

# 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)?**

## 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?**

## 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?**

## 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.**

## 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.

**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:

- ❶ Read aloud the paragraphs you wrote for the question at the end of Thursday’s lesson. Discuss your answers.
- ❷ 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?
- ❸ 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?

## Blessed Interference

by ASERI SUKA

I love evangelism! Recently I held meetings on the island of Vanua Levu, in Fiji. We hoped for a turnout of two hundred people or more. But on the first night only ninety came. We learned that the meetings conflicted with a popular television program that came on every night at 8:00. We prayed that God would reach these people with His message. And He answered our prayer in a totally unexpected way!

The meeting started, and in time I stood to preach. While I spoke, we noticed people running back and forth between houses. *What is happening?* we wondered. Then someone came to talk to a team member in the back of the tent.

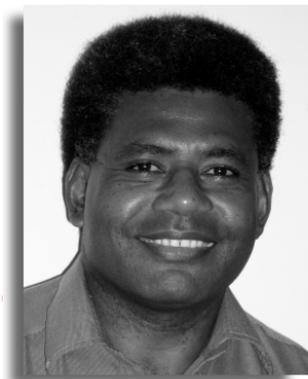
After the meeting the team member told me our public address system was interfering with their television reception. The people received the video signal for their favorite TV program, but the audio came from the evangelistic meetings. The people were more puzzled than angry.

We checked our system and found everything was operating as it should. But the next night the same thing happened. And the next. For two weeks during the evangelistic series televisions in the area played the audio of our meetings.

With no competition from television, people began coming to the evangelistic meetings, the only “entertainment” available. One night the choir from the local Protestant church came, offering to present special music for the meetings. No one had asked them to come; they volunteered because they were enjoying the religious meetings.

People from nearby villages came when they heard about the television sets that broadcast the evangelistic meetings. Attendance more than doubled to almost two hundred people. So far, nineteen have been baptized, and seventy-four more are preparing for baptism. I am convinced that without the miraculous interference with television, the attendance would never have reached one hundred. We have built a temporary church to house the new believers.

Your mission offerings help fund evangelistic efforts in Fiji and around the world.



*Aseri Suka (left) is Family Life director for Fiji Mission.*