

***The Blessing: A Study in Genesis 12-36***  
**Lesson 3 - Abram is Renamed**  
**Genesis 16-18**

Abram proves that a person can be a genuine God-follower and still fail miserably. The good news is that faith, and ultimately salvation, rests not on our performance, but on God's promise. This truth does not give us license to engage in sin. It does, however, give us reason to hope in God's faithfulness.

Though he was a man of faith, Abram was sometimes as unpredictable as the wind. But the one constant in this story is God. Abram is known to us as a man of faith, not because his trust never wavered, but because God, the object of that trust, never wavered. God was the anchor to which Abram's fledgling boat was always attached (K. Strassner, *Opening Up Genesis*, p. 70).

**I. The God Who Sees (Genesis 16)**

None of us like to wait. For the believer, the time between the promise of God and the fulfillment is often referred to as *gap time*. We are perhaps most vulnerable during this season because impatience creeps in and unbelief becomes a very real looming danger. But it is in the waiting room that God does some of His deepest work to prepare us for the ultimate revelation of His purpose and plan.

Ten years have passed since Abram received the promise from God concerning an heir, but motherhood has continued to evade Sarai. Sarai has grown restless and impatient and began to plot a work-around, a plan to help God out. Sarai had an Egyptian maid named Hagar who was, in all probability, acquired during Abram's disastrous expedition to Egypt. As Sarai pondered her predicament, she began to think that Hagar might have a role to play in gaining an heir for Abram.

John Phillips writes,

The situation was highly explosive. It took the course it did because, for all their spirituality and godly convictions, Abram and Sarai were ordinary people with hopes and fears and desires and wants just like those of anyone else. Abram wanted a son and heir more than anything in the world. Sarai was frustrated beyond words at her inability to give him one. Added to that witch's brew were an attractive slave girl, a legal loophole, some worldly reasoning, and a carnal resolve. The result was an entanglement so snarled and so twisted that four thousand years have not unraveled it (*Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, p. 136-137).

By this point in the story, God had already told Abram that a son would "come forth from your own body" (Genesis 15:4). God had even sealed His promise with a solemn covenant ceremony. But Sarai's role had not been confirmed. As an aside, because of God's instructions concerning marriage (see Genesis 2:24) and since God saw Abram and Sarai as one in the marriage union, it was implied that Abram's heir would come from Sarai. Perhaps Abram had been questioning her part in the

fulfillment of God's revelation. We can also assume Abram had been describing his divine encounter to others, causing them to wait expectantly to hear news of the impending arrival of his heir. Each pleasant inquiry of Sarai's status in the baby department must have become a dagger in Abram's heart as he replied, "Not yet." All of this played into the emotionally charged discussions between Abram and Sarai as they waited to welcome a bouncing baby boy. Years of waiting led to multiplied disappointments, which ultimately plunged Sarai into despair. Her suggestion adhered to a legal custom of that culture which permitted the husband of a childless woman to take her servant as a second wife. The child/children borne of that union could legally become the child/children of the barren wife. Sadly, no mention is made of seeking the Lord. Instead, "Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (Genesis 16:2). Hagar conceived and immediately despised Sarai.

Hagar, pregnant with the child of Abram, began to feel superior and became insolent towards Sarai. In the wake of Sarai's misery, she berated Abram. Abram and Sarai were at odds and the once harmonious home was now marred by contention and chaos. He seemed to abdicate his spiritual headship and allowed Sarai to take out her frustration on Hagar. So harsh was her treatment of her maid that Hagar fled into the wilderness.

Hagar made haste to return to Egypt. While no one seemed to notice Hagar's departure, the Lord intercepted her and spoke. This is the first mention of "the angel of the Lord" (Genesis 16:7) in the Old Testament, generally considered to be a pre-incarnate visitation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the coming of the Omnipresent One to Hagar, we see the *grace* of God wrapped up in His sovereignty. It is the first time in Scripture that reference is made to the angel of the Lord. It is remarkable, to say the least, that the first occurrence of the Jehovah angel (probably none other than the Lord Jesus Himself in one of His pre-incarnate angelic appearances) should be not to Abram but to Hagar; not to the heir of all the promises, but to an Egyptian fugitive; not to a man but to a woman; not to a saint but to a sinner; not to a person of high rank, but to a slave; not to one seeking God, but to one fleeing toward Egypt. The Friend of the friendless, the loving second Person of the Godhead, met that forlorn woman beside a fountain as centuries later, clothed in living, human flesh, He met another woman at a wayside well (John 4). It was a revelation of the grace of God. He loved Hagar just as much as He loved Abram. He sought her and found her on the frontiers of Egypt as He had sought and found Abram in far-off Ur (John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, p. 140).

The Lord revealed that she would have a son, to be named Ishmael. He would have a wild nature and live in a state of everlasting conflict. Ishmael became the father of the Arabs, the perpetual enemies of the Jews even until today.

Hagar encountered God in the desert and addressed Him as *EI Roi*, "The God who sees me." Notably, this is the only occurrence of *EI Roi* in the Bible. Hagar's

God is the One who numbers the hairs on our heads and who know our circumstances, past, present and future. When you pray to *El Roi*, you are praying to the One who know everything about you (*The Blessing*, p. 60).

## II. The God Who Meets All Our Needs (Genesis 17)

In the last chapter, we saw the terrible consequence of failing to trust the Lord and wait on His timing. God had promised Abram a son. In his restlessness to see that promise fulfilled, Abram fell victim to impatience and took matters in his own hands.

It is always a mistake to try to hasten the work of God. He has His own reasons for His seeming delays. But Abram could not wait. As a result of his impatience there followed a solemn silence in which, for thirteen long years, he received no further word from God. He was eighty-six when Ishmael was born and ninety-nine when God at last broke the silence (John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, p. 143).

Thirteen years passed in silence between chapters 16 and 17. There was no vision. There was no voice. Only silence. And then...God speaks. He declares, "I am God Almighty." The name in the original language is *El Shaddai* which means "the All-sufficient One who can meet all our needs." When God did speak to Abram, He gathered up the various threads of the promise He had already made and wove them into one glorious comprehensive covenant. It was an absolute, unconditional, and binding agreement initiated and activated by God. No failure on Abram's part could derail God's covenant. In keeping with this, God changed Abram's name to Abraham (see Genesis 17:5). He added the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet to Abram's name, a number associated with grace in the Scripture. God wasn't naming Abram based on who he was. He was naming him based on who he would become.

Sarai's name was also changed to Sarah which means "princess." God revealed that she would bear a son and become "a mother of nations" (Genesis 17:16). God confirmed that the covenant would not be with Ishmael. but with Sarah's son Issac, who would be making his appearance the following year. Talk about grace! Only God in His magnificent sovereign plan could take an idol-worshipping pagan couple and give them new natures and new names: Abraham - "the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5) and Sarah - "the mother of nations" (Genesis 17:16).

The seal of the covenant was circumcision. Circumcision was an outward symbol of the covenant between God and man. It was intended to remind God's people of their identification with Him. When God revealed to Abraham the need for circumcision, he at once set about obeying God's instructions. Abraham, Ishmael, and "all the men of his household...were circumcised with him" (Genesis 17:27). The life of faith is in essence a life of obedience to the known will of God.

### III. The God of Miracles and Mercy (Genesis 18)

Abraham was taking his daily rest during the heat of the day when three strangers approached him. Since few people traveled when the sun was so hot, Abraham's interest was immediately piqued. The guests accepted Abraham's hospitality while asking the whereabouts of his wife, Sarah. The fact they used her new name, a change only known to God and the couple, confirmed Abraham's suspicions: these were more than mere men. He was entertaining the Lord and two of His angels.

The Lord confirmed His promise to the aged couple saying, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son" (Genesis 18:10). Sarah laughed to herself at the absurdity of such a thing. Her husband would be 100 and she would be 90, both to them far beyond the child-bearing years! But beloved, nothing is too difficult for the Lord!

The men arose and turned to face Sodom and Gomorrah, two exceedingly wicked cities. The Lord engaged Abraham in a dialogue about the destruction of these two cities so that he might see the rightness of His actions.

Knowing the Lord was bent on destroying Sodom and Gomorrah and was aware that Lot and his family were living inside the city gates, Abraham's immediate response was intercession. He asked God not to "sweep away the righteous with the wicked" (Genesis 18:23). Abraham pled with the Lord to stay His hand of judgment if at least 10 righteous people could be found living in Sodom. Sadly, only four were in residence. Not only was this an indication of the pernicious nature of sin, it was also an indictment on Lot's failure to impact his culture for the Lord.

Throughout the study of Abraham, we are reminded multiple times of the goodness of God. He is "rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loves us" (Ephesians 2:4). "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us" (Ephesians 1:7-8a). How grateful we are for God's mercy, His forgiveness, His grace. It was evident in Abraham's story even as it is in ours. However, the interjection of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is evidence that while God extends the free gift of grace for all who receive Him with repentance and faith, He does have a deadline when His justice eclipses His mercy against those who reject Him.

Beloved, may we walk in such a way that we are able to impact our culture and influence others in their spiritual journeys to consider Jesus! God has **blessed** us to be a **blessing**, to make His name famous and His ways known! What a **blessing**!