



## **ABRAHAM—THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS**

**Reading: Genesis 16-19**

### **Abram has a Son, Ishmael (Genesis 16)**

God had told Abram that *“he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir”* (Genesis 15:4). Abram believed this implicitly as we have seen, and this faith was counted to him for righteousness (Gen 15:6). However Sarai was barren and she realised that, humanly speaking, it was now impossible for her to bear a son to Abram. Yet God had promised the land to the seed of Abram.

The sorrow and disappointment of being barren finally caused her to seek a solution to this problem. She decided to give her Egyptian handmaid Hagar to Abram that she might bear a child for her. This, she felt, would console her whilst also providing a seed to Abram *“of his own bowels”*. However, rather than bringing joy to Sarai, this scheme brought her bitterness and sorrow, for when Hagar saw that she had conceived she despised Sarai (v5-6). Sarai dealt severely with Hagar and this caused her to flee into the wilderness (v6).

In her distressed state the angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar telling her to return to her mistress and submit to her (v9). The angel comforted her by revealing that God would multiply her seed greatly (v10). She would have a son called Ishmael, meaning “God shall hear” *“because,”* the angel said, *“the Lord hath heard thy affliction”* (v11). In obedience to the angel, Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai and in due time a son was born to her, whom Abram called Ishmael (v15).

God promised Abram that He would bless Ishmael and make him become a great nation (17:20), but that the seed spoken of in the promises would be the child of both Abram and Sarai (17:21). Ishmael became the father of the Arabs. His twelve sons, who became the heads of the Arab tribes (Isaiah 60:6-7), are mentioned in Genesis 25:12-16. Ultimately the Arab peoples will be blessed too, under the rule of Christ in the Kingdom of God.

### **“Thy name shall be Abraham” (Genesis 17:1-8)**

Another 13 years passed and Abram was now 99 years of age when the Lord appeared to him again. This time God spoke further about the covenant that He had made with him (Genesis 15:18). Speaking of the far reaching aspects of this covenant God said, *“I will multiply thee exceedingly”* (v2), and so, *“thou shalt be a father of **many** nations”* (v4). Because the fulfilment of this covenant would incorporate a multitude God said: *“Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham, for a father of many nations have I made thee”* (v5). The name Abram means “lofty, or high father” whereas Abraham means “father of a multitude” of nations.

The significance of the change of his name has a direct relationship to the promise and covenant that God made with Abraham. We see this explained in the following places in the New Testament:

#### **1. Galatians 3: 7-8**

*“Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham”*

Anyone (Jew or Gentile) who shows a faith like Abraham’s is considered by God to belong to Abraham’s family. The family of Abraham is based upon faith and not fleshly descent, because it is a spiritual family.

*“The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen [the Gentiles] through faith”*

The blessing of being “justified” or “counted righteous” as Abraham was (Genesis 15:6 - see Lesson 9), is available to all who show the same faith in God as Abraham did. Gentiles (“the heathen”) and Jews can share in this blessing on the same basis (Galatians 3:27-29).

*“preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed”*

This sentence includes a quotation from Genesis 12:3. The word “Gospel” means “good news”. It is good news for all mankind, both Jew and Gentile. Jesus Christ has made the blessing available to all men. Thus “all nations” can share this hope of righteousness through faith and be reconciled to God through baptism into the Lord Jesus Christ.



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### Lesson 10

Remember that this makes us heirs also of the promises made to Abraham and to his seed (Galatians 3:16, 27-29).

#### 2. Romans 4:16-17

In this chapter, which we considered when looking at Genesis 15:6, we find Genesis 17:5 quoted by Paul.

*“Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, [Jews], but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham [Jew and Gentile]; who is the father of us all [Jew and Gentile].”*

The promise to Abraham was not exclusive to the Jews, but inclusive of all people upon the principle of faith. God’s promise to Abraham was made 430 years before the Law was given to Israel through Moses (Galatians 3:17-18). The Law, which only applied to Jews, did not cancel out the promise, for the Law came to an end at the death of Christ, but the promise of God must still be fulfilled.

*“(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations)”*

By quoting Genesis 17:5 Paul is emphasising the universal nature of the promise. By this change of name from Abram to Abraham, no Jew can boast of his genealogy from Abraham. The change of name shows clearly that people of all races can share in the blessing of the promise in the Gospel.

#### 3. Romans 9:6-9

Here again, Paul shows that being of the lineage of Abraham does not of itself commend a person before God.

***“For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel”***

Simply having one’s name on Abraham’s family tree is not sufficient to be a seed of Abraham. A person must have a different relationship than that of mere flesh.

***“In Isaac shall thy seed be called”***

Abraham had a number of sons, including Ishmael and those listed later in Genesis 25:1-6. However, when God made His promise to Abraham He said specifically, *“In Isaac shall thy seed be called”* (Genesis 21:12). God was making a selection.

***“These are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted for the seed”***

To be considered “children of God” we must become related to the promise of God. We identify ourselves as such through faith, demonstrated by baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:26-29).

Once we appreciate the reason for the change in Abram’s name to Abraham we can see how the promises can be shared by *“many nations”*. Turning back to Genesis 17:7-8, we find that God reaffirms that His covenant is an ***“everlasting covenant”***. When the eternal God declares His covenant an *“everlasting covenant”*, then we can be sure that it will be fulfilled.

#### **Circumcision - the Token of the Covenant (Genesis 17:9-14)**

God, wishing to make a perpetual reminder to the seed of Abraham that this covenant had been made with Abraham, introduced a “token” or “sign” to remind them of this glorious covenant of hope. Circumcision was to be *“a token of the covenant betwixt me and you”* (v11). *“Every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger”* was to be circumcised (v12). Circumcision was a token of the covenant to Abraham’s literal descendants, as well as to those strangers who were joined to his family. It was a vivid reminder that God’s promise was not to be fulfilled by man’s “fleshly” power, but by the power of the Almighty God.

#### **Circumcision - A Sign of Baptism**

Paul shows that circumcision pointed forward to baptism into Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:11-13). We recall that through baptism into Christ a person becomes an heir of the promises made to



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## **EXPLORING THE BIBLE**

### **Lesson 10**

Abraham (Galatians 3:27-29). Baptism now replaces the rite of circumcision. As we have indicated, circumcision was a reminder that man's fleshly desires and powers must be forsaken. In baptism too, we demonstrate that we are putting away the things associated with the flesh (Colossians 2:11-13; Galatians 5:16-25).

#### **Sarai's Name is Changed to Sarah (Genesis 17:15-16)**

Not only was Abram's name changed to Abraham, to incorporate the idea of the great promises that God had made to him, but Sarai's name was also changed to Sarah, meaning "princess", thus elevating her role, for she was to be the mother of the nations of which Abraham was to be the father.

#### **Angels Visit Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18)**

This chapter tells of the visit of three messengers from God. Notice that, whereas three "men" (v2) came to Abraham, it is soon apparent that they were angels (Genesis 19:1; cp 18:17). We can picture the happy domestic scene as Abraham and Sarah show hospitality to their visitors. There is a lesson here for all who would follow their example (Hebrews 13:2).

These angels repeat to Abraham the message that he and Sarah would have a son. "*Sarah laughed within herself saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also*" (v12). To her it seemed impossible, and humanly speaking it was impossible (v 11).

Peter, in referring to this incident, highlights the fact that Sarah called Abraham her "lord", and makes the point that all true "daughters" of Sarah will likewise acknowledge their faithful husbands as their 'lords', being in submission to them (1 Peter 3:5-7). This God-given instruction is ridiculed by society today. This is partly because the 'lordship' that husbands are called upon to exhibit is not understood. It is not male domination, but a loving and caring protection and service for his wife, after the example demonstrated by the Lord Jesus Christ for his followers (Mark 10:42-45; John 13:13-15; Ephesians 5:22-29).

Although, for the moment Sarah doubted, the angel answered her saying, "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" (v14) In due time, according to the word of God, a son was born to Abraham and Sarah whom Abraham called Isaac (Genesis 21:1-7). Paul comments that "*through faith Sarah received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age*" (Hebrews 11:11-12).

#### **The Destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19)**

After delivering their happy message to Abraham and Sarah, two of the angelic messengers continued their journey toward Sodom (v22; 19:1). One remained to warn Abraham of God's impending judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham was distressed because of Lot and his family and pleaded that God spare the righteous. "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (v 23). The angel agreed that if there were ten righteous in the city then he would not destroy it (v23-33).

When the two angels arrived at Sodom, Lot prevailed upon them to take shelter and rest in his home. As we read through the account of the night's activities we realise the utter wickedness of that city (v4-11), and understand why God's judgments were to be poured out upon its inhabitants. The angels warned Lot to take his family from the city immediately. Lot pleaded with his family, but they would not listen (v12-14).

When morning came, the angels urged Lot, his wife and two daughters to flee the city, and told them not to look back. "*Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven* (v 24). Lot's wife looked back, for her heart was still with the people of that wicked city. So she was caught up in their fate and became a pillar of salt (v26). The destruction of those cities was absolute. It is believed that the geophysical destruction caused the depression of the Dead Sea and its sterile surrounds, and that Sodom and Gomorrah are now beneath the southern end of the Dead Sea.

#### **The Lessons of Sodom's Destruction**

The lessons from the destruction of that wicked generation are referred to throughout the Bible.



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### Lesson 10

- **Jesus Christ** said that widespread base immorality similar to that of Sodom would be one of the signs indicating the nearness of his return (Luke 17:28-32). How accurately these words are being fulfilled before us today, with many governments legalising such depraved behaviour. He warned us to remember Lot's wife and not have our hearts caught up with the pursuits of this evil world.
- **The apostle Peter** used the example of God's judgment upon Sodom as a guarantee that such ungodliness will not go unpunished (2 Peter 2:6-9; Jude 7).
- **The prophet Ezekiel** in rebuking his people, paralleled the wicked state that had developed in Israel with the vile conduct of Sodom. He lists the sins of Sodom (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

#### Summary Points

1. Abram's name was changed to Abraham (**Genesis 17:1-8**). In so doing God said to him: "*Thou shalt be a father of many nations*".
2. Circumcision was given as a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham (**Genesis 17:9-14**). Paul shows that circumcision pointed forward to baptism (**Colossians 2:11-13**), by which we become part of the seed of Abraham (**Galatians 3:26-29**).
3. Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. He was the one through whom the seed should come (**Genesis 21:12**).
4. The account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in **Genesis 18-19** carries the sober warning of impending judgment upon this evil generation today (**Luke 17:28-32**).

#### Lesson 10 - Questions

1. What was the name of the son that Abraham had by Hagar?
2. Why did God change Abram's name to Abraham?
3. The Gospel was preached to Abraham in these words, "*In thee shall all nations be blessed*" (Galatians 3:8). What do we learn from this?
4. How can we become part of Abraham's "seed"?
5. Circumcision was a "token" of the covenant that God made with Abraham. What did circumcision point forward to for believers today?
6. Sodom's wickedness brought utter destruction on that city. What lesson did Jesus teach from this event?