

Journey INTO THE Bible

Leader's Guide

Genesis, Part One: Lesson Six

Genesis 18:1—19:29

Introduction

Suggestion: When you are ready to begin the Bible study, it is appropriate to open with a prayer. You may use one the one below or one of your own that connects with some facet of the lesson, for example, the tension between God's justice and compassion.

Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you challenge us to dare to approach you with all of our problems and concerns after the manner of Abraham, our father in faith. We, too, long to know the difference between justice and compassion. We realize that at times we must be courageous enough to point out mistakes and offer corrections. At the same time, we are well aware that we must temper this strategy with compassion for our charges. Give us the gift of discernment that we may know the difference between justice and compassion. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Suggestion: Welcome newcomers and returning participants, and make any announcements. After doing so, read aloud "Setting the Stage."

Setting the Stage:

In Genesis 18:1-15, we are introduced once again to the promise of the birth of a son to Abraham and Sarah. The three men and the Lord confirm the earlier assurance that the following year Sarah will give birth to a son. Her reaction is not unlike Abraham's in Genesis 17:17—she laughs! Given the darkness of the forthcoming destruction of the sin cities, there is the hope of light in the birth of a new born son.

In Genesis 19:1-29, we learn the fate of the sin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this episode, the simple equation is the following: Sin demands punishment; serious sin demands serious punishment. We then learn of the wickedness of Sodom when the townspeople attack Lot's house and demand to "know" the two guests he has taken under his roof. When the offer of his two virgin

daughters instead of the guests is rejected, these men cast blindness on the attacking population and save Lot and his household. After considerable hesitation, Lot finally flees with the men and settles in a little city rather than the hills. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah then proceeds with a rain of sulfur and fire on the wicked inhabitants. Only in the end (19:29) do we learn why Lot and his household are spared.

In Genesis 18:16-33, we have a theological discussion regarding the issue of human sin and divine punishment. Abraham, assuming the position of interviewer, dares to initiate this discussion. In view of his excellent credentials with the Lord, he asks if he will simply sweep away the righteous with the wicked. In effect, he is inquiring into the nature of the Lord's righteousness. He asks if fifty righteous will be an adequate number to avoid the planned catastrophe and observes that the proposal to wipe out the cities flies in the face of the Lord's holiness. Having worked the number down to ten righteous, he notices that the Lord is more concerned about the righteous than the guilty. Abraham realizes that righteousness can overrule evil, but that the Lord's decision to destroy is justified. God continues to be God, not a fickle tyrant.

Text One: Genesis 18:1-15; 19:1-29

Suggestion: Since the text is long, you may wish to read only Genesis 19:1-11, which can be divided among four readers: (1) narrator; (2) Lot (19:2a, 7-8); (3) angels/messengers (19:2b); and (4) townspeople (19:5, 9a).

Think and Talk Questions

1. How would you describe the character portrayals of Abraham and Lot?
2. Why is Genesis 18:16-33 so central to the entire narrative?
3. How would you describe the sin of the people of Sodom? What importance does God's direct dialog with Abraham about the pronouncement of destruction have to our lives?

Leader's Guide

Genesis, Part One: Lesson Six

Genesis 18:1—19:29

Additional Questions for Text One

1. What are some of the different reactions to God's words and actions? Sarah's reaction in Genesis 18:12 is disbelief (she laughed). Abraham's reaction in Genesis 15:6 to God's promise of a son and huge progeny is faith. Other actions of the couple show that they are hedging their bets, for example, in Sarah's offer of Hagar as a proxy wife in Genesis 16:2 and Abraham's request for Ishmael, not Isaac, as his heir in Genesis 17:18.
2. What is the relationship between fact and interpretation? For example, Genesis 19:1-28 shows that the destruction of the cities (fact) is to be explained on the basis of the wickedness of people (interpretation). The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 B.C. (fact) was seen to be due to the weakness of the God of Israel (interpretation). In the New Testament, the empty tomb is a fact. There can be several interpretations: Jesus never died, the disciples stole the body, the followers of Jesus found the wrong tomb. The New Testament interpretation is the following: The tomb is empty, because Jesus has been raised.

Break

Text Two: Genesis 18:16-33

Suggestion: This text may be easily divided among three readers: (1) narrator; (2) the Lord (18:17-21, 26, 28b, 29b, 30b, 31b, 32b); and (3) Abraham (18:23-25, 27-28a, 29a, 30a, 31a, 32a).

Think and Talk Questions

Does Abraham's intimacy with the Lord (18:19) allow him to ask such bold questions? What credentials does Abraham possess (18:18-19)? What significance does posture have in Genesis 18:22?

Additional Questions for Text Two

1. Is it really appropriate to be so bold in dealing with God as Abraham is in Genesis 18:23-32? Note that the Bible encourages such daring language. For example, in Exodus 32:7-14, Moses is bold enough to get God to change his mind about destroying the people after the golden calf incident. Jeremiah is bold enough to state that the Lord has actually seduced him by making the prophet endure such a painful career (Jeremi-

ah 20:7-12; also 20:14-18). The lament psalms legitimize the use of strong language in dealing with crisis and pain (Psalms 22; 44; 60).

2. Is it merely sufficient to accept traditional answers to problems, or should we continue to probe? Genesis 18:16-33 responds to the rather complacent theology of Genesis 19:1-28 where the destruction of the cities corresponds to the guilt of the people. The Book of Job is a powerful response, not only to the problem of evil ("when bad things happen to good people"), but also to the problem of human relationships with God.

Wrapping Up

When there are about twenty minutes left in the Bible study, bring the discussion of Genesis 18:16-33 to a close and invite participants to briefly comment on what they have learned.

Closing Prayer

Since God's justice has been central to discussing this passage from Genesis, perhaps Psalm 7:6-11, 17 is a fitting concluding prayer. The New Revised Standard Version reads as follows:

"Rise up, O Lord, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies; awake, O my God, you have appointed a judgment. Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered around you, and over it take your seat on high. The Lord judges the peoples; judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous, you who test the minds and hearts, O righteous God. God is my shield who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day...I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness, and sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High."

Suggestion: Remind everyone about the next meeting time and place, and encourage them to read and work through Lesson One of Part Two for the next session.