

**Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church**  
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DHW  
LESSON 12

The Book of Genesis  
Chapters 15-17

*INTRODUCTION*

The strengthening of Abraham's faith has reached a point when it was ripe for the LORD to ratify the promises He had made to Abraham. Abraham's faith in the LORD together with the imputation of righteousness accorded to him becomes the principle for all future generations (15:6): *And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness.*

The LORD also made known to him that his posterity would be enslaved for four hundred years in a foreign country before they would return and settle in the Promised Land. And the LORD *cut* His covenant with Abraham in a vivid and dramatic way.

God sometimes takes a longer time to fulfil His promises. The wait for a son to be born to Abraham and Sarah was quite long from our view point. Ten years have passed and there was no sign of Sarah conceiving. Instead of waiting for the LORD's timing, they went ahead in their own ways to have a son by Hagar, who was Sarah's maid. Impatience on man's part to precipitate God's promise usually brings unpleasant and untold consequences.

It has been said that God is never too early or too late. God's timing is always the right timing! God loves

reminding His people of His promises. God often reiterated His covenant, which He had made with Abraham. God instituted the rite of circumcision as a sign and to remind them of their special relationship with Him.

In these three chapters 15-17, we learn the further strengthening of Abraham's faith, though there were some moments of weakening. God saw the afflictions of His people and heard their cries, and acted to bring about good for all. And what God promises, God will keep.

The following is an outline of the chapters:

1. God specifically promised Abraham a son and he believed (15:1-6);
2. God made a covenant with Abraham to confirm His promises (15:7-21);
3. Abraham tried to fulfil God's plan in his own way (16:1-6);
4. The Angel of the LORD told Hagar to return and submit to Sarah (16:7-16);
5. God re-confirmed His covenant with Abraham calling him to walk uprightly before Him (17:1-8);
6. God instituted the rite of circumcision as the sign of His covenant with Abraham (17:9-14);
7. God affirmed with Abraham that the son by Sarah would be the heir and not Ishmael (17:15-27).

## STUDY THE WORD

### God Promises Abraham and He Believes

The preceding chapter ends with Abraham rejecting the opportunity to increase his wealth when the king of Sodom offered to give him the entire booty of the war which was taken from Sodom by the invaders. It is interesting to note the encouraging words of the LORD to Abraham after this incident. In fact, God knew what had transpired between Abraham and the king of Sodom, and how Abraham expressed his trust in the LORD. The LORD reassured Abraham that He should not fear for He would be his Protector and that He would reward him greatly (15:1). How wonderful is the LORD God who knows every detail of our life, and blesses His children who trust and honour Him!

When Abraham complained that he was childless, God specifically promised him that his heir would be from his very own flesh and blood. Abraham still harboured some doubts about the future of his family. Abraham lamented over the fact that he did not have a son, and that all his possessions would go to his most trusted servant Eliezer. When God reaffirmed that Abraham would have an heir of his very own, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in heaven, even though he was old and Sarah was past child-bearing. God further reassured him that his descendants would be numberless as the stars in heaven. When Abraham heard these words of the LORD, he believed. It is a faith against all odds. He believed God would fulfil His promises and that He could do the impossible. On the grounds of

Abraham's unquestionable faith in Him, God *counted it to him for righteousness* (15:6).<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that all along Abraham had not trusted or believed in God. Right from day one when he was called, he believed in God.<sup>2</sup> It was a timely reaffirmation of his faith in God.

### God Makes a Covenant with Abraham

God reassured Abraham once more by declaring that He is the LORD (YAHWEH), His personal Name, and reminded him that it was He who had called him out of Ur of the Chaldees, and to give him the land of Canaan (15:7). In this revelation to Abraham, the LORD showed that He *worketh of all things after the counsel of His own will* (Ephesians 1:11b). God is Sovereign! Abraham responded by asking how he could be sure that he would inherit the land. In other words, Abraham asked for a guarantee. The LORD confirmed this promise by "cutting" a covenant with Abraham.

He required Abraham to bring five kinds of animals to make an offering. Abraham was required to cut each animal into two symmetrical halves except the birds, namely, the turtledove and the pigeon, which were not divided at all. Abraham did accordingly.<sup>3</sup> When birds of

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<sup>1</sup> The Divine commentary in Hebrews:11:11 *Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.*

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:8 *By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.*

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 15:9: a young heifer is a young cow which has not given birth to a calf.

prey began to attack the carcasses, Abraham drove them away. When the sun was setting, Abraham fell into a deep sleep. He could not drive the vultures away; and a horrendous darkness enveloped him (15:12). This symbol is explained by what the LORD told Abraham. The LORD predicted that his descendants would be afflicted by a foreign nation for four hundred years before they would return to the Promised Land. The word *afflict* which is used here (Genesis 15:13) is the same word used in Exodus 1:1.<sup>4</sup> This prediction is a reference to the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt. Having spoken this to Abraham, the LORD God appeared in the midst of a fire and the fire passed through between the pieces of the sacrifices severing the pieces in two. The text states that *the LORD made a covenant with Abram* (v.18). The word *made* is significant. The Hebrew word is *karath*, meaning to “cut off.” Literally, the text should read “in the day, the LORD Himself cut with Abram the covenant.” It signifies that if the person who makes the covenant does not keep it, he would be cut off like the animals. This meaning is suggested by Jeremiah.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the LORD God who “cut” the

covenant with Abraham and his seed will never be “cut off” because He will faithfully keep His covenant. It means that the promise of the land and all the attending promises are ensured by the covenant, which is permanent and irrevocable.<sup>6</sup>

Another factor relating to this four hundred years of suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, was the statement, *the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full* (15:16). The word *Amorites* is a general term for all the tribes inhabiting in Canaan. God, in His longsuffering, had allowed the sin of the Amorites to be full before He would judge them. Hence, the command of the LORD to Joshua to destroy all the Canaanites was a judgment of their sins rather than a capricious act of a despotic God. The soul that sins must die, thus says the LORD God.<sup>7</sup>

### Sarah Tries to Help God to Fulfil His Plans

Chapter 16 opens with the statement that Sarah, Abraham's wife, *bare him no children*, and that she had a handmaid who was an Egyptian by the name of Hagar. Sarah could have gotten her when Abraham went to Egypt as there was famine in Canaan. Abraham was now

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 1:11 - *Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses.*

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 34:18 - *And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof, 19 The princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf; 20 I will even give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life: and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth.*

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<sup>6</sup> Since 70 A.D. when Israel was dispersed throughout the world, the Jews had no permanent place of their own which they could boast as their sovereign nation. For almost two thousand years these stateless Jews were dispersed throughout the world, although many became the citizens of the country of their adoption. But on May 14, 1948, the nation Israel was incredibly and officially established and admitted into the United Nations. And since then, even they were invaded numerous times by their Arab neighbours, Israel remained till today intact as a nation!

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 18:4 – *Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.*

85 years old and Sarah 75. Ten long years have passed since God called Abraham and promised him a son. Nothing had happened. Sarah had not conceived and moreover she was past child-bearing. She put to Abraham that the LORD prevented her from conceiving a child. (16:2). She thought that she might have children through her handmaids. In those days this was an accepted practice.

So, Sarah suggested to Abraham to take one of her maids so that she could have a child through her. Abraham should have sought the LORD first. Instead he readily succumbed to Sarah's tempting proposal. Sarah chose Hagar, and consequently, Hagar was pregnant. The latter was proud that she could conceive and bear a child to her master Abraham. She began to despise Sarah, her mistress. We are not told how Hagar despised Sarah. Perhaps Hagar refused to let Sarah to have her child. Hagar's attitude towards Sarah obviously had changed. Now Sarah turned around and blamed Abraham for what happened. This blaming of others reminds us of what had happened in the Garden of Eden. It seems very hard for man to be humble and admit his own fault or sin. When Sarah complained to Abraham, the latter did not take sides. He told his wife to deal with Hagar as she pleased (16:6). Observe that both Sarah and Abraham did not mention the maid by name. Sarah was angry and began to abuse Hagar. Abraham should have tried to reconcile the two women and protect Hagar, because she was now also his wife. Hagar could not take it any longer and she fled.

### God Intervenes and Helps Hagar

Hagar fled from Sarah and *the angel of the LORD* found her resting near a fountain in the wilderness on her journey back to Egypt in the land of Shur, which was in north-eastern Egypt. This Divine personality knew quite a lot about her. He called her by name and that she was Sarah's maid (16:8). *The angel of the LORD* told her to go back to her mistress Sarah and to submit to her. Although it was humiliating on her part and to be subjected to Sarah, *the angel of the LORD* assured her of His blessings. The Divine Visitor promised that He would multiply her *seed* exceedingly referring to the child she was bearing. He then prophesied concerning the unborn child. The child would be a son, and she should call him Ishmael (God has heard). God had heard and known her affliction. Each time when Hagar would call his son Ishmael, she would recall this encounter with *the angel of the LORD*. The child would be *a wild man*. The word, *wild* (Hebrew, *parad*) has the qualities of independence, and separateness. What kind of a person Ishmael would be? He would be one, who loves freedom, independence; stubborn and proud, and one who would have untameable strength.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Hagar responded by addressing the Divine Visitor rather than talking about what had been told to her about her unborn child. Hagar gave a name to the angel of the LORD, *Thou God seest me* (You-God-who-sees-me), adding that He saw her and cared for her (16:13). Then she named the

<sup>8</sup> Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50*, p. 59. Baldwin went on to suggest that even today Arabs who were the descendants of Ishmael exhibit the same kind of character towards their neighbours.

well where she was as *Beer-lahai-roi* (16:14). The name means: “the well of the Living One seeing me.” Apparently, Hagar returned to Abraham in accordance with the word of the angel of the LORD. She gave birth to a son, and Abraham called him Ishmael. Abraham was 86 years old, when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. The child was to be Sarah’s as originally planned. But Hagar’s name was significantly left out. Three times it is mentioned that Hagar bore a son for Abraham.

### **God Confirms His Covenant to Abraham**

No less than fourteen years had passed since God *cut* the covenant with Abraham. Those long fourteen years must have been another test of his faith in the promises of God. It is mentioned here that the LORD would make a covenant between Him and Abraham (17:2). But the LORD had already *cut* His covenant with Abraham. Fourteen years ago it was private and personal. The covenant sacrifice then was an unconditional act of God in which Abraham had no part to play and which he could make no contribution. The covenant that God had already made with him was now to be openly declared and made known by a covenant sign.

God now appeared to him as *the Almighty God* (Hebrew: *El Shaddai*). The significance of the name indicates that the LORD is the Supreme Ruler of the earth and that He has power to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, although it had already been occupied by the Canaanites. Secondly, it signifies that He is absolutely able to do what He had promised and to give Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age.

God required Abraham with whom He had covenanted to live in such a manner as to please and honour Him. He was to walk perfectly as God is perfect. God demanded of him his whole-hearted devotion and loyalty. God changed his name from *Abram* (meaning: “exalted father”) to *Abraham* (meaning: “father of many”), for Abraham shall be a father of many nations (17:5). The new name is symbolic of his regeneration. Today there are many Christians all over the world who believed in the God of Abraham just like Abraham had believed in God, and they become his spiritual children!

God rehearsed His pledges to Abraham. He reiterated His promises:

*I will make my covenant between me and thee* (17:2).

*I will multiply thee exceedingly* (17:2);

*My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations* (17:4);

*I will make thee exceedingly fruitful* (17:6);

*I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee* (17:6);

*I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant* (17:7);

*I will give unto thee and to thy seed after thee all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession* (17:8);

*I will be their God* (17:8).

### **God Institutes the Sign of the Covenant**

God had unconditionally committed Himself to Abraham, and now Abraham had to commit himself and his heirs equally unconditionally to their God, and

to keep His covenant.<sup>9</sup> The sign of the covenant is that,

*This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant (17:10-13).*

Three important features of the covenant sign need to be noted. First, all the male descendants of Abraham must be circumcised. There is no mention of female descendants or reason given. One reason offered is that a woman is a part of man.

Secondly, children born to them are to be circumcised when they are eight days old. Children are an integral part of the family. How could they be left out of the covenant promises, which were given to their parents! The children were told what their parents instructed them. They were not in a position to make any choice. The parents did not have to wait until they reach the age of accountability or to ask whether they would want to be circumcised. And thirdly, it was a permanent rite. It was not a social custom but a religious imperative.

As the text declares, circumcision is *a token* or sign (Hebrew: *'ot*) of the covenant (17:11). The question is asked: Is

it a sign for the one who is circumcised or God? If it is a sign for the one who was circumcised, it was a sign that reminded God's people of who they were. If it was a sign to God, like the rainbow in chapter 9, God would remember His promise to Abraham and to all his descendants. It is difficult to decide which one, because no explanation for the sign is given.<sup>10</sup> Hamilton's conclusion of his discussion is enlightening:

"We take the position that circumcision is a means by which Abraham and his seed ratify God's lordship over them. It is their identity sign as God's covenant people. As such, circumcision is not a cognition sign, one for God's benefit, but rather a confirmation sign, one bearing witness to Abraham's belief that God would fulfil his promises with respect to progeny. . . . Circumcision has nothing to do with age or marital status, but is connected with the covenant. The Hebrews alone focused on the intimate relationship between a covenant from God and circumcision as a mark of that covenant."<sup>11</sup>

Circumcision is the sign of the covenant initiated by God alone, not by any human. It signifies what God is saying, in terms of promises to the one who is circumcised. The sign conveyed and sealed those promises to the one who is circumcised. The similarities between circumcision and the New Testament covenant sign of baptism are obvious. This covenant sign

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, pp.470-471. Hamilton discusses the use of the word "sign" in the Old Testament.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp.471-472. New Testament rite of baptism vis-a-vis the Old Testament of circumcision, the same reasoning applies. Baptism in the New Testament is a testimony of one's public declaration of the lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ in his life and a sign of his being a part of the Church, the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

signifies what God has done for us, and all who believe are invited to appropriate for themselves, and it includes believers' infants and children.<sup>12</sup> Circumcision was not optional insofar as the children of Israel were concerned. If anyone was not circumcised, even when the child was eight days old, that child was in violation of the sacred law and would be *cut off from his people* (17:14). This refusal to obey is to break the covenant and would result in the forfeiture of its promises.<sup>13</sup>

### God Affirms Isaac not Ishmael as the Heir

Next the LORD changed the name of Abraham's wife, from *Sarai* to *Sarah* (meaning: "princess"). Sarah was ninety years old then. She was well past child-bearing age. Yet the LORD told Abraham that she would conceive and give birth to a son. And they should name him *Isaac* (17:19). When Abraham heard this, he fell prostrate on the ground and strangely he laughed thinking to himself the impossibility of the whole thing. Abraham prayed to God to let Ishmael be God's choice. But God replied Sarah would bear a son, and they were to call him *Isaac*. However, the LORD assured Abraham that He would bless Ishmael too (17:18-20).

Chapter 17 concludes with Abraham obeying God and carrying out His commandment. He took and circumcised Ishmael and all the male folks who were *born in his house*, and those whom he bought with his money that very same day. Abraham immediately carried out what God had commanded him. Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised, and Ishmael, 13 years old.

### PRACTICAL VALUE

We observe that God had been reminding and reiterating His promises to Abraham, and particularly, that the latter would have a son of his very own. Abraham and Sarah needed to be patient. God had His timing. This teaches us that God, who speaks in plain language, He means what He says. Our part is to keep believing though it might take many years for God to act according to His promises. Apply this to Christ's promise to return. It has been delayed for 2,000 years. Christ will come back as He has plainly promised. Let us be believing and patient.

We also observe that when we make sacrifices and in so doing honour God, He sees and knows. We see this in the case of Abraham who refused to take any gift from the king of Sodom, yea, not even a shoe-lace. Abraham looked to God to bless him. Similarly, when we honour God in this way, He will encourage us not to fear but to keep trusting in Him.

Abraham and Sarah tried to help God to fulfil His plans. It does not work. God is capable of performing all that He has promised to do. Who are we to pretend that we are wiser than God to do the things which He has said that He would do? It is dangerous. On this side of history, we see how disastrous it turned out. The relationships between the descendants of Ishmael, the Arabs, and those of Isaac, the Jews, have been always strained even till today.

In times of affliction, like Hagar's experience, the LORD God reveals Himself to be a loving and caring God. This episode should encourage us to persevere on in life even in the midst of much afflictions and adversities. AMEN

<sup>12</sup> Baldwin, pp. 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Baldwin, p.66.