

Genesis, Part 15

Last session we saw Abram mount a military expedition against the army of Chedorlaomer to rescue his nephew Lot who had been taken prisoner. Devising a daring, two-prong night attack on the enemy, Abram was able to defeat them and send them in a chaotic retreat. With Lot recovered along with the booty of the defeated army, Abram returned south to encounter both the King of Sodom and Melchizedek the King of Salem (Jerusalem). We saw Abram give deference to Melchizedek as his spiritual superior while rejecting any rewards from the King of Sodom. Now we will see God reward Abram.

After Abram rescued Lot and received the blessing from Melchizedek, the Lord formally made a covenant with Abram, thereby confirming the promise given earlier (12:2–3).

Genesis 15:1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”

Before God made the covenant, He set aside Abram’s fear and doubt with a word of assurance, “Do not be afraid. I am your Shield.” When the Lord promised Abram that his reward would be great, the patriarch immediately asked what he would receive since he was childless. Abram burst forth in a prayer of complaint. For ten years his faith in the promise had been tested. The tension was unbearable. In his prayer, Abram suggested that he wanted an heir, not a reward. He was childless and, as matters stood, his servant, and probably adopted son, Eliezer of Damascus, would inherit all his wealth. Abram was asking for an explanation from God.

Gen 15:4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” 5 And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring

be.” 6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. 7 And he said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”

Here we find one of the most important sentences in the Old Testament, “Then he [Abram] believed in the Lord; and He [the Lord] reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). God had come to Abram in a night vision (15:1) and promised him the unthinkable—a family. Abram and his wife, Sarai, were childless, and they were also old—well beyond child-bearing age. Abram could not understand how he could ever father a child. Yet he believed God! Here is the first use in the Bible of the important verb believe. God revealed to Moses that he credited Abram’s faith in the promises of God as righteousness. To be righteous is to measure up to the demands of God. No man is righteous, no not one. God’s plan, however, accepts obedient faith as equivalent to righteousness (Rom 4:2f.; Jas 2:20–24).

But God promised that Abram’s heir would not be one of his servants, but a son of his own (15:4). And not only would Abram and Sarai have a son, but also God would bless that son so that, in years to come, the descendants of Abram would have family reunions of the largest proportions (15:5) and would possess the land of promise (15:18). Using the night sky as a pledge, God promised that the seed of Abram would become as numerous as the starry host.

God had promised something that seemed impossible to Abram. Not improbable—impossible! Eighty-plus-year-old couples don’t have babies! Yet here we are with God promising just that! Put yourself in Abram’s shoes. Would you not wake up from your sleep, shake your head, and tell yourself you should not have eaten that chocolate before going to bed? Not Abram. When faced with the unthinkable, we find that Abram simply “believed in the Lord.”

Not only would Abram have children but he was reminded that God had brought him out of Ur to give him possession of the land in which he was now a sojourner.

Gen 15:8 But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” 9 He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward, they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

Abram wants to be assured he will indeed possess the promised land. In a solemn ceremony in which the Lord made a binding covenant with Abram, God assured him of the ultimate fulfillment of His promises (vv. 7, 18–21). Obeying God’s instructions, Abram severed in half (v. 10) three animals—a heifer, a goat, and a ram (v. 9)—and also brought a dove and a young pigeon. These will be used as confirmation to Abram of the Lord’s promises. It is a traditional ceremony used during this time as a guarantee between the two parties of a covenant agreement. The two halves of the animals are laid out in a row along with the carcasses of the two birds. The covenant makers then walk down the line between the several animals as a promise that should they break the covenant they will die and their own bodies should be rendered in two just as these animals.

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep (*tardemah*). After sunset, God revealed Himself in the image of an oven (smoking fire pot) and a torch, two elements that were connected with sacrificial rituals in the ancient world. These images are part of the “burning” motif that describes God’s zeal and judgment in the world. Fire represents the consuming, cleansing zeal of Yahweh as well as His unapproachable holiness, which are interrelated (cf. Isa. 6:3–7). Terror fell upon Abram, and deep darkness, symbolizing the ominous character of the revelation about to be presented.

After the sun had set the blessed theophany took place. A smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the animal carcasses. A fire pot was a portable clay oven a couple of feet high. It resembled an inverted bowl with a hole in the upper side for the draft. The explanation of this theophany is clearly stated in verse 18: “On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram.” The covenant maker walked alone between the animal carcasses signifying that fulfillment of the covenant promises rested solely on God.

In the darkness (Gen. 15:17) Abram saw nothing else in the vision except these fiery elements that passed between the pieces of the slaughtered animals. Thus the holy God was zealous to judge the nations and to fulfill His covenantal promises to Israel. He came down and made (lit, “cut”) a formal treaty (a covenant) with Abram (the Abrahamic Covenant). Since God could “swear” (confirm the covenant) by none greater, “He swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13). In other words this was a unilateral and unconditional covenant depending solely on the integrity of God. As such, its promises are absolutely sure.

God also declared that there would be a long 400-year period of enslavement for Abram’s descendants (vv. 13–16). Unclean birds of prey swooped down on the offering animals—an evil omen. God’s announcement of Israel’s enslavement (vv. 13–14) clarified the meaning of the attacking birds. The word “afflicted” (‘ānâh, v. 13; cf. 16:6) is the same word used in Exodus 1:11–12 to describe Egypt’s oppression of Israel.

Egypt, like birds of prey, opposed the covenant, but ultimately the covenant will be fulfilled. Later, in Moses’ day when the Israelites were in Egypt, they could count the years and see that 400 years had elapsed and their time of deliverance from slavery was at hand. Exodus 12:40 and Galatians 3:17 state that the Egyptian bondage was 430 years (from 1876 to 1446). Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6, with their references to 400 years, are using rounded figures.

God is just, and wished to permit the sin of the Amorites to be full before He would judge them (Gen. 15:16). God would tolerate their sins until Israel under Joshua conquered Palestine. Thus the fulfillment of the promises to

Abram involves a retributive judgment on the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. Abram's seed would get the land—but not one hour before absolute justice required it. God had much to do before fulfilling His promise—including disciplining His nation to make it fit for receiving the promise.

What was the “sin of the Amorites”? One thing Genesis 15:16 shows is the certainty of God's judgment on the wicked. The Amorites and other Canaanites were exceedingly wicked (for a list of some of their sins, see Leviticus 18). During the time of Moses, God gave the reason for the Canaanites' downfall: “The land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants” (Lev 18:25). God had predicted this back in Abraham's time. The Amorites were wicked, and Judgment Day was coming. But God gives grace before judgment, and the Amorites were given time to repent and turn from their ways while God prepared Israel to enter the land.

The principle of grace before judgment: There is always a grace period of intense evangelism before judgment is administered by our Lord Jesus Christ. Arrogance blinds the unbeliever regarding his need for eternal salvation, but judgment removes that blindness using personal or historical disaster. Historical disaster offers the option of grace or judgment. Failing to respond to grace, the Amorites will eventually experience judgment when the Israelites enter the land and drive them out.

Gen 15:17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.
18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring, I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

God even specified the geographical boundaries of Israel's land—from the river of Egypt (Wadi el-Arish, not the Nile River) to the great river, the Euphrates. Israel has never possessed this land in its entirety, but she will when Christ returns to reign as Messiah. The Canaanite tribes listed (Gen. 15:19–21) were dispossessed later in the Conquest.

For Abram, God's message was clear: despite the prospects of death and suffering (enslavement in bondage), his descendants would receive the promises, for God assured it. Israel could be encouraged by this at the Exodus as well as in subsequent times of distress, even during the Babylonian Captivity. God's solemn covenant assures the Chosen People of the ultimate fulfillment of His promises despite their times of death and suffering.

Israel would also notice the parallel touch at the beginning of this narrative. Compare "I am the Lord [Yahweh] who brought you out of Ur," v. 7, with Ex. 20:2: "I am the Lord [Yahweh] your God who brought you out of Egypt." This assured Israel that despite opposition and bondage God would judge their enslavers and fulfill His promises.

This passage encourages New Testament believers as well. God affirms solemnly that He will fulfill His promises concerning salvation and all the blessings that pertain to that life (cf. 2 Peter 1:3–4); despite opposition, suffering, and even death, He keeps His promises.

The divine declaration which accompanied the theophany explained to Abram when the land promise would be fulfilled. The land of Canaan would belong to his descendants after five conditions had been met:

1. his descendants would spend four hundred years in a strange land where they would become slaves;
2. the land which enslaved them would be judged;
3. his descendants would come out of that land with great substance;
4. Abram would die in peace at an old age, and
5. the sin of the Amorites would have reached its full measure. Thus in the fourth generation (counting a generation as a hundred years), Abram's descendants would return to Canaan.

At that time, that region was occupied by ten different peoples. But according to the oath of God, that land would someday belong to Abram's descendants.

Sarai Has a Plan

Abram had been living in the land of Canaan for ten years. He was now eighty-five and still, he had no heir. The promise of God seemed to have failed. Perhaps God expected him to take matters into his own hands. After all, God helps him who helps himself. This kind of worldly logic led Abram into a scheme of which God could hardly approve. In Genesis 16 and 17 the stark contrast between two kinds of wisdom becomes evident.

When God's promises do not seem to materialize, believers sometimes resort to their own devices, which we call "human viewpoint solutions". The opening verses of Genesis 16 give the sad details of a desperate scheme by Sarai and Abram to help God keep his word. (As if God needed their help.)

Gen 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

Barrenness was viewed as an intolerable curse by women in Old Testament times. Sarai must have blamed herself for the continued disappointment of her husband in not having an heir. At her age, little hope of conception in the ordinary way seemed possible. By all human calculations, the heir of the promise could not come through her at all. As a result, she made an evil proposal in the vain expectation that some good might come out of it. This set in motion some dubious activities by Abram and Sarai. Abram learned, however, that God's promise was not to be fulfilled in this way.

The practice of offering a servant to be a surrogate mother for a barren woman has been documented in the law codes of that period. In the legal custom of that day, a barren woman could give her maid to her husband as a wife, and the child born of that union was regarded as the first wife's child. If the husband said to the slave wife's son, "You are my son," then he was the adopted son and heir. So Sarai's suggestion was unobjectionable according to the customs of that time. But God often repudiates social customs.

And “Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” Sarai’s scheme was another test for Abram, and he flunked. The text indicates no protest on his part, no resistance to his wife’s suggestion. He surely was fully persuaded that his wife’s plan was in harmony with the will of God. After all, God had never said that Sarai would have a child. So Abram made a deliberate choice, a reckless and inexcusable choice. He chose the path of worldly wisdom. In the previous chapter, Abram listened to the voice of God and exercised faith. Here “Abram listened to the voice of Sarai” and fell into sin.

In this scheme, Hagar became Abram’s concubine (*pilgash*), i.e., a wife of secondary rank. Sarai presented the bride to her husband! This plan cost Sarai deeply. His relationship with Hagar would have legal standing under the laws of that period. Nevertheless, what is legal is not always what is righteous! God never intended that a man have more than one wife. However noble Abram’s motives may have been, and the approval of Sarai notwithstanding, the marriage to Hagar constituted a failure of faith and a sin on the part of the patriarch.

And The Plan Goes South

Gen 16:3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. 4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

Well now, what was fun times in the land of Canaan just went south. Hagar the mistress gets pregnant and demonstrates pride in that fact, to the chagrin of the spouse #1. Sarai suddenly realizes this Hagar plan was a really bad idea.

Gen 16:5 And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!” 6 But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The ill-advised measure taken by Sarai and Abram created a chain of negative consequences. Sarai experienced humiliation. When Hagar saw that she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Sarai was apparently under much duress due to the haughty conduct of Hagar. Sarai complains to Abram about the disrespect and she blames him for it! Sarai shows no inclination to acknowledge her own role in the ill-fated scheme. Bad ideas often tend to find themselves homeless. The harmony between Abram and Sarai was shattered. She blamed him for her plight. Hagar was his wife, and he was responsible for exercising family discipline.

Because of her priority in marriage, Sarai had legal rights. A second wife could not treat her in this manner. Assuming that her husband would not take action, Sarai recklessly appealed to God for justice (“May the Lord judge between you and me!” 16:5). Such hasty and passionate appeals to heaven reveal an impious spirit. God’s name must be invoked with reverence.

Intimidated by the verbal abuse of his wife, Abram relinquished his responsibility to discipline his concubine. Abram tells Sarai the problem is hers. That was another bad idea. Abram may have been responding to his wife kindly. On the other hand, his response more likely indicates weakness. In any case, Sarai retaliated against the arrogance of the Egyptian by treating her harshly. The situation became so unbearable for Hagar that she fled from her mistress. She set out toward Shur on the border of Egypt. She intended to return to her native land.

Thus, worldly, human viewpoint scheming resulted in humiliation for Sarai, misery for Abram, and oppression for Hagar.

The Angel of The Lord

Gen 16:7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

Done with suffering at the hands of her mistress, Hagar bails out and heads for Egypt. She was unaware that she had an important part to play in God’s plan, and that plan called for her to remain, for a time at least, in the camp of Abram. Hagar could flee from her mistress, but not from God. By the

spring on the way to Shur, she had a most wonderful experience. Hagar encountered the “Angel of the Lord”.

And just who is this “Angel of the Lord”?

This is the first reference in the Old Testament to “the Angel of the Lord” (lit., “the Angel of Yahweh”). Hagar referred to him as Yahweh in Genesis 16:13. He addressed her in a style befitting only the Most High in Genesis 16:10. He promised to perform only what God alone can do, and he foretold only what God alone could know. This, then, was no ordinary angel. This “Angel of the Lord” is a theophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity, a manifestation of Himself to man before He became the incarnate Jesus Christ. This “Angel” is identified with Yahweh in Genesis 16:13, as well as in 22:11–12; 31:11, 13; 48:16; Judges 6:11, 16, 22; 13:22–23; and Zechariah 3:1–2. These passages clearly point to His deity. Genesis 24:7; 2 Samuel 24:16; Zechariah 1:12 seem to see the Angel of the Lord more specifically as the Second Person of the Trinity.

Gen 16:7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. 12 He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.” 13 So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

The Angel of the Lord finds Hagar during her flight from her mistress and addresses her by her name. He knows who she is, yet He inquires, “Where have you come from and where are you going?” Of course, He already

knows that answer, too. The purpose of the question is to engage her. She admits she is running away, and He directs her to “return to your mistress and submit to her.”

Four words summarize the encounter with the Angel of the Lord.

1. **Arrestment** (16:7–8). The angel had the purpose of stopping Hagar in her tracks. This he did in several ways. (1) He addressed Hagar by her name. (2) He called her Sarai’s handmaid rather than Abram’s wife. The Lord would thus lead her back to the humility of former times. (3) He asked her questions designed to arouse in her a sense of her plight. She was leaving a favored home for a very uncertain future. Hagar made no effort to conceal the reason for her flight, but she could not answer the question about her destination. From the perspective of a few miles’ journey into the wilderness, Hagar’s mistreatment by Sarai must have seemed inconsequential.
2. **Commandment** (16:9). Hagar was given two direct commands by the heavenly messenger. She was to return to Sarai and submit to her authority. The implication is that Hagar had done wrong in despising her mistress and endangering the fruit of her womb by this reckless trek. Returning to Abram’s house would be in Hagar’s best interest. Submission to Sarai would be a manifestation of repentance.
3. **Encouragement** (16:10–11). Promise follows quickly on the heels of command. (1) Hagar would have numerous offspring. (2) The child she was carrying would be born. (3) The child would be a son. (4) The child would wear a name which would commemorate God’s intervention on her behalf in the present instance, and which would pledge a special measure of grace to help her deal with her hostile mistress. The name Ishmael means “God hears.” God often sweetens onerous commands with precious promises, glimpses of future glory, and grace to deal with present frustrations.
4. **Enlightenment** (16:12). Hagar received a snapshot of the future of her child. What mother has not cradled a newborn son in her arms and wondered what manner of man he would become? Through the revelation by the angel of the Lord, Hagar knew! Her son would be a wild ass of man – he would roam over desert lands. He would be a powerful man, more than holding his own against all who might oppose him. He would dwell as a free man among his brethren, a

reference to Abram's future descendants by Sarah. This characterization was to fit not only her son Ishmael but also his descendants.

Often in Genesis popular etymologies capture the message. These are rhetorical devices that draw from the account the explanation of names. Thus the name was a mnemonic device for remembering the events and their significance. In this passage, two popular etymologies form not only the climax of the section but the point of the whole unit. God Himself named the boy Ishmael, which He then explained: for the Lord has heard of your misery (16:11). Ishmael means God hears. He meant this primarily for Hagar, but it was also meant for Abram and Sarai. The other naming was Hagar's referring to God as "the One who sees" after her, that is, looks out for her. So in these two names is a world of theology: God hears and God sees. This spot would afterward become holy, a place where God could be found providing for and hearing the cries of His people.

The names provide the message: God spoke in direct revelation, and Hagar responded in faith. God sees distress and affliction, and He hears. Sarai should have known this. Since God knew Sarai was barren, she should have cried out to the Lord. Instead, she had to learn a lesson the hard way from the experience of a despised slave wife who, ironically, came back with a faith experience. How Abram must have been rebuked when Hagar said God told her to name her son Ishmael, "God hears."

In great distress (here Sarai's barrenness), one must turn to the Lord because He hears the afflicted, sees them in their need, and will miraculously fulfill His promises. They cannot be turned by human intervention. Giving children to the barren is God's work (Ps. 113:9). Sarai still had a way to go in her faith.

Abram was caught up in a chain of causes and effects that would trouble him for years to come. Hagar's child Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arabs. So God provided for the pregnant woman who was thrust out into the desert. God promised that Hagar would be a matriarch—her son would become the father of a great tribe of wild, hostile people (cf. 25:18), living in the Arabian desert (25:12–18). But they would not be the promised seed; they would only complicate matters. Sarai's sin was the origin of the

Ishmaelites, a harvest that is still being reaped. Joseph, Sarai's great-grandson, was later taken to Egypt by the Ishmaelites (37:28).

The lesson was clear for Sarai, Abram, Hagar, Israel, and Christians: God's servants are to trust His Word and to wait for its fulfillment, enduring patiently till the end. It becomes increasingly clear in Genesis that any person or any nation that owes its existence to divine election should live by faith. Human efforts will not help. But the good news for God's people is that the living God sees and hears.

Gen 16:15 And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.