

## Abraham, a father of many nations

Genesis 16:1 - 17:27

Key verses 17:4, 5

**„As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.“**

We thank the Lord for teaching us creation faith and living with the promise of God through the Genesis Bible study. In the previous lesson, we learned how God visited Abram when he was in deep despair, helped him count the stars and believe that Almighty God would give him as many descendants. God repeatedly visited Abram with His promise and helped him build his life on the promise of God.

In today's lesson, we learn how Abram and Sarai became impatient. As a result of human efforts, they experienced many problems in their family. For many years after Ishmael's birth, Abram lived only a family-centered life. But God visited him again because He had a much greater plan and hope for him, which was to make him a father for many nations. God gave new names to Abraham and Sarah and a new identity, and promised them Isaac, who would be the bearer of God's promise. Let us not live complacently with our human solutions, but grasp God's great vision and promise and be used as fathers and mothers for many peoples in God's eternal work of salvation.

### 1. Ishmael's Birth (16:1-16)

In chapter 15, we met Abram as a man of faith who believed God's promise in an impossible situation. God counted this faith to him for righteousness. But he still had no son, and we learn that 10 years after they followed God's calling Sarai tried to solve

the descendant problem with a human solution. At that time it was a great shame for a woman if she could not bear children. Despite God's promise, Sarai probably could not bear to wait for a child. That is why she thought about how to solve this problem. Finally, she came to Abram with an unusual proposal. She wanted to give him her maid Hagar as a concubine, hoping to have a child through her. In those days, it was an accepted way out to take a concubine if you could not get a natural heir any other way. Verse 2b says, "Abram agreed to what Sarai said." Abram did not obey the voice of God. Abram obeyed his wife and common opinion without consulting God first. It was a human solution that did not please God. The consequences of this mistake are experienced by Abram's descendants to this day.

Abram and Sarai had started their new life by faith, leaving everything behind and trusting only in the promise of God. But after 10 years, they had become impatient and also tired of continuing to wait for the promise of God. Instead of holding on to the promise of God in faith, they used a human method to get their desire for a child fulfilled. Impatience is a fruit of unbelief. In other words, patience is an important quality in our life of faith. Hebrews 10:36 says, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised." Abram and Sarai thought they had waited long enough. But God's time had not yet come. Our God is faithful.

He does not lie. But he is not bound by our imagination and our timetable. God sometimes makes us wait for the promise to be fulfilled because He wants us to grow in faith and know Him better.

What was the result when Abram and Sarai, in their impatience, chose a human substitute solution? The spiritual order in the family was completely upset. Until then, Hagar had probably been Sarai's favorite maid, working very well with her and loving her dearly. Hagar had always held Sarai in high esteem. But as soon as Hagar became pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. She now did not want to wash the dishes or clean up the tent. Instead, she sat on the couch and listened to classical music to soothe the baby. Every time Sarai came in, she would purposely present her big belly to offend her. The bigger Hagar's belly grew, the bigger her pride became. Thus, the harmonious family life was drastically disrupted. Sarai was offended and accused Abram of being to blame for everything: "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. May the Lord judge between you and me." Then Sarai wanted to teach Hagar a lesson and humiliate her. Hagar then ran away with the child in her womb. The family was broken and Hagar almost died of thirst in the desert.

This story shows us that the consequences of human actions often bring unforeseen and unsolvable problems. Instead of peace and love, Abram's family suddenly had many relationship problems, distrust, envy, conflict and many tears. But how could this problem be solved? Abram could not solve this problem with his own strength. God Himself intervened and sent His angel to Hagar. The angel said to her, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" The angel showed her that in her ego obsession, she had forgotten who she was and had lost her purpose in life. He told her to humble herself and return to Sarai. He also gave her a great promise concerning her descendant. God knew that Hagar's problem was her pride. Therefore, He commanded her to

return to her mistress and humble herself under her hand. Repentance is the only way an unsolvable human situation can be resolved. When Hagar repented and humbled herself, Abram's family was restored. Above all, Hagar was able to come to know God through this incident. She confessed, "You are the God who sees me." She realized that God is also her personal God who sees her, who knows her situation intimately, and who gives her right direction. So Hagar returned to Abram's family and gave birth to Ishmael when he was 86 years old.

Here we see that God is a good shepherd who carefully attended to Abram's human concerns. Although Abram had made a mistake and put himself in an unsolvable situation, God did not rebuke him. Rather, God worked in Hagar that she might know God's love for her and repent. God is a God who sees us. He also cares best for our sufferings and difficulties. That is why David testified in Psalm 121: "The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand." Let us give thanks to God, who knows us best and cares for us like a good shepherd.

## **2. God changed the name of Abram to Abraham (17:1-27)**

Let's look at 17:1: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." Between the last verse of chapter 16 and the first verse of chapter 17, 13 years passed. It was a time when Abram took a break spiritually. He was probably doing well on the outside. Ishmael had already grown into a teenager. Abram was living contentedly. But God was not satisfied. God realized that Abram was in a great crisis because he was no longer living with the promise of God, but was living a self-centered and self-indulgent family life.

The greatest danger in the life of faith does not come through afflictions, but when all our desires are fulfilled. After a young man successfully completes his studies, finds a

job and starts a family, he becomes complacent and no longer fights a spiritual battle. He thinks that his life of faith is OK because God has blessed him. But in reality, he is in a spiritual crisis because he has lost God's promise. Especially in the Western world, there is a great danger of living a comfortable and complacent life of faith and losing sight of the great purpose of God.

How did God help Abram when he found himself in a serious spiritual crisis after 13 years? Let's read verse 1 together, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." Until now, God had never rebuked Abram. But now he seriously rebuked Abram, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." God reminded Abram of who He is and admonished him to live a blameless i.e. perfect life before Him. Abram was to repent of his unbelief, renew God's promise, and return to God's mission. When Abram heard these words, he fell on his face.

"I am God Almighty" says that with God no thing is impossible. Until then, Abram thought that it was impossible that Sarai with her snow-white hair could still get pregnant. But the Creator of the universe could still give Sarai a son even in her old age. At the time of communism, it seemed unthinkable to send a single missionary to the then USSR. Many laughed at us because of this prayer topic. But God Almighty opened the Iron Curtain and brought about a time of Christ. Mark 11:22 says, "Have faith in God!"

"Walk before me and be blameless" does not mean that Abram would never commit a sin again. Rather, it means that he would consecrate his life wholly and completely to the Lord. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." God exhorted Abram to return to his calling and mission.

Finally, God announced to him that He would make a covenant with him. Verse 2 says, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." It is the unilateral grace of God that He establishes a covenant. This covenant was not just for Abram, but it was an "everlasting" covenant that would include all of his countless descendants.

What was the content of this covenant? Let's read verses 4 through 6: "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." At the beginning of his life of faith, God promised Abram, "You will be a blessing." Now he became more specific: "a father of many nations." Later, the expression "a kingdom of priests" also had its roots in God's promise to Abram. Through these verses, above all, we can know God's great vision. Abram was content to live as a noble father. He was happy to have a son and to be respected by those around him. But God's will for him was to become a father of many nations, who would serve all the people on earth and even produce many kings. Abram just wanted to be a good person, but God wanted him to become a great and influential person.

God also has a great vision for each of us. God does not want us to remain stuck in a petty and self-indulgent life, but to take up His great vision and be used as sources of blessing and as fathers and mothers to many nations. God wants to pasture through each of us 12 students this winter term. He wants to spiritually reawaken Germany and Europe through us. 500 years ago, Germany was the starting point for the Reformation, giving the Bible back to the people. God still has a great hope for Germany that we can be used as a blessing and as a shepherd nation for the world mission, even to the M-world.

Let's look at verse 5: "No longer will you be called Abram ; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations." God changed the name of Abram to Abraham. A person's name represents his personality and identity. Abram means "noble father," but Abraham means "father of many nations." God wanted to change Abraham, that he would put on a new inwardness and a new identity. He was no longer to live fixated only on his own life, but to become a father and blessing to countless people, even to whole nations, as a man of mission. Such a life of mission involves pain and dedication. But God wanted to make Abraham great, just as the first commandment says: "Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth."

For most people, it is important to live their own lives happily and contentedly. Many believers also live with such a petit-bourgeois desire. But God does not want us to live like a house cat in our own 4 walls, but to make our horizons wide and grow into great trees that produce countless fruits. With the great vision of God, the servant of God went on an exploratory trip to Turkey. With this great vision, he also mobilizes the next generation on the international level so that they grow into global spiritual leaders.

Let us consider verses 7 and 8. "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." God's goal was to become the God of Abraham and of all his descendants. In other words, God wanted to restore the destroyed order of creation in Abraham's descendants. God wants all people and all creatures to honor God, to esteem Him, to love Him and to obey Him. God also wants the people of Germany and Europe to acknowledge him as God, to live a blessed, happy and influential life as his people.

In verses 9 to 14 God describes the sign of the covenant, namely circumcision. Let us read verses 10 and 11: "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. " Circumcision is an identity-forming sign of belonging to the people of God. The prophets of Israel always made it clear that circumcision is not just an outward sign, but that it is about the circumcision of the heart. The fact that even the servants were to be circumcised shows that God does not exclude anyone, but has included all people in His plan of redemption. God does not want believers to become worldly, but all worldly-minded people to become believers.

Consider verses 15 and 16: "God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." The name Sarai means "princess," but Sarah, according to this verse, means "mother of many nations." In other words, Sarai should no longer live as an ordinary woman, but as a woman who can serve all people of all nations. She was to be a spiritually minded co-worker who carries all nations in her heart. Moreover, God promised to give her a son who would be the bearer of God's promise.

How did Abraham respond to this great promise of God? In verses 17 and 18, we learn that he laughed at it because he thought it was impossible. He just looked at his own age of 100 years and that Sarah was already 90 years old. Then he said, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Abraham was satisfied with his life so far and only wanted his son Ishmael to grow up healthy. But God did not accept this excuse from Abraham. God told him plainly, "Yes," and added, "but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an ever-

lasting covenant for his descendants after him." God's plan was clear. He was willing to give Ishmael worldly blessings as well, but spiritual blessings were to flow through Isaac alone. God did not allow a compromise, but helped Abraham to believe and live with the great promise of God.

We learn here how to look at our sheep or children. They are not just one person, but a whole people. Even if they sometimes live self-centered or visionless lives, we may strengthen and encourage them with the promise of God that they will be used as fathers and mothers of faith for many peoples on earth.

Olaf is a great people of God. God has given him victory in his studies. Now he is helping him to take up God's great hope and vision for his life, which is to take up God's calling. Even God has used him preciously this morning as a minister of God's word. Joshua is a general of faith who lives with Joshua 1:6-9. Through the community of life, he learns to deny himself and obey God. Through lecture preparation, he learns to speak with power, joy, and confidence and to be used as a shepherd and leader for his fellow students. Sarah is an influential mother of faith who lives with God's promise Genesis 17:15, 16 and suffers with joy along with Jesus.

Let's look at Abraham's response. In fact, Abraham repented and accepted God's promise anew. How long did he consider whether to accept the promise? That very day he performed circumcision on himself, on his son Ishmael, and on all the servants in his household. Circumcision was a painful surgery. But he was determined to bear this pain and thus raise up the obedience of faith in himself and also in his whole family. Abraham entered into the covenant of God decisively and without hesitation. Thus he was changed from an ordinary father Abram to an Abraham, a father to many nations.

In this lesson we learn not to live a self-satisfied life with the human solution, which is meaningless in God's eyes. God desires

that we hold on to God's great vision and promise for our lives by living as shepherds, Bible teachers and spiritual leaders for spiritual revival in Germany and Europe and to the ends of the earth. Through one-to-one Bible study, we may help young people see God's vision and live a life with God's promise, namely as fathers and mothers of many nations. May the Lord use us to bring His covenant of grace to all peoples.