



ABRAHAM STUDY GUIDE

**A 10 WEEK DEEP DIVE INTO THE
LIFE & WALK OF ABRAHAM**

PART 05

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SONS

GENESIS 16-17

THE LIVING GOD WHO SEES ME

In his covenant with Abram, God promised to give his offspring a land of their own. Yet, Abram's life situation hasn't changed very much at all. He's still an old man—eighty-five, to be exact—and his wife, Sarai, is still an old woman. And they remain childless. It's pretty clear that God is going to have to do something extraordinary for there to even be an offspring to inherit the land. And yet, Abram and Sarai have apparently not fully grasped the miraculous nature of God's promise, because in chapter 16, we see them trying to bring about its fulfillment through their own wisdom and their own craftiness. We might even say they were trying to do it through their own works.^[1]

And they do so by resorting to a disturbing, yet widely attested custom that was acceptable in their day.^[2] Sarai would give her servant woman Hagar to Abram as a concubine, and the child born to her would be raised as Sarai's own. Just as Abram had previously considered Lot, and then Eliezer, to be his heirs, there is nothing explicitly contrary to God's promise in this. After all, God told Abram in chapter 15 that it would be his son who would be the heir; so far, he has said nothing of Sarai. Nevertheless, various aspects of the text seem to criticize this decision as something

they should have known to be wrong.^[3]

On the other hand, we should also note that thus far Abram has not received much moral instruction from God. And so, it is unclear whether or not he and Sarai would have perceived this as morally wrong. That is not to say that these two are presented as saints in this chapter; clearly, they are not. However, we need to be careful before we assume that these people, living nearly four thousand years ago, would have had the same moral compass that we do today in the (post)modern west, and also would have regarded such an arrangement as sinful and exploitative. On the other hand, it is beyond question, given the full scope of biblical revelation, that using a socially vulnerable woman as a means for a wealthy couple to achieve their procreative ambitions is serious sin in the eyes of God. Nowhere are Abram and Sarai commended for doing this. Apparently, they are acting against the will of God.

To make matters worse, Hagar's resulting pregnancy creates massive strife in Abram's household. Hagar grows contemptuous towards Sarai, Sarai turns on Abram, and Abram cowardly allows Sarai to mistreat Hagar.^[4] Some caution is warranted in assessing Sarai's behavior after Hagar conceives, since we are not told the specifics of her treatment under Sarai; the text simply says she "dealt harshly with her."^[5] Eventually, however, life becomes so unbearable for this poor, pregnant concubine that she runs away. This is a horrible situation that engenders nothing but sympathy and compassion for Hagar, who is now pregnant, and apparently is returning to her homeland of Egypt.

It is there, in the barren wilderness, that the angel of the LORD finds her and tells her to return to Sarai and submit to her, and gives her a promise that sounds very similar to the one made by God to Abram: "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."^[6] God is calling her to endure something painful in order to gain something greater. He knows that her situation is far from good. But he also knows that she has protection as a member of Abram's household that she doesn't have on her own. After all, what kind of life would this pregnant, husbandless, landless woman have on her own back in the land of Egypt?

Her son, she is told, will be called "Ishmael," which means, "may God hear," harkening back to God hearing her cries in the wilderness, and reminding her that God will hear her in the difficult years ahead. And then, in response to God's surprising revelation, she gives God a name: "'You are a God of seeing,' for she said, 'Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.'"^[7] The name, in Hebrew, is El Roi, and this is the only place in the entire Hebrew Bible where a human being gives God a name.

Hagar then returns to Abram's family and gives birth to Ishmael. For thirteen years this flawed but chosen family lives together, apparently under the belief that Ishmael is the promised offspring to come from Abram's own body.^[8] Despite the bumpy ride, the promises to Abram seem to have been fulfilled.

THE PROMISE REAFFIRMED

But then, "when Abram was ninety-nine years old," the Lord once again appears to him, proclaiming his fidelity to the covenant established so many years later. At this, Abram immediately falls with his face to the ground in worship. This time, however, God intends to amplify the promises already made to Abram, especially those concerning his offspring. Whereas in Genesis 12:2, he declared that he would make Abram into "a great nation," here he will be "a father of a multitude of nations." He even changes Abram's name to Abraham to correspond with this expanded promise.^[9] Moreover, God tells Abram (now Abraham), "Kings will come from you." This is the first promise of a royal lineage springing from the chosen offspring, and something that will be massively important as the biblical storyline progresses. Lastly, we have the heart of the covenant: "I will be their God."^[10]

God then gives Abraham a sign for this magnificent covenant: circumcision. To us, this seems weird and maybe a little silly. But for Abraham and his descendants, it is fitting that their covenant with God, transmitted from generation to generation, is to be signified by a mark on the male organ that produces (half of) that offspring. Circumcision would be required of every male residing in the house of Abraham who is eight days old, even those of foreign descent.

Finally, God turns his attention to the question of direct offspring. Sarai too will undergo a name change to Sarah, for she, contrary to everyone's expectations, is every bit a part of this covenant as Abraham: "I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples will come from her."^[11] Once again, Abraham falls on his face, only this time to laugh. It was one thing to have offspring at eighty-six. But now he's a hundred, and Sarah is ninety! And besides, he already has a son from his own body. So, he protests, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" But the Lord stands firm. Indeed, Sarah will have a son and it will be with him and his offspring that the covenant will be established.

Abraham's understanding of God was not yet big enough. He believed in a God who would bless him with flocks and help him to stand in battle. And he believed in a God who would give to his offspring the land of Canaan. But he did not yet believe in a God who could move heaven and

earth to fulfill his promises to him, even if that meant a literal miracle—giving a biological son to an elderly couple. In fact, he laughed at the very prospect. And just so everyone would understand that the God whom Abraham follows is that big and that powerful, he is told to name his son “Isaac,” which in Hebrew literally means, “he laughs.” Every time anyone would use Isaac’s name, they would be reminded that he is the living testimony of the God who can do the impossible to bless his people, even to the point that his own father laughed at the notion that God would (or could) do such a thing.

God has brought Abraham and his offspring into a loving relationship with himself through his covenant. And now, bearing his new name, Abraham obediently submits himself to that covenant by circumcising himself, along with all the other men of his house.

[1] Paul encourages us to see Genesis 16 through this lens in Galatians 4:21–31.

[2] Examples of this include The Code of Hammurabi § 146, a text uncovered at Nuzi (Cyrus H. Gordon, “Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets,” BA 3 [1940]: 3), an Old Assyrian marriage contract, and a Neo-Assyrian marriage text (Athalya Brenner, “Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the ‘Birth of the Hero’ Paradigm,” VT 36 [1986]: 257–73).

[3] Compare Genesis 16:2 with 3:17. Compare the verbs “took” and “gave” in 16:3 to 3:6. Consider also Rachel’s decision to do the same thing in 30:1–4, where it is clearly an indication of faithlessness and immorality.

[4] Genesis 16:4–6.

[5] Genesis 16:6.

[6] Genesis 16:10; cf. 15:5.

[7] Genesis 16:13.

[8] Genesis 15:4.

[9] Abraham sounds like the Hebrew for “father of a multitude” (*ab h môn*).

[10] Genesis 17:1–8.

[11] Genesis 17:16.

QUESTIONS:

Use time this week to thoughtfully answer these questions. Take time to reflect, pray and ask the Lord to be a part of this process.

1. The custom of using a servant woman to bear a child for an infertile couple is a practice that we can say is clearly sinful and wrong for a variety of reasons. And yet, Abram and Sarai still did it, allowing their desire for a child to surpass Hagar's dignity and worth as a woman who bore God's image. What practices and beliefs do we accept uncritically, even though they very well may be repugnant to God, simply because they are accepted in our culture?

2. Often, Abram and Sarai's actions are explained away by well-meaning preachers and Bible commentators. Why do you think that is, and what is lost by not acknowledging the faults and fallenness of such important people in Bible history?

QUESTIONS:

3. Ishmael’s name means “may God hear.” When was the first time you realized that God hears you?

4. How is God’s promise that Abram will become the father of “a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:5) fulfilled in Jesus?

5. Isaac's name means "he laughs," apparently to remind Abraham how he doubted God's power to do the impossible. What are other examples of seemingly impossible things that God has done?

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NOTES

Use this space to make notes during the sermon or jot down prayer requests or anything important.

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LOVING JESUS, LOVING PEOPLE, PLOWING A COUNTER-CULTURE
