

Genesis

Lesson 9: Ishmael and Circumcision

Read Genesis 16

Chapter 16 begins with Sarai telling Abram to take her Egyptian maid, Hagar, as a wife so they can produce offspring. From our culture and time, this is an outlandish idea, but some clay tablets have been unearthed which may help shed some light on this proposition. The Nuzu (or Nuzi) tablets are Babylonian social and legal transactions that were recorded from the fifteenth century B.C. originating from the Horites who lived in the city of Nuzu. These tablets help us to understand that in Abram's time and culture, it could actually be written into the marriage contract that a barren wife had to provide a servant to bear children for her husband. Although Sarai was not bound legally to do this for Abram, it does help to see that this was not an unusual practice at that time.

In Genesis 16:2, Sarai confesses that the Lord has "prevented [her] from bearing children" and we know from verse 3 that they have been living in Canaan now for ten years. The possibility that this great nation will come from Sarai's womb looks rather bleak. Whether or not God allowed this to occur intentionally or not is never addressed in Scripture, but He does allow Hagar to conceive.

After Hagar conceives, verse 4 tells us she "despised" Sarai. Again, we are not told why, but it is apparently bad enough that Sarai describes it as a "wrong" that has been done to her. The Hebrew word for "wrong" in this passage is CHAMAC which means "violence, damage,

cruelty, or injustice". Abram gives Sarai full authority to deal with Hagar however she pleases and, in verse 6, we see that she "treated her harshly". The Hebrew word for this phrase is ANAH which means "looking down, to depress, afflict, humble". It was severe enough to cause Hagar to live up to the meaning of her name which is "flight".

In verses 7-14 we see the Lord interacting with Hagar. He begins by asking her "where have you come from and where are you going?" Sometimes God just wants us to stop and think through things. When we refocus, we find clarity and humility. When we know the answers to the two questions He asked, then we realize that we need God and we are much more willing to listen to the solution. Hagar was a poor, pregnant woman in the wilderness alone, but God gently gives her the wisdom she needs.

The Lord tells her to "return to [her] mistress, and submit [herself] to her authority". The word "submit" in this verse is the very same word used in Genesis 16:6 when describing Sarai's harsh treatment of Hagar, ANAH. The Lord is telling Hagar to go back and fully subject herself to Sarai, but He also blesses her. Just as Abram and Sarai will have uncountable descendants, Hagar receives the same promise to "greatly multiply [her] descendants". He also tells her to name him Ishmael, which means "God will hear". Although I am rather certain you and I do not wish to be called a "wild donkey", at this time it might not have been so bad. It actually held the meaning of strength and was most likely a blessing not a

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derogatory reference even though he would be at odds with everyone.

I love what Hagar names the Lord in verse 13. She says, “Thou art the God who sees” and the well where they visited is named Beer-lahai-roi which means “the well of the living one who sees me”. Is that not what we all crave? To simply be seen and heard, loved and cared for is the ultimate desire of all humans. Praise God that these are things He willingly provides not only for Hagar, but for us as well.

Think About It:

When you remember where you came from, is it easier to forgive others and, if so, why?

When you remember where you are going, is it easier to obey God and, if so, why?

Do a biblical search of submission and list all those God has called you to submit to and evaluate whether or not you are humbling yourself to them.

Has anyone ever treated you like you were invisible? Describe how that felt.

Has anyone ever really made you feel “seen” and “heard”? Describe how that felt.

As you go about your daily lives this week, remember to treat others the way our Lord treats us and strive to “see” and “hear” those around you.

Read Genesis 17

The end of chapter 16 lets us know that Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born and the beginning of chapter 17 tells us it was another staggering thirteen years before we have God recorded as speaking of His promises again to Abram. As the Lord begins talking to Abram in Genesis 17:1, He calls Himself “God Almighty”. This is the first time we see Him referred to as “Almighty”, which is the Hebrew word SHADDAY meaning “most powerful” and it is God Himself who introduces it. He also changes Abram’s name which means “exalted father” to Abraham which means “father of a multitude”. He then proceeds to establish His covenant with Abraham.

Although it is not the first time we have seen the Hebrew word OWLAM, I thought it would be a good time to discuss it as we find it several times here in chapter 17. It is translated “everlasting” all four times that it is used in this chapter, but it is translated differently in other places.

Apparently there is no specific word that truly means “everlasting” in the Hebrew language. OWLAM actually has more of the meaning of

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“old, long duration, or ancient” and can refer to the past or present. It comes from the word ALAM which means “to veil from sight, conceal, or hidden”. This may help us understand that OWLAM is referring to a lengthy, but unknown or “hidden” amount of time in the past or future. Contextually it is obvious that it does not refer to “everlasting” as we know it since many things it describes have ended, including the very covenant being spoken of in Genesis 17:7. In many passages such as Genesis 6:4, Psalm 77:5, and Isaiah 63:9, it is translated “old”, “ancient times”, and “days of old”. Keep this information in mind as you read through Genesis or any of the Old Testament in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding of the Scriptures.

In Genesis 17:9-14, God tells Abram that he and all the males must be circumcised as “the sign of the covenant” between them. In verse 12, we read that newborns would receive circumcision on the eighth day and we now know several medical reasons why the eighth day is the best day for something like that to take place in a newborn’s life. We also learn from verse 14 that God takes this sign very seriously by telling Abraham that any male who does not do it “shall be cut off from his people”. God takes this disobedience as a breaking of His covenant and that person will not be counted among His people.

Just as God gave Abraham a new name, He gives Sarai one as well in Genesis 17:15. She is no longer Sarai meaning “princess”, rather Sarah meaning “noble woman”. He then proceeds to assure Abraham that it will be the son he has with Sarah that the promises will come through. In verse 17, Abraham laughs at the thought of him and Sarah being able to produce an heir in their

old age, but God is clear the He will bless them with a son. At this time Ishmael is thirteen years old and surely Abraham not only had a strong affection for him, but probably had begun to believe that he was that heir. Naturally he asks God to consider Ishmael, but God has other plans. However, he does console Abraham in verse 20 by letting him know that he has heard him and will not forget Ishmael.

At the end of chapter 17, Abraham and all the men in his household are circumcised. They have all entered into that covenant with the Almighty and they will soon see that He is faithful and mighty enough to do all that He promises.

Think About It:

Reread chapter 17 and note all the times God says, “I will”.

Can you think of other things that are described as “everlasting” in the O.T. that have ended?

Go online and read up on the benefits of circumcising on the eighth day.

How do you think Abraham felt about Ishmael not being the promised heir?

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Can you think of other times in the Bible
when God fulfilled His promises in an
unexpected way?

What unexpected things has God done in
your life?
