

Abram and Sarai both struggled trusting the LORD's promise that He would give them offspring. They apparently felt that the LORD needed help since time was running out on their ability to have children. After having a son through Sarai's handmaid, Abram thought that this illegitimate son might be the means through which God would fulfill His promise but that was not the LORD's plan.

---

### Genesis 16

<sup>1</sup> Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. <sup>2</sup> And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

In that day a woman was considered to be a failure as a wife if she could not produce children and heirs for her husband. Thus it was the custom of the day that if the wife could not bear any children then she had the option of giving a servant girl to her husband as a surrogate for herself. Any children conceived would then be considered to be children of the wife and alleviate her shame. Sarai held the LORD responsible for her inability to bear children and so she may have thought that the LORD intended to fulfill His promise through a different method. She decides that they should take advantage of this custom to produce children and fulfill the LORD's promise to Abram that "he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir" (Gen. 15:4b). Thus, instead of trusting the LORD to fulfill His promise they take matters into their own hands and make a sinful attempt to bring the LORD's promise into reality. Sarai asks Abram to use her handmaid Hagar (a servant they apparently acquired while in Egypt) to produce children for them.

<sup>3</sup> And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. <sup>4</sup> And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

Abram entered the land of Canaan at the age of 75 (Gen. 12:4) and he apparently was 85 at this time (see Gen. 16:16, allowing for at least a 9 month pregnancy). After 10 years being in the land the LORD had still not provided for them to have children and so Abram and Sarai follow the custom of the day and Hagar becomes pregnant. The Hebrew word for "despised" means "small" or "light." The idea seems to be that Hagar lost respect for Sarai and began to look down on her as a result of the pregnancy. Either she held a grudge knowing that Sarai would claim her child or more likely (considering the value women placed on bearing children at the time) she considered herself superior to Sarai and better at being a wife to Abram since she was able to get pregnant and Sarai could not.

**Verses 5-14:** Sarai notices that Hagar's attitude has changed toward her and blames the situation on him. Abram tells her she is free to do as she wishes with her own handmaid but Hagar runs away when Sarai begins to treat her harshly. The angel of the LORD finds Hagar in the wilderness in the midst of her flight and instructs her to return and submit herself to Sarai. He names the unborn child Ishmael and promises to bless him and his descendants.

<sup>15</sup> And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup> And Abram was fourscore and six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram.

Hagar obviously told Abram of her encounter with the angel of the LORD in the wilderness, for he gives the child the name that was given by the angel of the LORD. We are told that Abram was 86 when Ishmael was born, which is roughly 10 years and 9 months after he entered the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:4).

---

### Genesis 17

<sup>1</sup> And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I *am* the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. <sup>2</sup> And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

**"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine"** – This would be 24 years after Abram entered Canaan. Ishmael would be 13 at this time.

**"the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I *am* the Almighty God"** - The LORD appears to Abram and identifies Himself as "the Almighty God." In Hebrew the name is *El Shaddai*, which reveals something of the LORD's character to Abram. *El* means "God" and *Shaddai* means "all powerful" so together it means "the all-powerful God."

**"walk before me, and be thou perfect [complete; whole]"** – The LORD commands Abram to "walk before me" (in obedience) and be "perfect." The same Hebrew word for "perfect" is elsewhere translated "*upright*," "*without spot*," "*without blemish*" and "*in sincerity*." The LORD is calling Abram to a life of obedience and righteousness.

**"And I will make my covenant between me and thee"** – The LORD had already made the covenant with Abram in chapter 15, where we read that the LORD had Abram make a ceremonial offering in which the LORD took part to essentially "sign" the agreement between them. **Gen. 15:18** "*In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:*" The LORD now repeats His covenant with Abram years later as an indication that He has not forgotten it.

**"and will multiply thee exceedingly"** – Abram still does not have a child by Sarai and yet the LORD promises that Abram will have descendants. Sometimes we have to wait a long time to see the fulfillment of the LORD's promises.

<sup>3</sup> And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, <sup>4</sup> As for me, behold, my covenant *is* with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

**“And Abram fell on his face”** – Abram falls on his face in humble worship and thanksgiving for the LORD’s goodness to him. **“and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations”** – Israel will not be the only nation that traces back to Abram. Ishmael’s descendants make up many nations and Isaac’s son Esau becomes the father of the Edomites. Abraham takes another wife after Sarai’s death and the descendants of this union form other nations in Canaan (Gen. 25:1-3).

**“Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee”** – The LORD gives Abram a new name befitting his identity as the recipient of these promises. The name Abram means “exalted father” but the name Abraham means “father of a great multitude” or “father of many nations.”

<sup>6</sup> And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

The LORD repeats and expands the promises He has made to Abraham. At this time Abraham still has no heir through Sarai and yet the LORD promises that many kings and nations will descend from him. He also promises that the covenant between Abraham and Himself will be an everlasting covenant and will extend to Abraham’s descendants forever and He will be their God.

<sup>8</sup> And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

The LORD repeats the promise that the land of Canaan will be an eternal possession for Abraham and his descendants.

**Verses 9-12:** The LORD declares the requirement that Abraham and his descendants must fulfill as a “token” (sign or reminder) of the covenant between the LORD and the Jews. The males must be circumcised as a sign of the relationship they have with the LORD to always remind them that He is their God and that they are His people.

<sup>13</sup> He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

All male children and all male servants in the household were required to be circumcised. This sign of the covenant became a permanent part of their bodies to always remind them of the everlasting nature of the covenant. Any males who were not circumcised were to be “cut off” from the people. Sometimes the term “cut off” referred to death but in this case it likely meant that such a person was to be considered a Gentile because he had rejected circumcision and thus rejected the Abrahamic covenant.

<sup>15</sup> And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall* her name *be*. <sup>16</sup> And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother* of nations; kings of people shall be of her.

**“And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be”** – The name “Sarai” means “my princess” but the LORD gives her the new name of “Sarah” which means “princess.” The subtle dropping of the personal pronoun “my” means she is no longer “my princess” (princess over a single family) but a princess over many.

**“And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her”** – Sarah had born the shame of being childless all her life but the LORD is going to bless her and she shall be the mother of Abraham’s heir.

**“yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her”** – Sarah will share in the promises that the LORD made to Abraham so that many nations and kings will also be descended from her.

<sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall *a child* be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!

Is Abraham laughing a sign that he did not believe God? The fact that he fell on his face indicates worship so likely it was a laugh of joy as he pondered the incredibility of the LORD promising that he and Sarah would have a child at their respective ages of 100 and 90. Abraham then recommends Ishmael, his first born, to be the heir. Perhaps he thought it would be easier for the LORD to use a son already living than to have two old people bear a child together.

<sup>19</sup> And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his seed after him.

The LORD rejects Ishmael as being the heir of the Abrahamic covenant, reemphasizing that He has chosen Sarah to bear a son whose name will be Isaac. The name “Isaac” means “laughter” and probably served as a reminder of the reaction Abraham had to the LORD’s promise. It will be the descendants of Isaac who will inherit the benefits of the promises of the covenant instead of Ishmael. The Apostle Paul uses this passage to describe Christians as children of the promise, just as Isaac was (Rom. 9:6-9).