

Introduction

We've studied roughly 10 years of Abram's stay in Canaan (16:3). In those years he traveled to Egypt and back, built several altars, rescued Lot from the hands of a powerful confederation of kings, and God re-confirmed His promises at least twice. In chapter 15 we saw that the covenant was unilateral because only God passed through the animal pieces. Abram did not. He was the recipient of the covenant, not a co-maker of it.

One of the important parts of the promise was that Abram would have descendants that were as the stars in number (15:5). After 10 years of trying to have children, however, he was not having success (11:30 and 16:1).

I. The Birth of Ishmael, 16:1-16**A. Perceived Need to Help God Leads to Sin, 16:1-3**

Things were not going "as planned" and so Sarai suggested that they have a children by a surrogate mother. Bad idea! Abram takes Hagar as a second wife and fathers Ishmael.

The problem of polygamy is raised here. Obviously, the Bible does not smile upon this perversion of the marriage relationship, as evidenced by the consequences that follow in the family structure (16:4ff). Two-becoming-one in the marriage relationship makes it impossible for polygamy to be morally upright or workable.

B. Sin Leads to Consequences, 16:4-6

Sarai could not take it now that there was a child-bearing rival in the home who was actually able to have a child while she was not. The old adage "you made your bed, now lie in it" seems to apply here. Abram cannot take his wife's complaining and so puts Hagar under her hand to do with as she wishes. She drives her away from her home. Think of it, an obviously pregnant woman treated like that.

C. God's Directions for Hagar, 16:7-14

In an encounter full of grace, God appears to Hagar the first time (see ch. 21 for the second). The Lord told her to return to Sarai. He also promised that her son would have a large number of descendants as well. God set it up this way because (as 21:13 tells us) Ishmael is also a son of Abram, so that he gets some blessing on account of that.

God then informs Hagar that her son will be a wild man who is a foe to everyone around him. What must a mother think at this!

Hagar expressed her experience with God by calling God by the name "The God who sees." This is not infrequently done in the OT. God can be characterized by lots of his activities. How gracious that He saw Hagar in her hour of need.

D. Birth of Ishmael, 16:15-16

Hagar obeys the Lord's command to return. By the time Ishmael was born, Abram was 86 years old. This was 11 years after he left Ur of the Chaldeans (12:4).

II. Reconfirmation of the Abrahamic Covenant, 17:1-8

In this section the promise to Abram is confirmed once again. Specifically, Abram is promised a large number of descendants (2 and 5b-6). Note Abram's posture before God in verse 3. This is how the Bible tells us that every man responds to an appearance of God.

God changes Abram's name (*exalted father*) to Abraham (*father of a multitude*). This name change is tied closely to the fulfillment of the covenant promise. Whenever you think of *Abraham*, remember that the name itself foreshadows the fulfillment of God's promises.

One thing to keep in mind about this is that it is the fourth time that the covenant has been mentioned in Genesis. The first was in chapter 12, then 13, then 15, and now 17. At the first, Abram was 75 years old (12:4); then perhaps 80; then about 85 (16:3); then 99 (17:1, 17:17, 21:5). So at least over a period of 25 years God repeats the covenant to Abraham. This is no passing fad!

The covenant itself is an "everlasting covenant" in verse 7 and it promises the land as an "everlasting possession" to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac (v. 8).

III. Circumcision as the Sign of the Covenant, 17:9-14

God gives a sign of the covenant with Abraham: the removal of the foreskin on the male child at 8 days of age. It is a sign of obedience and belief in the covenant that God gave to Abraham. It is a physical rite which does not transmit any grace or have any other sacramental value to the recipient of the sign.

There is an issue here with respect to circumcision and salvation. Rom. 4:9-12 clearly tells us that Abram was saved before he received the sign of circumcision. This ordinance is not required for salvation, and it did NOT guarantee the salvation of the child who was circumcised. This is true despite the loud protestations of Judaizers in the first century who said that circumcision was required to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). The Jerusalem council unequivocally responded to this heresy by saying that circumcision is NOT required for salvation. Circumcision does not avail anything in Christ (Gal. 5:6).

There is another theological issue here about the relationship of circumcision to baptism. In some churches, baptism is seen as the NT counterpart to circumcision, effectively bringing the child into the "covenant community." So, baptism is done to children. The NT does not suggest this in the least. Baptism in the NT is for believers, not infants who have not professed faith in Christ. There is no "covenant community" in the NT, where the focus is on the Church. The very term "covenant" shows that these folks are not following a proper dispensational understanding of the Scriptures. Remember in any case that the old covenant was broken and no longer is operative (Heb. 8:13).

IV. Prophecies of Isaac's Conception and Birth, 17:15-18:15**A. Amazing Promise of a Child to a 100/90 Year Old Couple, 17:15-27**

God also changes Sarai's name to Sarah at this point (both names have the idea of *princess*). God says that He will bless Sarah with a child and she will be the one through whom the covenant promises will come to fulfillment (v. 15-16).

Abram laughed at this (v. 17). In addition, he asked God to make the promise run through the line of Ishmael (v. 18). That just would not do for God, for He delights in doing the seemingly impossible (v. 19). Verse 19 also tells us that God had selected Isaac (named before he was even conceived) as the one through whom the promises would come. The same everlasting covenant would be given to Isaac that was given to his father.

While at least for a time Abraham was incredulous at this promise of a child in his old age, Romans 4:18-22 tells us that Abraham was strong in faith and believed God. Even those strong in faith have moments of unbelief and doubts. Just keep on believing!

Abraham's plea to God in v. 18 did not go unheard. Ishmael would also be blessed, but note that the blessing is limited by the fact that Isaac would be the recipient of the covenant with Abraham. God has said so twice (v. 19, and v. 21).

Abraham did just as he was commanded with the circumcision rite.

B. Theopany, 18:1-15

Now it was Sarah's time to laugh at the promise of God. Three men (two angels and God who had taken on the appearance of men) came to Abraham and he offered them a meal. Notice Abraham's hospitality (he "hurried" in v. 6 and "ran" in v. 7).

Once the meal was underway, the men asked where Abraham's wife was. The LORD made the promise yet again about their having a son, and Sarah couldn't believe it. The LORD perceived that Sarah had laughed, but she denied it for fear. Unfortunately, such a lie, though it might work with men, will totally fail with the all-knowing God (v. 15).

Conclusion

Lessons: a) trust God and don't be pragmatic; b) sin has consequences; c) believe the promises of God, including those yet unfulfilled to Abraham; d) know the doctrine of baptism and circumcision; e) be hospitable (Heb. 13:2); f) don't lie!