



## Lesson 11

## Ishmael and the Promise of Isaac (16:1-8)

In the last lesson we saw how Abram believed the promise God made to him – that he would have a son and through this son would come many descendants.

However Sarai, Abram's wife, was barren and she decided to take matters into her own hands. She had a servant, an Egyptian called Hagar, who she wanted to give to Abram as a second wife. Instead of patiently waiting for God to show him how he would father a son, Abram listened to his wife and did as she asked.

In this he was like Adam who listened to his wife rather than to God and as a consequence, sin and death came into the world. Because Abram listened to Sarai, trouble came into their family.

Abram is one of the great men of the Old Testament, a man who God chose to be an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, like all of us, his faith failed at times and he tried to work out his life without God and so he had to learn some hard lessons.

### **Hagar runs away (16:7-15)**

When Hagar became pregnant, she despised her mistress and Sarai treated her badly so that Hagar ran away. However, an angel appeared to her and comforted her and told her that she would have a son, Ishmael. So she returned to Sarai. Abram was 86 years old when this happened and another 13 years passed before God spoke to him again. During this time not only was Sarai barren but Abram became impotent and so he learned the hard lesson that the fulfilment of God's promises would not happen through any strength or ability he had but only through the mighty power of God.

## **God appears to Abram (17:1-14)**

When Abram was 99 years old, God appeared to him and said:

"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Genesis 17:1-2

Abram's response to this was remarkable, he '*fell on his face*' before God. This was a complete humbling of himself before Almighty God; it was an acceptance that he was totally reliant on God's power to fulfil the promise of a son. God promised that he would have many descendants – he would be 'multiplied' and as a reminder of this, his name was changed from Abram to Abraham which means 'father of a multitude'.

God now makes His fourth promise to Abraham and we can summarise it like this.

## PROMISE 4

1. You will have many descendants.
  2. You will be the father of many nations.
  3. Because of these things your name will be changed to Abraham.
  4. Some of your descendants will be kings over these nations.
  5. This covenant will be an everlasting one with your descendants forever.
  6. I will give you and your descendants the land of Canaan forever.

## The Sign of Circumcision

The things that God said to Abraham were not just promises. They are described as a covenant, a solemn binding agreement between God and the man. Abraham's part of the covenant was that he had to believe what God said with all his heart and also be circumcised. Circumcision was an acceptance by Abraham that what God had promised could never be accomplished by Abraham's natural ability to father children. The Apostle Paul described Abraham's response in these words.



"He (Abraham) did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." Romans 4:19-22

Circumcision became a sign of belief in God's promises for all of Abraham's descendants, the Jews. However it is not necessary for disciples of Jesus. Instead God asks us to do something else to show our belief in His son. He asks us to be baptized. For Abraham, circumcision was a sign that he did not have the power to father a son and so fulfil God's promises; he was totally dependent on God. For us, baptism is a sign that we do not have the power to save ourselves from sin. We are totally dependent on the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ to save us so that we too can have the promise of life in God's kingdom to come. When we are baptized, we acknowledge to God our belief in these things.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his... Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." Romans 6:3-8

So strong was Abraham's faith in what God promised him that he took Ishmael and every man who worked for him and circumcised them that same day. He did not hesitate at all. This would leave his whole household vulnerable and at risk from robbers while the men recovered from the operation but Abraham trusted that God would look after them all.

Not only did God change the name of Abraham, his wife's name was also changed – from Sarai to Sarah. Abraham was told that she would be the one (not Hagar) who would bear the promised son. Abraham's response is remarkable. Once again '*he fell upon his face*' in total submission to God. He laughed inwardly, rejoicing that God's mighty power could give a baby son to a man of 100 and a woman of 91.

God now makes another, fifth, promise to Abraham.

#### PROMISE 5

1. Sarah will bear Abraham a son at the same time next year.
2. The son will be called Isaac (the name means 'laughter').
3. God will establish His covenant with Isaac forever.
4. God's promises will be fulfilled through the descendants of Isaac.
5. Ishmael's descendants will also become a great nation but they will not be God's special, promised people (see Genesis 17:20).

#### SUMMARY

In this lesson we have learned the following key points.

- Only when Abraham realised that there was no natural way for Sarah and him to have a son did he fully turn to God and believe that God would make it happen.
- God tells them the son they will have will be called Isaac, he will be the one with whom God will work.
- Abraham believes and immediately has all the men of his household circumcised as a sign of submission to God.

