



BEGINNINGS

A Study of the Book of Genesis

Sanctuary Bible Studies – Woodbury Lutheran Church

Session 13, "The Mark of the Covenant" (Genesis 17)

Chapter 16 ended with the birth of Ishmael, the son of Abram and Sarai's servant girl, Hagar. Sarai and Abram had taken the fulfilling of God's covenant into their own hands, using Hagar as a surrogate mother to gain a child. Thirteen years pass between Chapters 16 and 17. God is silent for these years, leaving Abram and Sarai to wonder if Ishmael was the child through whom their descendants would be blessed. Then, when Abram was ninety-nine, God broke the silence, renewing the covenant and requiring Abram to wear a sign of the covenant on his body.

1. EL SHADDAI PUTS THE HA IN ABRAHAM (17:1-8)

- In vss. 1-2 the LORD uses the name "El Shaddai" (God Almighty, literally, God of the Mountain) to identify Himself. The name denotes the power God has to accomplish His promises and act in His people's behalf. It serves here also as a motivation for Abram to be blameless before God. God reminds Abram of his dependence on Him and then confirms the covenant made earlier. The covenant in Chapter 15 focused on the land Abram would receive. Here the focus is on increasing the number of Abram's descendants. Nine times in this chapter the phrase "my covenant" is used by God.
- In vs. 3, Abram shows his submission before God by falling prostrate on the ground. God promises that Abram will be "the father of many nations," renaming him accordingly as Abraham. Abram in Hebrew means "exalted father." Abraham means "father of many." The new name signifies the extended covenant and Abraham's living under the covenant's promises. God gives Abraham several promises in vss. 4-8:
 - Vs. 4, "You will be the father of many nations."
 - Vs. 5, "I will make you very fruitful."
 - Vs. 6, "I will make nations of you."
 - Vs. 6, "Kings will come from you." This is a new aspect of the covenant to be fulfilled in the line of Judah from whom Israel's kings would come and ultimately in Jesus the Messiah and His followers. See Gen 49:8-12; Rom 4:16-18, 15:8-12; Gal 3:29.
 - Vs. 7, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants..."
 - Vs. 8 "The whole land of Canaan...I will give you as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you."
 - In both vss. 7 and 8 God promises to be the God of Abraham and his descendants.
- Note that in vss. 7-8 the covenant is twice described as "everlasting." The word is not lost on those who see the land of Israel as a lasting gift of God to the Jewish nation.

2. ABRAHAM'S FAMILY WEARS THE COVENANT (17:9-15, 23-27)

- Circumcision is instituted here for all males in Abraham's household and for all of his male descendants. Circumcision was practiced by other nations (Jer 9:25-26; Ezek 32:18-19). It involved the cutting away of the foreskin of the penis and is still practiced today, but not without differing views as to its benefits. Here, however, it was to be practiced for these specific covenant reasons:
 - As an act of obedience to El Shaddai;
 - As a "sign of the covenant" worn by its recipients, revealing a heart that is right with God (See Romans 2:25-29; 4:9-12);
 - As a consecration of the male "seed" for God's purposes
 - As a warning that the disobedient would be "cut off" from God's promises (a self-maledictory oath)
- The command to circumcise future generations on the 8th day was common practice among faithful Jews at the time of Jesus, who Himself was circumcised accordingly and named as well (Lk 2:21).
- In vss. 23-27 ("On that very day..."), Abraham continues his practice of immediate obedience to a command of God. He and the males of his household, including Ishmael, now a teenager, are circumcised. Islam today goes back to Abraham for its practice of male circumcision. As Christians, Baptism replaces circumcision as a mark of the covenant (Galatians 3:26-29).
- In the early church, circumcision became the first conflict point between Jewish and Gentile believers. The circumcision party said one had to be circumcised to be a Christian. The opposition said God's grace in Jesus Christ, not circumcision, saved them. See Galatians 5:1-15, Titus 1:10-11, and Acts 15 for a glimpse at the controversy.

3. SARAH AND ISHMAEL (vss. 15-19)

- In vss. 15-16 God changes Sarai's name to Sarah. Though both names carry the root meaning of "Princess," her new name marks the extended covenant given here and emphasizes her as the mother of future kings (vs.16). What catches Abraham's attention, though, even to the point of laughter, is God's promise that He will bless Abraham and Sarah with a son.
- Vs. 17 gives us Abraham's ironic laughter, foreshadowing the very name he would give his son, Isaac, which means laughter. Note that God does not reprimand Abraham for laughing, perhaps recognizing the value of his laughter as a tool for teaching. Abraham's words show his laughter to be rooted in the incredible nature of the promise.
- Vss. 18-22: Abraham clearly loved his son, Ishmael. His "If only..." wish for Ishmael in vs. 18 is answered graciously by God who promises Ishmael many descendants and a great nation of twelve rulers. This promise, first given to Sarah, is fulfilled in 25:12-18. God makes clear, though, that it will not be the son of Hagar but the son of Sarah who will be the child of the covenant of promise with Abraham.

BEGINNINGS

1. The silence of God does not mean the end of God's promises.
2. God cherishes our obedience as a sign of where our heart is. (Deut 10:16).
3. We are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ not by obedience to the law.
4. God often picks up laughter as a teachable moment.

