

ABRAHAM AND THE ANGELS

Genesis 18

This lesson is from the middle of the Abraham story. Review briefly the facts concerning Abraham up to this point, leaving the rest of his story to be covered later. In the story this time Abraham's desire to be directed by the Lord should be emphasized, in contrast to the general state of mankind especially as it was pictured in the lesson on the Tower of Babel.

Doctrinal Points

Before His Advent the Lord appeared to men by filling an angel with His presence.

In the Word literal history begins with Genesis 12.

Faith is really of the heart. The mind tends to doubt.

Abraham's trust in the Lord and obedience to Him are essentials of charity.

Notes for Parents

In this story Abraham is nearly a hundred years old. The Lord has kept his promise—made when He called Abraham to leave his ancestral home in Chaldea and go to the land of Canaan—and Abraham is rich and well established in the land. But one promise of the Lord is still unfulfilled. For the Lord has said that Abraham's descendants shall inherit the land and become a great nation, and as yet Abraham's wife Sarah, who is also very old, has had no children. Abraham has one son, Ishmael, born to him by Sarah's bondswoman Hagar, but the Lord has told him that Ishmael cannot be his heir.

Abraham's outstanding virtues were trust in the Lord and obedience to Him. It was these virtues which made it possible for the Lord to be with him and to prosper him, and also to speak to him as He does in our chapter. As we read the chapter, we find that

Abraham almost immediately recognizes the three men as angels or messengers of the Lord, and as the chapter goes on, he speaks to them as one person and is answered by the Lord, until in the last part of the chapter his whole conversation is with the Lord. The renewal of the promise of an heir to be born to him by Sarah he accepts without question. Sarah cannot conceal her doubts, but we know that within the year she did have a son, Isaac.

The lesson for us in this chapter is that trust and obedience are never in vain. They always bear fruit which carries on into the future. Sometimes it seems to us that the good have many hardships to bear and that the evil prosper, but that is because we are thinking only of what happens in this world and forgetting that this is only the beginning of our life and that what counts in the end is what is happening in our souls. This is what the last part of our chapter tells us. We all have in us the spiritual counterparts of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, selfish desires and wrong thoughts, but if we do our best from day to day to learn the Lord's will and do it, the Lord will surely spare us and bring us safely to heaven.

Primary

Only the first part of the chapter is chosen for these younger children. The Lord's promise to Abraham and the fact that he and Sarah were old people and had had no son will serve to point up the lesson. The details of his entertainment of the angels will interest the children. Tell the children that the word *angel* means "messenger."

Our story is about Abraham. Abraham was one of the people who still wanted to be taught by the Lord and to obey Him even after most of the world had become self-willed and ignorant of heavenly things. So the Lord could teach Abraham and be with him and help him.

The Lord told Abraham to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan and settle there. It was a long journey but Abraham obeyed, and he finally settled in a place called Hebron—or sometimes called Mamre. The Lord prospered him and he became very

rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. He and his family were shepherds and herdmen and lived very simply—not at all as most of us do today. Their homes were tents, which they could take down and move about so that their flocks could always find pasture.

The Lord had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, but Abraham and his wife Sarah had had no children and they were now old people. This troubled Abraham very much, but the Lord always keeps His promises.

Who came to see Abraham?

How did he receive them?

What did he tell Sarah to do?

What other food did he give them?

What did they promise him?

What did Sarah do of which she was afterward ashamed?

The three men who came to Abraham were angels or messengers of the Lord, and Abraham recognized this and welcomed them and was happy to entertain them with the best he had. And he believed what they told him, even though Sarah doubted.

Junior

For this class the story of Abraham is best taught with the help of a map, and this story should be treated as an incident in the total story, with the emphasis on the promise of Isaac. Do not, however, neglect the general lesson of Abraham's questions concerning Sodom and Gomorrah. The exact location of these two cities geographically is not known, but their general location may be assumed from the story of Lot.

What is the first great church on earth called?

How is its end described in the Bible?

What is the second great church called?

What serious fault developed in it?

What happened to it when it would no longer serve the Lord?

By what story in the Bible is its end described?

The Lord never lets the world be without a church. You remember that Cain represents faith and that the Lord kept Cain from being killed even after Cain had killed Abel. To start the third church the Lord chose Abram. Abram and his family had grown

up with a great many wrong ideas about God and religion, but they still wanted to do what would please God instead of just trying to have their own way. So the Lord could teach them.

The Lord told Abram to take his family and leave Ur of Chaldea and travel to the land of Canaan. Abram made his home at Hebron, where the Lord renewed His promise to Abram that he would be father of a great people, and as a sign changed his name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. This was a sign because the letter *h* is the principal letter in the Lord's name *Jehovah*, and it meant that Abraham and Sarah, because they were obedient to the Lord, had come to stand in a very special relation to Him.

Now we come to our story for today. *Mamre*, in the first verse of our chapter, is another name for Hebron.

Who came to see Abraham at Mamre?

What did Abraham offer them first?

What did he tell Sarah to do?

What else did he give them to eat?

What did they promise him?

What did Sarah do?

On your map find the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These were in the valley which Lot had chosen for his home, and perhaps you remember that Lot had already had trouble because he lived too near these wicked cities. He and his family had been captured, and Abraham had had to go and rescue him. Now the two cities have become so wicked that they must be destroyed.

What does Abraham ask the Lord?

What were the numbers in order as Abraham gave them?

When you are older, you will understand more of what this story means, but you can see now that it teaches us that the Lord is very kind and merciful and does everything He can to help and save us, so long as there is any real goodness in us. It is never the Lord's fault if a person does not get to heaven. But the Lord cannot save us if we turn from Him altogether and become wholly selfish. And of course the more obedient and unselfish we are, the more happiness the Lord can give us.

Intermediate

The principal lesson for this class is the correspondence of Abraham, the meaning of his call, and the importance of the good states of our infancy in our later development.

Abraham obeyed the Lord. When the voice of the Lord came to him, telling him to leave his home in Ur of Chaldea and make the long journey to the land of Canaan, he gathered together his family and his possessions and started out. You remember the story. Abram and his wife Sarai—their names were later changed to Abraham and Sarah—together with Abraham’s brother Nahor and his family, and their nephew Lot—son of another brother, Haran, who had died—and their old father Terah took the route up around the northern edge of the Arabian desert, living in tents and stopping often to pasture their flocks and herds. At one of these stopping places, not too far from Canaan, Nahor decided to settle. They named the place Haran after Lot’s father, and in the Bible it is also sometimes called “the city of Nahor.” There Terah died. We need to remember this place because of its importance in our later stories.

Abraham and Sarah and Lot, with their servants and their animals, went on into the land of Canaan, stopping at Shechem and Bethel, where Abraham built altars, and then going on southward. You remember that because of a famine they had to go to Egypt for a time and that they prospered there and became rich. When they returned to the land of Canaan, they separated, Lot choosing to live in the rich Jordan valley, in spite of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in that area, and Abraham taking the more mountainous region and making his home at Hebron.

This is a true story, but it is also a story of a spiritual journey which we take in our early childhood, for Abraham represents the state of every little child, a state of simple trust and obedience. At that state of our lives we are all ignorant and we know only the external things which we see and touch—just as Abraham was an idolater—but the Lord has seen to it that there is something in us which accepts instruction about Him. The land of Chaldea rep-

resents our first natural self-centered state, but we are called by the Lord to go to the land of Canaan, which represents heaven or a heavenly character. And the Lord promises each one of us, as He promised Abraham, that if we obey Him the land of Canaan shall be ours forever.

In our present chapter Abraham is settled in Hebron and is prosperous and happy except for one thing. He has no heir. Ishmael has been born to him by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian bondswoman, but the Lord has told him that Ishmael is not to be his heir. We soon recognize that the three men who come to Abraham are messengers of the Lord, or angels, for they speak for the Lord.

In fact, if you read carefully, you will find that the angels are sometimes called "he" and that in verse 13 they are even called "the Lord." Swedenborg explains this for us by telling us that before the Lord came into the world as Jesus Christ He sometimes appeared to men by "filling an angel with His presence." Abraham received the men with joy and gave them the best he had. This again shows Abraham's openness to direction by the Lord, and it is a picture of the simplicity and of the pleasure with which little children receive instruction in the stories of the Word.

The angels told Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son, even though by this time Abraham and Sarah were both old. Sarah doubted, but Abraham believed. The promise of an heir is the promise that the truth we learn and the good we do will not be wasted but will "bear fruit," that is, will lead to further development of heavenly character.

The latter part of our chapter, although it seems to have no connection with this promise in the letter, really carries it further. The wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah picture the evils and falsities which "come natural" to us because we are born selfish. Sometimes we get to thinking that we just can't help being bad, and we become discouraged with ourselves and are tempted to give up trying to be good. This is pictured by the angels going down to look over Sodom and Gomorrah to see if they are so wicked that they must be destroyed. Every number in the Word has a corre-

spondence. So the numbers which Abraham uses in our chapter describe different kinds and degrees of goodness, beginning with fifty, which pictures a life full of goodness and truth, and ending with ten, which pictures “remains,” the good states of our infancy stored up in us by the Lord. Perhaps you have read stories of how a young man who seemed about to become a criminal has suddenly thought of his mother and his innocent childhood and decided to change his ways and reform. This is an example of how the Lord can work through these childhood “remains.”

So the conversation between the Lord and Abraham in our chapter teaches us how the Lord uses every bit of goodness and truth we ever had, and is trying always to save us from becoming wholly selfish and destroying our spiritual life.

Basic Correspondences

- Abraham = the state of infancy
and very early childhood
 - the land of Chaldea = the natural state into which
we are born
 - the land of Canaan = heaven or a heavenly character
 - Sodom = evil from the love of self
 - Gomorrah = falsity from the love of self
 - fifty = what is full (truths full of goods)
 - ten = remains
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Senior

More can be done in this class with the conversation concerning Sodom and Gomorrah. One of the temptations young people have to meet is the question –not only in their own minds but from other people–“What’s the use?” They need to be impressed with the fact that the Lord’s presence with us is very real, and that no right choice of ours is ever wasted.

The story of Abraham’s call to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees and go to the land of Canaan pictures something in the experience of every one of us. We are born wholly ignorant and with a deep-seated tendency to selfishness which comes to us by

inheritance from our natural ancestors. The evils and consequent false tendencies which developed in the Most Ancient and Ancient churches are born in us just as they were in Abraham. But the Lord sees to it that each of us has also an inheritance from Him in the form of a “counter-urge” to overcome our selfishness and make spiritual progress. When you were a very little child you began to feel this prompting to be good instead of naughty. It was the voice of the Lord calling you to leave “the land of your fathers”—your selfishness—and go to the land of Canaan—the heavenly character which the Lord would make your own if you obeyed.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob picture our spiritual development as we grow from infancy to adulthood. Abraham stands for our infancy and very early childhood. Abraham trusted and obeyed the Lord just as we, when we are little, trust and obey our parents. We have studied Abraham’s journey, the settling of his brother Nahor in Haran, the arrival of Abraham and Lot at Shechem and then at Bethel, their sojourn in Egypt because of the famine, and their return and separation, when Lot chose the Jordan valley and Abraham took the more mountainous part of the land. You will remember the story of Lot and the difficulties he had because he lived too near the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that this represents the tendency of the natural, external part of our minds to be lured into evil by the attractions of the world.

At the time when our lesson for today opens, Abraham is settled at Hebron—also called Mamre—and has been made rich and secure through his obedience to the Lord. He has one son, Ishmael, born to him by his wife’s Egyptian bondswoman Hagar; but the Lord has told him that Ishmael is not to be his heir. Yet he has been promised that his descendants shall inherit the land after him, and that his wife Sarah shall have a son.

This promise is renewed and made definite as to time by the three men who come to Abraham in our chapter. Notice that although there are three, they are referred to and addressed as one, and that Abraham not only receives them with all possible honor but evidently recognizes that they speak for the Lord. Swedenborg

tells us that before the Advent the Lord appeared to men by “filling an angel with His presence.” Isaiah (63:9) speaks of “the angel of his presence.” Of the three men who appeared to Abraham Swedenborg says: “That this signifies the Divine Itself, the Divine Human, and the Holy proceeding, may be seen without explication; for it is known to everyone that there is a Trine, and that this Trine is a One.” (AC 2149) He explains this story as it refers to the Lord’s early childhood, and says: “In the internal sense the subject here treated of is Jehovah, in that He appeared to the Lord, and that the Lord perceived this; but not by an appearing such as there was to Abraham; for it is historically true that three men were seen by Abraham, but this represents the Divine perception, or the perception from the Divine which the Lord had when in the Human.”

The promise of an heir is the promise that our obedience to the Lord will have lasting good results. Sarah’s laughter at the promise of a son pictures our natural tendency to doubt whether it is really worthwhile to try to be good. Abraham did not doubt and therefore we have the account of his conversation with the Lord concerning Sodom and Gomorrah, which is really a further explanation of the promise of an heir. The numbers picture various states of goodness and truth. Fifty is a full state. Five always means “a little.” So five less than fifty means lacking only a little of a full state of goodness and truth. Forty pictures temptation, and we are told that the Lord never lets anyone come into temptation unless he has the strength to resist it if he chooses to do so. Thirty is a lesser degree of temptation. Twenty is “the good of ignorance” and is used of those who are good but are not yet adults. Ten signifies “remains”—states of good stored up in us by the Lord, especially from our early childhood, to help us when we are tempted. The lesson is that any one of these states of goodness has in it the elements of salvation. We all have in our natural heredity the elements of our spiritual destruction—Sodom and Gomorrah—but if we will hold fast whatever truth we learn and do our best to live according to it, the Lord will be able to save us

in spite of our many mistakes and backslidings. It is only when we stop trying to learn of the Lord and to obey Him that we are following the road to spiritual destruction.

Adult

The story of Abraham and its general correspondence should be familiar to the Adult class unless the group contains newcomers to the church. Most of the time should be spent on the details of the chapter, with special attention to Swedenborg's explanation of the visit of the three men, of Sarah's laughter, and of the conversation about Sodom and Gomorrah.

In approaching the familiar story of Abraham we need again to remind ourselves that all history is the record of slow changes, and that events which seem to us sudden and sometimes inexplicable are nevertheless the result of the development of seeds sown long before. As the devastation of the Ancient Church was accomplished gradually, so the inauguration of the Jewish Church was not by a sudden sweeping creation.

The Jews look to Abraham as the father of their race, and we are accustomed to think of the call of Abraham as the beginning of the Jewish Church. But if we read the writings carefully, we find that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob constituted the last phase of the Ancient Church. Swedenborg speaks of three Ancient Churches. The first is pictured by Noah and his sons. The second began with Eber, who is the first real person mentioned in the Word and from whom the Jews take the name of Hebrews. The third is described in the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For although Abraham was an idolater, having lost all understanding of spiritual things, he still had the desire to serve God rather than self, the desire which is essential to a true church. Isaac and even Jacob retained something of this desire. The Jewish Church, which was not a true church at all but merely the representative of a church, was instituted among the sons of Jacob and their descendants. Swedenborg has much to say about this in connection with the interpretation of Genesis 32, 33, and 34.

In explaining the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Swedenborg deals principally with the celestial sense, with their application to the states through which the Lord passed from infancy to adulthood, as He progressively opened the planes of His Human and united them to the indwelling Divine. But we are frequently reminded in the writings that the process of regeneration with man is analogous to the process of glorification in the Lord. So we rightly think of Abraham as picturing our spiritual state in infancy and very early childhood, a state of celestial innocence and trust but also a state of ignorance. The call of Abraham to leave his father's house in Ur of the Chaldees and go to the land of Canaan is the call we hear when, as little children, we first recognize that we ought to be good instead of naughty. If we obey the call, we begin our journey and eventually reach the Holy Land. Like Abram we go down into Egypt for the sustenance we need—the knowledges of the Word necessary to our spiritual life—and return rich “in cattle, in silver, and in gold.” We experience the separation from Lot when we see that the natural part of us seeks external satisfactions; and our early struggles with ourselves are on this most external plane, as Abraham had to rescue Lot when he became involved in the difficulties of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah appear in our chapter for today. We may wonder at first what connection there is between the first half and the last half of the chapter, but the connection becomes evident when we think what the promise of an heir means. We are approaching the birth of Isaac, who represents our higher rational faculty. Ishmael—the natural rational—is already in the picture. That is, we are passing out of the infant state and have developed the ability to “reason from appearances.” We are at the stage when we begin to argue with our parents. At heart we know we ought to continue to trust and obey them—Abraham's confidence does not waver—but our innocent delight in their complete wisdom—pictured by Sarah—is attacked by doubts. The promise of an heir is the promise that our efforts to do right will surely bear lasting

fruit. The doubt comes to the child in the form of a question: “What is the use of trying to be good all the time? I try and try, and never seem to satisfy people.”

In verse 1 of our chapter Swedenborg’s translation is “the oak-groves of Mamre,” and as the Hebrew word is *terebinth*—the teil-tree or oak of Palestine—there seems no reason for the translation “plains” of the King James Version. The Revised Standard Version translates it “the oaks.” The oak groves signify perception from memory-knowledges, and the fact that Abraham sat in the tent door signifies a state of worship. So we have present the conditions necessary for receiving a communication from the Lord. We are told in the writings that before the Advent the Lord appeared to men by filling an angel with His presence, and we find that Abraham received the three men immediately as angels or messengers of the Lord. In AC 2149 Swedenborg says that the three men signify “the Divine Itself, the Divine Human, and the Holy proceeding,” and he continues: “for it is known to everyone that there is a Trine, and that this Trine is a One.” Then he analyzes the conversation between Abraham and the angels to point out that they are addressed as one, that they speak as one, and that this One is identified with the Lord. A similar circumstance may be noted in chapter 19, where the two men who come to Lot are referred to as “they” while they are in Sodom, but become “he” after Lot has been led out.

The mission of the angels is to confirm the promise of an heir and to name the time of his birth. Concerning Sarah’s laughter, which revealed doubt, Swedenborg says in AC 2216 that laughter is “an affection of the rational” and he continues: “So long as there is in the rational such an affection as displays itself in laughter, so long there is in it something corporeal or worldly, and thus merely human.” Even in the Lord, at the time in His earthly life which is pictured here, the rational still had much of the human in it, which was to be expelled, and this in the celestial sense is signified by Sarah’s laughing.

Abraham’s questions concerning Sodom and Gomorrah and the

Lord's replies are an answer to our childhood question, "What is the use of trying to be good?" They are a study in the basic requirements for salvation. "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." Fifty signifies "what is full," in this case "truths full of goods." This is a spiritual picture of the man who has persisted in the effort to learn truths from the Word and to live according to them. But we all recognize our shortcomings in this respect. "Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous." Five signifies "a little." Forty and thirty both signify temptation—thirty a less degree than forty. We are told that genuine temptations come to no one who is not regenerating, for spiritual temptations are not mere external trials but are the urge to despair of our power to do right and to give up the battle, to take the easy downward path. So long as we have these inner struggles, we may know that our state is not hopeless. Twenty represents "the good of ignorance," "those who have not been in temptations and yet are good," and Swedenborg ascribes this especially to the state of young people between the ages of ten and twenty, because they have not reached the age of full responsibility for their choices. All these are saved. Finally the number ten signifies "remains." All little children—in whom the Lord always stores up remains of good and truth—and all adults who have not by their own choice destroyed these remains in themselves are saved.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 2216: "It is an affection of the rational, and indeed the affection of truth or of falsity, in the rational, that is the source of all laughter. So long as there is in the rational such an affection as displays itself in laughter, so long there is in it something corporeal or worldly, and thus merely human. Celestial good and spiritual good do not laugh, but express their delight and cheerfulness in the face, the speech, and the gesture, in another way; for there are very many things in laughter, for the most part something of contempt, which, even if it does not appear, nevertheless lies concealed; and laughter is easily distinguished from cheerfulness of the mind, which also pro-

duces something similar to it. The state of the human rational with the Lord is described by Sarah's 'laughing'; and thereby is signified with what kind of affection the truth of the rational, at that time separated from good, regarded what was said: that it should be put off, and the Divine put on; not that the Lord laughed, but that He perceived from the Divine what the rational still was, and how much of the human there still was in it, and which was to be expelled. In the internal sense this is what is signified by Sarah's 'laughing.'"

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Where was Abraham's first home? *Ur*
- P. What did the Lord tell him to do? *leave, go to Canaan*
- J. Where did he finally settle? *Hebron (Mamre)*
- P. Who came to him there one day? *three men*
- P. How did he receive them? *as honored guests*
- P. Who were they really? *angels*
- J. What did they tell Abraham? *Sarah would have a son*
- J. Why did Sarah laugh? *she was old, doubted*
- J. Where did the angels go when they left Abraham? *to Sodom*
- J. Why were they going to Sodom and Gomorrah? *to destroy them*
- J. What was the first question Abraham asked of the Lord? *destroy the good with the bad?*
- J. What did the Lord tell him? *If I find fifty righteous . . .*
- J. How many questions did Abraham ask? *-5, 40, 30, 20, 10 (five questions)*
- J. How did the Lord answer each time? *I will not destroy if . . .*
- J. What was the smallest number of good people Abraham mentioned? *ten*
- I. What does Abraham represent? *state of simple trust and obedience*
- S. What is pictured by his being told to leave Ur and go to Canaan? *leave selfish outlook, start to develop heavenly character*
- S. What is pictured by the birth of a son? *new development of truth or new intellectual faculty*