

JANUARY 6, 2012

Genesis 15, 16, 17

Today you read Genesis 15, 16 and 17.

The first is that Abram's preoccupation with the promises of God and His tendency to try to "help" God fulfill the promises is important. God has promised Abram a posterity - he would be the father of many nations - but Abram did not even have son and time was marching on (he was probably about 80 years old or so when the events of chapter 15 occurred). Now it wasn't that Abram didn't believe God's promise; on the contrary, he believed it passionately. It was just that Abram had a penchant for trying to do God's work for Him (now I know you never try to do that - but sometimes I think I have been guilty of that).

So in Chapter 15 Abram has this bright idea - he is going to adopt Eliezer of Damascus and make him his legal heir. But God says, "No Abram, that's not what I have in mind."

So, in chapter 16, Sarah gets the even brighter (and much more disastrous) idea to lend Abram Hagar, her handmaid. (Hagar is the Bible's first recorded surrogate mother! But I want you to know something...the concept didn't work much better than it does now). Now before you condemn Abram too vociferously, you need to know that both these ideas were commonly accepted in the ancient world. Everything there depended on having an heir, so adopting a servant or using a fertile slave to substitute for an infertile partner of a marriage, were both common practices. And God has to say again, "Abram, that wasn't what I had in mind either. Abram get this through your head - I don't need your help!"

My friends, we need to get this thought through our heads too - God doesn't need our help. Now He often does His work through us - He often is pleased to allow us the privilege of becoming His instruments, but never, never, never, never get the idea that God somehow needs your help. He doesn't! Abram had to learn that God is big enough, when there is no other possible means of human intervention, to still keep His word. And He always does! You might want to do a little inventory in your own lives today by asking this simple question - are there areas of my life in which I am trying to help God do His work in a way that is inappropriate...in a way that I am trying to do His work for Him? Abram found that a pretty frustrating task and my suspicion is that you will too.

Hagar's son Ishmael was born when Abram was 86 years old, but he was not the promised heir. God took care of Ishmael and Hagar his mother. Because God is the "God who sees me" - and that is another name of God.

The second thing I want you to note in chapter 15 is the covenant God makes with Abram. This is the second major covenant talked about in the book of Genesis, and while there is a great deal we could say about it, you should at least notice that first of all, God initiates the covenant - it is His idea. As a matter of fact, it is a very one-

sided deal. The fact that God is the only initiator is emphasized by the fact that Abram is asleep when the covenant is actually confirmed - God alone passes between the sacrifices. Next notice that the covenant contains promises - unconditional promises about the number of Abram's offspring. Third, it is initiated by a ritual ceremony involving the shedding of sacrificial blood. Fourth, notice the terror that Abram felt. This is a pattern we will discover again and again as people encounter the real presence of a Holy God. Anyone who gets too 'cozy' in the presence of God is probably not encountering the God of Abram or Moses or Isaiah or Peter or John.

The last thing I want you to notice in chapter 15 is in verse 6 - "*Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.*" You might want to do some studying in Galatians 3, Hebrews 11, and Romans 4 - in all these New Testament passages it is crystal clear that the way of salvation has always been by grace through faith just as it is for you and me today. Our faith is that which activates the free grace of God waiting for each of us.

Finally, just make a mental note that God told Abram that the Hebrew people were going to be slaves in a country that was not their own for 400 years. He told them why - "*because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.*" God was giving the people who lived in the Promised Land time to repent. Just like the people in Noah's day, they didn't use the time for the purpose for which it was given them. That is exactly true today as well. God never brings judgment upon a nation without first giving them ample opportunity to repent.

The first thing I want you to notice is that the conversation between God and Abram regarding the circumcision and the birth of a son occurred when Abram was 99 years old. If your memory is very sharp, you may remember that when Ishmael was born, Abram was 86 years old. It may very well be that Abram had to wait 13 long years after Ishmael's birth to have his next direct encounter with God.

Sometimes when I read the Bible, I think of how great it would have been to have God speak directly to me like He did to Abram or Isaiah or Elijah. And that would be great, but that kind of relationship also had a downside - since it was God not Abram who always initiated the contact, communication was only forthcoming at special times and there were often long, long periods of time between those conversations. For thirteen long years after Abram tried to "help God" get the promise fulfilled, Abram had to patiently wait, and apparently, to his credit, Abram had learned to simply be patient and wait.

Now contrast that with your situation: because you have the written Word of God, (Abram didn't), and because you have the wonderful miracle of the indwelling Holy Spirit, you do not need to simply wait patiently for God to decide when to talk to you. You can read His Word every day, you can talk with Him anytime you choose - any day - any time of the day. What do you think Abram would have given for access like that? The really crazy thing is that you and I don't really appreciate this privilege, not as much as we ought.

The second thing you need to notice is that God uses yet another name for Himself in this encounter with Abram. This time He says, "My name is El Shaddai - God Almighty." (write this in your notebook under "God's Names.") Each time God uses a new name, he tells His people something new about Himself. This name, "El Shaddai", is one the God uses particularly in connection with revelation to the patriarchs - the 'fathers' of the Old Testament. This is the name used thirty-one times in the book of Job alone.

It doesn't take too much thought to understand why God would choose to emphasize His omnipotence - (that is His ability to do absolutely anything) - by calling Himself "God Almighty" in Genesis 17. If you, like Abraham, were just about to turn 100 years of age, and your wife was 90 years old, and God were to say 'you're going to have a son', what would you need to remember? Right - that God is omnipotent and that He can keep a promise like that even when you are 100 years old! Before we leave this point, I would like you to think about situations in your life that could be addressed only by El Shaddai - God Almighty. Maybe, like Sarai, you are facing something utterly impossible. Maybe it is medical, physical, relational, or psychological. God can do anything, even the impossible because he is El Shaddai.

The third thing we need to note is that Chapter 17 contains an expansion of the Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant was previewed for Abram in Chapter 12, was actually "cut" by God in Chapter 15, and now further clarified in this passage. Perhaps this "staging" of the covenant's elements was a way of reminding Abram constantly that the covenant was center - the focal point - for his entire life. This much is certain - unless we understand this "covenantal" focus, we will not understand the life of Abram or, for that matter, very much else in the Old Testament. In this passage, the gift of land to Abram is confirmed and the responsibility of the covenant recipient is underscored. The covenant is unconditional - it is all of grace - but it does require something of Abram. God says, "I expect that you - as a result of the grace conferred upon you - will walk before me and be blameless." Once again, there is a strong parallel between Abram and us. We too have been the recipients of a wonderful covenant based upon the free grace of God. And just as there was the command to Abram, "*now walk before me and be blameless*," so God's Word to us is now "*you be holy for I am holy*."

It is at this point in God's dealing with Abram that God gives to him a covenant sign. It's the sign of circumcision. It is a physical sign on his body of the invisible grace that God has bestowed upon the one who has entered into a covenantal relationship with Him. The sign is not the thing that saves, but it is an outward visible mark testifying to an inward spiritual relationship. The New Testament, as you may already know, draws a direct parallel between circumcision, the sign of the Old Testament covenant, and baptism, the sign or mark of the new covenant. Now also Abram's name is changed from Abram, "exalted Father," to Abraham - "the father of many."

This is Mark Ashton, reminding you that 'blessed is the one who delights himself in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night.' Peace be with you.