiritual father of the believers of all nations who trust God as Abraham did.

In the New Testament period in which we live, does God still have any special regard for the nation of Israel? Not in the sense that Israel will be saved any differently than the rest of us. Salvation for Jew or Gentile is through faith in Christ - Romans 11:23. But Israel is special to God because of the patriarchs - Romans 11:28, 29. He still has a plan for calling Israel to faith in Christ - Romans 11:1-32.

17:8 - I will be their God - Compare with the covenant language between God and Israel in Exodus 6:7. God "marries" his people and Israel becomes his bride in the covenant at Sinai, Exodus 19, 20.

17:10 - circumcised - this will be the sign of the covenant and mark the Israelites as a people set apart from other nations for God. This became such a distinguishing mark that in New Testament times the Jews were sometimes referred to simply as "the circumcised" or "those of the circumcision" - see Galatians 2:7-9.

17:14 - cut off – A play on words. If he has not experienced the "cutting off" of circumcision, he himself will be cut off from being an Israelite.

17:15 - Sarah means "princess," a fitting name for the mother of many nations and kings.

17:17 - Abraham...laughed - A temporary amazement. But he recovered his faith. Paul's statement in Romans 4:19, 20 that Abraham "did not waver" refers to his subsequent trust, not to his initial reaction.

17:18 - If only Ishmael... - Abraham loved his son Ishmael and wished God would just let him be the heir to all the promises made by God.

17:19 - Yes - Ishmael will have his own blessings - verse 20.

but...Sarah will bear you a son...I will establish my covenant with him - The son of God's promise, whose birth was possible only by God's power, would inherit the great covenant promises given to Abraham. Through Isaac, not Ishmael, the covenant nation would come.

Paul uses God's choice of Isaac above Ishmael as an example of the sovereign grace of God - Romans 9:6-8, 15, and 16. Compare the similar case of God's choosing Jacob over his twin brother Esau, Genesis 25:23; Romans 9:10-16. Paul also uses the free wife Sarah and her son and the servant wife Hagar and her son to illustrate the two covenants, old and new - Galatians 4:21-31. Children of the Old Covenant were born into it by human physical power as Ishmael was, but children of the New Covenant are born by God's power as Isaac was.

17:23 - On that very day - Abraham, being the believer that he was, moved quickly to obey God. Real faith always acts and obeys - James 2:14-26; Galatians 5:6.

Every male - Abraham was careful to obey fully what God required. Later Moses would come under God's anger for neglecting to circumcise his son - Exodus 4:24-26.

18:1 - The LORD appeared to Abraham - This appearance was in human form - see verse 2. This was almost certainly an angel who directly represented God and spoke in God's place. (No one has ever seen God himself in his full glory - John 1:18.) Compare the incident where an angel spoke to Moses from a burning bush, yet the same account says God spoke to him from the bush - Exodus 3:2, 4.

18:2 - three men - The LORD in the person of his representative angel, accompanied by two other angels. For another example of an angel appearing in human form, compare the experience of Jacob, Genesis 32:24-30.

hurried...bowed low - This may have just been oriental courtesy, which took hospitality very seriously indeed. Or Abraham may have sensed that there was something different about these persons.

18:4 - wash your feet - A common courtesy in those days when people walked in open sandals and their feet needed cleansing as well as refreshing.

18:5 - something to eat - More literally, as in the NASB, "a piece of bread." Compare "a little water," verse 4. This is oriental exaggeration, downplaying what the host will do for the visitors. The writer of these notes, visiting Korea, was amazed when the host would put out an amazing array of dishes on the table and then apologize for the poor, small meal.

Quick - so as to minister to the travelers and not to delay them unnecessarily.

18:8 - stood near - to serve any need they might have.

*Hospitality* is a Christian virtue and one of the most strategic ways we can serve the kingdom of God. Probably in reference to this story in Genesis 18 and that in Genesis 19, the writer of Hebrews says, Hebrews 13:2, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

At the judgment, Jesus will say, "I was a stranger and you invited me in" - Matthew 25:35. The apostles command Christians to be hospitable - Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9. To be qualified as a leader of the church, one must be hospitable - 1 Timothy 3:2. Hospitality is not easy under the financial and time pressures of modern life, yet it is very important for God's people to use hospitality powerfully for God.

18:9 - Where is your wife Sarah? This journey of the angels has several purposes, one of which is to reconfirm to Abraham and Sarah that God will give them a son of their own.

18:12 - Sarah laughed just as Abraham had first done when God made this announcement to him.

18:14 - Is anything to hard for the LORD? Compare Luke 1:37; Matthew 19:26. J. B. Phillips wrote a book called, "Your God Is Too Small." We need to believe in God as he really is, all-powerful. This should determine our view of what is real and should be the basis of our peace and confidence as we cope with life and work for God.

18:16 - looked down toward Sodom - Dealing with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah was the other purpose of their journey.

18:17 - Shall I hide from Abraham - In James 2:23 Abraham is called God's friend. Jesus said to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" - John 15:15.

18:19 - chosen him so that he will direct his children... household...to keep the way of the LORD - That is also what we are called for today.

so that - Abraham's obedience to God and his training of his children in righteousness was a condition of God's promised blessings. Before the writer of these notes and his wife adopted their daughter as a baby, they prayed, "Lord, do not let us have this child unless you will make us able to guide her into a righteous, faithful life."

18:20 - outcry - The cry to God of people wronged by the wicked. Compare the cry of Abel's blood to God from the ground - Genesis 4:10. We may think no one cares when we cry out against injustice. But God is always listening for such cries. Whether or not injured people can get justice from earthly authorities, they can get it from God. Vengeance belongs to God - Romans 12:19. Because he is God, we must accept his timing, not insist on ours.

18:20 - their sin so grievous - An indication of how God feels about violence and sexual immorality and perversion. Sodom was also condemned for her arrogance and for not caring about the needy - Ezekiel 16:49.

I will go down and see - God can know anything he wants to from heaven, but it seems that he limits himself in his dealings with humans so we can understand his actions better. Perhaps he also wants to make room for men and angels to share the glory of a part in his work.

Notice that God is careful to see all the facts before punishing or destroying people. He "has no pleasure in the death of the wicked" - Ezekiel 18:23; compare Jeremiah 18:7, 8; 2 Peter 3:9. God had much rather see the sinner change and be forgiven, than to see him destroyed. He delays judgment until a group of people become hopelessly wicked, hoping that they will repent - Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9.

18:23 - sweep away the righteous - Abraham intercedes for Lot and his family and any others in Sodom who may still fear God. It takes boldness for Abraham to ask God the things he does. But love will move a person to intercede. Abraham has already proclaimed Lot his brother. *A brother will intercede for his brother*, then and now.

When we lovingly intercede for others we are acting like God, who does not want people to perish, and like Christ, who always intercedes for us to God. God especially loves to hear prayers of intercession because they are prayers of love.

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? That is why we have hope. Earthly authorities may be corrupt, but the highest judge of all is not and never will be. Faith in the righteousness of God, even when we cannot understand all of what he is doing, is foundational for Christians.

18:28 - forty-five...forty...thirty...twenty...ten - Abraham's love makes him boldly continue.

19:1 - sitting in the gateway - This probably means that Lot had become one of the leaders of the city, as leaders held court in the gateway.

bowed - Respect and courtesy like this can hardly be found in the Western world. Without realizing what it was, did Lot also sense something in these particular visitors that demanded respect?

19:2 - please turn aside - Lot invites them home. People of the East felt a customary obligation to go this for travelers.

spend the night in the square - That is where travelers still sleep in many countries of the world.

19:3 - bread without yeast - Not delaying the meal to let bread rise.

19:4 - all the men - Our cities have gang problems, but the whole male population of Sodom was a gang.

Old as well as young were part of it, totally abandoned to evil.

have sex with them - Homosexual gang rape. Homosexual sin is still called "sodomy" after the name of this city. Not all homosexuals are violent and totally depraved like these men of Sodom. But homosexuality is a growing moral problem in our own culture. No longer hidden as shameful, it is now flaunted arrogantly.

What is a Biblical, Christian approach in dealing with the problem of homosexuality?

First know what the scriptures teach. Genesis 1:27, 28; 2:21-25 shows that God made humans male and female, gave Adam his wife Eve, and intended a heterosexual relationship which would produce children. Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; and Deuteronomy 23:18 show that homosexual practice is an abomination to God.

Related is Deuteronomy 22:5 which forbids wearing the clothing of the opposite sex; God wants men to be men and women to be women. Our present passage, Genesis 19:4-9 tells of attempted homosexual rape in Sodom and God's punishment that followed; the term "sodomy" derives from this event. See Judges 19:13-20:48 for a similar incident at Gibeah in Benjamin.

When reformers wanted to bring Israel back to God, they removed the homosexual male prostitutes from the land - 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46. Romans 1:23-27 shows that when pagan Gentiles refused to know the true God and followed idols, God eventually gave them up to ordinary immorality and further to homosexual and lesbian relationships as part of their destruction.

Paul writes that male prostitutes and homosexual offenders are among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Some of the Corinthian Christians, converted from this lifestyle, had been washed, made holy and forgiven - 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. In 1 Timothy 1:9 Paul loosely summarizes the Ten Commandments, and it is interesting that where adultery would come, Paul mentions both "adulterers and perverts [Greek: male homosexuals]," showing that God condemns homosexual activity for what it is

morally, not just because of its sometime connection with idolatry.

Homosexual theology claims that the Bible only condemns homosexual activity when it is connected with pagan idolatry, and tries to make this the context of the above passages. They claim that an ordinary homosexual relationship is not displeasing to God. But heterosexual immorality and ritual murder (human sacrifice) were also practiced in worship of idols and were condemned by God. One might as well argue that murder and sex outside of marriage are OK as long as they are not practiced in connection with idolatry.

It is better to take the scriptural statements at face value: it is abomination to God when a man lies with a man as he would with a woman. One of the very reasons God hates idolatry is because of the abominable sexual practices connected with it. Even if a person does not accept the authority of scripture, nature itself shows that homosexuality is abnormal; it is not hard to see that it is against the life and survival of the species and contrary to anatomy.

Some other things to remember:

1. Although some persons inherit more of a tendency toward perversion, just as others do toward alcoholism or a bad temper, we are all still responsible to cope with our individual weakness and say no to them. We are responsible for our moral choices.
2. Jesus says the truth makes us free - John 8:32. Many homosexuals and lesbians are locked into their behavior because they have believed the lie that says they are what they are and nothing can change them. Once they understand the truth that Christ can change them, many homosexuals do change in response to the love and truth of the gospel and the help of the Holy Spirit. Secular psychiatry can do little with perversion, but a number of ministries operated by former homosexuals and lesbians are helping people become free.
3. It is important to distinguish between the homosexual condition and homosexual practice. Again using a parallel example, many heterosexual people are oriented toward promiscuity, but those who say no to temptation for Christ's sake are acceptable to him.
4. Jesus teaches us to love the sinner even though we hate the sin. Jesus himself had to do that for each of us. Jesus loves homosexual and lesbian sinners just like he loves heterosexual sinners. Though criticized, he spent much time among "sinners" outcast by society. He said the sick are the ones who need a doctor. If Jesus were here today, he would be talking with homosexuals. Scripture certainly does not give us any right to treat a person hatefully because of his/her sexual orientation.

Because homosexual behavior is so naturally offensive to straight people, we tend to class this sin apart from others. Actually we can be rejected by God just as surely for moral looseness of the heterosexual kind. Which of us has not sinned sexually, at least in mind if not in body? And we can also be lost for proud self righteousness just as the Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' time were.

19:6 - Lot went outside - It was his duty to try to protect his guests.

19:8 - two daughters - It seems horrendous to us that Lot would offer his daughters, but we have to understand this in the context of Lot's culture where the safety of one's guests had to come before any other interest. This was the only thing Lot knew to try.

19:9 - Get out of our way - The people of Sodom had become so hardened in their wickedness that no argument would stop them. They were totally controlled by lust. Sodom is a picture of what it is like when evil grows unchecked. How did Sodom get so evil? It did not happen in a day, but by slow degrees.

It is said that you can put a frog in a pan of water at room temperature, set it on a very slow heat, and the frog will sit still and boil to death because it does not recognize what is happening so gradually. We grow accustomed to evil and it becomes more acceptable. We are no longer outraged by it; after all, we see it every day on TV. Gradually those who assert themselves against evil are the ones who seem out of step, strange. Satan puts us to sleep and does his thing without much opposition.

Given the trends of depravity, violence, and perversion in our own country, how far is it to Sodom from where we are now?

19:11 - struck the men...with blindness - Evil people cannot prevail against God.

find the door - Even being struck blind by an angel did not stop them from trying. There was no moral fear left in these people.

19:14 - thought he was joking - With wickedness goes unbelief. Lot's daughters had married men of Sodom who had no fear of God and no respect for what a man of God like Lot said. Many people unknowingly have chosen their eternal destiny when they chose the person they would marry. When our children start to look for a mate in today's culture, it is a minefield. The only safe practice is to date only Christians, and even there go carefully until you know the person is committed to God like you are.

19:16 - hesitated - Lot knew he was leaving behind his married daughters and everything he had worked for all his life. It was not easy to leave.

men grasped his hand - The mercy of God.

19:17 - Flee for your lives...Don't look back - Lot and his family still hadn't grasped the urgency of the situation. There are moral situations today where it is just as urgent to flee and not look back, if we want to live and save our families.

19:21 - I will grant this request - Again the mercy of God.

19:22 - Zoar means "small."

19:24 - burning sulfur - It may be that God used some kind of volcanic eruption which resulted in the falling holocaust. Someday God will destroy the whole earth by fire - 2 Peter 3:7, 10-12; Luke 17:26-32.

19:26 - pillar of salt - So we have Jesus' warning, "Remember Lot's wife!" - Luke 17:32, 33. We cannot trifle with God. Obedience is a serious thing. Many people fail in the Christian life because they look back to the old life and their hearts are divided.

19:28 - smoke rising from the land - Sodom and Gomorrah came to an awful end, and so will every society that rebels against God long enough.

19:30 - left Zoar - Lot may have been afraid of being attacked by the people of Zoar because of their wickedness, or because they might blame Lot for what happened to their sister cities. Or he may have been afraid that the wickedness of Zoar would bring similar punishment on it. One who had just witnessed the destruction of Sodom would take God's judgments very seriously.

lived in a cave - Now Lot reaped the end result of his bad decision to move to Sodom. He had lost children and his wife and all he owned. He was about to lose his remaining self-respect.

19:32 - preserve our family line - This was a legitimate concern but it did not justify what these women did. They should have sought help from God and trusted him by behaving righteously while they waited for

God to give them a way - Psalm 37:5; Proverbs 3:6; Philippians 4:6,7. Singles need to trust God for the right mate and be willing to wait for God to move. We all need to trust God in "impossible" situations and not take things into our own hands. Trust is shown by always respecting God's standards of righteousness.

19:33 - drink wine - Alcohol and drugs remove our inhibitions, tranquilize our conscience, and lead us to do things we would never have done in our right mind.

19:34 - lay with my father - Sexual relations with a close relative are known as the sin of incest. This sin is common in America today and it inflicts horrible emotional and spiritual damage on its victims. Incest is an abomination to God - Leviticus 18:6-17. Cases of sexual abuse often involve incest and must be dealt with whatever the cost. The cost of not doing something is greater than the cost of intervening.

19:37, 38 - Moabites...Ammonites - These, though related to the Israelites, were bitter enemies of Israel. Again, going ahead of God produced long-term trouble. Nothing more is heard of Lot's history after this. We can suppose that he may have reunited with Abraham, though shame over his choice and its outcome may have prevented him.

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