

Lesson12

Genesis 17

In the first covenant with Abram, God transforms His first promise into the reality that Abraham will be the father of many descendants through Ishmael, and by giving Abram land, gave these descendants the means to become nations. The special promise of becoming a dynasty (making his name great) involved more than just fathering children. It required a special descendant. One in whom all of God's promises could be fulfilled; more than just a Patriarch, a priest-king that would lead the nations back to God. It is interesting that every time He offers everything to someone He requires them to give it up in order to keep it. The typology is unmistakable. God offers Abraham exodus (a way out) from sin and death by having Abraham endure a small death (circumcision).

Abram Becomes Abraham Read Genesis 17:1-8

God appears to Abram thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael. He is ready to turn the promise to make Abram's "name great" into a covenant. Why do you suppose He commands Abram to "walk before me, and be blameless" as He announces another covenant action?

Each time in Genesis that God has entered into a covenant with men, there has been an implicit understanding that they are to live in a way that honors Him. With Adam and Eve, God's commands were more positive than negative - be fruitful, have dominion, and don't eat the forbidden fruit. With Noah, the commands were similar - be fruitful, have dominion, and respect life. Now that God is formalizing a promise into a covenant (the promise to make his "name great" in Gen. 12:2), He tells Abram to live his life blamelessly before Him. This perpetuates the pattern we have seen thus far in Genesis, in which God does a mighty thing, with mighty promises, and then requires a life appropriate to the great gift He has given man. In Eden, God blessed man and woman with life in a beautiful garden, with each other, and with a provision for their every need. They could preserve this blessing by obedience. With Noah, God preserved him and his family from utter destruction. He blessed them with all they needed; they could preserve this blessing by their obedience. With Abram, God has opened heaven to heap up promises of blessings for him, his descendants, and all the earth. For his part, Abram will preserve the blessing by living his life before God in righteousness, as God directs him. To be "blameless" is to be "perfect." Did the episode with Hagar call forth from God this kind of exhortation? Quite possibly. God wants Abram's complete trust in Him, always a covenant requirement.

This is just what Jesus says to those in the New Covenant: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Like Abram, we preserve the great gift of new life from God by walking before Him blamelessly.

What is Abram's response to this appearance of God and these words (vs. 3)?

Abram falls down to the ground, in an act of complete reverence for God.

Abram's name gets changed to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude of nations." Why do you suppose he gets this name change now and not when he first left Haran?

In this appearance to Abram, God is about to do something in and through him that will create the beginnings of a new nation. Abram has lived for twenty-five years with God. He has occasionally stumbled, but he has never turned back from God's call to trust Him. God is pleased with Abram's faith; He changes his name to reflect the fact that He is going to make of this faithful man "a multitude of nations." Perhaps it was necessary for his faith to be tested before he would be ready to receive a new name like this.

By living in Canaan for twenty-five years, he has left behind for good the life he once knew. Now even his name will reflect the new thing that God is doing in him.

The Covenant of Circumcision **Read Genesis 17:9-21**

[The practice of circumcision was fairly extensive in the world of Abraham's time. The Egyptians circumcised boys at the age of 13, which would have been Ishmael's age at this time. For the Jews, it became a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. This is one of many instances of God's appropriating an already existing practice and dedicating it to His own purpose.]

The circumcision of grown men, without anesthetic, is a challenging idea. In addition, Abraham was nearly 100 years old. Why do you think God would ask Abraham and his whole entourage to undergo such an extreme rite?

[Sarai also gets a name change, to Sarah, which means something like "queen mother" or "princess" - in other words, a suggestion of royalty. From her descendants would come King David, in whom this part of the covenant ("kings of peoples shall come from her") was fulfilled. When David sat on Israel's royal throne (c. 1010-970 B.C.), God made a covenant with him that someone from his line would always sit on the throne of Israel (see 2 Sam. 7). Jesus, born of the house of David, would be that King, reigning forever over the New Israel, the Church.]

God makes an incredible promise to Abraham and his descendants, a promise that will be received through a rite that causes pain, blood, suffering, and a period of impotence in adults as they recover. For Abraham, it was a test with special meaning, since it directly affected his reproductive organ - the part of his body most crucial to the production of descendants. As a sign of the covenant God made to be God to the descendants of Abraham, it packs a powerful message. Through a kind of "death," marvelous life will come. Through a rite that represents complete dependence on God to keep His promises (since, humanly speaking, those who receive it will be "incapacitated"), a great nation will be born. It will also be a reminder that the child to be born to Abraham will be a miracle child, not one produced through human will, like Ishmael. It is actually a very appropriate sign of how God works His will. It is a pre-figuring of the death and seeming impotence of Christ on the Cross. The One the Jews expected to usher in the kingdom of God was put to death as a criminal. Christ's obedience "unto death" (Phil. 2:8) opened the gates of heaven for all men, fulfilling the promise of blessing given so long ago to Abraham.

Baptism now is the fulfillment of circumcision. It is the initiation rite of the New Covenant. Although it involves water, which seems a far cry from pain, blood, suffering, and death, the Scripture tells us that in baptism, we share in Christ's death. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). In Christ, death leads to life, just as in accepting the sign of circumcision, a temporary "death" led to greatness for Abraham.

What is Abraham's response to God's promise about the birth of a son to Sarah (vs. 17)? What do you make of it?

Abraham falls down in a fit of laughter. Is it the laughter of amusement or of incredulity? It is hard to tell. Perhaps it is a mixture of both. The idea of Abraham and Sarah having a child in their advancing years is so outrageously wonderful to him that it is laughable. This kind of joy is something the apostles experience when Jesus appeared in their midst after the Resurrection and they "did not believe for joy" (see Luke 24:36-41). It is something too good to be true.

Notice that Abraham makes his comments to himself, not God. Perhaps he is trying to talk himself into believing what God has just promised. Then he does ask God to make Ishmael his heir (see next question), which possibly suggests a certain ambivalence about it all.

The picture of Abraham on the floor, laughing at the thought of fathering a child with Sarah, is not easy to evaluate. Is it a picture of delightful intimacy between God and Abraham? Is it an expression of irreverence? What does it mean that God says the son to be born shall be called "Isaac," which means "he laughed"? Abraham will have a perpetual reminder that what he thought was too good to be true actually happened. God, Who works through reversal, will have the last laugh."

Why do you suppose Abraham pleads with God to let Ishmael be his heir (vs. 18)?

Ishmael, Abraham's only son, is thirteen years old. Surely Abraham loved him very much. Deep bonds of affection have developed between them. It isn't too surprising that Abraham longs for this beloved child to be the one through whom God works. This is not necessarily a lack of faith on Abraham's part. It may simply be the expression of his attachment to his son, which is a natural human instinct. One of the consequences of Abraham's lapse with Hagar is that he will have to suffer the agony of detaching from his hopes of the covenant promise being fulfilled through Ishmael. This will be difficult. It represents the kind of temporal suffering we introduce into our lives by departing from God's plan.

Notice the blessing God grants to Ishmael on account of Abraham's plea (vs. 20). What does this suggest about the power of Abraham's prayers?

This is the first (but not the last) time that Abraham speaks to God on behalf of someone else, which we call intercessory prayer. God responds generously to his pleas for Ishmael, although not granting exactly what he requested. It is clear, however, that God's love for Abraham is the basis on which He acts. This begins a pattern in Scripture, which was continued in the leaders of Israel whom God called to do His work. It culminated in Jesus, Who prayed for sinners as He hung on the Cross. Intercession is embedded in the Lord's Prayer, since it is not a prayer for "me" but for "us." The Church, Christ's Body on earth, prays for the whole world at every Mass, as she makes an offering in thanksgiving to God for His great mercy and marvelous promises. Because this offering is joined to the perfect offering Jesus made on Calvary, we know that it is accompanied by the High Priestly prayer of Jesus, at the right hand of God, and that it is efficacious.

What does God finally give to Abraham, after twenty-five years (vs. 21)?

God finally tells Abraham when to expect the birth of his son.

**Abraham Obeys God
Read Genesis 17:22-27**

Hearing God say that the birth of Isaac was only one year away, what might have tempted Abraham to delay the ordeal of circumcision instead of carrying it out "that very day" (vs. 23)?

Imagine Abraham's possible line of thought - Sarah will give birth in another year, but circumcision will knock him out of commission for awhile. He might have been tempted to take care of work with Sarah first, while he was in good shape, and then circumcise himself. His prompt obedience is a strong sign of his desire to please God, no matter what his misgivings might have been

As Abraham readily submits himself, Ishmael, and all his men to circumcision, what is he agreeing to in this covenant with God? In other words, the circumcision is a sign of something. What is it?

Circumcision represents Abraham's formal acceptance of the covenant God has made with him. He believes that God will keep His magnificent promise of making his name great, with kings coming from him in a royal dynasty. He agrees to walk before God and be blameless - to live as God wants him to live. He obeys

God's command to be circumcised, accepting the blood, pain, suffering, and temporary impotence it will cause, entering into the paradox of "death" leading to life. This scene is a paradigm of how men enter the New Covenant, mediated by Jesus Christ. We believe in the promises of God offered to us through Christ; we agree to be God's people through the gift of His grace, walking blamelessly before Him, turning away from sin; we obey the call of Christ be baptized, following Him into death that we may follow Him into life.