

GOD CALLS ABRAM ABRAHAM

Genesis 16-17

Lesson 8

Key Verse: 17:5

"No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."

When God called Abram, he promised that he would make him into a great nation (12:2) and that to his offspring would be given the land of Canaan (12:7). In chapter 13, after Lot left, God promised him that his offspring would be so many that no one could count them--like the dust of the earth. Then, when he had been depressed after his great victory over the kings (14), and sat in his tent, thinking that his servant would be his heir, God promised him that a son from his own body would be his heir (15:4). Now, 10 years had passed since he had heard God's call and obeyed him. Still, Abram had no son.

1. The birth of Ishmael (16)

Chapter 16 begins with the words, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar." Sarah was very sorry and ashamed that she could bear Abram no child. She loved Abram and knew how much he wanted a son. She became fatalistic about herself, and decided to make a sacrifice that is hard

for any woman to make. She said, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Sarai's counsel did not come from prayer or faith. She rationalized that this must be God's will since "the Lord has kept me from having children." It came from her fatalism and unbelief.

Abram agreed to what Sarai said; he slept with Hagar, and she conceived. Abram should have prayed about this; he should have listened to God's voice instead of the voice of his wife. But because he was impatient, and he wanted to satisfy his own subconscious desire, he accepted Sarai's words. He did not wait on God, but used human means to solve his problem. We are responsible for our actions, even if someone else gives unwise counsel.

From the first, this decision brought grief to their household.

After Hagar became pregnant, she became proud and began to look down on her mistress, Sarai. When Sarai complained to Abram, he said, "She's your servant; do what ever you think best." Abram did not try to mediate between two women. He restored spiritual order in his home, and made it clear that his wife Sarai was the mistress of the home. So Sarai treated Hagar harshly, and Hagar fled into the desert.

What a tragedy! How sorrowful Abram would have been if Hagar, carrying his child perished in the desert. But God helped Hagar. First,

he told her not to run away, but to go back and challenge her situation. He gave her a promise concerning her son, Ishmael. Ishmael could not be the covenant son, but God would bless him. How great is our God who sees and cares about one lonely slave woman. Hagar met the God of Abram personally. She believed his promise and obeyed his command, and he took care of her and of Ishmael.

Ishmael was a child of impatience (which is unbelief), compromise and human calculations. He was a son of the flesh. He could not be the inheritor of God's eternal covenant. He brought human joy and sorrow to Abram, and tension and unrest to Abram's household. God did not stop Abram from following his own way. He did not abandon him, either. He stooped to Abram's weakness and cared for him and his family and waited on his own time.

When I think of how God helped foolish Abram and Sarai, my heart is filled with thanksgiving. How many times I have done foolish things or counseled others to do foolish things! God helped Abram. He lifted his burden of sin and helped him to continue to live by faith in God's covenant promise.

2. Walk before me and be blameless (17:1)

Thirteen years passed between chapters 16 and 17. Abram was 99 years old when God spoke to him again. 17:1 says, "When Abram was 99 years

old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." Abram had lived those years thinking that God had answered his prayer for a son. He did not pray so urgently. He enjoyed watching little Ishmael grow up into a strong and handsome teenager. He had been busy being a father to Ishmael and busy keeping peace in his home. He went through the motions of worship, but he had no deep personal walk with God. He forgot to look up at the stars. He was living a compromised "Christian" life.

The God who appeared to Abram was El-Shaddai, the Almighty God. He said, "Walk before me and be blameless." This was a call to Abram to repent of his petty, family-centered life and walk before the Almighty God who had called him and who had a great purpose for his life.

3. A changed name and a renewed covenant (17:2-8)

Abram fell face down before God in repentance. God changed Abram's name; he renewed his covenant with Abram; he commanded Abram to seal that covenant with circumcision.

First, God changed Abram's name to Abraham. Abram means "noble father"; Abram was living a narrow, family centered life. "Abraham" means "the father of many nations." God wanted to bless the whole world through Abraham. Abraham was to be, not only the physical father, but also the spiritual father of many nations. Second, in order to make Abraham a

source of blessing for the world, God renewed his covenant with him. God wanted to raise a covenant people who would be a source of blessing for all people on earth. (i) Through this covenant people, God would send the Savior. (ii) He wanted his covenant people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5,6) so that the good news of forgiveness and salvation through the Savior might be spread to the whole world. God's greatest blessing is the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of a right relationship with God. He sent Jesus, Abraham's offspring, for this purpose. This is the blessing which God has now made available to all nations through the preaching of the Gospel by his people.

The Almighty God is an everlasting, eternal God, so God's covenant with Abraham is an everlasting covenant. God's ultimate purpose is to restore Paradise. This is the heart of Biblical thought (Ro 8:21-32; 1Co 15:26-28). Only when sins are forgiven and God becomes the God and Father of all people will creation order be restored. Then the basic problem of humanity living under the curse can be solved. No man can be God to other human beings. When men are ruled by material power, the world becomes a very sorrowful world. God's redemptive love is revealed in the words, "I will be their God."

God promised that the land would be an everlasting possession, given to Abraham and his descendants forever. God's promise of land was literally fulfilled during the days of King David, but this promise

looks forward to the conquest of the whole world by the gospel. (Ro 4:13)

However, nothing in this world is forever. God was promising Abraham the land of Canaan, but he was promising more. He was promising him and us the eternal kingdom of God. So the writer of the Hebrews says of Abraham and the patriarchs, "they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (Heb 11:14-16) Third, The covenant which God made with Abraham was to be sealed by the rite of circumcision. God wanted Abraham's acceptance of the covenant and its promises to be very concrete. He commanded him, as a sign and seal of the covenant, to undergo circumcision, and to circumcise every male in his household, including the teenager, Ishmael. This was a painful operation, but by this act, Abraham would cut away from himself a compromising life and commit himself and his family wholly to God. It would mean that the covenant was sealed in blood.

Then God brought out some surprises for Abraham. Since the birth of Ishmael, Abraham had thought that his "no son" problem was solved. But God told him that Ishmael, the son whom Abraham loved and in whom he had placed his hope was not to be the covenant son. God would give Abraham a son by his wife, and her name would be changed to Sarah. She would be the mother of nations and of kings. Abraham couldn't believe it. He laughed to himself. And he prayed for Ishmael. But God was very

clear. Isaac, whose name means "laughter" would be born to Abraham by Sarah. He would be the covenant son. (But God would bless Ishmael, also.) Abraham's relationship with God rested on God's promise, which Abraham believed--not on works or ritual, but on faith.

Abraham accepted God's promise. He accepted God's mission and God's covenant. On that very day he was circumcised; and on that day he circumcised Ishmael and all those born in his house. This was an act of obedience that comes from faith. Abraham believed that God is God Almighty. He made a decision to walk before him in complete trust and obedience.