

## Lesson 11

# Genesis Chapter 15 & 16

As Abram settled into the land of Canaan, we saw that he was a man of growing trust in God and virtue. After making amends for his behavior in Egypt, he made a fresh start with God. He showed himself to be dedicated to his family, even to the point of risking his life to save his nephew, Lot. He received God's blessing from Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, who made an offering of bread and wine. He was one who recognized that God is worthy of human generosity. In a test of his allegiance, he refused the offer of great wealth in order to live only in God's debt. He appeared to be a man of solid faith.

From the time Abram left Haran to the time of the events recorded in chapter fourteen of Genesis, probably about ten years had gone by. In chapter fifteen, we will see what effect waiting can have on a man's faith. The promise of descendants and a great nation was wonderful, but it had to begin with at least one heir. Although Abram counts himself as God's man, what is he to make of the time it is taking for the really big event to happen? How does his faith hold up under that kind of test?

In this lesson, we hear a conversation that Abram has with God about this test. It will prove to us that our intuition about the intimacy and love that God and Abram shared was on target. This exchange is the first recorded prayer in Scripture—not, of course, the first time a man has prayed but our first record of a prayer. We already know Abram as a man of faith and obedience; surely he spoke regularly with God. The prayer recorded in Genesis 15 begins the long history of written accounts of what men of faith say to God, especially when they are tested, and what God answers back. We are all ears.

### Read Chapter 15

**Abram begins a conversation with God, the first recorded prayer in Scripture. What veiled charge does Abram make against God? What indications are there that this is a problem that has been on Abram's mind for awhile?**

Abram suggests that God hasn't really kept His promise. Remember that it has been about ten years since he left Haran. He and Sarai are getting older every year. It appears that Abram's mind has been fixed on this dilemma long enough for him to think he had to come up with another plan to obtain an heir. Eliezer was Abram's slave; it was not uncommon in that culture for barren couples to adopt a son to make him their heir. Abram seems to think that he will have to resort to this practice because God has not given him a son of his own. We can't miss the tone of disappointment and frustration in his words. The long wait for Abram and Sarai to see concrete proof of God's promise is taking its toll.

**How does God address Abram's doubt? Why do you suppose God responded this way?**

The first thing God does in response to Abram's doubt is to speak the truth to him: "Your own son shall be your heir." Perhaps Abram thought that he had misunderstood God—there had been no mention directly of his own son being his heir, although that was certainly the implication. God speaks to clear away Abram's second guessing. Then, knowing how difficult it is for Abram to believe this word, God takes him outside and tells him to look at the stars, challenging him to count them. He assures Abram that his descendants will be as innumerable as the stars.

This is a very interesting response. What kind of response do we think Abram was hoping for? Perhaps he wanted a timetable or a schedule of when this son would appear. Maybe he wanted reassurance from God that He recognized the limitations to reproduction brought on by age. Was he hoping to hear God say, "Yes, I can see you aren't getting any younger. It's time to get on with this." That is not what happens. Instead, God directs Abram's attention to a beautiful sight in nature, the countless stars of heaven. God allows the stars to be witnesses to His power and wisdom. He does not defend or explain Himself to Abram. He simply joins the evidence of His own word of revelation to Abram ("Your own son shall be your heir") to the evidence from nature that He knows what He's doing. Then he leaves the decision up to Abram. This kind of response acknowledges Abram's need for encouragement in a time of doubt; it is not contemptuous of human weakness. Nevertheless, it does not make God accountable to Abram. God is asking him to exercise faith. This is not blind faith, since Abram has a solid word from God, as well as the witness of the stars. Abram will have to decide whether He can trust God for what he can't see on the strength of what he can.

**Try to picture Abram gazing at the stars. What do you think was going through his mind? Describe the scene that you see as accurately as you can.**

Perhaps when God first took Abram outside to look at the stars, he was disappointed. So many questions must have been racing through his head: "How long will I have to wait to see this son that has been promised to me? Ten years is a long time! Did I make a big mistake in leaving my father's house to come out here to this strange land? Who is this God, anyway? What will I tell Sarai? Will she really believe that she's going to become pregnant with my son? And now I'm told to look at the stars. How's that going to help?"

Maybe those questions kept him distracted for a time, looking at the stars but not really seeing them. Yet think about what a starry night looks like and know that what Abram saw was more magnificent than any night we've seen, since all of us live in the modern era of artificial light and an atmosphere affected by pollution. Even modern men, however, stand in awe of the wonder of the heavens at night. What do the stars inspire? They make us feel small enough to be humble, which is always a good thing. The sheer vastness of the sky and the countless lights of the stars make us marvel over the creation and the Creator of such splendor. They give us a recognition of and respect for God's power. Paradoxically, they also move us to amazement that in a universe of such size, God knows and cares about us, about me. While we are star-gazing, most of us eventually become very quiet in the presence of this great mystery. If we spend time looking at the night sky, words start to seem like an intrusion. We simply want to drink it all in, which only silence seems to accommodate properly. Is this what happened to Abram? Did his face at first seem creased with doubt and frustration? Was it a mirror of all the years, months, days, and minutes that went into those ten years of waiting? Were his eyes in one place but his mind another? God left him in silence to take a good, long look. Was Abram gradually caught up in the reverie that the night sky always creates? Did his face begin to relax, his dazzled eyes shining with wonder?

How long did he look at that sky? We don't know what time it was when God took him out there. Did Abram lie down on the ground, to mull it all over? We know that the action that follows, in vs. 7-11, seems to have happened during the day. That means Abram might have looked at the stars all night. We don't know how much time lapsed between God's statement in vs. 5 and Abram's act of faith in vs. 6. Quite possibly it took him many hours, even until dawn, to make his decision to put his doubts aside and believe the Lord. It seems his doubts were finally silenced by the wordless testimony of the star-filled sky: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Ps. 19:1-4). Abram "heard" the "voice" that "is not heard" and put his confidence in God.

**In vs. 6, we see that Abram "believed the Lord," and God "reckoned" or "counted" it as righteousness in Abram. In other words, Abram's trust in the promises of God made him righteous, or "pleasing," in God's sight. Catholics speak of this as being in a state of grace. This was not the first time Abram had put his trust in God. Why do you suppose this act was especially pleasing to God at this point in Abram's life?**

Abraham's faith in God had been put to the test by the passing of time. We know from Eden that God tests man's love. Man's decision to love and obey God must be a free choice. It must be a choice arising from more than just convenience. The circumstances of Abram's ten-year wait, with no heir in sight, made it a difficult decision to continue his walk of faith. Surely his initial faith and obedience to God's call while he was in Haran resulted in God reckoning him as righteous. In Heb. 11:8, Abram is remembered as a man of faith who "obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go." That would have been the first occasion of Abram being "justified" by faith, as St. Paul would say. Perhaps another occasion was when God told him to walk through the land He promised to give him, and Abram built an altar to the Lord (Genesis 13). This episode in Genesis 15 is clearly another occasion when Abram's faith pleased God, perhaps because of the difficult test of time. Each decision of trust in the promises of God advances righteousness in Abram. He is becoming God's true friend.

## **The Example of Abram in the New Testament**

### **Read Romans 4:1-4, 9-12**

[The episode in Genesis 15 of Abram's faith making him righteous is one that is frequently recalled in the New Testament, especially by St. Paul. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, its interpretation became a source of sharp disagreement between Protestants and Catholics. It is worth pausing a moment to consider this. About the passage in Romans, note the following:

- a. The word "justified" in vs. 2 means being in a state of grace, cleansed from sin and pleasing in God's sight.
- b. St. Paul's reference to "works" (vs. 2) is not a reference to the "good works" that we do from faith and gratitude to God. The term as he uses it here refers to "the works" or "rules" that made the Jews a nation separate from all others, beginning with circumcision and including the dietary and liturgical laws, as well as the Ten Commandments, that God gave to Israel through Moses. Many Jews of St. Paul's day believed that simply by virtue of being born a Jew, observing all the requirements or "works" of the law, they were righteous in God's sight. For them, righteousness was not a matter of faith and trust in God but a matter of keeping all the rules.
- c. To prove that Jews should not look to their observance of the Jewish law in order to be pleasing in God's sight, St. Paul uses Abraham as an example. He was, after all, the first Jew. Abraham was "reckoned as righteous" before there were any Jewish rules or "works." See that in vss. 9-12, St. Paul shows that Abraham was righteous in God's sight before he was circumcised (which would be a sign of the covenant between God and His people, but which doesn't happen until chapter 17 of Genesis). A true Jew, as St. Paul says, is one who is "not merely circumcised," but who follows "the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (vs. 12).
- d. St. Paul's point in all of this is to say that Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) are all "justified," or put into a state of grace, in the same way—through faith and not by keeping a set of rules. It is a gift from God (grace) and not something we earn.
- e. Notice that St. Paul does not use the phrase "faith alone" when he writes about Abraham. He simply refers to Abraham's "faith." His point is that Christians must put their faith in an outrageous promise from God just as Abraham did. The promise of the gospel is wildly improbable. We must believe that God sent His Son in human flesh to live and die for us, sinners that we are. We must believe that Jesus worked miracles and came back from the dead. We must believe that He paid the price for our rebellion and made it possible for us to be forgiven and to live forever with God, in new bodies and divine glory. To put our trust in God for this promise requires the same kind of faith that Abraham had—"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).]

### **Abram asks a question about his possession of the land of Canaan of the Lord in vs. 8. Is it a question of doubt? What kind of question is it?**

[In ancient Semitic cultures, covenants were sometimes sealed by cutting animals into pieces and having the two parties making the covenant pass between the pieces (see Jeremiah 34:18). The idea was to demonstrate their commitment to keeping the terms of the covenant by taking an oath: "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I don't keep this covenant."]

Abram has already put his trust in God, so the question he asks cannot be prompted by doubt. Perhaps he is asking for some physical demonstration that will give evidence of the promise God has made for the land, just as the stars had been evidence of his human descendants. It is not the question, "What will You show me that will make me believe?" Rather, it is the question, "What will You show me that represents the promise You have made?" He is asking for a sign of the covenant God is making with him, not for a sign of God's trustworthiness. The joining of God's promises to material realities in nature has always been at the heart of God's covenants with men.

### **Picture Abram setting up this elaborate arrangement of dead animals. He had to drive away the birds of prey. What does that tell you about the time factor in this scene? What do you think was going through his head?**

It looks like Abram once again had to wait on God. If he had to chase away the birds of prey, the carcasses must have been lying there for a while. There must have been time for doubts to creep into Abram's mind. Did he have to fend them off, just as he fended off the birds? This picture of Abram, sitting in the sun with a pile of dead animals, waiting for God to act, is a powerful one. In a way, it will be repeated throughout the history of Israel and the history of man. Israel, the great nation promised to Abram, would repeatedly lie in pieces, waiting on God to act. The Church, the new Israel,

continues this waiting. "Though already present in his Church, Christ's reign is nevertheless yet to be fulfilled 'with power and great glory' by the king's return to earth. This reign is still under attack by the evil powers, even though they have been defeated definitively by Christ's Passover. Until everything is subject to him, 'until there be realized new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church, in her sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons of God.' That is why Christians pray, above all in the Eucharist, to hasten Christ's return by saying to him: Maranatha! 'Our Lord, come!'" (CCC 671)

### **Why do you suppose Abram fell into a deep sleep? Isn't that anticlimactic?**

Abram's deep sleep is reminiscent of Adam's sleep, when God solved the only problem he had in Eden, which was being alone. It perhaps represents man's ultimate inability to solve his own problems or ensure his own fate. It underscores dramatically how divine initiative and human helplessness come together to accomplish God's loving purposes (think of the sleeping apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane, upon whom Christ intended to build His Church).

### **God speaks to Abram while he's asleep, apparently, and gives him a somewhat gloomy picture of the future of his descendants. How does this compare with God's earlier promise to Abram of a "great nation," one that would be a source of blessing to all men?**

It appears that the nation destined to come from Abram will have a time of suffering before it achieves glory. This, of course, describes the early history of Israel, which began as a collection of twelve tribes that wound up in slavery in Egypt (more about that later in Genesis). They multiplied greatly while their bondage worsened. Finally, after about 400 years there, God called Moses to lead His people out of slavery and back home to Canaan again. The covenant God made with Moses at Mt. Sinai (see Exodus 19-24) would be a ratification of this promise of land that He makes to Abram, while Abram is in a deep sleep. Why would the nation to come from Abram suffer such a humiliation in its early life? It was to teach Israel a lesson that would be repeated throughout her history. God chose Israel not because it was a better nation than all the others—how can a nation of slaves in bondage have anything to boast about? He chose them because He wanted to show His power to those who, humanly speaking, have no hope of saving themselves. In their own national history, they would live out the story of Eden, a story of human beings in bondage and very far from home, whose only hope is the power and mercy of God. The greatness of Israel was meant to be rooted in humility.

### **God is represented by a "smoking fire pot and a flaming torch" as He solemnized the covenant He made with Abram. [Note: This phrase probably indicates only one symbol, "namely, the appearance as of a smoking furnace from which torch-like flames shot out." (The New Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1960; p. 90)] Read Exodus 3:2; 13:21; 19:18; 40:38. Why do you suppose God appears as a fire in the history of His people, beginning in this scene in Genesis?**

Fire is a powerful presence among us. Its light can lead the way or make us draw back. Its appearance can console or terrify. Its heat can sustain or destroy; it can harden or melt. How the fire is experienced depends on what comes into contact with it. In that sense, fire is an apt symbol of God's presence. It does justice to all that He is in His essence. The Scripture consistently refers to the fire of God, as both an expression of His power and love, as well as His wrath and judgment.

### **Notice that it is only God who passes between the animal parts, not Abram. What does this suggest about the covenant that God made with Abram?**

God's covenant with Abram, to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan, is one in which He is the responsible party. This is the perfect picture of God's gracious condescension to man. God appears to be doing the work of both parties. He, of course, will never fail to keep His covenant. Abram's hopes for a future homeland are entirely secure. This is the first occasion in Abram's life when God confirms a part of the promises He made to him when He called him out of Haran (see Gen. 12:1-3) by sealing a covenant with him. He had promised to make a "great nation" of him (which will take descendants and land), to make his "name great" (which means a dynasty of kings to come forth from him), and to make him a "blessing" to "all the families of earth" (which means Abram will be the source of universal blessing, which later came through Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abram). There will be two more occasions when promises become covenants in Abraham's life. Each is preceded by a time of testing (in this case, the test of time) and each is followed by an action of God (in this case, the "sign" of the covenant given in the liturgical ceremony of the animal pieces and fire).

## Chapter 16

The test of time on Abram's faith produced an occasion of doubt in his relationship with God. The passing of years without a son born to him tempted him to come up with a new plan to fulfill God's promise. God met Abram in a powerful way during this time of uncertainty. Abram was honest about his perception of the dilemma. God heard his honest doubts and enabled him to rise above them. By repeating the truth to Abram ("Your own son shall be your heir") and by directing his attention to the powerful witness to His power and wisdom given by the night sky, God inspired confidence and trust once again in Abram. His act of faith in the midst of reasons to doubt pleased God, making Abram righteous in His sight.

Yet what about Sarai? How is she holding up during the long time of waiting? This lesson will enable us to see how she responds to her own doubts about God's promises to them. In addition, we will see how God expands the covenant He has made with Abram and Sarai, when He visits them nearly twenty-five years after they had left home for the land of Canaan. With so much time spent waiting for God to act, what sort of people have they become? What does God expect from them? In their advancing years, will they have an opportunity for a fresh start and new hope? In the longest exchange between God and man yet recorded in Genesis, we will have an opportunity to see the scope of God's plan for Abram and his descendants, its benefits and its requirements. It is the occasion of yet another promise being transformed into a covenant.

### Sarai's Plan Read Genesis 16:1-6

**It seems that Sarai had doubts of her own about whether she would ever have a son. What is the difference between what Abram did, when he doubted, and what Sarai did?**

[It was the custom of the time for a barren wife to give her slave girl to her husband, in the hope of having an heir. "It was not strictly polygamy but rather a means the lawful wife used in order to give her husband children. From what we know of Babylonian laws of the time, if the slave girl became pregnant and then began to look down on her mistress, she could be punished and revert to being treated as a slave. That is what Hagar fears will happen, so she runs away." (The Navarre Bible: Pentateuch; Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1999; p. 97-98)]

Sarai's doubts are very similar to Abram's. She, too, wants to hold God responsible for her lack of a son: "...the Lord has prevented me from bearing children" (v. 3). This is a little stronger accusation than Abram's. His was a charge of failure to act; hers is a charge of meddling intervention. Her mind also raced ahead to come up with an alternative plan of action. The big difference between how they each doubted is that Abram spoke his doubts to God; Sarai seems to have let them burn inside of her. Abram questioned God; Sarai issues orders. Perhaps we want to excuse Sarai by saying that it was Abram who had the intimate relationship with God, not her.

He was the head of the home and acted as the priest of the family. How would she have an opportunity to speak her doubts to God? She could have presented her doubts to Abram, with a simple request: "Ask your God about it." Instead, she takes things into her own hands. She circumvents both Abram and God.

**What should Abram have done when Sarai made this proposal? What did he actually do (vs. 2)? Why do you think he acted that way? What does this remind you of?**

Abram should have exercised his role as Sarai's husband and domestic priest by insisting that they refer the plan to God for His approval. It was his job to make sure that anything they might do to hurry along God's promise was not an act of unbelief. He could have gone to God and said, "You told me my own son would be my heir. Did you mean a son from my own wife, Sarai?" Instead of asking God to clarify the situation, he yields to Sarai's urgency.

Knowing from our previous lesson that Abram had consciously put his faith in God for the promise of a son, we might be surprised that he does not stand up to Sarai. Yet this episode reveals just how human these people are. Abram looks like a true son of Adam in this scene. Adam, who was perhaps intimidated by the serpent, refused to be the domestic priest in Eden, defending God's honor and His plan for man. Perhaps Abram is intimidated by Sarai and wants to avoid confrontation with her. Perhaps her doubts stir up the embers of his own. Perhaps the reasonableness of her plan appeals

to him. Perhaps he fears his life would be miserable unless he yields to her. We cannot help but remember Eden in this episode. As Adam listened to Eve and ate the forbidden fruit, so Abram "hearkened to the voice of his wife" and departed from God's plan for them. What Sarai needed from Abram was the same thing Eve needed from Adam - a man who puts God first, no matter what the cost, whether it's facing a cunning serpent or an emotional, insistent wife. We almost don't need to read the rest of the details to see where this will lead.

### **What were the unexpected (but perhaps predictable) consequences of this departure from God's plan?**

Sarai's plan leads almost immediately to disaster, which is what we should have expected. Hagar looks down on Sarai, and Sarai blows up at Abram. She appears to be blaming him for the whole mess. Surely here is a husband who can't win - his wife insists that he carry out her will and when he does, she blames him for the problems it creates. Abram has another chance here to assert his role as head of the home. He could have taken the sorry problem to God; instead, he removes himself from it. By allowing Sarai to take care of things, he simply deepens the chaos within the household. In some ways, this is a living example of the effects of original sin on male and female. When men fail in their leadership, women are ready to usurp authority, with problematic results. No one is happy.

## **The Birth of Ishmael Read Genesis 16:7-16**

[Because the "angel of the Lord" (vs. 7) speaks in the first person as God, most commentators see this as an actual visitation by God Himself and not a visit from a created angelic being. This happens periodically throughout the rest of the Old Testament (Gen. 32:30; Exodus 3:2, Joshua 5:13-15). Some scholars suggest that these angelic visits to men are the Second Person of the Trinity, the One Who, someday, would become the man, Jesus. In the Incarnation, Jesus is truly "a God of seeing," as Hagar exclaims in vs. 13. The Hebrew there means "a God Who can be seen," as is made clear in the last phrase of that verse.]

### **Why do you suppose that God deals kindly with Hagar, promising a great number of descendants to her through her son, Ishmael (whose name means "God hears")?**

[Ishmael became the father of the Arab nations, brothers by blood to the Jews, yet in constant battle with them, just as God foretold in vs. 12.]

God always deals kindly with slaves. As we know from an earlier lesson, He would allow His own people to become slaves in Egypt so that they would comprehend how utterly dependent on Him they were. The Incarnation was God's response to the captivity of sin that binds all descendants of Adam and Eve. In this episode, Hagar seems especially helpless. She is used by Sarai to obtain a son, then is treated harshly when she offends her mistress by her attitude. She runs away out of fear.

Notice that when the angel of the Lord asks her the kind of questions that God asked Adam, Eve, and Cain, Hagar responds honestly and without accusation or blame. God tells her to return and submit to Sarai, a life that is sure to be difficult. Yet she is bound to be safer there than on her own in a strange land. God encourages her with the promise of many descendants, even though her son's life will be characterized by family hostility.

Hagar seems humbly appreciative of this visit from God, marveling over the fact that she is still alive to talk about it. God meets her in a situation not created by Him. Her pregnancy is not part of His plan for Abram. There will be long-lasting consequences of this action. But Hagar personally meets God. He stoops down to relieve the affliction caused by Abram and Sarai. He never turns a blind eye to human suffering, even (perhaps especially) when it comes from human blundering.