

GENESIS 16:1-17:27

ABRAM'S PROMISE OF A SON

This morning, we will be continuing our look at the life of Abram. We will see a bit later that God changes his name to Abraham. Just a quick background before we get into today's lesson here in Genesis Chapters 16 and 17. In Genesis Chapter 12 God came to Abram and made a promise to him. At this point Abram was 75 years old and was living in a place called Haran (Genesis 12:1-4). Abram obeyed God and moved his wife, his nephew Lot and all their possessions to the land of Canaan. There God came to Abram again (Genesis 12:7). And then, for a third time God spoke to Abram (Genesis 13:14-17). God reiterated a previous promise to give him this land. Time goes by. Abram is 85 years old and he and his wife Sarai were STILL childless. Well, the LORD visited Abram a fourth time and reassures him that He is a sovereign God who will keep His promise (Genesis 15:3-5).

I mentioned last time that you need three things to have a nation – land, people and laws. God has promised two of these three things to Abram – He promised Abram would have countless descendants (people) and that they would possess the land of Canaan (land). The third thing, laws, will be given to Abram's descendants, the nation of Israel four centuries later at Mount Sinai when God gives Moses the Law.

The one mysterious aspect of God's promise to Abram, that he will be a blessing to all nations, the Apostle Paul later commented on this in his letter to the Galatians: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:8-9). Paul sees this promise as being fulfilled in the coming Messiah, the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. That's his argument in Galatians.

As we come to Chapter 16, Abram is 85 years of age and has a grand total of ZERO descendants. In addition at present Abram possesses NONE

of the land. Given the circumstances, at this point these wonderful promises to Abram seem so improbable! And yet Abram believes the LORD, and God counts it to him as righteousness. We have no idea at this point just HOW God is going to bring all of this to pass. What we do know is what Abram knows, that somehow and some way God WILL keep His promises.

Well, a year or so goes by. Abram and Sarai aren't getting any younger. They still have no children. Abram is now 86. Sarai is 76 and she's still barren, unable to have children. Their faith is being severely challenged as the chapter opens.

READ Genesis 16:1-2

Remember from earlier that God had told Abram, "Your very own son shall be your heir." In other words "Abram, your heir, your son shall come from your own body." Abram and Sarai wrongly reason that while Abram will in fact be the father, the promised son must come through some other woman other than Sarai. After all Sarai cannot have children. So, Sarai conceives this plan. I guess she thinks she's going to help God out. She selects one of her servant girls to produce a son for Abram. Is this a good idea? NO! As we shall soon see.

READ Genesis 16:3-4

Their plan is carried out. Abram has sexual relations with Hagar and she becomes pregnant. But this is NOT God's plan and it proves to be disastrous. The servant girl, Hagar the Egyptian gets pregnant with Abram's child. At this point the servant girl Hagar wrongly thinks that she will displace Sarai as Abram's first wife. Of course this is not the case and major problems begin to develop in Abram's household.

The quarterly provides some very interesting insight into this whole concept of having a surrogate mother, which is what's going on here. It says, "Using a slave as a surrogate mother was a common custom in the ancient Near East. The husband would marry a concubine-wife, or as here, the wife gave her slave to her husband as a concubine-wife. The child born

of the concubine was then considered to be the first wife's child to raise as her own. In ancient times a concubine-wife had a legal status. She could not be denied housing, food, clothing, provision, or conjugal visits – and her son was supposed to inherit from his father if he was the first born."

So what you need to see is that this was not an uncommon practice in that day and time. But, with that said, it was certainly NOT God's plan. God never directed Abram and Sarai to do what they did.

READ Genesis 16:5

Sarai basically blames Abram for the contempt being shown her by Hagar. The fact is that Abram and Sarai are equally to blame. After all, they acted together to carry out this plan.

READ Genesis 16:6

Abram tells Sarai, "You are still my first wife and as such you are in authority over the servant girl." So then, based on the customs and practices of that day, Sarai is in the wrong here. Hagar as the slave girl had just been following orders. She had just done what she was told to do by her mistress. So, God intervenes. He sends His angel to meet with Hagar who is the victim of this whole ordeal.

READ Genesis 16:7-9

Hagar is told to return to Sarai and willingly submit to her authority.

READ Genesis 16:10

Hagar finds out that her son will one day be the father of an innumerable people.

READ Genesis 16:11

Hagar is told that her son's name will be Ishmael, which means "God hears." Ishmael's nature is described in verse 12. READ it. This does not sound very complimentary in our day and age. What this means is that

Ishmael will be a fiercely aggressive and independent free-roaming solitary man.

READ Genesis 16:13-14

The name of this well means, "well of the loving One who sees me." It goes right along with what Hagar declared in v 13. To her credit, Hagar does as the angel of the Lord had directed her and returns to Sarai.

READ Genesis 16:15-16

In his commentary John Walvoord makes this statement: "When the way of faith, which involves patient waiting, was abandoned and the way of human calculation was taken, Abram was caught up in a chain of causes and effects that would trouble him for years to come. Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arabs, who are still hostile to the Jews." He wrote this back in the 1970s and it's still true some 50 years later! And that brings us to Chapter 17...

READ Genesis 17:1-2

Thirteen years has passed since Ishmael was born. At this point Abram is thinking that the child of promise, the one that will be heir to God's promise is Ishmael. But as we will see this is not the case. God will fulfill His promises, not by human effort, but by God Almighty (Hebrew "El-Shaddai"). God is going to do what seems to be humanly impossible! What God wants from Abram going forward is that he lives in the knowledge of God's presence with him and that he be wholly devoted to the Lord.

READ Genesis 17:3-5

God changes Abram's name from Abram (meaning "exalted father") to Abraham (meaning "father of a multitude"). Then God underscores His covenant promise to Abraham. Notice how often in the next several verses God says "I will..." Not you will, but I WILL! This phrase spoken by God Himself appears 12 times here in Genesis Chapter 17.

READ Genesis 17:6-8

This covenant between God and Abraham is referred to as an “everlasting” covenant – what does “everlasting” mean? Forever, never ending, eternal. So then, does this covenant still apply today or not? YES!

John Phillips in his commentary on Genesis says: “This is an absolute, unconditional, binding, irrevocable agreement in which all the initiative, all the intent, and all of the insistence are God’s. No failure on Abraham’s part, no flaws, no forgetfulness on the part of his [descendants], can annul the decree.”

READ Genesis 17:9-14.

God directs Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household – v 11, “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.” This is God’s appointed sign of His covenant with His people. It is to distinguish those who believe in God and follow Him from those who do not. There’s no evidence in scripture that Abraham balks at all at what God instructs him to do. There is no – “You want me to do WHAT God? Did I hear you correctly? Can you repeat that?” There’s none of that. As we will see, Abraham simply obeys.

READ Genesis 17:15-16

Sarai’s name is also changed from Sarai (meaning “my princess”) to Sarah (meaning “a princess”). What’s this all about? Well, kings will come from her. She’s no longer just Abraham’s princess but she is the mother of royalty. Can you recall the name of any kings who descended from Abraham and Sarah? David, Solomon, and all those kings of Judah discussed in 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles.

READ Gen 17:17

God is going to answer Abraham’s questions here in this verse very shortly. Let’s talk about Abraham reaction. It says here that he laughs. One commentary I read said that Abraham laughed out of skepticism, that it was a purely human reaction. Even our quarterly seems to imply this. A person who was in my class several years ago when I taught this same

lesson conjectured that Abraham may have laughed out of embarrassment. But I think that John Phillips has it right in his commentary. This is what he says: "Abraham laughed out of sheer joy. The glorious impossibility of it!" Phillips goes on to say that Abraham "laughed the laughter of faith as Romans Chapter 4 makes perfectly clear." And then Phillips quotes this passage: "He [Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised" (Romans 4:19-21). I'm siding with Paul on this one. There is NO skepticism on Abraham's part. He believes God is actually going to do it and he is overcome by this incredible thought! Well, back to Genesis...

READ Genesis 17:18

Abraham obviously loves his one and only son at this time, Ishmael. He doesn't want his boy to be left out. He wonders to himself, "Why can't Ishmael be the covenant son?" But God has other plans which He now tells Abraham.

READ Genesis 17:19

"NO Abraham, Ishmael is not going to be the covenant son." Then God's answers his two questions from v 17 – "Shall a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Shall Sarah, who is 90, bear a child?" God's answer is "YES, Abraham. This is exactly what's going to happen! Your wife is going to bear you a son and you will name him Isaac."

READ Genesis 17:20-22

God's covenant with Abraham of people, land and being a blessing – will come through Isaac and not Ishmael. God WILL bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation. But Ishmael and his descendants – those in the Arab countries including the Palestinians – will not enjoy the covenant

blessings that God promised to Abraham. And with that God terminates his conversation with Abraham. End of discussion.

READ Genesis 17:23-27

On that very same day, Abraham fully carries out God's command to circumcise every male of his household which, of course, includes himself.

So what can we take away from this lesson? Very often a lesson's application is personal. But sometimes the application has to do with what is happening around us in our world. While it is true that God chooses and uses regular ordinary people and through them does the extraordinary, the application I want to leave you with is much bigger. Here it is...

God is sovereign. He has a plan and it will not be thwarted. Pay attention to the headlines. This is all playing out in Israel even today (I originally taught this in February 2024) as the Israel-Hamas War wages on.

Keep in mind God's covenant promise to Abraham and to the covenant nation that did not come through Ishmael and the Arabs but through Isaac and the Jews. This is quite relevant even today and understanding it will guide our politics and shape our worldview.