
Day 6 - January 6

Period of the Patriarchs (2100 -1525 BCE)

God's Covenant with Abram

Birth of Ishmael through Hagar

Names and Circumcision as Signs of Covenant

Readings: *Genesis 15:1-17:27*

Reflections:

- Genesis 15 starts with the Lord saying a simple statement to Abram that is rich with meaning:
 - “Do not be afraid...” God speaks into the basic human condition of fear.
 - “Abram” - he knows us each by name (see John 10)
 - “I am your shield” - protection from all danger
 - “Your very great reward” - provision for all need
- Abram's question makes all the sense in the world. What can God do when he is so old and has no children? An impossible situation. We can see Abram is already beginning to plan an alternate way to carry on some sense of lineage apart from the crazy promise God had given him. Look at the next line. Basically you will have your own son and then...”Look up, at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.” Complete and utter insanity! But what does Abram do? This isn't just a promise of a miraculous child but also of a nation. “Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Notice that Abram's sin was covered under God's mercy (as we will see this is because of Christ) because Abram believed what God said, even though it was humanly impossible and basically crazy talk.
- God goes on to say he will give him the land again and Abram asks how is this going to happen. It is interesting that true faith in what God says doesn't mean you aren't allowed to ask questions.
- God responds with a command that again probably catches Abram off guard. It was a command to get ready to make a covenant. It was a life and death covenant of cutting these animals and birds in half and then normally the two people entering into the life

and death covenant would walk through the halves to swear to each other on their lives that they would keep the covenant. God asks Abram to get ready to do this.

- The description of Abram falling into a deep and dark sleep means that he was entering into a deep place before God. God doesn't really answer Abram's question but simply tells him more about God's plan for the nation that will be his descendents. It isn't uncommon for God not to answer our questions but instead simply tells more of what he is planning to do. He knows exactly what we need to know for us to be found faithful to him.
- The text states, "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." This will be repeated in the future. God's judgment of sin against a nation is revealed when sin has reached a point of complete domination and control of a culture. In this culture was widespread gluttony, orgies, human sacrifice, and brutalization of slaves. It was a culture of complete self-indulgence and hatred of others. These are the marks of a culture that has been engulfed in sin. When a culture is consumed this way, God will judge and wipe them out. This is important to note because people often ask why God was a God of war in the Old Testament but a God of peace and love in the New Testament. God still judges this way. But he revealed in Christ the depth of this love and mercy. So in Christ we should not expect nations that reach the fullness of sin will not be judged. The wonderful thing is that because of the impact of Christ, much of the world is no longer anywhere near this type of rampant sin. Christianity has wiped out most forms of slavery and human sacrifice. It remains in some places but in very limited ways.
- Now here is the most important part of the story. When God makes his covenant with Abram only God makes the covenant. Abram does nothing. God does it all. Here we see clearly the grace of God. God takes all the responsibility to deal with our sin, to deal with our salvation. We are simply recipients of his grace. What does Abram have to do? Simply believe and trust God. Nothing more! Isn't that awesome? This is just like God reminding himself through the rainbow.
- Unfortunately, under Sarai's suggestion, Abram immediately fails. Ishmael is conceived and born as a human attempt to complete God's promise. Now, Ishmael is a mixed blessing. Hagar runs away, but God does not reject her. He wants to still bless her and the baby even though it is going to cause challenges down the road.
- We see a connection to submission, obedience and promise in the Lord's statement to Hagar "Go back to your mistress and submit to her. I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." The same blessing as was given to Abram for Isaac. So God remains a God of incredible grace although he points out that now the tensions and hostilities will be there for good.
- Now remember, this is all about life apart from Christ. In Christ, we have both God's grace and the power to fully redeem our sin so that we should not fear lasting "curses."

Not that you should willfully choose to create an Ishmael. Yet if you do, it is reassuring to know God can redeem it.

- In terms of Abram being covered by Christ, we will see after Jesus comes, his death covered all past, present and future sins. Animal sacrifices never accomplished anything but were merely symbolic. So, Christ died once for all...including Abram. So in this way, Abram as the first father of Israel lived according to faith not according to law. He had no law to follow. Just faith! That is where God begins and ends.
- It is interesting how many times God has to reaffirm and restate this promise to Abram. It seems that God speaks multiple times on the same basic issue when it is rooted in craziness. God knows his ways are not of the norm and therefore he works with Abram to reassure him repeatedly. Each time God speaks he gives a bit more. In this case, God makes it clear that walking in righteousness is primarily walking in faith and believing for the promise. No other real commands or expectations have been placed on him.
- Abram (meaning: father) has his name changed to Abraham (meaning: father of many) signifying a change to his core identity. Names are more than just tags in the Bible. They are a symbol of the real you. This is why Jesus changes the names of his key disciples and Saul became Paul. Name changes represent the real you.
- Now about circumcision. Circumcision proves the text of the Old Testament was not inspired by men for men. Circumcision is without doubt one of the most fearful and painful things an adult male could go through. Being in covenant means surrendering the most private, vulnerable part of you, the life creating part, the intimate part, and then allowing God to cut away the sinful aspect, even as painful and difficult as that is. Once this has happened, then you are marked as holy. Holiness is not you living a morally perfect life at this point. It is simply being set apart by God and for God. It is what is done for you. You don't do anything. It is pure grace (although at this point it is painful grace.) Also, it is just the men, on behalf of the household, who are circumcised. In this way, men lead the way and go first and need to lay their lives down for their household.
- In Christ, circumcision of the heart is required, for both male and female. The outward sign takes on inner life meaning. In Christ, we are set apart by him for him. We don't do it to ourselves but he does it as a sign of grace. A gift. Nothing we need to strive or struggle for. Pure grace (although sometimes painful grace).
- Sarai means princess (like little princess for a little girl) and her name is changed to Sarah (a more dignified, adult version of princess). This signifies her authority and maturity as a mother to a great nation.
- Abraham laughs in faith and joy when he hears the promise again. It is interesting that Abraham and Sarah are contrasted. Both laugh but one laughs in joy (snickering, giggling) and the other in disbelief (more of a scoffing laugh). This is an intentional contrast between two kinds of hearts.

- Now Abraham still pleads for his other son, for his blessing. Abraham still loves Ishmael. God is not angry with Abraham but simply affirms that Ishmael is blessed too, but the promise of a nation is through Isaac and Sarah.
- As God speaks again, he gives more information, dates, as well as how it will work with twelve rulers coming through Ishmael's line to parallel the twelve tribes. Now for the parallels, Ishmael and his descendents will always cause problems for Isaac's descendents so this competition and battling shows the power and the effect of our faith-less choices impacting us when we are trying to walk by faith. Here we see God is giving the information Abraham needs to be found faithful.
- The great thing in Christ is that we have the power of God's grace in more fullness to redeem our faith-less choices to an even greater extent as God works all things for the good of him or her who loves God and is called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)
- So all the males are circumcised. I am not surprised Ishmael gets a bit angry in later years when he has to be circumcised at thirteen. Ouch! Not a great father-son bonding experience. But obedience back then as well as now can be painful. The key is to submit to God and know his will.
- Final thought. Abraham would have always viewed a true descendent as coming from his Sarai. The other was culturally a compromise. Now, God didn't tell him more from the beginning because from day one it was obviously a miracle and so Abraham was supposed to do nothing but wait. He didn't need any more information than to know that God was going to do this one thing and he was to wait for it. God gives more information to help him along as he struggles, but God expects us to grow in just being able to hear, believe and then act (or wait) appropriately.