

PART THIRTY-ONE

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM: THE PATRIARCH AS INTERCESSOR

Genesis, 18:1-33

1. *Abraham as the Gracious Host (18:1-8)*

1 And Jehovah appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; 2 and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood over against him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the earth, 3 and said, My lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: 4 let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: 5 and I will fetch a morsel of bread, and strengthen ye your heart; after that ye shall pass on: 'forasmuch as ye are come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said. 6 And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes. 7 And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it unto the servant; and he hasted to dress it. 8 And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.

(1) *Abraham and His Mysterious Visitors.*

Under the oaks (terebinths) at Mamre, not far from what later became the city of Hebron, the place where the patriarch had formerly pitched his tent (Gen. 13:18), we now see him sitting in the opening of his tent (a fold of which was fastened to a post near by to admit any breeze that might be stirring) "in the heat of the day," that is, at noontide. (Cf. 1 Sam. 11:11, the cool of the day; Gen. 3:8, here the Hebrew reads the "wind" of the day: these terms refer to the eventide). Among Orientals

the noon hour is the time of rest (S. of Sol. 1:7) and of dinner (Gen. 43:16, 25). In this instance Abraham had probably dined and was resting after the dinner, as indicated by the fact that when the visitors arrived special preparations were begun for their entertainment. Who were these mysterious visitors? When first perceived by the patriarch he took them to be men, but on closer scrutiny (when he *saw* them, that is, not with physical but with mental vision) he recognized them as divine beings, as evidenced by the fact that he "bowed himself to the earth, and said, my Lord," etc. This expression indicates the complete prostration of the body by first falling on the knees and then inclining the head forward until it touches the ground. This was a mode of salutation practised by Orientals toward superiors generally. Certainly the language in which Abraham immediately addressed one of the three men leads to the conclusion that he had already recognized one of them as Yahwe Himself or as the Angel of Yahwe. Obviously the divine character of the three was fully disclosed by the fact of their supernatural knowledge of Sarah's thoughts (vv. 12-15). Lange (CDHCG, 433): "Abraham instantly recognizes among the three the one whom he addresses as the Lord in a religious sense, who afterward appears as Jehovah, and was clearly distinguished from the accompanying angels, ch. 19:1." "In its definitive form this 'Yahwistic' narrative recounts an apparition of Yahweh (vv. 1, 3, 13, 17-22) accompanied by two 'men' who, according to 19:1, are angels. . . . In these three, to whom Abraham addressed a single act of homage, many of the Fathers saw a foreshadowing of the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine that was revealed only in the N.T." (JB, 33). It is difficult, from the language of the text here, to think of this as an apparition: *there were real persons*, not just ghosts or phantoms. We believe Skinner is correct in describing the incident as a *theophany*. Speiser (ABG, 129): "At

this stage (v. 3) Abraham is as yet unaware of the true identity of his visitors, so that he would not address any of them as God; and he cannot mean all three, because the rest of the verse contains three unambiguous singulars. . . . Later on, in vss. 27, 32-34, the divine appellation is in order, because by then it is clear that Abraham's guests are out of the ordinary. The present pointing was probably influenced by the explicit mention of Yahweh in vs. 1. But this is the author's aside to the reader who is thus prepared at the outset for the surprise that is in store for Abraham." (The pointing here, says this writer, is that which "is applied to YHWH in the received text"). For a contrary view (to be expected, of course, from the general *critical* approach of the entire work), see IBG, 617: "The statement that *he bowed himself to the earth* does not mean that he recognized his visitors as divine beings. The act was an expression of the self-deprecating courtesy of the Orient (cf. 23:7, 1 Sam. 24:8, 2 Sam. 14:4, 22; 1 Ki. 1:31)." Murphy (MG, 315): "These men in some way represented God: for the Lord on this occasion appeared unto Abraham (v. 1). The number is in this respect notable. Abraham addresses himself first to one person (v. 3), then to more than one (v. 4, 5). It is stated that '*they* said, So do (v. 5), *they* did eat (v. 8), *they* said unto him, Where is Sarah, thy wife?' (v. 9). Then the singular number is resumed in the phrase *and he said* (v. 10), and at length, 'The Lord said unto Abraham' (v. 13), and then, 'and he said' (v. 15). Then we are told '*the men* rose up, and Abraham went with them' (v. 16). Then we have 'The Lord said' twice (v. 17, 20). And lastly, it is said (v. 22) '*the men* turned their faces and went toward Sodom, and Abraham was yet standing before the Lord.' From this it appears that of the three men, one, at all events, was the Lord, who, when the other two went toward Sodom, remained with Abraham while he made his intercession for Sodom, and afterward he also

went his way. The other two will come before us again in the next chapter. Meanwhile we have here the first explicit instance of the Lord appearing as man to man, and holding familiar intercourse with him." "The person to whom Abraham addressed himself, and who was at least the chief speaker, was the Son of God and Judge of the world: cf. v. 25 with John 5:22" (SIBG, p. 241). Was the Lord in this instance a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Eternal Logos? Was this another epiphany of the Angel of Jehovah, the Logos whose goings forth have been "from of old, from everlasting" (Mic. 5:2). Surely, this interpretation is in greater accord with Bible teaching *as a whole* than any of the other views suggested!

(2.) *Abraham the Host.* We have here a realistic picture of the ancient ritual of hospitality. The scene is one, we are told, which may be seen in any Bedouin camp even at the present day. The hospitality of the Easterner, and even that of the Arab has often been remarked by travelers: "the virtue of hospitality is one of the great redeeming virtues in the character of the Bedouins." Whitelaw (PCG, 241): "Whenever our path led us near an encampment, as was frequently the case, we always found some active sheikh or venerable patriarch sitting 'in his tent door,' and as soon as we were within hail we heard the earnest words of welcome and invitation which the Old Testament Scriptures had rendered long ago familiar to us: 'Stay, my lord, stay. Pass not on till thou hast eaten bread, and rested under thy servant's tent. Alight and remain until thy servants kill a kid and prepare a feast'" (quoted from Porter's *Great Cities of Bashan*, p. 326). Since this was the hottest and drowsiest time of the day, it is indeed likely that Abraham at first glance recognized the strangers only as three "men" approaching his tent, and received them with all the courtesies of a generous, high-minded, and self-respecting chieftain. Skinner (PCG, 299): "The description 'presents a perfect picture of the

manner in which a modern Bedawee sheikh receives travelers arriving at his encampment. He immediately orders his wife or women to make bread, slaughters a sheep or some other animal, and dresses it in haste; and, bringing milk and any other provisions that he may have at hand, with the bread and meat that he has dressed, sets them before his guest: if they are persons of high rank he also stands by them while they eat'" (quoted from E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 5th ed. 1860). It will be noted that after the preliminary greetings the first act of the ritual of hospitality was the serving of the visitors with water for washing their feet. As people in those countries went barefoot, or with sandals, because of the heat, washing the feet after traveling was a common and needful practice (cf. Gen. 19:2, 24:32; Judg. 19:21, 2 Sam. 11:8; 1 Tim. 5:10, Luke 7:44). Note v. 4, "*rest yourselves* under the tree," that is, recline by resting on the elbow. V. 8—Abraham *stood* by them as their servant, to give them what they needed (Neh. 12:44, Gal. 5:13, Luke 14:8). "Here, therefore, as often in Genesis, one recognizes that the framework of a story belongs to a far-off time. Yet there are values in it which do not disappear. There is the opening picture of the hospitality of Abraham. From the door of his tent he sees three figures coming toward him through the heat of the day—figures whom he has no reason to believe are other than ordinary men who have chanced to come his way. Instantly he goes out to meet them and to offer them his utmost hospitality; and the men, thus welcomed, bring to Abraham a reward of which he had not dreamed. It was not the last time that a generous spirit has found that he has 'entertained angels unawares' (Heb. 13:2). When anyone receives another human being with warmhearted kindness he may be nearer than he knows to a divine experience. Although it is a long way from Genesis to the Gospels, in

the story of Abraham there is at least a foregleam of the promise of Christ, Matt. 25:40" (IBG, 617). In the words of Lowell, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*:

"The gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and me."

(Cf. Exo. 23:9, Lev. 24:22; Deut 10:18, 27:19; Matt. 22:1-10 25:34; Luke 14:12, Rom. 12:13, 16:1; 1 Tim. 3:2, 5:10; Heb. 13:2, 1 Pet. 4:9). Leupold (EG, 539): "The eating of the three heavenly guests—and they ate—is marvelous indeed. We must declare this eating to have been real but rather by way of accomodation than of necessity. Augustine's word still stands as a classic explanation: 'That He ate, was rather of power than of necessity. The earth absorbs water by drinking it in. Different is the mode of absorption by the glowing day of the sun. The one is because of need; the other by virtue of power.' The eating on the part of the glorified Christ after the resurrection serves as an explanatory parallel to this incident. The friendliest and most intimate contacts among the sons of men are oft made over a friendly meal." (Cf. Luke 24:36-43, Acts 10:41). "At first, Abraham sees his guests as mere human beings, and welcomes them warmly; their superhuman character is only gradually revealed (vs. 2, 9, 13, 14)" (JB, 33).

2. Sarah's Laughter (18:9-15).

Oriental courtesy no doubt in those early days forbade to all, except the most intimate friends, inquiry about a wife. The fact that these visitors did inquire about Sarah indicates their special authority to do so. It is now disclosed that their visit is concerned vitally with an experience that is relatively soon, let us say, to befall her. Moreover, Sarah's faith needs to be raised to the proper degree to do justice to the experience. "Behold, in the

tent" is the patriarch's reply to his visitor's pointed question, "Where is Sarah thy wife?" The "behold" here amounts to little more than "there inside the tent."

9 *And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent.* 10 *And he said, I will certainly return unto thee when the season cometh round: and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard in the tent door, which was behind him.* 11 *Now Abraham and Sarah were old, and well stricken in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.* 12 *And Sarah laughed within herself, saying After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?* 13 *And Jehovah said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, who am old?* 14 *Is anything too hard for Jehovah? At the set time I will return unto thee, when the season cometh round, and Sarah shall have a son.* 15 *Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.*

Without circumlocution the visitor, the One outstanding among the three, assumes control of the conversation and delivers the promise He has come to give, "Sarah shall have a son." "When the season cometh round," that is, at the time determined, we may well suppose, *naturally*: "according to the time of that which is born" or nine months after conception. Of course, we do not know how much time had elapsed since the earlier announcement to Abraham (17:16-19, 21:2). Sarah, standing behind the tent door, "was hearing," that is, *she was listening*: no doubt with the well-known female curiosity. So Sarah *laughed to herself*: not a laugh of derision: it evidently bore no trace of scoffing. Rather it was *the laugh of incredulousness*, and hence to a degree a form of unbelief. To the carnal thinking of Sarah, sexual delight could not be expected *naturally* at the age to which Abraham and

she had both attained: it should be noted that she did not put the matter very delicately (v. 12). There is nothing equivocal where Sarah is concerned. "She is depicted as down-to-earth to a fault, with her curiosity, her impulsiveness, and her feeble attempt at deception" (Speiser, ABG, 131). A remarkable evidence of divine insight follows: the Speaker knows that Sarah has laughed within herself, although He has neither seen nor heard her. Whitelaw (PCG, 242): V. 13—"And the Lord said unto Abraham, *Wherefore did Sarah laugh?*—a question which must have convinced Abraham of the Speaker's omniscience. Not only had He heard the silent, inaudible, inward cachinnation of Sarah's spirit, but he knew the tenor of her thoughts and the purport of her dubitations." Sarah herself is startled by this unexpected exposure of her secret thoughts into actual *fear* of these visitors, especially of the Principal Guest who has taken over the course of the conversation to reiterate the promise of the covenant-heir. Fear threw her into confusion and engendered the *deception* to which she resorted (v. 15). "The laughter is not from Sarah's lack of faith: Sarah does not yet know who her Guest is; in v. 15, she guesses and is frightened" (JB, 35). *As to the identity of this Heavenly Visitor, verse 14 alone might have left the question unresolved, but v. 13 had identified the Speaker beforehand.* "With a directness similar to that which he employed in dealing with the first culprits in the garden, not contending in a multiplicity of words, but solemnly announcing that what she said was false. The silence of Sarah was an evidence of her conviction; her subsequent conception was a proof of her repentance and forgiveness" (PCG, 242). "Sarah, like Abraham, passed through periods of doubt and disbelief. It was the laughter of doubt which caused God to pose the question, *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* (v. 13). God who changes not continues faithful despite the sin of unbelief in His people. In 17:15 the same Sarai, meaning "conten-

tious' or 'princely,' was changed to Sarah which means 'princess'" (HSB, 30). The J B Version makes these verses most meaningful: "So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, 'Now that I am past the age of child-bearing, and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again?' But Yahweh asked Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, am I really going to have a child now that I am old? Is anything too wonderful for Yahweh? At the same time next year I shall visit you again and Sarah will have a son.' 'I did not laugh,' Sarah said, lying because she was afraid. But he replied, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'"

The second half of the chapter begins at this point (v. 16). It tells us what transpired at Mamre after Abraham's guests had been escorted along the road for a short distance. It is not until 19:1 that the two "men" are specifically identified as angels. Noting the distinction clearly made in vv. 16-17 and v. 22, between the two and the third (the Principal Speaker) who is specifically designated *Jehovah*, it seems obvious that this personage was Jehovah Himself, or more likely, the Angel of Jehovah, *i.e.*, the pre-incarnate Logos who appears so frequently in the Old Testament.

3. *Abraham the Intercessor* (18:16-33).

16 *And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. 17 And Jehovah said, Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do; 18 seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Jehovah, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. 20 And Jehovah said, Because the cry of*

Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; 21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

22 And the men turned from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before Jehovah. 23 And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked? 24 Peradventure there are fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou consume and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? 25 That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from thee: shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? 26 And Jehovah said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sake. 27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord who am but dust and ashes: 23 peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous; wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it, if I find there forty and five. 29 And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do it for the forty's sake. 30 And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. 31 And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord: peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said I will not destroy it for the twenty's sake.. 32 And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for the ten's sake. 33 And Jehovah went his way, as soon as he had left off communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place.

(1) *The Announcement of Impending Doom* to be visited on Sodom and Gomorrah. V. 16—The two “men” as distinguished from Yahweh who stays with Abraham. In 19:1 we shall be told that they were angels. Vv. 17-21: “By God’s *inquiring* into things, is meant either his bringing the persons concerned to a proper sense of their condition and conduct (Gen. 3:9; 4:9, 10; 16:8; 1 Ki. 19:9, 13; John 4:4, 9); or it marks the wisdom, patience, and equity of his procedure (Gen. 11:5, 7; Exo. 3:8, 33:5; Mic. 1:3)” (SIBG, 241). The Three have left Abraham’s tent and turned their steps eastward toward Sodom. Abraham accompanies them, and on the way one of them, in whom he recognizes no other than the *Angel of the Covenant*, informs him of the real purport of this visit to the cities where Lot had taken up his abode. The sin of these cities is very great, they tell him, and their cup of iniquity is now full; their inhabitants have wearied themselves with wickedness, their licentiousness and iniquity call to Heaven for a visible demonstration of Absolute Justice, and divine judgment is now *even at the door*. (Cf. Gen. 15:16).

(2) *The Perennial Problem of Absolute Justice*. Thus informed of the impending judgment, the Friend of God draws near, and with amazing boldness properly blended with the deepest humility, pleads with the Almighty for the guilty cities. Peradventure there might be found therein at least fifty, or forty-five, or forty, or thirty, or twenty, or even *ten* righteous souls, *would the Lord of all the earth spare them for ten’s sake?* Thereupon he is assured that if only ten righteous souls can be found the cities will be spared. While he is thus pleading with God, the two other angels have entered Sodom and are being hospitably entertained by Lot. (Cf. Isa. 1:9, 1 Ki. 19:18, Rom. 11:4, Jer. 18:5-10). Sanders (HH, 35, 36): “The importance of the message which came to Abraham concerning his son is measured by the various ways in which

a promise of his future greatness had been made (13:14-17; 15:5; 17:6-8) and by the Divine purpose which was to be fulfilled through him (18:19). But how characteristic of the knightly chieftain that all thought of his own future was supplanted by anxiety to save the few in Sodom who were not hopelessly depraved." Vv. 22, 23—"Abraham's *standing before* and *drawing near* to the Lord, imports his bold and familiar intercession with him (1 Sam. 14:36, Psa. 73:28; Heb. 7:19, 10:22; Jas. 4:8)." We have here what Cornfeld calls "a charming tradition" which "illustrates how Abraham, on intimate terms with the Lord, dared to intercede with him, in the famous dialogue over the problem of the wicked people of Sodom and its few, hypothetical righteous men" (AtD, 67). In the same context is the incident of Sarah's laughter [18:11-15], says Cornfeld, adding: "Sarah, who was eavesdropping on the conversation (between Yahweh and Abraham) is reported to have laughed heartily to herself, knowing that she had reached the age when this was physically impossible. Certainly this intimacy of men with gods and the reaction of God to Sarah's and Abraham's laughter [cf. 17:17], would be unthinkable among later generations who had a different attitude towards divine manifestations. But comparative evidence from Canaanite literature tends to justify and explain the meaning of this ancient story in its true context. . . . God was not conceived as impersonal in patriarchal times, and if we are to understand properly the biblical texts, we must develop a feeling for a social phenomenon of the times, the closeness of men to gods, and of the Hebrews to God. In our society a man who claims to have divine visitors is regarded as queer. That is why it is not easy for every modern reader, who is not familiar with the ancient background and literatures, to understand that aspect of Hebrew society. For the ancient Hebrews, the human and divine intermingled freely. The early direct relationship between men and gods is common

to all the epics: Ugarit, Mesopotamian, Greek and proto-patriarchal. The simple personal contact between men and God was gradually eliminated" (AtD, pp. 66-67).

V. 25—"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The perennial problem: *Must the good suffer along with, and because of, the wicked?* Is God to be understood as Absolute Justice? What is the relation of Divine Love to Divine Justice? Is Mercy compatible with Absolute Justice? How does the principle of Equity come into this problem? (Equity is defined, NWCD, *s.v.*, as "any body of legal doctrines and rules similarly developed to enlarge, supplement, or override a system of law which has become too narrow and rigid in its scope.") Cf. v. 23—"Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked?" Skinner (ICCG, 305): "This question strikes the keynote of the section—a protest against the thought of an indiscriminate judgment. . . . In OT, righteousness and clemency are closely allied: there is more injustice in the death of a few innocent persons than in the sparing of a guilty multitude. The problem is, to what limits is the application of this principle subject? . . . Unrighteousness in the Supreme Ruler of the world would make piety impossible." Whitelaw (PCG, 249): "Assuming it as settled that the fair Pentapolis is to be destroyed, Abraham practically asks, with a strange mixture of humility and boldness, if Jehovah has considered that this will involve a sad commingling in one gigantic overthrow of both the righteous and the wicked." "The patriarch appeals not to Jehovah's covenant grace, but to his absolute judicial equity" (*ibid.*, 250). Again, Abraham regarding it as impossible that the entire population of Sodom was involved in common ruin, kept modifying the conditions of his appeal, believing that the city might be spared, even if only a few should be proved to be righteous. It was inconceivable to him that Jehovah would do anything to tarnish His divine righteousness, such as destroying even ten righteous persons in order to punish the

entire population; that is, overwhelming the innocent in order to bring retribution on the guilty. But Abraham did not know how universal the corruption of Sodom really was. The stark naked truth that stands out as the dark background of this sordid story, the reality that vitiated all pleas for clemency, was the fact that *Sodom had become a vessel fit only for destruction*. (It should be understood that Sodom in this story is the name that describes the complete moral corruption of all the Cities of the Plain.) It turns out later that Lot (but only by implication, two of his daughters) was the *only* person considered relatively worthy of Divine clemency, and that partially in response to the plea of Abraham, God's Friend. What a tremendous lesson here for men of all generations!

(SIBG, 241-242): "Whenever the righteous are cut off with the wicked in public calamities, it manifests them to have been partakers with them in their sins (Amos 3:2; Rev. 18:4), and yet it is in everlasting mercy to their souls (Isa. 57:1, Phil. 1:23)." "The conviction of collective responsibility was so strong in ancient Israel that the question does not here arise whether the just may be spared individually. God will, in fact, save Lot and his family, 19:15-16; but the principle of individual responsibility is not deduced until Deut. 24:16, Jer. 31:29-30, Ezek. 14:12 ff., Ezek. ch. 18. Abraham, therefore, supposing that all are to share a common destiny, asks that a few just men may win pardon for the many wicked. Yahweh's answers approve the part the saints have to play in saving the world. But Abraham's bid for mercy does not venture below the number ten. According to Jer. 5:1 and Ezek. 22:30, God would pardon Jerusalem even if only one just man could be found there. Finally, in Isa. 53 it is the suffering of the one servant that is to save the whole race, but this prophecy was destined to remain unintelligible until it was fulfilled in Christ" (JB, 35). (This comment, however, is based on the critical view that Deuteronomy—rather,

the Deuteronomic Code—was a kind of pious fraud foisted on the people to restore the power of the priesthood, as late as the reign of Josiah (2 Ki. ch. 22). We do not accept this view; rather, we find every reason to hold that the entire Torah was the handiwork of Moses and that Deuteronomy was what it purports to be, namely, addresses delivered to Israel by Moses just before his death. Hence, in Exo., ch. 20, we have the doctrine of the *consequences* of sin, and in Ezek., ch. 18 we have the doctrine of the *guilt* of sin. We see no reason for assuming that the doctrine of individual justice was such a late development. There is not now, there never was, in Biblical religion, any notion of *salvation by proxy*. C.C.). In Rom. 3:6 ff., it is made clear that it would be injustice to condemn the innocent, however few in comparison with the many sinners.)

V. 21—Leupold (EG, 547): “‘I am going down’ in this case involves a mere descent from the higher spot where these words were spoken, to the low-lying cities. In reality only the two angels (19:1) go directly to the city. The statements of the verse in no wise imply that God’s omniscience is curtailed and that so He is under necessity of securing information as men might. God chooses this mode of procedure to make apparent the fact that He, as Just Judge of all the earth, does nothing without first being in full possession of all facts. The subsequent experience of the angels in Sodom displays the moral state of Sodom far more effectually than could many an explanation besides. God practically claims that the facts of the case have come up before Him already. But He does nothing until facts warrant interference.” Again (*ibid.*, p. 248): “The boldness of faith betrayed by this [Abraham’s] intercession may well astound us. It surely is not based on the assumption that God might deal unjustly. . . . But Abraham recognized that there was a possibility of the perishing of righteous men in this impending catastrophe, even his own relatives also. Much

as he hopes that Lot and his family might be rescued, he is not so narrow or selfish as to think only of these. One might almost say that with a heart kindled by the love that God imparts to faith, Abraham ventures to plead the case of God's love over against God's righteousness. We may never know how these attributes of God are reconciled to one another, except in so far as they blend in Christ. But the boldness of this act of faith is acceptable with God inasmuch as it is really born out of God's heart. This attribute is the 'importunity' Christ refers to in the parable of Luke 11:8." On v. 25 (*ibid.* p. 550): "Most amazing is the free address of faith at this point. Yet, though it strikes a responsive chord in every heart, hardly anyone would be capable of venturing to address God thus. Behind it lies absolute confidence in God's fairness. Besides, that grand and correct conception of God that was characteristic of the patriarchs appears very definitely here. God is far from being a tribal God; he is 'the Judge of *all the earth*.' The critics have failed to evaluate this fact properly."

It has been rightly said that the three most important questions for man to ponder are these: What am I? Whence came I? and, Whither am I bound?—that is to say, the problems respectively of the nature, origin, and destiny of the person. In Gen. 18:25 we face the problem of *the correlation between merit and destiny*. Speiser (ABG, 135): "In Yahweh's soliloquy (vss. 17-19), and the colloquy with Abraham which follows . . . what the author sets down is not so much received tradition as personal-contemplation. The result is a philosophical aside, in which both Yahweh and the patriarch approach the issues of the moment as problems in an enduring scheme of things. Specifically, the theme is the relation between the individual and society. For Yahweh, the individual who matters is Abraham. Having chosen Abraham as the means for implementing His will, and as the spearhead in the

quest for a worthy way of life ('the way of Yahweh,' vs. 19), should he not now take Abraham into his full confidence? The patriarch, on the other hand, in his resolute and insistent appeal on behalf of Sodom, seeks to establish for the meritorious individual the privilege of saving an otherwise worthless community." Concerning the correlation between merit and destiny, this author goes on to say: "The basic issue is only one aspect of the theme of the Suffering Just, which Mesopotamian literature wrestled with as early as the Old Babylonian age (cf. AOS 38, 1955, 68 ff.); the OT has treated it most eloquently in the Book of Job." The answer given here, Speiser goes on to say, "is an emphatic affirmation of the saving grace of the just. And even though the deserving minority proves to be in this instance too small to affect the fate of the sinful majority, the innocent—here Lot and his daughters—are ultimately spared." (AOS—American Oriental Society, Monograph Series)

(HSB, 30): "God is love (1 Jn. 4:8), but because He loves holiness and truth, He is also just (Ps. 89:14, 145:17). His judgments are (1) according to truth (Rev. 19:2); (2) universal and certain (Rom. 2:6); (3) impersonal and impartial (Rom. 2:11); (4) concerned with motive as well as outward conduct (Rom. 2:16; Luke 12:2, 3). Three major judgments are mentioned in Scripture: (1) the judgment of believers' sins, which is past, having been inflicted on the Christ at Calvary (Jn. 5:24, Rom. 8:1); (2) the believers' judgment for rewards (2 Cor. 5:10, Rom. 14:10, 1 Cor. 3:10-15); (3) the judgment of unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15)." (Cf. motivation as Biblically presented, according to which the *fully completed intention is made equivalent to the overt act* (Matt. 5:28; 1 John 3:15, 4:20). Again, Does not Scripture teach that our Lord willingly accepted His role in redemption, which included, of course, the death on the Cross, "for the joy

that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2), that is, for the sheer joy of redeeming lost souls?) (For a full discussion of the problem of v. 25, see *infra*, "The Covering of Grace.")

What does Abraham's "Dialogue" with Yahweh teach us about prayer? Note the following pertinent comment (HSB, 31): "Six times Abraham beseeches God to spare Sodom. Each time God grants his petition. This incident should encourage believers to intercede effectively and to expect responses to prayer. It is a solemn commentary on the awful condition of Sodom that there were not even ten righteous people to be found within its gates." To this we might add the obvious and significant fact that in all of his petitions Abraham never importuned God to save the people of Sodom *in their sins*. Yet this is precisely what is expected by all humanists, moralists, cultists, and nominal church members, who, if they think of God at all, look upon Him as a kind of glorified bellhop whose sole business is to attend to their desires. *There is not the slightest indication in Scripture that any man is saved outside the Covering of Grace, the Atonement planned by the Father, provided by the Son, and ready to be applied by the Holy Spirit to all obedient believers* (Rom. 3:21-27, Eph. 2:8).

4. *The Problem of the Heavenly Visitors.*

Jamieson's treatment of this problem is thoroughgoing, as follows (CECG, 159): "With reference to the three persons who figure so prominently in the details of this narrative, two opposite views have been advanced. Some have held that these were the three Persons in the Trinity who manifested themselves in a visible incarnate form. But this is a hypothesis which not only implies a development of doctrinal mysteries beyond what was made in the patriarchal age, but it is at variance with Scripture (John 1:18, Col. 1:15). Others maintain that they were all three created angels, who came on the business, and spoke in the name, of their Divine Master, founding this

opinion on the fact, as Kurtz expresses it, that their mission was not merely to promise, but to punish as well as to deliver. Others maintain that it was the Lord who appeared, speaking through the medium of his messengers. But this view is open to many and strong objections:—

1. Because the superiority of the one whom Abraham addressed is acknowledged through the whole interview, whilst his two attendants, as his inferiors, observe a respectful silence.
2. Because he speaks and undertakes to act as a Divine person, whilst the other two claim only to be messengers (19:13).
3. Because Scripture does not give any instance of an address being presented to God as represented by a created angel.
4. Because, not to mention the name Adonai, which is used six times, that of Jehovah is applied eight times to him in this passage.
5. Because he ascribes to himself the right and power of independent judgment in the case of Sodom.
6. Because, on the hypothesis that they were all three created angels, it is impossible to account for the third not taking part in the judicial work at Sodom; whereas the cause of his absence, if he was the angel of the Covenant, is perfectly explicable.
7. And only this view affords a satisfactory explanation of the circumstance that throughout this chapter the three are called *men*, while in the next chapter, the two are designated angels—viz., to prevent a confounding the Lord with the angels who attended Him. The condescending familiarity of the visit accords with the simplicity of the early patriarchal age, and with the initial education of Abraham in religious knowledge. It is probable that in some of the past revelations with which Abraham was favored, a visible appearance had been vouchsafed: and that he who must have been incapable of rising to the conception of a spiritual Being would become familiar with the idea of an all-powerful mysterious man, who both in Chaldea and Canaan had repeatedly manifested himself, promising, guiding, protecting, and blessing him as a

constant and faithful Friend. Accordingly, this last manifestation, on the occasion of which he became a guest of Abraham was not an isolated event in the patriarch's experience, but one of a series, in which the Divine Mediator appeared, spoke, and acted, in condescending accomodation to the simple and childlike feelings of Abraham, and as a preluding of the incarnation, when 'God manifest in the flesh' would 'tabernacle with man.' . . . The idea of this narrative being a myth, invented by some Jewish writer for the gratification of national pride, is utterly groundless; for, once admit the peculiar relation in which Abraham stood to God, and this visit is in perfect accordance with his position. As little ground is there for putting this narrative in the same category as the heathen fable of Philemon and Baucis, for, though many of the details in that mythological fable are similar to those of the Scripture narrative, it wants the covenant relations—the grand peculiarity of the patriarchal story—which no poetic imagination could have invented." In a word, the Third Personage in this narrative of Abraham's Intercession was surely the Angel of Jehovah who appears so frequently through the old Dispensations, and who appeared as God's Only Begotten in the manger of Bethlehem (cf. Mic. 5:2, John 17:5).

Speiser's comment about the "Biblical process" becomes pertinent here (ABG, Intro., 52): "The question has often been posed whether the course of recent history would have changed much if on August 15, 1769, Letizia Bonaparte had given birth to a girl instead of a boy. The answer is obvious when limited to decades. But would it still be true a hundred years later, or a hundred and fifty? The chances are that it would not, and that the deviation from the original course which the advent of Napoleon brought about would have been righted in due time. Now let us ask the same kind of question about the biblical process and its presumed originator. The answer can be

ventured with much greater confidence because the measuring span is twenty times as long. That distant event altered history irrevocably. In the case of Napoleon, the detour rejoined the main road. But in the case of Abraham, the detour became itself the main road."

5. *The Problem of Intercessory Prayer* (in relation to that of Absolute Justice) is a most difficult one. (1) In Abraham's case, it was presented from the most profound humility: "I . . . who am but dust and ashes," v. 27. Murphy (MG, 317): "This may refer to the custom of burning the dead, as then coexistent with that of burying them. Abraham intimates by a homely figure, the comparative insignificance of the petitioner. He is dust at first, and ashes at last." (Cf. Gen. 2:7, 3:9; Psa. 103:13-16; Eccl. 12:7; Jas. 4:14, etc.). The patriarch's prayer here surely indicates genuine humility arising from realization of his insignificance and weakness in the presence of his Creator. Yet, *there is realism in it, for if man is no more than body, life has very little meaning for anyone, and without the Breath of Life infused into him by God Himself, he truly is dust and ashes, and in the long run, only that.* Dr. John Baillie, in his impressive book, *And the Life Everlasting*, calls attention to the notion so widespread in our world today, not just that there is no such thing in prospect as life eternal, but *that such a destiny is not even desirable.* He points up the fact that this view, to the Christian is fundamentally contrary to human being as such; that it is derogatory to human dignity to fail to want for our fellows all that Divine Love has done and can do for them. "I insist," he writes, "that to love my brother for God's sake is the same thing as to love him for his own deepest sake, because the deepest thing in him is not his either by inherent right or by conquest, but only by the gift of God. It is only in the possibility which is open to it of personal intercourse with God that the value of the individual human personality can be held to reside

—even as it is upon this possibility alone that its claim to immortality rests.” Again: To the Christian spirit “the ultimate fact is not death but life, not the Cross but the Resurrection and the Crown. It is what it is only because it is persuaded that the sting of death has been drawn and the grave robbed of its victory; so that death has no more dominion over us. It is frankly recognized that in its own self-enclosed and untransfigured nature, as it must present itself to those who do not share any such persuasion, death must be a ghastly and terrible thing; and indeed it is thus that death always *has* presented itself to sincere and profound unbelief. To see one’s beloved stamped into the sod for his body to rot and the worms to eat him . . . and then be of good cheer! No, there can be no good cheer unless it be true that that to which this dreadful thing has happened is not really one’s beloved *himself* but only his earthly tabernacle; unless it be true that ‘the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever’ (1 John 2:17). Whereas, therefore, it would be nothing but shallowness of spirit for one who had no hope beyond the grave to cease to be obsessed by the fact of death (whether by facing it cheerfully or by refusing to make it the object of his too constant thought), such a result in the soul of a Christian must be the mark of a great depth and maturity. . . . I have quoted Spinoza’s saying, spoken in defiance of Plato, that ‘the free man thinks of nothing less than of death; his wisdom is a meditation not upon death but upon life.’ Let me now say that of the man who stands fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made him free this may well be true—truer than Plato’s ‘studying nothing but dying and being dead’; since he can now cry with St. Paul, ‘For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.’” (Rom. 8:2). (See Baillie, *op cit.*, 341-342). (2) Lange (CDHCG, 441): “In regard to the thought of Abraham’s intercession, we

would make the following remarks: (a) His intercession takes more and more the form of a question. (b) He does not pray that the godless should be freed from punishment, but for the sparing of the righteous, and the turning away of the destructive judgment from all, in case there should be found a sufficient salt of the righteous among them. (c) His prayer includes the thought that God would not destroy any single righteous one with the wicked, although the number of the righteous should be too small to preserve the whole." Gosman adds, *ibid.*, "The righteous, of course, are not destroyed, although they are often involved in the punishment of the wicked." (3) Jamieson (CECG, 158): "The continued and increased urgency of Abraham's pleading with God, which almost rises into shamelessness (Luke 11:5-8), assumes an entirely different character, from the consideration that he is not a suppliant for any benefit to himself, nor even to his nephew Lot, but an intercessor for the people of Sodom generally. 'His importunity was prompted by the love which springs from the consciousness that one's own preservation and rescue are due to compassionate grace alone; love, too, which cannot conceive of the guilt of others as too great for salvation to be possible. The sympathetic love, springing from the faith which was counted for righteousness, impelled him to the intercession which Luther thus describes:—He prayed six times, and with so much ardour and depth of emotion that, in gradually lessening the numbers, in order to ensure the preservation of the wretched cities, he seems to speak almost foolishly. This seemingly commercial kind of entreaty is the essence of true prayer, which bridges over the infinite distance of the creature from the Creator, appeals with importunity to the heart of God, and ceases not until its point is gained' (Keil and Delitzsch)."

6. *Pagan Imitations of this story.* Lange (CDHCG, 433): "Delitzsch thinks that Abraham recognized the unity of the God of revelation, in the appearance of the three

men. . . . He adds: 'One should compare the limitations of this original history among the heathen: Jupiter, Mercury, and Neptune, visit an old man, by name Hyricus, in the Boeotian city Tanagra; he prepares them a feast, and, though childless hitherto, receives a son in answer to his prayer (Ovid's *Fasti*, V, 494, etc.).' And then, further, the heathen accompaniment to ch. 19: 'Jupiter and Mercury are journeying as men; only Philemon and Baucis, an aged, childless wedded pair, receive them, and these, therefore, the gods rescue, bearing them away with themselves, while they turn the inhospitable region lying around the hospitable hut into a pool of water, and the hut itself into a temple (Ovid's *Metam.* 8, 611 ff.).' But the essential distinction between our ideal facts and these myths, lies in this, that while the first lie in the center of history as causal facts or forces, having the most sacred and real historical results, these latter lie simply on the border ground of mythology." To this Gosman adds: "How completely and thoroughly these words dispose of the whole mythical supposition in this as in other cases!"

7. *The Quality of Mercy*

In Genesis the wickedness of Sodom (the city which obviously exercised hegemony of a kind over all the Cities of the Plain (frequently designated a Pentapolis) is set forth so realistically that its very name has become proverbial—"a very Sodom"—and its various kinds of lust are given a single name, "sodomy." Yet here we find Abraham interceding for these people: the righteous man, the Friend of God, is pleading for mercy for the wicked. One is reminded of Portia's eloquent encomium on mercy in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained,
 It droppeth as a gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice bless'd:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
 The throned monarch better than his crown.
 His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty,
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
 It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
 It is an attribute to God himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
 That in the course of justice, none of us
 Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy:
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 Deeds of mercy."

Let us consider in this connection, the following pertinent suggestions (from IBG, 622, 623): 1. Who is most likely to come to the help of evil men? Can those who are evil trust their own kind for support? Of course not. "Men who are thoroughly bad are as merciless to others of their kind as a wolf pack is merciless to the wounded wolf. . . . It is the consistent badness in the bad and the inconsistent badness in the hypocritically good which make them cruel, and the generosity of those whom the respectable may class as bad men is due to the great warm fact that there is so much actual goodness in them. So also the highest generosity and compassion are in those who are neither all bad, nor half bad, nor half good, but who, like Abraham, come as near to thoroughgoing goodness as human nature can. The most merciful men all through the Bible are the best men—Joseph, Moses, David, Stephen, Barnabas. Supremely so was Jesus, who in his perfect righteousness could be the friend of publicans and sinners. There is no more corrupting sin than censoriousness and self-righteousness. Let church members examine their own hearts. The

truth which applies to individuals applies to nations also. . . . It is easy for the proud and for those who are drunk with power to consider the enemy as men of Sodom, deserving of nothing but destruction. They like to arrogate to themselves a supposed right to the favor of God and to act as though fanatical revenge had the merit of religion. If Abraham had been like them he would have gloated over Sodom. Being the man he was—an example sorely needed—he was moved with pity.”

2. A second truth stands out in this story: “the sacred worth of individuals, and the evil of involving the innocent minority in a judgment visited on the mass.” “The deepest depravity and moral perversion of war lies here; and war with modern weapons makes this evil more monstrous than ever.” It is a tragic fact that even good people can grow callous to these things. “Atrocities which first shocked the conscience may come to be accepted with only lukewarm questioning or none at all. But a world in torment will begin to have a better hope only when there shall be many men like Abraham.” Should even ten men be caught in a general destruction and given no chance to escape? “To Abraham it seemed to be intolerable that this should be allowed to happen. So much for the instincts which made Abraham the type of a great soul. But observe the further and more important fact: Abraham believed that what was highest in his own heart was his right clue to the nature of God. That which to his own conscience seemed lifted above all doubt must be divine in its authority. That is the meaning of the vivid story of Abraham in the dialogue with God and of his question which he was sure could have only one answer.”

3 The final suggestion of the story of Sodom is a truly somber one. “Not even five righteous persons were left in Sodom to justify its being spared destruction. Here is an eternal picture of the corrosive possibilities of a bad environment. Those who accustom themselves to the ways

of an evil society may themselves at last be evil. What is happening now to people who make no effective protest against the wrongs they live with every day?"

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? Even the old pagans, in particular Socrates and Plato, repudiated the poetic tales of the immoralities of the gods, and insisted that all such tales should be censored so that immature children would not be led astray by them. Plato said expressly (*Republic*, II, 379ff.), "Few are the goods of human life, and many are the evils, and the good is to be attributed to God alone; of the evils the causes are to be sought elsewhere, and not in him"; again, "God is perfectly simple both in word and deed; he changes not; he deceives not, either by sign or word, by dream or waking vision"; and again, "the gods are not magicians who transform themselves, neither do they deceive mankind in any way." This apparent antinomy between God's goodness and His omnipotence is resolved only by the Christian doctrine of the Atonement. See *infra*, "The Covering of Grace." Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were definitely repudiating the polytheistic deities of the pagan "religions."

FOR MEDITATION AND SERMONIZING

The Covering of Grace

Gen. 18:25—"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Many are the passages of Scripture which state positively that the only remedy for sin is the blood of Christ. (Cf. 1 John 1:7, 2:2; Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; Rom. 3:25; Matt. 26:28; John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Heb. 9:22, 9:14; Rev. 1:5, etc.). This blood-theme first appeared when animals were slain to provide a *covering*—note this word carefully—for our first parents when they discovered their nakedness, Gen. 3:21. It appeared again in Abel's pro-

pitiatory sacrifice, Gen. 4:4—it was an offering of blood (cf. Heb. 11:4). It appeared in the sprinkling of the blood on the people, on the book of the covenant, on the tabernacle and the vessels of the ministry when the Old Covenant was ratified at Sinai (Heb. 9:17-22). It appeared on the door-post of every Jewish habitation in Egypt on the memorable night when God “passed over” that stricken land (Exo. 12:22). It appeared in all the ceremonial cleansings of the Old Covenant. It appeared in the Cup sanctified by the lips of our Lord at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:28). It appeared in the fullness of its efficacy when Christ bled and died on the Cross, thus ratifying the New Covenant and at the same time abrogating the Old (Heb. 9:11 ff., Col. 3:13-15). From that day to this it has appeared in many parts of the world in the Memorial Feast appointed for God’s saints to keep, “the communion of the blood and of the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 10:16). That Christ died is a fact of *history*: that He died for our sins is a fact of *revelation* (1 Cor. 15:3).

These fundamental truths have been proclaimed by all who are worthy of the name Christian, in all ages of the Christian era. Yet they are being challenged in our day by the atheists, agnostics, positivists, demythologizers, and analytical critics, and indeed all the nitpicking self-styled “intellectuals.” The doctrine has been assailed in all ages—by bitter opponents of the Faith—as “vulgar,” “barbaric,” a fantasy of man’s wishful thinking, and the like. The only efficacy of our Lord’s ministry, we are told, if any at all, is that of the power of His example. His death thus becomes only a martyrdom, and the doctrine of the Atonement is thrown profanely out of the window. This is all very soothing, of course, to the “I-love-me” spirit that is so prominent in the human makeup. This is an age in which intellectual pomposity is going its merry way. Let me say here that if there is anything in this world that

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I despise most of all, except sin, it is this spirit which all too often turns a good thinker into a pompous ass. This worship of erudition is precisely the thing—the desire to be as wise as God, Gen. 3:6, the determination to play God—that swept man into the maelstrom of sin and suffering in the first place, and the foremost factor in keeping him in that environment today.

I. In discussing the significance of the Blood of Christ, we are dealing, of course, with the Biblical doctrine of the Atonement.

1) This word "atonement" occurs only once, in the Authorized Version. In various other renderings the Greek word used here, *katallage*, is given as meaning "reconciliation" (Rom. 5:11). The Hebrew *kapbar*, translated "atonement," is found many times in the Old Testament; rendered literally, it means "covering." It seems rather unfortunate that this meaning was not brought over into the Greek and English of the New Testament. For certainly, from whatever point of view one approaches the subject, one finds Biblical teaching to be crystal clear, namely, that our Lord in shedding His blood, and so offering His life—for the life of the flesh is in the blood (Lev. 17:11)—was providing for all mankind God's Covering of Grace, (John 1:29). On the divine side, everything that God has done and will do for sinful man is inherent in the word grace ("unmerited favor"). The Atonement, therefore, is God's Covering of Grace. By coming by *faith*, that is, in God's own way, as that way is revealed in the New Testament, the sinner puts himself under the blood, under this divine Covering of Grace. Thus divine grace and human faith "meet together" and the result is, in a legal sense, *remission* or *justification*, and in a personal sense, *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. The simple fact is that man is alienated from God, not as a consequence of the sin of Adam, nor of the sins of his fathers, but as the consequence

of his own sins ("lawlessness," 1 John 3:4; Rom. 3:23; Col. 1:21; Eph. 1:2). He has mortgaged himself to sin, sold himself under sin (Rom. 7:14, 6:6; Gal. 4:3). In this state it was necessary for his original Owner to buy him back, redeem him, lest he be lost forever. God Himself, the original Owner of the Totality of Being (Psa. 24:1, 89:11; 1 Cor. 10:26), loved man too much to allow him to perish forever, and therefore made provision to buy him back. He gave His Only Begotten (John 3:16), the Son gave His life by shedding His blood. He paid the ransom price; He provided the Covering of Grace whereby the majesty of the moral law was sustained, and at the same time everything was done that could be done to woo the sinner back into covenant relationship with Him. (Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6). Those who ridicule the Blood simply close their eyes to the lawlessness which has always pervaded man's realm of being. To deny or to ignore the facts of sin and suffering, of love and redemption, is sheer stupidity.

II. In what sense does the Blood of Christ cleanse us from sin?

One "school" answers that Christ's blood was shed as an example to impress upon man the magnitude of God's love for him; that it was not designed in any way to affect the attitude of God toward man, but to affect only the attitude of man toward God. But to make this the sole objective of Christ's death is to make sheer nonsense the many Scriptures that speak of His dying "the just for the unjust," "as a propitiation for our sins," "as a ransom for us all," etc. (1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:2; Eph. 1:7; Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6, etc.)

Another "school" of "theologians" would have us believe that Christ "died in the room and stead of the sinner," *i.e.*, that He paid the penalty demanded by the moral law, paid it in full, and so freed man completely from the curse of sin. If this is true, obviously, the sinner owes no debt, no obligation: he goes "scot free." This is

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completely refuted by the Apostle's words in Rom. 3:23-26, "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation, *through faith*, in his blood . . . that he might himself be just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus." This language is plain, and there is no point in making a riddle of it. It means simply that God was under the necessity of imposing the penalty of sin unless something could be done to sustain the majesty of the broken law. Because of His ineffable love for His creature, all this God did for him, lest he perish forever.

III. How is the Blood necessary to save us from sin?

Reflect, if you will, on the Mystery of Blood. What is blood? What is the Mystery of the Flowing Blood? The Mystery of the Flowing Blood is the Mystery of Life itself. How fitting the wonderful metaphor, "the river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb, in the midst of the street" of the Holy City (Rev. 22:1). The life any human being enjoys flowed into him from his parents, their life flowed into them from their parents, and so on back and back to the first life which God breathed into the lifeless body to make of the man a living soul (Gen. 2:7). What a mystery—this red river of life, the Mystery of the Flowing Blood, the Mystery of Life itself!

Man has been from the beginning a creature under law. To deny this fact is absurd. One who violates the laws of the physical world suffers the penalty here and now. One who jumps out of a twenty-story building, thus defying the law of gravity, breaks his neck. One who picks up a live coal, burns his fingers. One who indulges physical appetites unduly will sow disease in his body. Whatever a man sows, that shall he reap, sooner or later. Because law is not law without its penalty and without its enforcement. Why do we assume, then, that we can flout

the moral laws of God and get away with it? As it has often been said, man actually does not break the moral law; on the contrary, *that law, if violated, breaks him.* God who is holy can do anything He wills to do that is consistent with His character as God. But for Absolute Holiness to accept a man in his sins would be a contradiction in itself: it would be putting a premium on sin; it would be accepting sin and all the anarchy that proceeds from sin. Therefore the problem before the Divine Government can be stated in rather simple terms: it was that of sustaining the majesty of the violated law while at the same time manifesting divine mercy and compassion toward the sinner—a demonstration of love designed to woo the sinner back into fellowship with God.

God is holy. God hates sin. God cannot condone sin, and be God. God had to deal with sin. He could not be God were He to fail to deal with it. Calvary was the demonstration not only of the indescribable love of God for man, but also of the awfulness of sin. Never forget it—our sins nailed the Son of God to the Cross.

How, then, did God resolve the apparent antinomy between His goodness and His omnipotence? This problem was raised in ancient times by Epicurus, if I remember correctly. If God is all good why does He permit evil to prevail in His world. Since, however, it is apparent that evil does prevail in the world in which He has put us, obviously it prevails because God is not sufficiently powerful to eradicate it. This is the age-old problem of the balance between the goodness of God and the power of God.

We reply to this dilemma by affirming that God Himself has resolved the antinomy. He Himself provided the Covering of Grace—the Gift of His Only Begotten—essential to the sustaining of the majesty of His law and will violated by human sin, and by the same Gift has extended general amnesty to sinful man on the terms of the

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Gospel. The Blood is the remedy for sin, the Gospel is the method of application, and eternal life is the reward, the ultimate Highest Good.

In a word: *Divine Justice required the Atonement, and Divine Love provided it.* God freely gave His Son, who—"for the joy that was set before him," the sheer joy of redeeming lost souls, Heb. 12:2—endured the cross, despising shame, and "hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." As stated so clearly by W. Robertson-Smith (*The Religion of the Semites*, p. 62) "To reconcile the forgiving goodness of God with His absolute justice is one of the highest problems of spiritual religion, which in Christianity is solved by the doctrine of the Atonement." The design of the Atonement must be regarded as twofold, namely, to vindicate God's justice and so sustain the majesty of the moral law, and at the same time to woo man back into a state of reconciliation by a demonstration of His ineffable love and compassion sufficient to overcome—in every honest and good heart—the rebellion engendered by sin. To omit either of these objectives is to distort the doctrine of the Atonement. (Cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-20, Luke 8:15, Rom. 3:26, 1 Cor. 6:2, Rom. 2:4-16, Rev. 20:11-15, 22:1-5, 10:15, etc.).

IV. Where does the penitent believer meet the efficacy of the Blood of Christ?

Denominationalized preachers proclaim glibly that we are cleansed by the blood of Christ (which, to be sure, is true), but they never tell the inquiring penitent how and where to meet the efficacy of that blood; that is, they never tell him in Scripture terms. In fact the great majority seem to have no conception of what the New Testament teaches about this important matter, even though the teaching is clear. We must accept and confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. We must repent of our sins; then we meet the cleansing blood of Jesus when, as penitent believers, we *actually enter into the*

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covenant which has been sealed with His blood (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Acts 16:31, 2:38; Matt. 16:16; Rom. 10:9-10; 2 Cor. 7:10; Luke 13:3; Gal. 3:27). The blood of Christ flowed when He died. Therefore, in order to come under the efficacy of His blood, *we must die with Him*. We must commit ourselves to His Cross—that of self-crucifixion (Gal 2:20, 6:14). Where does this transaction take place? It takes place when we are inducted into Christ. When and where are we inducted into Christ? When, as penitent believers, *we are baptized into Christ*. When the Roman soldiers came to the Cross, one of them plunged a spear into His side to make sure that He was dead, and out of the wound flowed blood and water. The only place divinely appointed in which we meet the efficacy of the blood of Christ is the *grave of water*. (Gal 3:27; John 3:5; Acts 22:16; Tit. 3:5; Eph. 5:26). The efficacy is in the fact that Divine grace has made this appointment and human faith meets it, making it possible for the pardon to take place where it must take place, namely, *in the mind of God*. These facts are all made too clear for us to be in doubt, in the sixth chapter of Romans.

Shame on those who would speak of Christian baptism as a "mere outward act," "mere external performance," "mere form," etc. There are no "mere forms," no "non-essentials," in Christianity. It is an insult to our Lord to accuse Him of establishing "mere forms" or "non-essentials." We need to learn that in baptism we die, not just *symbolically*, but *literally* to the guilt of past sin. And we do well to make the words of the grand old hymn our favorite baptismal litany,

"O happy day! happy day!
When Jesus washed my sins away."

Beloved, if we are saved at all, we are saved by the efficacy of the blood of Christ. There is no other way—no other remedy for the sin of the world. (Acts 22:16;

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John 1:29). *And, according to plain Scripture teaching, the only place where the believer appropriates the efficacy of Christ's Blood is in the baptismal grave* (Gal. 3:27, Rom. 6:3-11, Tit. 3:5, Matt. 3:13-16; Acts 2:38-41, 8:12, 8:38, 10:47, 16:31-33, 22:16).

REVIEW QUESTIONS ON PART THIRTY-ONE

1. Explain the Oriental ritual of hospitality as exemplified by Abraham in Genesis 18.
2. How explain Sarah's laughter on hearing the announcement that she would bear a son? What kind of reaction did this indicate on her part?
3. Why did she subsequently resort to deception when faced with the facts?
4. What reasons have we for holding that of the three heavenly Visitants to Abraham's tent two were angels? Cf. Heb. 1:14.
5. What reason do we have for believing that the third Visitant was God Himself in the person of the Logos?
6. Review the Old Testament teaching concerning the Angel of Jehovah. Correlate Micah 5:2.
7. What announcement did these heavenly Visitants make concerning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah?
8. Explain what is meant by "the perennial problem of Absolute Justice."
9. How is this problem stated, in the form of a question, in v. 23, and again in the same way in v. 25?
10. How account for the "boldness" of Abraham's intercession? Would you say that it lacked humility?
11. How does Cornfeld explain the apparent familiarity of Abraham's approaches to God?
12. How refute the claim that these cultures had not yet attained the ideal of individual responsibility, but were concerned only with collective righteousness and responsibility?

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13. Did Abraham's intercession include any effort to benefit himself?
14. Did he ask God to save the people of Sodom *in their sins*? Could God have done this and really been the living and true God?
15. Why is the notion completely untenable that the narrative in chapter 18 is in any sense a myth?
16. Comment on the patriarch's declaration in v. 27 that he was "but dust and ashes." In what sense only can this be said to be realistic?
17. Show how the notion widespread in our day that a future life is *not even desirable* is a violation of the noblest characteristic of man and a complete repudiation of the law of love? Summarize Baillie's treatment of this view.
18. Restate Lange's treatment of "pagan imitations" of the story of Abraham and his heavenly Visitants.
19. In what way does this narrative point up the nobility of "the quality of mercy"?
20. In what way does it emphasize "the sacredness of the individual"?
21. Why is the final suggestion of the story of Sodom designated "a truly somber one"?
22. What according to Scripture is the only remedy for sin?
23. In what facts is this remedy foreshadowed in the Old Testament?
24. What forms do present-day denials of this fundamental truth take?
25. With what great doctrine of Christianity are we dealing when we discuss the Scriptures having to do with the Blood of Christ?
26. What is meant by the Covering of Grace? How is it related to our redemption?
27. In what sense does the Blood of Christ cleanse us from sin?

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28. How is the Blood of Christ necessary to save man from sin?
29. What is meant by the antinomy of God's justice and His goodness?
30. How is this resolved by the Christian doctrine of the Atonement?
31. What is the twofold design of the Atonement?
32. Explain how the justice and love of God are both involved in the efficacy of the Blood of Christ.
33. Where does the penitent believer meet the efficacy of the Blood of Christ? Explain fully.
34. Where in the process of conversion does pardon take place?
35. Is there any such thing taught in Scripture as "baptismal regeneration"? Explain.
36. Explain what is meant by the Mystery of the Flowing Blood.
37. Is it conceivable that our Lord as Head of the Church would ordain "non-essential" institutions?
38. In the light of our present study review the question of Genesis 18:23, "Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked?"
39. In the light of the present study review the question of Genesis 18:25, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"
40. What did Abraham do at the conclusion of his "dialogue" with God?