

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study – Genesis 16-17

Read Genesis 16:1-16

God had promised Abram a great number of descendants, but Sarai was still childless. What was her plan to rectify that situation? Why do you think she made up this plan?

- gave her maidservant Hagar to Abram to be his wife; wanted to try to build a family through Hagar
- perhaps felt that God was taking too long to fulfill His promises – had been 10 years since they left Haran by this point
- was socially acceptable at the time to build a family through a slave (cf. offspring of Jacob in Genesis 30-31)
 - may have thought that this could be the way God would fulfill His promise to Abram – had not been made clear to this point that it would be through Sarai

-Why did Sarai blame Abram after Hagar conceived, even though it had been her suggestion? How did Abram respond, and how do you think God would judge between them?

- on Sarai's part, easier to blame someone else than to take responsibility for your own actions
- but Abram's dealings not ideal either – had agreed readily, without inquiring of God, it seems
 - failed to see the strife that would result; perhaps failed to protect Sarai from a bad decision by overriding her decision in the first place
 - God's design was for 1 man-1 woman (e.g. Matt 19); also, that the son of the promise would come from Sarah herself (17:19)
 - failed to protect Hagar (now his 2nd wife) and the son he had fathered; opened them for abuse at Sarai's hands

-How & why does God's promise regarding Ishmael (16:9-12) differ from His promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3,7? (You might also consider Genesis 17:18-21)

- promises numerous descendants, but no land and not the same blessing that Abram had (bless those who bless, etc.)
- in fact, Ishmael to be a wild donkey of a man, living at enmity with all his brothers
- God's covenant promises to Abram to flow through Isaac, not Ishmael

-What do we learn about God from His dealings with Hagar and Ishmael in this passage?

- He is a merciful and compassionate God who sees misery and suffering
 - Hagar for her part responded in faith by returning to her mistress
- a God of order – commanded Hagar to return and submit to her mistress
- He is faithful to His promises – Ishmael blessed on account of God's promise to Abram, even though he is not the one to inherit God's covenant with Abram
- He is sovereign – is free to choose whom He will bless, and how (cf. Romans 9:6-13) – not based on Ishmael or Isaac's works, as neither had yet been born – points to the nature of our election, also not by works, but by His sovereign choice

God's word in Genesis 16:9-12 regarding Ishmael and his descendants began to be fulfilled within Ishmael's own lifetime (Genesis 25:12-18) and continues to be fulfilled to this day in the Arab nations, who claim to be descended from Ishmael.

Read Genesis 17:1-27

Genesis 17:1 marks the first use of the name, 'El Shaddai' (God Almighty) in the Bible.

-In v.2, God says He will confirm His covenant with Abram. What is a covenant? (Review Genesis 15:1-21)

- covenant was the most binding/unbreakable of agreements → punishment for breaking a covenant was death
 - established blessings for keeping the covenant; curses for breaking it
 - establishing a covenant required shedding of blood, symbolizing the death of the covenant-breaker, i.e. testifying to the curse/punishment that would fall on the one who broke the covenant (Heb 9:16-21 → implications for the New Covenant)
- animals killed & cut in half; parties making the covenant would walk together through the pieces
 - parties were saying, in effect, "May what has been done to these animals be done to me, if I break this covenant"

-What was the covenant that God made with Abram in Genesis 15? How does He expand on this covenant in Genesis 17:1-8?

- God promised in Genesis 15 to make Abram's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and to give them the land of Canaan
- in Genesis, again confirms the promise of many descendants and of the land as their everlasting possession
- but expands by saying that the covenant he establishes will be an everlasting one that includes Abraham's descendants
 - also, he will father many nations (not just 1) and kings as well

-For his part, what did God demand of Abraham?

- to walk before Him and be blameless (v.1)
- to circumcise himself and all other males in his household, for the generations to come (v.9ff)

-Why did God rename Abram and Sarai?

- points to new identity under the covenant → Abram means 'exalted father'; Abraham means 'father of many' – reflects promise made to him by God and perhaps a reminder to Abraham himself of God's promise
- Sarai and Sarah both mean 'princess' – also included in new identity under the covenant
- kings would come from her, thus her name is appropriate (17:16)
- new identity symbolized also in circumcision – cutting off of the old

-What is circumcision, and what does it signify? Did being circumcised automatically set a person in right relationship with God as one of His covenant people? (consider also Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4 & 9:25-26; Romans 2:28-29; Colossians 2:9-12; Romans 4:1-3,9-12)

- circumcision = cutting off of the foreskin from the penis
- circumcision practiced by other nations at time of Abraham, but not by Canaanites; generally used as a rite of passage to manhood
- given new meaning in God's covenant with Abraham → administered at 8 days of age, not at puberty
- circumcision is the sign/seal of the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and confirmed in Genesis 17 (17:11, Rom 4:11)
- not a new covenant, but a permanent sign of the covenant in Abraham's body → a permanent reminder to Abraham & his offspring
- part of the same covenant; had to be obeyed by Abraham & his descendants; their disobedience would cut them off from participating in God's promises, but would not derail His fulfillment of His promises
- He alone passed through the pieces in Gen 15 → would bear upon Himself the curse of covenant-breaking → points forward to work of Jesus Christ on the Cross

- circumcision not meant only to be an outward/physical sign, but also to point to the need for inner purification/cleansing
- i.e. a cutting off of the sinful nature → i.e. "circumcision of the heart" (Deut 10:16, Jer 4:4 & 9:25-26; Rom 2:28-29)
- an "outward sign of cleansing [that] symbolized the inner purification necessary for a life of obedience and love to God." (O. Palmer Robertson)
- the true circumcision that God seeks is the circumcision of the heart
- a seal of the righteousness that comes **by faith** (Rom 4:9-12); not a work required for salvation, but an outward sign of an internal reality

- circumcision not just a 'badge of national membership'; thus, being circumcised did not automatically set someone in right relationship to God
- God looking for those who were of circumcised hearts → condemned those who were only circumcised in the flesh but not in heart (Jer 4:4 & 9:25-26)

- in the NT, circumcision linked with baptism → the circumcision done by Christ on the Cross → putting off of the sinful nature
- baptism similarly not a work required for salvation, but an outward sign of an inward reality (of cleansing, purification)

-What did God tell Abraham with respect to his offspring in v.15-21? How did Abraham respond? (see also Romans 4:18-21)

- God promised that Sarah would have a son, through who would inherit the promises of the covenant
- Ishmael would be blessed with numerous descendants and nations, but the covenant would be made with Isaac and his line, not through Ishmael
- again demonstrates God's sovereignty in choosing

- Abraham responded with surprise (laughed), but in faith → did not waver through unbelief, but was fully persuaded that God could do as He promised (Rom 4:18-21)
- faith demonstrated by fact that he circumcised himself and all males in his household "that very day"

Aliens and strangers in the world

Circumcision was given to Abraham and his descendants as a sign of the covenant that God made with him. It would be a permanent reminder to him and his descendants after him of the promises God made to Abraham. Those who rejected this sign were therefore rejecting the promises of God and so were cutting themselves off from His blessing. Yet, from the beginning, circumcision was meant not only to be an external sign and a 'badge of national membership', but was meant to point to a greater spiritual reality – to the need for the inner purification and cleansing necessary for a life of obedience to God. Hence, circumcision was not meant to be only outwardly, but a 'circumcision of the heart', a cutting off of the old, sinful nature so that we might follow God. Thus, while circumcision marked entry into the community of God's people, those who were circumcised outwardly but whose hearts remained uncircumcised would ultimately face God's judgment rather than His blessing (Jer. 9:25-26). As the apostle Paul writes, "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God." (Rom 2:28-29)

For us who believe in Christ, baptism has superseded circumcision as the sign of the New Covenant. Yet, the same truth remains that the external sign of the covenant has lasting value only for those who have had their hearts circumcised by Christ at the Cross, through the putting off of the old sinful nature (Col. 2:9-12). Though we were once dead in the uncircumcision of our sinful natures, God made us alive with Christ, forgiving all our sins, nailing them to the Cross (Col. 2:13-14). As Abram was given a new identity, so also we who have been raised with Christ have a new identity in Him. And as Abraham responded in obedience, so also must we respond, walking no longer in the ways of the sinful nature, but walking instead in obedience to God. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Col. 3:1-2)