

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-
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DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 12

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Chapter 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 made to Abraham. Abraham's faith in the LORD and the imputation of righteousness accorded to him becomes the principle for all future generations: "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 returned and settled in the Promised Land. And the LORD "cut" His covenant with Abraham in a vivid and dramatic way.

God sometimes takes a long time to fulfil His promises. The wait for a son to be born to Abraham and Sarah was too long. 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, 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 reiterated His covenant, which He had made with Abraham. God instituted the rite of circumcision as a sign or 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 sees the afflictions of His people and hears their cries, and acts to bring about good for all. And what God promises, God will keep.

OUTLINE

I. God's Specific Promise to Abraham and Abraham's Response and Acceptance by God (15:1-6).

- A. The LORD declared to Abraham that He was his protector and rewarder (v.1).
- B. Abraham complained that he was still without a child of his own (vv.2-3)
- C. The LORD assured Abraham that his very own son would be his heir and his descendants would be innumerable (vv.4-5)
- D. Abraham *believed and he counted it to him for righteousness* (v.6).

II. God's Revelation of His Personal Name and His Confirmation of His Promise to Abraham (15:7-20).

- A. God declared His personal Name, Yahweh (v.7).
- B. Abraham desired a confirmation of God's promises (v.8).

- C. God cut the covenant with Abraham (vv.9-20).

III. God's Plan Done in Man's Ways (16:1-6).

- A. Sarah's plan to have a son through her slave girl Hagar (vv.1-2)
- B. Sarah's plan did not work out as she planned (vv.3-4).
- C. Sarah mistreated Hagar who fled from them (vv.5-6).

IV. God Sees and Hears (16:7-16)

- A. The Angel of the LORD instructed Hagar to return to Abraham (vv.7-9).
- B. The Angel of the LORD named Hagar's child "Ishmael" (vv.10-12).
- C. Hagar's response to the LORD (vv.11-16).

V. God Appeared to Abraham to confirm the Covenant (17:1-8)

- A. God called Abraham to a life of obedient faith (vv.1-3).
- B. God changed Abraham's name as a confirmation of His promises (vv.3-8).

VI. God Instituted the Rite of Circumcision as the Sign of the Covenant (17:9-14).

- A. God instituted the sign of the covenant (vv.9-10).
- B. God stipulated the regulations concerning the sign of the covenant (vv.11-14).

VII. God Affirmed His Promise of a Son to Abraham and Sarah (17:15-22).

- A. God changed Sarah's name as a pledge to His promise of a son to them (vv.15-17)
- B. God would continue His covenant with Abraham's son whom God named Isaac (v.18-22)

- C. Abraham obeyed God (vv.23-27).

Believing in God

It is interesting to observe that before God reassured Abraham that his heir would be from his very own flesh and blood, God comforts through words of encouragement. God told Abraham not to be afraid for He would protect him and would greatly and abundantly reward him. If Abraham still harboured any doubts of the future, God reassured him. However, Abraham who saw that he had not had a son of his own, lamented over the futility of greatly rewarding him, seeing that he was childless and that all his possessions would go to his most trusted servant Eliezer.

When 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 at his old age and Sarah being past child-bearing, it was reported that Abraham believed. It is faith against all odds, believing that God would fulfil His promises and could perform the impossible.¹ God accepted His faith in Him and imputed upon him for righteousness. 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.² It is a timely reaffirmation of his

¹ 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.

²Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after

faith in God, and God's acceptance of his faith. God freely gives His righteousness to anyone who puts his faith in His promises.

Guaranteeing of God

The LORD God reassured Abraham again that the LORD called him out of the Ur of the Chaldees to give him the land of Canaan. Abraham responded by asking how he could be sure that he would inherit the land. God then introduced Himself by His personal name of LORD, Yahweh. He is the source of all life and the supreme sovereign possessor of heaven and earth. He gave the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. And the LORD confirmed this promise by a covenant, which He was about to make.

He required Abraham to bring five kinds of animals to make an offering. Abraham cut the animals into two symmetrical pieces, but the pieces were not completely severed; except the birds, namely, the turtledove and the pigeon, which were not divided at all. Birds of prey began to attack the carcasses but Abraham chased them away. This symbol is explained by what the Lord told Abraham. The LORD predicted that Abraham's descendants would be afflicted by a foreign nation for four hundred years before they would certainly return to the Promised Land. The word "afflicted" which is used here (Genesis 15:13) is the same word used in Exodus 1:11.³ This prediction is a reference to the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt. Having spoken this to Abraham, the LORD God appeared in

receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

³ 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.

the midst of a fire and the fire passed through between the pieces of the sacrifice. It is recorded that *the LORD made a covenant with Abram* (v.18). The word "made" is significant. The Hebrew word is *karath*, meaning to "cut off." It shows 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.⁴ In other words, the LORD God who "cut" the covenant with Abraham and his seed will never be "cut off" because He will keep His covenant. The promise of the land and all the attending promises are ensured by the covenant, which is permanent and irrevocable.⁵

Now tied to this four hundred years of suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, was "the iniquity of the Amorites" which "is not yet full" (15:16). The word Amorites is a general term for all the tribes, which inhabited Canaan. God, in His longsuffering, had allowed the sin of the Amorites to be full before He judged

⁴ KJV 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.

⁵ Since 70 A.D. when Israel was dispersed throughout the world, the Jews had no permanent place of their 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, 1945, 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!

them. Hence, the command of the LORD to Joshua to destroy all the Canaanites was a judgement of their sins rather than a capricious act of a despotic ruler. The soul that sins must die.

The Impatience of Man

The opening statement declares that Abraham and Sarah were childless. Abraham was now eighty-five 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 she was past child-bearing. She put the blame on the LORD for her inability to conceive (16:2).

She suggested to Abraham to take one of her maids so that she could bear a child for her. This was an accepted custom in those days, like modern day surrogate mothers. Abraham listened to her. He did not seek the LORD first, but listened to the wife. The maid was Hagar, who was an Egyptian. Sarah might have gotten her when they were sojourning in Egypt. Hagar became pregnant and despised her mistress, Sarah. This Sarah did not expect, but it happened nevertheless for they had been impatient. They should have waited for the promise of the LORD. Sarah did not hesitate to blame her husband Abraham. This blaming of others is reminiscent of what happened in the Garden of Eden. It seems very hard for man to be humble and admit his fault or sin. Sarah began to abuse Hagar. Hagar could not take it any longer and she fled. This was not God's plan.

God Sees and Hears

She rested at a fountain in the wilderness on her journey back to Egypt, when the "angel of the LORD"

met her. This is theologically most wonderful: the LORD appeared to Hagar, an Egyptian woman! Indeed, God is no respecter of persons for all are His creatures. The LORD told her to go back to her mistress Sarah and submit to her. It was a humiliating action. Once again the LORD who calls one to a certain course of action will bless the person. The LORD promised her that the child she was bearing was a son, and gave her yet unborn son a name, Ishmael (the name means, "God hears"). God even described what kind of a person Ishmael would be—one who loves freedom, independence, of stubborn pride and untameable strength.⁶ The LORD comforted her by assuring that He saw her afflictions and heard her cry. When Ishmael was born, Abraham was 86 years old.

The LORD God reveals Himself to be a loving and caring God, although He is at the same time holy and just. This episode should encourage us to persevere on in life even in the midst of much afflictions and adversities. And as His special children, we may always cry to Him for help, for God sees and hears our prayers and our pleas. But we must always wait upon the LORD. Being impatient and doing things in our way instead of His way will bring about unnecessary misery and suffering. Trust and obey for there is no other way, but to trust and obey!

God Pledges His Promises

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

⁶ 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.

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 had power to give the land to Abraham and his descendants although it had already been occupied by the Canaanites. Secondly, it signifies that He absolutely is able to do what He had promised and gave Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age.

God required of Abraham to whom He had covenanted to live in such a manner as to please 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 he had believed in Him and are 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).

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's Covenant Sign

God had unconditionally committed Himself to Abraham, and now Abraham had to commit himself and his heirs equally unconditionally to their God, and to His covenant.⁷ 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

⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

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. No mention of female descendants or any reason given. One reason offered is that mercifully women were not subjected to any cutting, but this did not mean that they were excluded from the covenant, for they were an integral part of the family.⁸ Another reason 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? They have no choice, neither do the parents have to wait until they reach the age of accountability and then ask whether they want to be circumcised or not. And thirdly, it is a permanent rite. It is not a social custom but a religious imperative.

As the text declares, circumcision is a token or sign (Hebrew: *'ot*) of the covenant. 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 is circumcised, it is a sign that reminds God's people of who they are. If it is a sign to God, like the rainbow in chapter 9, God will 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, unlike the other signs in the Old Testament.⁹ Hamilton's conclusion of his discussion is enlightening:

⁸ Ibid., p.66.

⁹ Hamilton, pp.470-471. Hamilton discusses the use of the word "sign" in the Old Testament.

"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."¹⁰

Circumcision is the sign of the covenant initiated by God alone, not of any human response to the covenant. It signifies what God is saying, in terms of promises to each 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 signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper are obvious. They also signify what God has done for us and all who believe are invited to appropriate for themselves, and infants and children were included.¹¹ Circumcision is not optional insofar as the people of God are concerned. If any one is not circumcised, even the eight day old

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ Baldwin, pp. 65-66.

child, he is in violation of the sacred law and is *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.¹²

Sarah and Isaac

Next the LORD changed the name of Abraham's wife, Sarai, to Sarah (meaning: "princess"). Sarah was ninety years old, 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 laughed and thought to himself the impossibility of the whole thing. Abraham in fact prayed to God to let Ishmael be God's choice, to which God replied that Isaac would be His choice, and assured Abraham that He would bless Ishmael too (17:18-20).

Chapter 17 concludes with Abraham obeying God and carrying out His commandments.

¹² Baldwin, p.66.

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THE BOOK OF GENESIS

CHAPTER 15-17

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS**

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:1-8; Galatians 3:6-9.

TUESDAY: Genesis 15:7-20; Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

WEDNESDAY: Genesis 16:1-16; 1 Samuel 13:6-14; Luke 15:11-24.

THURSDAY: Genesis 17:1-8; Galatians 3:13-29.

FRIDAY: Genesis 17:9-27; Romans 4:8-25; Colossians 2:9-12.

Discussion Questions

1. What did the LORD say about Himself to Abraham?

2. How should Abraham respond to what the LORD had said about Himself to him?

3. Is it right or wrong for us to ask God for reassurances of His promises? Why?

4. Why did God account Abraham righteous?

5. Is there any specific way in which Genesis 15:1-6 can help us in our current life?

6. The LORD makes a covenant with Abraham. What was required? What did the LORD do?

7. What is the significance of the cutting of the offerings?

8. What would happen first to Abraham's descendants before they could settle in the land? Why the delay?

9. What do you think of Abraham's agreement to Sarah's plan to have a child by her Egyptian maid Hagar?

10. What have you learned by the way Sarah treated God, her husband, and her maid?

11. In what way does God's treatment of Hagar an encouragement to you?

12. What did God told Hagar to do and how did she respond?

13. In what name did God appear to Abraham? What impact should it have on Abraham?

14. What did God require of Abraham before He rehearsed the covenant promise to him?

15. Like the rainbow in 9:13, circumcision is the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants. What central element did the circumcision signify?

16. What do we learn about Abraham that is good in the last section of chapter 17?
