

THE LORD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

The Lord has required believers of all dispensations to walk by faith and not by sight. Abram walked by faith when he believed the Lord's promises concerning a land and also posterity (Gen 12:1-3). Genesis 12-14 record the testings of Abram's faith regarding the Lord's promise of a land. In this lesson, (Genesis 15-17), Abram's faith regarding the Lord's promise of a posterity was tested. When Abram questioned how the Lord would fulfill His promise about a posterity, the Lord explicitly promised that he would have a son of his own bowels and his seed would number as many as the stars in the heaven (15:1-5). At that point, Abram believed in the Lord and it was counted to him for righteousness (15:6). Verse six is quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3 and in Galatians 3:6 to prove that salvation is by faith apart from works. After Abram's faith was shown, the Lord unconditionally guaranteed His covenant with Abram by a unique act in which He passed through the pieces of the sacrifice alone (15:8-17). Later, Abram's faith lapsed and both he and Sarai resorted to fleshly means to get an heir. Sarai gave her slave, Hagar, to Abram to produce a son for her, but this was not according to God's plan. It was a worldly plan and the son born through this plan was Ishmael, the father of the Arab nations. Thirteen years later, the Lord reappeared to Abram to reconfirm His covenant. At that time Abram's name was changed to Abraham, which means the father of many nations (17:4-5). The sign of this covenant was to be circumcision (17:9ff). In Romans 4:9-12 Paul used this historical event with Abram's earlier expression of faith to prove that faith must precede the sign: Abraham's salvation came by faith (15:6), not circumcision (17:9ff).

I. Substance of the Covenant — 15:1-21

A. Posterity of the Covenant — 15:1-6

15:1-2 — God condescended to Abram's need and proceeded to secure the covenant for him. The text indicates two clear reasons why God gave Abram this divine encouragement: (1) Abram had been involved in a conflict with the kings of the east in which he had successfully rescued Lot (Gen 14), but now he may have feared retaliation from them, so the Lord encourages him by saying, "Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield"; (2) Abram was deeply concerned about the Lord's promise of a posterity because he still had no heir (15:2). This concern was exposed by the Lord's statement that He was Abram's "exceeding great reward." In other words, the Lord promised Abram that his reward would be very great.

15:2-6 — Abram had begun to think that his heir was going to be his own servant, Eliezer. Nuzu archaeological discoveries indicate that in the 14-15th centuries B.C. childless couples could adopt a servant (or any young man) who would receive their inheritance. In return, the adopted son would care for the childless couple. Nuzu law also indicated that if a child were later born to this couple, the adopted son would have to forfeit the right of inheritance. However, the Lord clearly indicated to Abram that his heir would be his own genetic son ("out of thine own bowels") and not his servant. Then the Lord took Abram out on a cloudless night and gave him a pictorial symbolic lesson by having him look at the stars in the heavens. Then He promised Abram that his posterity would be as many in number as the stars (15:5; Rom 4:18). When that promise was given to him, Abram believed God (15:6; Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; James 2:23). God's plan was not in accordance with reason, nor with human experience, but it had to be accepted by faith.

B. Land of the Covenant — 15:7-21

15:7, 8 — Once more the Lord reminded Abram that He had brought him out of Ur of the Chaldees to inherit the very land in which he was now living, but Abram asked the Lord to give him some assurance of the fulfillment of His promise (cf. Judges 6:17, 36-40; 2 Kings 20:8).

15:9, 10 — Abram divided various animals according to an ancient custom. The sacrificial animals were severed in half and then each party of the covenant would pass between the two halves. This was significant in two ways. First, the parties were united by the bond of a common blood. Second, if either party broke the covenant, it would no longer be valid.

15:11 — Many believe that the birds of prey that came down upon the severed animals foreshadowed the countries that would seek to destroy God's covenant with the seed of Abram before they realized its fulfillment.

15:12-16 — God revealed the nation's future suffering in Egypt. This was symbolized by the birds of prey as well as the "horror of darkness." After 400 years of suffering in Egypt, God would bring them forth to possess the promised land (Ex 12:34-40). God's judicial rightness is manifested here. The sojourn in Egypt not only allowed time for the Israelites to multiply, but it gave time to the Amorites, who possessed the land, to become so wicked that the land would literally spew them out (Lev 18:25).

15:17 — According to middle-east custom, both parties of the covenant would participate in the sacrifice. However, in this case only God walked through the parted animals which indicates this was an unconditional covenant. God promised to bring about His covenant regardless of the faithfulness of Abram's descendants. The symbolism of a "smoking furnace" and "a burning lamp" represents God in His awesome holiness, power, and justice (Ex 19:1-19; Is 6:3-5). God had the power to bring about His promise.

15:18-21 — The land to be inherited by Abram's seed was from the river Euphrates in the north to the river of Egypt, probably not the Nile, but a wadi (stream) south of Gaza. These borders have not yet been reached and will not be realized until the Millennium. Israel forfeited these blessings in the past because of sin and unbelief.

II. Sin Concerning the Covenant – 16:1-16

A. Abram's Failure - 16:1-6

1. The plan –16:1-3

16:1-3 — According to ancient custom, it was the responsibility of the wife to provide children. Nuzu Tablets indicate that a woman who could not bear children was responsible to provide her handmaid to her husband to bear children. According to the biblical standard, this was unacceptable, but Sarai thought (and Abram agreed) that the only answer was to follow the world's custom. Ten years had passed since Abram entered the land and still he had no son of his own bowels. Abram became desperate, but God was not. He would use His own method, not the world's way of doing things. Hagar probably became Sarai's handmaid during Abram's sojourn in Egypt. If this is true, then it is another fruit of the sin that Abram committed when he made that trip to Egypt out of the Lord's will.

2. The problem — 16:4-6

16:4-6 — Sarai was despised by Hagar when she became pregnant and strife arose between these two women. Abram gave Sarai permission to do as she pleased with Hagar and she made harsh and unjustifiable demands upon Hagar.

B. God's Intervention — 16:7-16

16:7ff — Hagar fled toward Egypt and on her way she met the angel of the Lord (pre-incarnate Christ). He instructed her to return and serve Sarai (v. 9). In addition, Hagar was promised a large posterity through Ishmael (v. 10). Ishmael became the father of many of the Arab people.

16:12 — "Wild man" - actually means that Ishmael would be free and roving, living as a Bedouin or son of the desert. The opposition between Sarai and Hagar is still seen in the struggle between the Jews and Arabs.

16:13-16 — Hagar demonstrated her faith by obedience to the Lord. Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born. This whole episode must be condemnatory on Abram's part for he should not have cohabited with her nor allowed her to be mistreated. Man should NEVER go contrary to God's clear revelation to accomplish God's purpose.

III. Sign of the Covenant — 17:1-27

A. Omnipotence Revealed in the Covenant — 17:1-8

17:1 — Thirteen years elapsed between Ishmael's birth and God's next appearance to Abram. God identified Himself as "the Almighty God" indicating that God had power to bring about His promises to Abram

17:2-3 — God reaffirmed His promise to Abram.

17:4-5 — The unconditional nature of the covenant is reaffirmed – God would provide a great posterity for Abram and would fulfill His covenant. As a symbol of the truth, Abram's name was changed to Abraham from "exalted father" to "father of a multitude."

17:6-8 — The covenant was reiterated again, but here God revealed the fact that this covenant would be an everlasting one. Although it is an everlasting covenant, the promises made to Israel cannot be applied to the church. This is inconsistent with Scripture. However, through Jesus Christ the church has been blessed with some aspects of the covenant, which the Israelites temporarily forfeited because they rejected Christ as their Messiah-Savior. Nevertheless, the covenant still is for the Israelites, even though they as a nation have been set aside by God for the present time. However, God does have a future plan for them when this covenant with them will be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom (Rom 11:1ff).

B. Obligation Demanded by the Covenant – 17:9-14

17:9 — Every covenant of God is associated with a sign (Noahic – rainbow; Mosaic – Sabbath; New Covenant – the Lord's Supper). So the Abrahamic Covenant has the sign of circumcision. It was a spiritual sign. To the obedient believer it was a reminder of God's promises. It was not a means of salvation. Paul, in Romans, is very careful to point out that circumcision followed Abraham's faith (Rom 2:25-29; 4:9-12). The Jews of Paul's day remembered the rite but they, for the most part, did not correctly understand its spiritual significance. The act of circumcision was to be performed upon an infant on the eighth day. It was done to a servant's children as well as the children of freemen. Anyone who would not participate in circumcision indicated their rebellion and would be "cut off" from the covenant blessing. Circumcision did not save anyone; it merely showed one's submission and faith in the promises of God.

C. Owner Established for the Covenant — 17:15-22

1. The one son accepted — 17:15-19

17:15-16 — God specifically promised a son to be born to Abraham. Sarai's name meaning "quarrelsome" was changed by God to Sarah meaning "princess," indicating she was to become the mother of nations.

17:17 — Abraham's response was to laugh at God's promise. Abraham could not conceive how he and Sarah could bear a child. He would be one hundred years old and Sarah ninety.

17:18-19 — Abraham was satisfied to have Ishmael as his heir, but God clearly indicated that Sarah would bear him a son and that his name should be Isaac. The covenant would be in effect only through Isaac and his seed.

2. The one son rejected — 17:20-22

17:20-22 — God clarified Ishmael's relationship to Abraham and the covenant. Ishmael would be fruitful in his progeny, but he would not be a part of the covenant.

D. Obedience Followed Faith in the Covenant — 17:23-27

17:23-27 — Abraham demonstrated his faith by performing circumcision upon all the males in his house. To this day, Ishmaelites circumcise a male at the age of thirteen while observant Jews circumcise on the eighth day (Luke 2:21; Phil 3:5). Paul uses Abraham as an illustration of true faith. Faith has an object; it is not blind hope (Heb. 11:1-3). The object in Abraham's case was the promise (the Word) of God (Rom 4:18ff).