

**God's Promise to Abram (Genesis 15-18)**  
**Elders'/Preachers' Symposium**  
**Sunnyside Road Church of Christ**  
**Monday, December 3, 2007**

My subject this morning is God's promise to Abram in Genesis 15-18. Within these four chapters are some very great lessons.

It would seem to me that from the title given to my lesson the focus would be on the threefold promise given by God to Abram. This three part promise is as follows: 1) God would make of Abram a great nation; 2) God would give to Abram land; and 3) God would produce from Abram a promised Seed Who would bless the Earth.

Although there is agreement that a great nation and the promised Seed have been fulfilled, many deny the land promise was ever fulfilled, particularly those who hold pre-millennialist positions. However, as you can see in the chart below the word of God does say that the land promise was fulfilled as well.

	<b>1 A Great Nation:</b>	<b>2 The Promise of Land:</b>	<b>3 The Promised Seed:</b>
<b>Genesis 12:1-7</b>	<i>"I will make you a great nation."</i>	<i>"To your descendants I will give this land."</i>	<i>"...in you all families of the earth shall be blessed."</i>
<b>Genesis 13:14-17</b>	<b>Verse 16</b> <i>"I will make your descendants as dust of earth."</i>	<b>Verse 15</b> <i>"...all the land you see, I will give it to you and your descendants forever."</i>  <b>Verse 17</b> <i>"I will give it to you."</i>	
<b>Genesis 15:5-21</b>	<b>Verse 5</b> <i>"...descendants like stars."</i>	<b>Verse 7</b> <i>"To give you this land."</i>  <b>Verse 21</b> <i>"...to your descendants I have given land."</i>	

	<b>1 A Great Nation:</b>	<b>2 The Promise of Land:</b>	<b>3 The Promised Seed:</b>
<b>Genesis 17:2-8</b>	<p><b>Verse 2</b> <i>"I will multiply you exceedingly."</i></p> <p><b>Verse 7</b> <i>"...exceedingly fruitful, make nations and kings from you."</i></p>	<b>Verse 8</b> <i>"I will give to you and your descendants after you all the land of Cannon as an everlasting possession."</i>	
<b>Genesis 18:18</b>	<i>"...surely become a great and mighty nation."</i>		<i>"...in him all nations of Earth will be blessed."</i>
<b>Genesis 22:17-18</b>	<i>"Greatly multiply your seed as the stars and sand."</i>	<i>"...your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies."</i>	<i>"...in your seed all nations will be blessed."</i>
<b>Genesis 24:7</b>		<i>"...to your descendants I will give land."</i>	
<b>Genesis 26:3-4</b>	<p><b>Verse 4</b> <i>"I will multiply Isaac's descendants as stars."</i></p>	<p><b>Verse 3</b> <i>"...to you and your descendants I will give all these lands,"</i></p> <p><b>Verse 4</b> <i>"...give your descendants land."</i></p>	<b>Verse 4</b> <i>"...by your descendants all nations of Earth will be blessed."</i>
<b>Genesis 28:4</b>		<i>"...give to Isaac's and your descendants to possess the land which God gave Abraham."</i>	

	<b>1 A Great Nation:</b>	<b>2 The Promise of Land:</b>	<b>3 The Promised Seed:</b>
<b>Genesis 28:13-14</b>	<b>Verse 14</b> <i>"Isaac's descendants like dust."</i>	<b>Verse 13</b> <i>"I will give it to you and your descendants."</i>	<b>Verse 14</b> <i>"...in you and your descendants shall all families of Earth be blessed."</i>
<b>Genesis 35:12</b>		<i>"...the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to Jacob, and I will give the land to your descendants after you."</i>	
<b>Genesis 46:3</b>	<i>"In Egypt, I will make Jacob a great nation there."</i>		
<b>Genesis 48:4</b>	<i>"I will make Jacob fruitful and numerous."</i>	<i>"...give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession."</i>	
<b>Exodus 6:2-8</b>		<p><b>Verse 4</b> <i>"I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned."</i></p> <p><b>Verse 8</b> <i>"I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession."</i></p>	

	<b>1 A Great Nation:</b>	<b>2 The Promise of Land:</b>	<b>3 The Promised Seed:</b>
<b>Exodus 12:25</b>		<i>“...when you enter the land which the LORD will give you, as He has promised, that you shall observe this rite.”</i>	
<b>Exodus 13:5</b>		<i>“...when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall observe this rite in this month.”</i>	
<b>Exodus 23:31</b>		<i>“And I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates.”</i>	

	<b>1 A Great Nation:</b>	<b>2 The Promise of Land:</b>	<b>3 The Promised Seed:</b>
<b>Exodus 32:13</b>	<i>"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom Thou didst swear by Thyself, and didst say to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens',"</i>	<i>"...and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever."</i>	
<b>Exodus 33:1</b>		<i>"Depart, go up from here, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.'"</i>	
<b>Fulfilled</b>	<b>Genesis 46:3</b> <i>"...do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there."</i>	<b>Joshua 21:43</b> <i>"So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it."</i>	<b>Galatians 3:29</b> <i>"...if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."</i>
	<b>Deuteronomy 10:22</b> <i>"Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons in all, and now the Lord has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven."</i>	<b>Deuteronomy 30:5</b> <i>"God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers."</i>	

	<b>1 A Great Nation:</b>	<b>2 The Promise of Land:</b>	<b>3 The Promised Seed:</b>
<b>Fulfilled</b>			<b>Hebrews 6:11-13; 19-20</b> <i>"...full assurance of hope...inherit the promises...God made the promise to Abraham...this hope we have as...one which enters within the veil (heaven), where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us."</i>
			<b>Acts 13:32-33, 38</b> <i>"...we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to us their children in that He raised up Jesus...that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."</i>

Genesis 15:1-6: Faith Conquering Fear

Genesis 15:7-21: The Furnace and the Lamp

Genesis 16: It All Depends on Me

Genesis 17: The Circumcised Life

Genesis 18:1-5: When God Comes to Dinner

Genesis 18:16-33: How Prayer Works

## Genesis 15:1-6: Faith Conquering Fear

### “Justification by Faith”

The opening paragraph of Genesis 15 strikingly illustrates for us what is commonly called in Bible study, “the law of first occurrence.” By this is meant that the first time a word or phrase is used in the Bible it is used in such a way or in such a manner as to highlight its basic meaning whenever else it is used in Scripture. Four of these first occurrence phrases appear in this paragraph for the first time in the Bible, though they are repeated many, many times afterward. They are “...**the word of Jehovah came...**”, “**Fear not...**”, “**I am thy shield**”, and “**And he believed in Jehovah. And He reckoned it to him for righteousness.**”

1. “...**the word of Jehovah came...**” (Genesis 15:1) This phrase emphasizes the God-breathed, inspired nature and character of the Bible. The word of the Lord came to many men, just as it came to Abram, and they wrote as they were borne along and led by the Holy Spirit, and then actually sat down and studied their own writings to learn what God had said, (1 Peter 1:10-12 RSV).

*In my opinion*, He Who appeared to Abraham was the Lord Jesus Christ in a pre-incarnate form, the eternal Word (John 1:1), the Son of God. God always reveals Himself to men and speaks to men only through Christ, the Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).

2. “**Fear not...**” (Genesis 15:1) Many times God reveals Himself to man, uttering these words Himself as is the case above, or through an intermediary, as when the angels announced the birth of the Savior to the shepherds.

**First**, the Lord bids His servant to cease from fear. “**Fear not, Abram.**” Why does He tell him not to be afraid? Abram had just succeeded in conquering four armies with only 318 shepherds! **Perhaps** he feared retaliation from those who remained of the kingdoms he had conquered. That seems to be the universal opinion of the commentators I have read. I am, however, inclined to think otherwise. I believe Abram was fearful simply because he was overwhelmed by the manifest presence of God. He was fearful because he knew himself to be a sinful man who was in the presence of the holy Lord God. Many others also experienced this fear when they found themselves in the presence of the Almighty: Moses, Daniel, Saul and John, to name four, so I see no reason why this could not be the case here when we are told that Abram felt fear. As the Wise Writer stated, “**The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**” (Proverbs 9:10)

This is a blessed fear. Should not a man who is aware of his own corruption of heart, his own depravity, and his own sin be overwhelmed and humbled before the Lord God? But when Christ appears to His own, He appears in perfect love, and He does so in order to cast out fear. Thus, He says, “**Fear not, Abram: I**

***am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.*** Here the Lord God our Savior makes two great promises to Abraham, by which He soothes Abram's fears, comforts his heart, and encourages his faith: 1) ***I am thy shield***, and 2) ***and (I am) thy exceeding great reward***.

3. ***"I am thy shield..."*** (Genesis 15:1) In a thousand wonderful varied alterations, we find this thought repeated frequently: God is our refuge and our strength; God is a tower of refuge; God is an overshadowing rock; blessed is he that hides under the shadow of the Almighty. This is the first intimation of this character of God found in Scripture.

***"But thou, O LORD, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head."*** (Psalms 3:3) [See also Psalm 5:12; Psalm 18:2; Psalm 61:2-4; Psalm 91:4; and Psalm 119:114]

This great promise is applicable to all believers, to all who are ***"strangers and pilgrims on the Earth."*** (Hebrews 11:13) The Son of God Himself is our Shield of faith (Ephesians 6:16). He is our Shield and defense. Christ is the One behind Whom faith hides, upon Whom faith leans, and in Whom faith finds refuge and safety. Who or what can harm us, if the Lord is our shield? ***"If God is for us, who is against us?"*** Paul asked rhetorically in Romans 8:31.

As He is our Shield, our Savior is also our exceeding great reward. ***"The Lord is my Portion, saith my soul. Therefore will I hope in him."*** (Lamentations 3:24) ***"The Lord is the Portion of my inheritance and of my cup."*** (Psalm 16:5) [See also Proverbs 22:4 and Hebrews 11:6]

4. ***"And he believed in Jehovah. And He reckoned it to him for righteousness."*** (Genesis 15:6) Belief in Almighty Jehovah is foundational to anyone seeking to live a righteous life for the Lord. Abraham's faith and justification before God are the subject matter throughout this entire chapter.

So we read the great sentence, ***"He believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness."*** This does not mean that this was the first moment that Abram was reckoned righteous before God. This had occurred earlier in Abram's life. The book of Hebrews makes clear that when Abram left Ur of the Chaldees, in response to God's command, his obedient faith was also reckoned to him for righteousness. Abraham is set before us in the Scriptures as the father of all who believe. He is the first man spoken of in the Word of God as a believer. Certainly, there were other believers before him. Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah and many others also believed God. But the word "believed" is not used in reference to any man in the Bible until we come to Genesis 15:6. Therefore, he is called ***"the father of all them that believe"*** (Romans 4:11). We see this doctrine, this grand, foundational doctrine of Holy Scripture, illustrated in the experience of Abraham in Genesis 15.

Abraham is also the father of all believers in the sense that he is held before us as the pre-eminent example of what it is for a man to believe God. From the time of his calling until the day of his death, the Lord God appears to have dealt with Abraham specifically to show us by example what the life of faith is. That which is here written concerning Abraham and his faith is written specifically for our instruction in the matter of faith and justification before God.

This is exactly what God the Holy Spirit tells us in Romans 4:23-24:

**"Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead."**

This is justification by faith.

### **Genesis 15:7-21: The Furnace and the Lamp**

In Genesis 15 we have a chapter which condenses for us the whole doctrinal movement of Romans 4-8. Since this is one of the most important sections in the entire New Testament, this is also a highly important part of the life of Abraham. It begins, as we have seen, with that great principle which governed Abram's life – a daily trust that God was able to do through him what He had promised. By this, Abram was counted righteous when he had no righteousness of his own. This is the truth so clearly presented by Paul in Romans 4-5.

The following chapters in Romans, 6-8, unfold the teaching of practical deliverance from the reigning power of sin. If our Christian experience ends in Romans 4-5, we are of all men most miserable, for we have not really entered into the fullness that Christ purchased for us. We need to learn by experience the process of sanctification, taught in Romans 6-8, and beautifully pictured for us in verses 7-21 of this 15th chapter of Genesis. It begins with nothing else but heart hunger.

***And He said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"*** (Genesis 15:7-8 RSV)

God reminded Abram that He Jehovah was the One Who had called Abram to leave Ur and go into the Land of Canaan. The land is both literal and spiritual in its significance. Through his descendants, Abram is to possess the literal land, that is, through his natural seed. But through his spiritual descendants, he is to possess fully the land in its symbolic significance. This is the fullness of life in the Spirit: All that God intends us to have in Jesus Christ – all the victory, the power, the abundance, and the fruitfulness that comes by the Holy Spirit. This is the land. It is already ours by promise, because we belong to Jesus Christ.

God reveals through an ancient covenant ritual the means by which Abram, through his descendants, will possess the land. He begins by showing Abram that the first step must be a consideration of a death!

***He said to him, "Bring Me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove and a young pigeon." And he brought Him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*** (Genesis 15:9-11 RSV)

Each of these animals and birds is a picture for us of Christ, our sacrifice. (I believe the significance of the animals being three years old represents the three year ministry of Jesus Christ. The birds of prey represent the enemies of the nation of Israel, and Abram driving them away represents Israel being preserved, where it exists today as spiritual Israel in the church. The vision of darkness and terror, I believe, is representing Israel's bondage, oppression and suffering in the land of Egypt.) Our deliverance from the reigning power of sin must be based upon that sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross. This is what we learn in Romans 6. We are told that Christ died for our sins in Romans 1-3. We learn that He died for sin in Romans 6. The perfect character of Christ is pictured for us by these animals and birds Abram brought, especially as it was poured out in death for us, so that we might have it. There on the cross, something took place that is able to break the control and dominion of sin over us and allow the Holy Spirit to produce the character of Christ in us.

Abram was made to see through this ritual and vision that just as Abraham vicariously suffered through his seed (but not actually himself), so he would receive land through his seed, (but not actually).

***"And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace, and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces."*** (Genesis 15:17)

Now, this is the whole story of the Christian life after conversion – a furnace and a lamp. That is the story of the nation Israel, throughout its history. It is a story of affliction followed by blessing. This, too, is the whole story of the Christian life. When self begins to threaten, He is a furnace – burning, scorching, and searing. When self is judged He immediately becomes a lamp, flooding the whole life with radiance and glory.

## **Genesis 16: It All Depends On Me**

Genesis 16:1 says,

***"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bare him no children."***

After all the lofty experiences of his visions, this was the heartbreaking fact to which Abram returned. For ten years he had been awaiting the fulfillment of God's promise. Sarai was by this time almost seventy-five years old. Still there was no son, and despite the renewed promises, Abram was puzzled and discouraged by the problem of barrenness.

This is also our problem in the life of faith. When the problem of barrenness begins to haunt us, the next thing is inevitable: The proposal of the flesh to do something about it!

**2. *And Sarai said unto Abram, "Behold now, Jehovah hath restrained me from bearing. Go in, I pray thee, unto my handmaid. It may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.***

There is much in this action of Sarai's which seems deserving of praise. It was, first of all, an act of genuine and costly sacrifice. She evidently had said something like this to herself: "God has promised my husband a son, through whom He means to fulfill all His promises. Yet He has never said that the son must come through me, and perhaps He means to fulfill this promise another way." So she resolves, through what struggles we can only imagine, to give up her own rights in an act of courageous renunciation. She gives up what is a wife's most precious possession, the right to have her husband's sole affection, and she offers her maid to her husband that he might have a child by her and thus fulfill the will of God. It was a perfectly proper and seemly act in the eyes of the community.

Yet, as we see the end of this action, we are aware that it was an act of appalling folly and stupidity, resulting in endless sorrow and heartache to all concerned. The results are evident yet, 4,000 years later! The Arabian nations originated in this act, and the enmity which sprang up between Israel and the Arabs, descendants of Ishmael, troubles the world to this day. If ever we have a picture of the longevity of sin, it is here.

How could Sarai have known what the results would be? How can we blame her for her decision? Here we need to go very slowly and listen very carefully. We are so like Sarai ourselves that we feel resentment at the idea that she should be blamed for this. Yet if we do not learn the lesson here, we shall find our own Christian lives continually plagued with this problem of barrenness, and we shall miss the secret of victory and fruitfulness. Here is presented pictorially the great secret Paul labors to unfold in Galatians: How to walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. He uses this very incident to illustrate it.

Sarai's difficulty was simply that all of her actions grew out of a basic philosophy which, put very simply, says: "God has told me what He wants, now the rest of it depends on me." We do the same today and end up with a church filled with divisions and strife, and realize we have Ishmael on our hands instead of Isaac.

In verse 2, we read, "**Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai and went in to Hagar the Egyptian.**" Abram was more culpable than Sarai. Abram should have been a steadying influence upon Sarai here, but instead he hearkened to her and went in to Hagar. It is the story of Adam and Eve all over again.

There are three obvious mistakes that lay behind Abram's act: **First, he listened to the voice of one who was not as far along in the spiritual life as he was.** This is a frequent source of failure today. We must ever be careful of taking advice from someone who is younger in spiritual things than we. This is why the Spirit of God warns against placing men in leadership in the church who are novices.

**Abram's second mistake was that he consented to something that especially harmonized with the desires of his self-life.** When some advice is particularly along the line of something you want very much to do, be careful. It may be nothing more than a pleasing of the self-life, as it was here.

**The third mistake, the one he shared with Sarai, was his readiness to do the will of God without seeking to discover the way of God.** Here is the heart of the problem. All through Scripture there is incident after incident to illustrate the folly of being committed to the will of God without being committed to His way.

We have seen the nature of the proposal of the flesh, now we must see the petulance that follows in verses 4-6.

The immediate results of acting in the flesh are always the same. We become petty and petulant, displaying enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, and other ugly emotions which lie ever near the surface of the fallen human heart.

The first one mentioned is **contempt**. When Abram placed Hagar into rivalry with his wife, Sarai, Hagar became insolent and impertinent and held her mistress in utter contempt, taunting her concerning her barrenness. She forced Sarai to drink the gall of bitterness.

The next thing mentioned is **unreasonableness**. Sarai said to Abram in verse 5, "**May the wrong done to me be on you.**" If you have had any doubts that Sarai was a true woman, this will convince you! She had initiated the proposal to Abram, and urged it upon him. But when he gave in, she turned around and threw it back in his face, crying, "It's all your fault. Why did you do this to me?" How completely unreasonable – but how completely characteristic of the flesh.

Then the next symptom is **irresponsibility**. Abram said to Sarai in verse 6, "**Behold, your maid is in your power, do to her as you please.**" If you have had any doubts that Abram is a true man, this should convince you! He is

dodging his responsibility, passing the buck. "Don't bother me with this," he says, "it is your problem – you settle it."

The result is harshness and rebellion. **"Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her."** (Verse 6) The whole household is in an uproar by now. Yet every one of them could have piously said, "We were only trying to do the will of the Lord." Each one is sure the others are wholly to blame, and no one is willing to face the evil of his own heart.

In the last section of the chapter, however, we see the provision of God's grace.

God extends His hand of grace to Hagar and her son, for it is the angel of the Lord who finds Hagar. This is the first appearance of this phrase in Scripture, and as we compare it with other uses, we find that this refers to none other than the pre-incarnate Christ. This is the Son of God Himself, appearing to Hagar. He says four things to her.

First, **"where do you come from and where are you going?"** (Verse 8) These are always arresting questions. Hagar answers the first, but she has nothing to say to the last. She does not know where she is going. Where can she go? The question draws her helplessness sharply to her attention.

Then the angel says in verse 9, **"Return and submit."** This is the only way to experience the grace and blessing of God. When God finds us wandering, this is always what He says, "Return and submit!" "Submit to the circumstances you dislike, and I will work it out. To do anything else is folly." So Hagar returns.

With the command to return comes the promise of blessing. Blessing always follows obedience. **"I will multiply your descendants so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."** (Verse 10) And then follows the prophecy of Ishmael's nature in verse 12. **"He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him."** He will be a non-conformist, a Missouri mule – a man with whom no one can get along.

The spiritual significance of this is explained in Galatians 4. There Paul says that Hagar is a picture of the Law and Ishmael, her son, is a picture of those who try to establish favor in God's sight through religious activity. These are the Ishmaelites, and God says there shall be a great multitude, more than any man can number. Spiritually it is written of them, **"Those who are in the flesh cannot please God,"** (Romans 8:8 RSV).

## **Genesis 17: The Circumcised Life**

Thirteen years elapsed between the account of chapter 16 and that of chapter 17, and we can well suspect these were years of unhappiness and unrest in the household of Abram. The presence of Ishmael in the home created endless

contempt, bitterness, envy, jealousy, weariness of spirit, and rebellion. These thirteen years were designed of God to teach Abram the folly of acting on his own. But after thirteen years of heartache, a new aspect of God's grace opens up before Abram. Three new developments are unfolded in chapter 17.

The first is the new revelation he has of God:

**When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." (Genesis 17:1-2 RSV)**

After thirteen years of silence, God appears to Abram in a new revelation and with a new name – God Almighty. In the Hebrew it is ***El Shadday***, which essentially means "the God Who is sufficient," the all-competent God, the adequate God, Who knows what He is doing and how to do it. This is an indication that Abram has learned something from his recent bitter experience. God says, in effect, "You have been learning for thirteen years the total inadequacy of your own efforts, through Ishmael. Now learn a new thing about Me. I am ***El Shadday***. You have discovered by sad experience how futile your plans and efforts can be without Me. Now learn how capable I am to do everything that I desire to do, whenever I desire to do it."

In this new light from God came a new demand from God. ***"Walk before Me and be blameless. I am El Shadday."***

This is what a circumcised life means, as we shall see fully in a little while. It is Christ asserting His practical Lordship in our lives. When you become a Christian, you did so by recognizing the right of Jesus Christ to be Lord in your life. This is essentially what the Lord is saying to Abram here. So important is this step, along with the new revelation of God, that new names are given to Abram and Sarai:

**Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "Behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the Father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." (Genesis 17:3-5 RSV)**

And then in verse 15:

**And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall come from her." (Genesis 17:15-16 RSV)**

Here God says to Abraham, "Look, Abram, your name now means 'father of many.' No longer will you be known as 'exalted father'. Your trouble all along has been that you were looking for your own exaltation. This must now be changed. You must lose your desire to exalt yourself; you will stop trying to advance and please yourself. Your name will now be 'the father of a multitude,' for great fruitfulness shall be evident in your life. Because you have now learned that I am **El Shadday**, your name can no longer be 'exalted' but it must now be 'fruitful,' for you will be the father of a multitude."

The same is true of Sarai. Sarai means "contentious." This speaks volumes of the home life of Abram and Sarai. Yet in the New Testament, Peter says that this woman is a model for all women to follow – not by her name, Sarai, "contentiousness," but by her new name, Sarah, "Princess." She is never referred to as Sarai in the New Testament. God does not set her up as a pattern for women until she becomes Sarah and loses her contentious spirit. As Sarah she learned to develop **"a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious,"** (1 Peter 3:4b RSV). Sarai was not naturally thus. She was an argumentative woman, a nagging wife. But she, too, had been taught by grace, and through the years she lost the need to defend herself on every occasion and became Sarah, a princess, a queen, an honored woman, having a meek and quiet spirit, very precious in the sight of God.

Now we come to the great sign of circumcision given in verses 9 through 13, the sign forever associated with the covenant between Abraham and God. The covenant procedure is recorded in verses 22-27. Circumcision is the great sign of Jewry, intended by God to be the mark of His possession, that they were God's instrument to use for blessing among the nations.

Now let us remember that what was physical and literal to Abraham is intended to have spiritual significance to us. In the New Testament, therefore, we no longer read of circumcision of the flesh but of the **heart**. The heart is the symbol of the soul – the mind, emotions, and will, the whole personality. Every believer in Christ is to bear on his heart the sign of Christ's Lordship. The total personality is to be at His disposal. That is the Christian's circumcised life.

Paul says to the Philippians, **"We are the circumcision, who worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,"** (Philippians 3:3). We are to have no reliance upon ourselves, but rely totally upon Him. Every thought, every imagination, is brought into captivity to Christ. That is the circumcised life.

## **Genesis 18:1-5: When God Comes to Dinner**

We are told clearly in Verse 1 Who this is that appears to Abraham. **"The Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre."** It is Jehovah Himself coming to see Abraham, and with Him come two angels who appear later on in connection with

the destruction of Sodom. These are the same two who visit Lot to warn him of the impending judgment upon the cities of the plain. Here is one of those mysterious appearances of Christ before He came to take upon Himself human life. He appears as a man, accompanied by two angels in human disguise.

Abraham does not recognize Him. The salutation, "my lord," with which Abraham addresses the central figure, is simply the common language of courtesy and does not mean that he had any thoughts that this was indeed the Lord.

This is obviously a test of Abraham's heart – whether he is really a circumcised believer – in which God appears in such a commonplace way that Abraham is not aware of His identity.

God tests us when we are unprepared, and off-guard. Is this not the meaning of Paul's words in Romans 12? ***"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, ... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,"*** (Romans 12:1a RSV). It is one thing to be present in a great meeting where the Spirit is moving in evident power and an appeal goes out to rededicate the heart, and we hear the words, "Present your bodies as living sacrifices unto the Lord." Under the stress or pull of that meeting we may well come up to the front and say, "Here am I Lord, I give my life to you." But this is never the test. The test comes when some situation occurs in daily life that forces you to face the question: Is my body really available for him to do what he wants? Am I ready to respond to the need of the human heart right there in front of me, right there at that moment? Am I ready to give of myself without stint and without limitation to meet a demand that comes suddenly in the course of my busy life?

This is what God is doing to Abraham when He appears without warning in the heat of the day. Now let us see how Abraham fared in his examination.

***And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*** (Genesis 18:6-8 RSV)

How beautifully Abraham met his test! Look at the words of action here:

He hastened into the tent and he said to her, ***"Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal."***

Then, Abraham ran to the herd and picked out a calf and gave it to the servant who hastened to prepare it. These words all indicate Abram's prompt and ready response to the evident need before him.

Sarah, too, is involved, personally making bread, although she also had servants. Hagar was there and others, but Sarah herself makes this bread and kneads it and makes it into loaves.

All this is a beautiful picture for us of the fellowship of a circumcised heart with Christ in becoming His instrument to meet the cry of human need all around. The Lord said in Revelation 3:20 (RSV): **"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me."** That is, we will fellowship together, we will have dinner together. This is not simply private enjoyment, not just a social hour for our own pleasure. This is a picture of the Lord using us as an instrument to meet the need of those around, and, in so doing, we enter into fellowship with the heart of Christ. When Christ comes in to us, He doesn't come in merely to give us a good time, to bless us, and make it an enjoyable experience. He comes in to fulfill His long-standing desire to be what He came into the world to be – a Savior to seek and to save that which was lost, to give and show compassion to others, to minister to human needs whatever they may be, through us.

**"And when did we see Thee sick or in prison and visit Thee?" You remember His words: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me,"** (Matthew 25:40 RSV).

This is the test of our faith. James says:

**Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.** (James 1:27 RSV)

This test reveals that Abraham really has a circumcised heart. He is not doing this because he wants to gain something for himself. He is not trying to impress anybody. He is not seeking credit or recognition. He is not trying to display his piety. Even if he had known who they were, he could not have treated them better. What made him do this? It was the fact that he had a circumcised heart: He really was Christ's.

These tests come to us every day. When the need for help arises, what do you do about it? Do you run and hide, or run to meet it, as Abraham did here?

The last picture applies to the feminine side of the household. Here we see Sarah in doubt.

Here the first hint is given to Abraham as to who these guests are. They ask him in verse 9, **"Where is Sarah your wife?"** Only the Lord could know of her recent name-change, but here is a Man Who asks, **"Where is Sarah?"** Abraham begins to realize then Who this is, and when the question is followed with the repeated promise of a son, he is sure of the identity of his guest.

Sarah made no sound at all, but laughed to herself, we are told (verse 12). But beyond the curtains, the Lord read her thoughts and said to Abraham in verses 13 and 14, ***"Why does Sarah laugh in her heart? Is anything too hard for the Lord? I'll set a date for this: I'll be back next spring and she shall have a son."*** And we read in verse 15 that Sarah was afraid. She saw that her heart was open and known to God. She saw that there was One Who reads hearts as we read books and she reacted just like we do. She denied that she had laughed. But God knows that to justify or excuse our sin or to protect it and rationalize it and build a wall about it is to drive us into further misery and heartache. We cut ourselves off from divine help. And so the stern word comes to her in verse 15. ***"No, but you did laugh. Admit it, face it: you did laugh, Sarah."***

Sarah's laughter is cynical, unbelieving. If this were all of the story, we would be tempted to say that this woman is no example to follow. But over in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, we get the rest of the story. There, in that wonderful eleventh chapter, the hall of fame of the heroes of faith, Sarah's name appears:

**By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.** (Hebrews 11:11 RSV)

As Sarah began to think of the One Who had said these words, she felt the full force of that question, ***"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"*** And she looked beyond the contrary facts of her own life and beyond the contrary feelings of her own heart and said, "Of course not. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. If He has promised, then it shall be done." Through faith she received power to conceive when she was past age because she counted Him faithful Who had promised.

What a beautiful lesson this is on the nature of faith. Faith looks beyond all the contrary circumstances to rest upon the character of the One Who promised. Do not be misled by the popular delusion that faith stands by itself, that it is simply believing – anything! Faith must have a promise to rest upon. Anything else is presumption, gullibility, folly. But when God has given a word, it is the Word of God, and it can be trusted despite circumstance, feelings, or anything else. For is anything too hard for the Lord? Sarah rested upon that and believed God.

### **Genesis 18:16-33: How Prayer Works**

As we look at this section of Scripture, we can learn some valuable lessons on the nature of prayer: First, we see that prayer begins with the proposal of God in verse 17, ***"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do....?"***

This marks a very important fact concerning prayer: Prayer never really begins with man; it begins with God! True prayer is never a man's plans which he brings to God for Him to bless. God is always the One Who proposes. Prayer enters in when God then enlists the partnership of man in carrying out His program. In other words, unless we base our prayers on a promise, or a warning, or a conviction of God's will, we have no right to pray. That is why we are always to pray, "Thy will be done."

Some people feel that the prayer of faith is crawling out on a limb and then begging God to keep someone from sawing it off, but that is not real prayer, that is presumption. If God makes it clear that He wants you out on a limb, fine – you will be perfectly safe there. If not, it is presumptuous of you to crawl out on a limb, expecting God to keep you there.

The difference is simply this: The prayer of faith is acting on a previous knowledge of what God wants. It is always founded upon a promise. It begins with a proposal which God makes, or a conviction He gives, or a warning He utters. On the other hand, the prayer of presumption is discovering something we would like to do, and then asking God to bless it. That kind of thing is doomed at the outset. In fact, this is why so many "works of faith" fail, when they otherwise might have been wonderfully blessed of God.

I think many Christians believe that because they have accepted Jesus Christ, all God has is now open to them. But there must be the walk, the daily appropriation of what He is, so that we learn to walk in righteousness. When we do, then God begins to share His secrets. I think the reason some people get a lot more out of the Bible than others is that they have learned this two-way relationship: God loves to tell secrets to His people!

God's proposal to include Abraham with His plans not only enlists the partnership of man, but is based on an impartial and careful justice. The Lord says to Abraham in Verse 20: ***"Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to Me."*** This, of course, is the language of accommodation. God does not need to go down and visit any city in order to see what is going on. He is using Abraham's own language to express the truth which reflects His nature. He talks as though a great outcry has been coming up to His throne from these wicked cities.

Before He judges the cities of the plain, God carefully investigates the charges and probes to see what the conditions are. Then He tells Abraham that He is going to destroy these cities. Actually, He does not specifically tell Abraham what He will do, but when Abraham hears the ominous words, "I will know," then he knows what God will do. Abraham knows all the unbridled lust, the foul acts of homosexuality, and the open passion for obscenity, the lurid and salacious

attitude that permeated all public and private life in these cities. Abraham knows that the cities' doom is sure.

And this leads us to the next step in prayer, the passions of man in verses 22-32.

This is a remarkable account. It sounds as though Abraham is backing God into a corner and making Him lower the ante every time. I wonder what we would have said if we had been in Abraham's shoes. I think some of us would have wrapped our robes of self-righteousness around us, and said, "Good for You, Lord; they've got it coming. I wondered just how much you could take. I've long since had enough." Or perhaps we might have said, "Lord, do You mean You are going to destroy the city? All these wonderful people – I know they are evil, Lord, but they mean well. They have just been carried away a little bit. Don't be too hard on them." Perhaps we would have interceded in that way.

Several issues are of great interest in this account:

First, Abraham recognizes the mercy of God. Notice that he says, "Lord, suppose there are fifty men in the city that are righteous. Wouldn't you spare the whole city for them?" Notice the way he is arguing. This is so easily misunderstood. Abraham is not trying to shame God into doing the right thing by appealing to His self-respect in this reminder, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" – as a mother might shame her child into doing right. God does not need anyone to remind Him to do right, or to tell Him it would be wrong to slay the righteous with the wicked. Rather, Abraham is basing his appeal on the knowledge of God's nature. He knows God would never destroy the righteous with the wicked. Now he is asking Him to go further and spare the wicked for the sake of fifty righteous. Abraham is recognizing the basis of God's mercy in every age since then.

In addition to the recognition of God's mercy, we note Abraham's awareness of his own status before God. In verse 27, Abraham answers: ***"Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Lord, I haven't any right to ask this of You. You, Lord, are wholly righteous, true, and I don't need to tell You what to do. Who am I, a man, talking to You – but Lord, I can't help but say this thing that is on my heart. Would you not spare the city if there are only 45 instead of 50?"*** This is the kind of language which delights God to hear and honor, for it is the very opposite of the pride and deceit that makes us think we can demand of God what we want.

The third consideration is for the protection of the righteous in Sodom. Abraham continues his dialogue until he comes down to ten people and stops there. Why does Abraham stop at ten? Because there were ten members in Lot's family. We learn in the next chapter that he and his own children and the ones they were to marry constituted exactly ten people.

Abraham never asks God to spare Lot and his family, but out of compassion for the wicked, he keeps trying to save the whole city for the sake of Lot and his family. God has a deep concern for the protection of the righteous, and, simultaneously, compassion on the foolish, lustful men who inflict the hurts. God seeks the slightest opening to show His mercy.

In one verse here at the end, the purpose of prayer is suggested to us:

***And the Lord went His way, when He had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.*** (Genesis 18:33 RSV)

It does not say, "And the Lord went His way when Abraham had finished speaking to Him." It says, "***when He had finished speaking to Abraham.***" In other words. Abraham did not quit here, God did.

The verse here suggests that God had initiated this whole conversation with Abraham and led him along all through it, and when he had responded in fullness as God desired, God terminated the dialogue and went His way. In other words, Abraham was not asking God to do something for him; it was God Who prayed in Abraham and set the limits of the conversation.

This agrees fully with what we read in the New Testament about prayer. In Romans Paul says, "***For we do not know how to pray as we ought,***" (Romans 8:26b RSV). Do you know what to pray for about yourself or about anyone else? No, you do not. But, he says, "***the Holy Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings which we cannot express, but which are nevertheless there in the heart.***" (Romans 8:26c-27). True prayer, therefore, is never man talking to God, but God talking to God through man. It is God Who is causing Abraham to feel His own compassion and to reflect His own desire for an opportunity to show mercy. This is the reason for prayer.

In that great verse about prayer in Philippians 4:6 (RSV), Paul says, "***Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.***" And what happens? God will do the thing you ask? No, that is not the promise. "***And the peace of God, which passes all understanding***" (Philippians 4:7a RSV), which you cannot reason out, which you cannot explain, which no circumstance will permit you to understand, the peace that rests at the heart of God, "***will possess your hearts and minds,***" (Philippians 4:7b RSV). Circumstances will not be any different. You rise from prayer and find your mother-in-law just as nasty as ever, your boss just as unreasonable, your children just as irritating, your husband just as stubborn, your wife just as bossy. Ah, but you have the peace of God that passes all understanding, which keeps your heart and mind through any circumstance.

Prayer affects the timing of God. Now this is a mysterious thing, but I am sure it is true. Certainly prayer does not change, nor alter, the will or purpose of God. Prayer is not a way to make God change His mind. When He announces something, He will do it. When He declares He will move in a certain direction, He always moves in that direction and no amount of prayer will ever change it. However, prayer can defer judgment, and prayer can also speed up blessing. It affects the timing.

We have such an example of how prayer affects God's timing in the case of Nineveh. When Jonah went there and announced **"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"** (Jonah 3:4b), the whole city went to prayer and repented, and God postponed the destruction of Nineveh. He waited until almost one hundred years later when the city was finally destroyed.

Also, Hezekiah in Judah had a severe illness of terrible carbuncles, boils that were eating away his very life. God sent the prophet Isaiah to him and he announced, **"Fix up your light in your house, you're going to die,"** (Isaiah 38:1). And Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and wept and prayed and said, **"Oh, God, spare my life."** God heard and stopped Isaiah as he was going out the door and told him to turn around and go back with another message. Isaiah went back in and said to the king, **"God has heard your prayer and added fifteen years to your life."** (Isaiah 38:5) Prayer doesn't change God's purpose but prayer does affect the timing.