

The Promise Affirmed

“Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. 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.”
—Genesis 17:3-5

The record of the Book of Genesis is of great importance to the sincere student of the Bible. In its pages is laid the groundwork of God’s plan for man’s salvation and the eventual blessing of all the families of the earth. Therefore, we do well to examine its record closely, and its harmony with the entire scriptural record found in the Bible. For our present consideration, our focus will center on Genesis, chapters sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen.

In these three chapters, as we study God’s dealings with Abram, later called Abraham, it is important to keep in mind the divine promise concerning a “seed.” Abram was to have an offspring, a seed, which would occupy an important

place in the plan of God. When this promise was first made to the patriarch, his wife Sarai, later called Sarah, was childless. Nevertheless, they both believed God's promise, and waited patiently for a child to be born. However, no child came.—Gen. 16:1

It was a long wait. To begin with, there was the time that elapsed from the making of the promise until the death of Abram's father Terah, just before they entered into the land of Canaan. Now another ten years had passed, and still no child had come. Sarai, in addition to being barren, was well along in years, and her faith that she would become the mother of the promised seed began to wane. Apparently, she still believed God's plan concerning a seed but began to wonder if it were his will that she should be the mother.

Meditating along this line, and desiring to cooperate with the Lord, if possible, she suggested to Abram that Hagar, her handmaid, serve as the mother of a child for him. According to Christian standards today this might be deemed an unethical procedure, but apparently it was not considered improper at that time. In any event, neither Sarai nor Abram were rebuked for it by the Lord, although he did not acknowledge the child of this union as being the promised seed.—vss. 2,3

From a natural standpoint, however, Sarai's suggestion did not turn out to be a satisfactory solution to the matter. Quite unexpectedly to Sarai, as soon as Hagar learned that she would bear a child, she began to despise her mistress. In those days, the ability to have children was prized very highly, and evidently Hagar began to feel that she was quite superior to Sarai, and she acted accordingly.—vs. 4

Sarai reported the situation to Abram, exclaiming, "My wrong be upon thee," thus trying to blame Abram for this turn of events. (Gen. 16:5) It is quite possible that Sarai at first expected that in the event Hagar had a child, she would in some way become its foster mother, and Hagar would step aside, not claiming the rights of motherhood. Now, however, Sarai realized from Hagar's attitude that there was no hope for an arrangement of this sort, so she came to realize that it had been unwise to suggest this method to obtain a seed for Abram.

Abram also realized that matters were not working out as they had hoped, so in loyalty to Sarai, he permitted her to deal with Hagar in any way she saw fit. According to verse 6, Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, probably by increasing her duties and tasks. Some historical scholars claim that under the laws in effect at that time, it would have been illegal to sell Hagar and thus get her out of the way. Thus, perhaps, was the reason her burdens were increased, with the hope that she might desert the household and run away, which is exactly what she did.

God Intervenes

At this juncture, the Lord took a hand in the matter. His angel, or messenger, found Hagar "by the fountain in the way to Shur." Shur was the name of the great fortified wall shutting Egypt off from Canaan. Evidently, Hagar was endeavoring to make her way back to her own people in Egypt; but the Lord intervened, and through his angel instructed her to return and be subject unto her mistress.—vss. 7-9

Then the angel uttered a remarkable prophecy. “The angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. ... Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction.” (vss. 10,11) Historians seem quite agreed that a large segment of the population of the Arabian countries of the Middle East are the descendants of Ishmael.

Hagar was greatly impressed by the visit of the angel of the Lord. The well where the angel found her was called Beerlahairoi, which in the Hebrew language means, “Well of the Living One seeing me.” Hagar seemed to realize that the Lord had been watching over her, and that although she had escaped from Abram and Sarai, she had not been able to escape from the God of Abram. She returned to her mistress, and in due course Ishmael was born.—vss. 13-16

There was also a lesson in this experience for Sarai, and indeed for all who are endeavoring to serve the Lord. It is the lesson that nothing is accomplished by endeavoring to run away from our trials, or to force them away from us. Sarai’s lack of faith had brought a severe trial into her life, and she thought of getting rid of it by forcing Hagar to run away. However, the Lord brought the experience right back to her. Probably the experience softened Hagar’s attitude also. In any event, the scriptural record indicates that the two women lived together after this for 15-17 years.

God’s Covenant Reaffirmed

Thirteen years had now passed, and in Genesis 17:1, we read, “When Abram was ninety years old

and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect." God's statement that Abram should be "perfect" should more properly read, "complete, or upright." Abram was a member of the fallen and dying race, and perfection of conduct was quite beyond his ability. Nevertheless, he could be upright before the Lord. This is possible for all of God's people, and nothing short of this is acceptable to the Lord.

In verses 2-8, God reiterated to Abram the covenant he had previously made and enlarged upon some of its features. In keeping with the importance of meanings attached to names in connection with the unfolding of the divine arrangement, the Lord changed the name of Abram, meaning "exalted father," to Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude." The original statement of the covenant assured blessings to all nations through the promised seed, but in these verses the Lord amplifies that thought by promising that Abraham would be "a father of many nations" who thus would be blessed. The term father means life-giver, and this was God's way of explaining that the blessing the nations would receive through Abraham's seed was to be that of life.

The Apostle Paul quotes this promise and indicates that all who exercise "the faith of Abraham" in the promises God made to him, thereby qualify to be his "seed." (Rom. 4:16-18) Some of this seed will be earthly, and some heavenly, but the important truth which Paul stresses is that one does not have to be a natural descendant of Abraham in order to be a part of his seed.

“Kings shall come out of thee,” God promised Abraham. (Gen. 17:6) Centuries later, the kings of the nation of Israel came through the lineage of Abraham. However, the principal fulfillment of this promise is in connection with the spiritual seed of Abraham—Jesus the Head and the church, his body. (Gal. 3:16,27-29; Col. 1:18) Jesus will be the King of kings, and his church will reign with him for a thousand years.—Rev. 5:10; 20:6

Genesis 17:8 states that although Abraham was living in Canaan at this time, he was a “stranger,” or sojourner, in the land. Abraham died without possessing the land which God promised to him; neither did Isaac nor Jacob possess the land. (Heb. 11:8-10,13) Abraham’s earthly seed will, nevertheless, possess the land when they are restored to life in the resurrection. It is most important to keep God’s eternal perspective in mind in our study of his Word, lest we fall into confusion and error in our endeavors to determine how some of his promises are fulfilled.

Circumcision—a Token of God’s Covenant

In Genesis 17:10-14, God’s instructions to Abraham concerning circumcision were given as a “token of the covenant” between them. Paul speaks of circumcision as a “sign” of the faith which Abraham had already exercised toward God and his promises, and for all those who walk in the same steps of faith.—Rom. 4:11,12

In the New Testament, circumcision is used to symbolize singleness of heart and purity of purpose. It is much the same thought as is contained in the Lord’s statement to Abraham that he should be

“upright.” While the spiritual seed of Abraham are not called upon to practice the literal rite of circumcision, they are admonished to circumcise their hearts, and to put away all impurities of the flesh. Paul wrote: “Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” “Ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.”—Rom. 2:29; Col. 2:11

It is appropriate that the token of the all-comprehensive Abrahamic Covenant should be circumcision. When we take into consideration the New Testament explanation of what circumcision signifies, it means that no one will receive the blessings promised under the Abrahamic Covenant except upon the basis of purity of heart and motive before the Lord and an abiding faith in his promises and the righteousness of his laws.

Sarai's Name Changed

Returning to Genesis 17, in verses 15 and 16 the Lord reveals to Abraham that Sarai's name was to be changed to Sarah—signifying “noblewoman”—inasmuch as she was to be the mother of kings. Apostle Paul explains the manner in which Sarah is considered by the Lord as being the mother of kings, stating that it is because she symbolizes the covenant by which the spiritual seed of Abraham is developed. Thus, Sarah is the mother of the same kings of whom Abraham is the symbolic father. These are the kings that Paul says are “the children of promise,” who are to reign for a thousand years for the blessing of all the families of the earth.—Gal. 4:22-31

Isaac Promised

Abraham had great faith in the promises of God, but it was not a perfect faith. At times it wavered, and one of those times is recorded in Genesis 17:17,18. Despite Sarah's barrenness, Abraham had faith to believe, when God first made the promise to him, that she would bear him a son, because she was then much younger. Now, however, in addition to her barrenness, she was ninety years old. When the Lord told him this time that Sarah would bear a son, Abraham "fell upon his face, and laughed."—vs. 17

In his heart, the passage indicates, Abraham doubted that such a thing could come to pass, and arising from the ground, he pleaded before the Lord, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!"—to be the seed of promise, seems to be the thought of this petition. God assured Abraham that Ishmael would live and would become the father of a great nation; but as far as the promised seed was concerned, Sarah was to have a child, his name was to be Isaac, and he would be heir to the covenant of promise.—vss. 18-21

Isaac was to be born "at this set time in the next year," verse 21 says. Here was a time prophecy of considerable importance to Abraham. He had waited many long years for God to fulfill his promise of a seed, yet during all that time no indication had been given, until now, as to how long that wait would need to continue. God has likewise tested the faith of most of his people along this same line of waiting. The disciples asked Jesus after his resurrection, "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know

the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.”—Acts 1:6,7

Often when the time nears for expected events to occur, the Lord reveals the secret to his servants. Noah labored long years in building the ark, with probably no definite idea of when the flood would come, but finally the Lord said, “Yet seven days.” (Gen. 7:4) So now with Abraham the Lord said, “At this set time in the next year.” In view of what Abraham was thinking in his heart concerning the unlikelihood of Sarah bearing him a son, perhaps the Lord gave him this definite information as a means of strengthening his faith.

In the concluding verses of Genesis chapter 17, it is recorded that Abraham was quick to obey the instructions of the Lord regarding circumcision, the “token of the covenant.” “In that selfsame day,” the account reads, he proceeded to have all the males in his household circumcised, including himself and his son Ishmael. (vss. 23-27) There is much evidence in the Scriptures that the Lord appreciates prompt obedience. In this case of Abraham, his promptness would indicate also that his faith in God’s promise concerning Sarah had been restored and that he desired to carry out every detail pertaining to his part in the covenant.

God Appears to Abraham

Mamre was an Amorite who had earlier joined with Abraham on the occasion when he rescued his nephew Lot. (Gen. 14:13) In Genesis 18:1, the expression, “plains of Mamre” evidently means the plains which belonged to Mamre, for Abraham was merely a sojourner in the land. Apparently, however,

he was on friendly terms with many Canaanites, such as Mamre and others.

“The Lord appeared” unto Abraham, the text states, yet later this appearance turns out to be the visit of “three men” who served as messengers of the Lord. (vs. 2) This manner of expression is employed quite frequently in the Bible when it speaks of the Lord’s dealings with members of the human race. No human being could actually see God and live. (Exod. 33:20) However, when he sends his messengers, he expects those whom they visit to treat them with dignity, and to give consideration to the message they deliver.

These “three men” who visited Abraham were actually angels—that is, spirit beings—who had materialized in order to be able to converse freely with the patriarch. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to them as such and by implication cites Abraham’s hospitality as an example worthy of emulation. “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers,” he writes, “for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”—Heb. 13:2

Abraham’s Hospitality

It is necessary to put ourselves in Abraham’s position in order to understand his great desire to make his unexpected visitors feel at home. It was not as though he lived on a busy city thoroughfare where thousands of people would be passing every day. Instead, he was living on the “plains,” and in a tent. It is quite possible that days might pass when not a single stranger would pass his tent. Here were three of them, and they gave every indication that they were men of considerable importance.

As Abraham saw it, this was to be a special event, and he was desirous of making as much as possible out of it. Abraham himself was an important man in that part of the world and was accustomed to giving instructions when he wanted things done. He gave directions to Sarah to help prepare a meal for these exceptional visitors. The same is true with respect to the young man whom he directed to dress a young calf and prepare it for a meal.—Gen. 18:6,7

Abraham revealed a measure of excitement over the visit of the three men, for the account says that he “ran unto the herd” and made a personal selection of a calf which he knew would be tender for eating. Visits from the Lord through his accredited messengers were not new to Abraham. While the Apostle Paul explains that he “entertained angels unawares,” it is quite possible that he perceived these three men as something more than they were disclosing. In any event, he proved himself to be a kind and gracious host, and Sarah seems to have cooperated willingly with him.

The Message to Sarah

Abraham stood while his guests ate, thus assuming the role of a servant. (Gen. 18:8) As they ate the three men inquired concerning the whereabouts of Sarah. While Sarah had helped with the preparation of the meal, up to this point she had evidently kept herself out of sight. Then the spokesman for these visitors said to Abraham, “I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son.”—vs. 10

Evidently the tent was not far from where the men was eating, for Sarah heard this announcement

and “laughed within herself,” or, as we would say, “laughed to herself.” However, the angel knew she had laughed, and when he referred to it later Sarah denied it, but the angel said, “Nay; but thou didst laugh.”—vss. 12-15

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” This is the practical lesson in the account for us. This is of great importance with respect to the outworking of the plan of God. Perhaps one reason the Lord permitted Abraham and Sarah to get so old before Isaac was born was for the very purpose of demonstrating that it was he, not them, who was responsible for the fulfillment of all his promises.

Churchianity today, and for centuries past, has erroneously imagined that the success of God’s purposes in the earth depends upon the efforts of man. We should all be glad that this is not so, and that his plan to bless all the families of the earth through the seed of Abraham is sure to be accomplished. It is sure, despite all the circumstances that seem to be to the contrary. It is a “hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.”—Heb. 6:19

God Tests Abraham

The Lord takes his servants into his confidence in matters which pertain to them and to those in whom they are particularly interested. Broadly speaking, the truth-enlightened people of God should be interested in all mankind. They should have the spirit of Abraham and manifest enthusiasm for the plan of God—the plan that, through the seed of Abraham, all the families of the earth are to be blessed.

The Lord had decided to destroy Sodom because of the gross wickedness of the city. However, he used the occasion to test Abraham's interest in the people of the city, and particularly his concern for his own kinsmen—Lot and his family, who dwelt there. "Shall I hide from Abraham," the Lord inquired, "that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?"—Gen. 18:17,18

In this passage we are furnished with an interesting example of how God makes allowance for the mental limitations of his servants in order that they might understand his viewpoint. To paraphrase God's statement to Abraham, it implies that he had heard a report that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were very wicked, so he had come down to investigate. If they were as wicked as the report indicated, he would surely destroy them. Actually, of course, the Creator of the universe and God of heaven and earth did not need to visit the earth personally in order to obtain the information he needed. This was simply his way of speaking on Abraham's level of understanding.

Abraham Intercedes

Abraham evidently perceived that the Lord had in mind the possible destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He petitioned the Lord earnestly to save the city, especially if there proved to be a few righteous souls therein. Abraham at first asked whether the city would be spared if there were fifty souls found to be righteous. When he continued

to lower the number, it is possible that he had Lot and his family in mind.—Gen. 18:23-32

The Lord displayed both his patience with Abraham and his willingness to show mercy by complying with his entreaty even as he kept lowering the number. As it turned out, there were not even the required ten who were righteous, so the cities were destroyed.—Gen. 19:24,25

This raises an important point in view of God's promise to bless all the nations of the earth. Jesus indicates that no particular effort was made to bring about the repentance of Sodom and Gomorrah. If there had been, Jesus explained, they would have remained and not been destroyed. (Matt. 11:23,24) Most importantly, however, Jesus also explained that in the kingdom judgment day period, they will be given an opportunity to repent, change their ways, and gain life. Thus, we see a clear example of the fact that, along with the rest of the world, they will be remembered, in harmony with the promise made to Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. How we look forward to the soon fulfillment of this and all of God's promises for his human creation! ■

Strength and Wisdom

Why do we long for an easier road

When greater strength comes from bearing the load?

Why wish we to be spared when storms arise

When it's such things that make us strong and wise?

—While Marching to Zion