

Trusting the God of Promise

Genesis 17:15-18:21

Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 17. At the beginning of Genesis 17, God changes Abram's name to Abraham. The name Abram meant "exalted father." Who gave him that name? HIS DAD, TERAH, RIGHT?! So, to whom does Abram's name likely refer? Don't say Abram. It likely refers to TERAH. As I was talking to Tim about this, he pointed out that that name, "*Exalted Father*," had to be a bit of a SORE SPOT. Every time he met someone, their greeting of "*Oh, hi, Exalted Father!*" reminded him of his childless state. His name was a sad reminder, but God told him that he would no longer be associated with his past. God said, "**but your name shall be Abraham**," which sounds like "*father of a multitude*." His name NO LONGER POINTED BACK at a life of hopelessness and sadness. This NEW NAME spoke of Abrahams FUTURE, a perpetual REMINDER OF THE PROMISE He would fulfill. God gave Abraham the sign of the covenant, the sign of circumcision, but he wasn't done. We pick up in verse 15...

Genesis 17:15-16

15 And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.

It only makes sense that the blessings to Abraham would flow to his wife; they were ONE. Like Abram, "Sarai" was a name that represented the past. While the meaning of "Sarah" (*princess or queen*) didn't really change, her new name was a name that would forever serve as a reminder of what God was going to do in the future, namely, to make her into "**nations**."

This is who they were now! THEY HAD NEW NAMES! Every time they interacted with someone, either introducing themselves or correcting someone when they greeted them with the old name, they would be TESTIFYING TO GOD'S WORK IN THEIR LIVES! There was another beautiful aspect about this too...



The letter "h" ("heh" in Hebrew) was added to each of their names...



...and incidentally the holy Name (Yahveh, יהוה) has TWO, one given to each it would seem...



Abraham and Sarah weren't merely given NEW names, they were given God's name. In the very same way, when people call upon the LORD Jesus Christ for salvation, their IDENTITY is NEW! Paul taught the Galatians...

Galatians 3:28-29

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

We're HIS! Our past is GONE! All things have become NEW! Our DESTINY is HEAVEN! When a person meets God, they're CHANGED. Abraham and Sarah (see, you can't even call them by their old name anymore) had a new identity in the LORD, and an amazing PROMISE. **"I will give you a son by her."** After talking about Jesus, do you hear the messianic overtones in that promise? **"I will give you a son by her,"** God's plan all along. **"I will give you MY SON by her."**

The promise is unmistakable. God never intended for Abraham and Sarah to have a son by surrogacy with Hagar or anyone else. The union of Abraham and Hagar at Sarah's instigation was the result of IMPATIENCE and UNBELIEF. ELEVEN YEARS had passed since God promised to give them a son, so they took matters into their own hands, and Ishmael was born. Now, THIRTEEN YEARS after that, God reaffirmed His promise. TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OF WAITING.... Despite their maneuvering (we attempt this ourselves), God's plan was unchanged. God's covenant with Abraham would flow through a son born miraculously through impossible circumstances, for in this is He glorified.

Genesis 17:17-18

17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? 18 And Abraham said to God, Oh that Ishmael might live before you!

HA! You've done that before, haven't you? Someone says something that utterly ridiculous, and a giggle (or perhaps a full BELLY LAUGH!) slips out! You fight to keep in, but it just comes out! Those are the best during important meetings! When I started working here, we had a Staff Meeting my first day. So, I sat down and joined the Team in the VITAL work of ministry planning. Guys, EVERYTHING that goes on here starts as a bullet point in that weekly Monday morning meeting; they're so important. Often many items are just mentioned so everyone's on the same page and isn't surprised by anything that's coming up, things like the message topic for Sunday. Well, that morning, Kevin said something (and you know how things hit you just right). He just nonchalantly said, "Sunday, we're going to talk about...JESUS," and I couldn't hold it in. By the end of it, everyone else was laughing because I WAS! Like I said, it hit me just right! WHAT ELSE WERE WE GOING TO BE TALKING ABOUT? HAHA! But just so we'd be prepared, Kevin let us know in Staff Meeting. WHEW!

I imagine Abraham's laughter like that, something that just came out. Jesus said that "**what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart**" (Matthew 15:18). Sadly, Abraham's OUTBURST of laughter came from DISBELIEF. "**Oh that Ishmael might live before you!**" that is, "*Oh that Ishmael might live WITH YOUR BLESSING!*" What blessing is that? The LORD had just told Abraham...

Genesis 17:6-8

6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

If you listen closely, nothing in the passage indicates that this promise points to someone BESIDES Ishmael. He was Abraham's offspring! That's why the LAUGH of unbelief comes at the point in the conversation when God says that the son will be born of Sarah. It was too incredible, too unreal. Abraham couldn't move past THE SON HE SAW before him. Do something for me. Think of someone you don't know. SAY WHAT?! Yeah, someone you've never seen or heard of. I doubt a face came to mind for any of us. That's how it was for Abraham. God told him of his true son, and it just didn't COMPUTE.

WHY COULDN'T IT JUST BE ISHMAEL?! He was right there! Moreover, ABRAHAM LOVED ISHMAEL. He was his son. He had known him for 13, whereas this other son just didn't seem real, though promised by God. Though Abraham loved Ishmael, the situation God promised was better. Yet, despite Abraham's renowned faith, he was more content to settle for the MODEST POSSIBILITY that he could see than TRUST GOD and WAIT for the MIRACULOUS UNSEEN. The promises of God not only ENCOURAGE us and bring us HOPE, but they're also meant to STRETCH and GROW us.

Genesis 17:19-21

19 God said, No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. 20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. 21 But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

The LORD gives Abraham a hanger for his faith. **“You shall call his name ISAAC. I will establish my covenant with him.”** God chooses the younger over the older a LOT throughout scripture. He had regard for Abel’s gift over Cain’s. He chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Ephraim over Manasseh. This choosing of the second born over the firstborn is a picture of God’s choosing of the SPIRIT over the FLESH. We enter this world in the flesh; it always comes first, but it’s the Spirit that’s blessed and represented by the SECOND BIRTH here and in the life of believers.

While God’s COVENANT would be established with Isaac, Ishmael would be multiplied and blessed as well because he was a descendant of Abraham. Blessing the offspring of the flesh was another example of God’s perfect FAITHFULNESS, but it is also an example of God’s perfect JUSTICE; God would keep His word to Abraham even through Ishmael would eventually become a rival. **“He shall father twelve princes,”** just as the children of Abraham would eventually be divided into twelve tribes. In Genesis 25 we read...

Genesis 25:12-16

12 These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s servant, bore to Abraham. 13 These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, 14 Mishma, Dumah, Massa, 15 Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah. 16 These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, TWELVE PRINCES according to their tribes.

We’re talking about the God of PROMISE. God is SUCH A KEEPER OF PROMISES that, even though the Abrahamic Covenant would only pass down through Isaac, and even though Ishmael’s descendants would eventually be AGAINST Isaac’s, the LORD blessed Ishmael because he was A CHILD OF ABRAHAM.

Genesis 17:22-27

22 When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. 23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. 24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. 26 That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. 27 And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

“God went up from Abraham.” Back at the beginning of Genesis 17 we saw that **“the LORD appeared to Abram,”** and given that we know that any physical manifestation of God is the second Person of the Trinity, we understand that Abraham was visited by the preincarnate Christ (and will be again in a moment).

“That very day,” Abraham was circumcised at age 99 and Ishmael at age 13 along with the rest of the males in his household. FAITH is borne out by OBEDIENCE. Well, time passes and the Bible says...

Genesis 18:1-8

1 And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth 3 and said, O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, 5 while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant. So they said, Do as you have said. 6 And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes. 7 And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

The LORD appeared to Abraham again by the oaks of Mamre, which was in Hebron. This is where Abraham was living back when Lot was taken as a prisoner of war. Though Abraham calls one of the "men" who visited him "Lord," *Adonai* in this case, NOT the holy Name, I believe Abraham recognized that this was God because he worshipped (bowed before) Him. At the same time, he recognized himself as the LORD'S SERVANT. The words "worship" and "service" are synonymous, at least, in the Greek. You'll see this in the way some of your Bibles are translated. Paul said...

Romans 12:1

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual WORSHIP.

In other translations it may say, **“your spiritual SERVICE.”** The words are synonymous. At any rate, the precept is true: we find ourselves in the presence of the LORD as our hearts are bowed in WORSHIP or SERVICE. Abraham was eager to linger in the presence of the LORD. He said, **“If I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.”**

He offered HOSPITALITY in the form of water for washing their feet. In Bible times, if you were getting anywhere, you were likely getting there ON FOOT. Leather shoes were common, both open and enclosed, but none of them fully kept the dust of the road out.

Abraham also brought food to refresh them, and the LORD and the two angels with Him ATE. This was some spread too! Three measures of flour equates to about 20 QUARTS OF FLOUR! That would've made a TON of bread! Add to that the fact that the calf that was prepared was far more food than necessary to feed three people. The mountain of bread, meat, curds, and milk was a meal for a KING! Abraham went far beyond what he had offered, but as I said earlier, as we worship and as we SERVE, we enter into the presence of the LORD. What do we find in His presence? David tells us in Psalm 16...

Psalm 16:11

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Therefore, as we enter the presence of the LORD in service, we find JOY, which makes it easier to do MORE and MORE for Him. This should be the posture of every believer's heart, bowed in worship and service. We do ourselves no benefit by holding back and sparing ourselves; we just end up missing a blessing, and those of you who have poured yourself out on a mission trip, or an outreach, or a weekly ministry team know the "GOOD TIRED" that I'm talking about.

We also see the ONENESS IN SERVICE of husband and wife. I could not do what I do in ministry if it wasn't for my bride. I called my wife "bride" in front of a guy I was doing business with, and he said, "Are you a 'church man?' Only 'church men' call their wives that." Yes, I'm a "church man," and I reiterate that I could not do what I do without my bride. She's my helper just as Sarah was for Abraham. As soon as this ministry opportunity arose, Abraham didn't run to find a servant to help him, he ran to Sarah.

Genesis 18:9-11

9 They said to him, Where is Sarah your wife? [because we know you didn't fix all this yourself! HAHA!] And he said, She is in the tent. 10 The LORD said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son. And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.

Did you hear what they called her? One of the angels, or the angels and the LORD together asked, "Where's SARAH?" They knew her NEW name and called her by it. **Dale Carnegie** said...

"A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

And it's TRUE! We turn any time we hear someone say our name no matter where we are. One's name is precious, but now hers would be even more so. Every time it was spoken, it would be a reminder to her of God's promise, and after fulfillment, it would be a reminder of His FAITHFULNESS. Given that the LORD is still talking about a child being born in ONE YEAR, we know this visit occurred shortly after the last one. He said, "I will surely RETURN to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall

have a son," but when do we see this "return?" We'll study this later, but about a year later, the Bible says...

Genesis 21:1-3

1 The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, WHOM SARAH BORE HIM, Isaac.

In this passage, it said that the LORD "visited" Sarah. However, we don't actually see an appearance of Him in this situation. So why do the scriptures say "return" or "visit?" This is SPECIAL. "Visit" is used in the same manner in Exodus as the LORD sends Moses back to Egypt to lead them out...

Exodus 4:30-31

30 Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. 31 And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had VISITED the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

In both passages, when THE LORD VISITED, the phrase means that God INTERVENED. *"It says more than that he took notice of them, took pity on them, or remembered them. He had not yet fulfilled the promises, but he had begun to act..."*

Have you been there? There was something you had waited for so long, something you NEEDED and truly believed to be the will of God. From time to time you wondered if it would EVER happen, but then SOMETHING STARTED HAPPENING!!! Pieces started falling into place! God was beginning to ACT ON YOUR BEHALF! What an encouraging moment, and what a blessing to RECOGNIZE it as it was happening! We watch for the LORD to move in hopeful anticipation.

The LORD promised He would RETURN and fulfill His promise, and that's something we can count on. It's something Abraham and Sarah should've been able to count on and believe, but despite all the LORD had already done for them, this promise was just TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE. They were one in their service to the LORD, but they were also ONE IN THEIR RESPONSE to His promise...

Genesis 18:12-15

12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out, and my LORD is old, shall I have pleasure? 13 The LORD said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? 14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son. 15 But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh, for she was afraid. He said, No, but you did laugh.



Just like Abraham, Sarah LAUGHED in UNBELIEF. Sarah was old, and **"the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah,"** meaning that she was post-menopausal. There was no earthly chance of her experiencing the delight of bearing and raising a child. Old, barren, ninety year old mother of a newborn...that would stretch anyone's faith, wouldn't it? Yep, but that's how the LORD works. When He does something, it's so AMAZING, so MIRACULOUS that no one else could possibly get the credit!

God made this entire UNIVERSE FROM NOTHING! Bringing forth a child from two people as good as dead was essentially the same thing, a NATION from a union incapable of childbearing. The LORD is the MASTER at accomplishing the impossible...

Old and barren Sarah...gave BIRTH to Isaac.
Barren Rebekah...gave BIRTH to Esau and Jacob.
Barren Rachel...gave BIRTH to Joseph and Benjamin.
Barren wife of Manoah...gave BIRTH to Samson.
Barren Hannah...gave BIRTH to Samuel and his siblings.
Old and barren Elizabeth...gave BIRTH to John the Baptist.
VIRGIN Mary...gave BIRTH to Jesus.

THIS IS OUR GOD! He's the One who keeps His promises AGAINST ALL ODDS! Abraham and Sarah had already experienced amazing works of God in leading him out and providing for them. The LORD rescued them from Pharaoh after they LIED to him in EGYPT. He gave Abraham victory over the armies of FOUR KINGS and spared him the heartache of losing his nephew Lot. He had SHOWN HIMSELF to Abraham despite his pagan heritage! Now in the midst of their unbelief, He asks them, **"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"** The scriptures along with all of human experience answer with a RESOUNDING "NO!" You can trust Him to keep His promises. So often I've found that people aren't RELYING on God's promises because they're UNFAMILIAR with them, or because of spiritual immaturity or biblical

illiteracy, they apply promises to themselves that are intended for the nation of Israel, and the Church isn't Israel. Finally, people who may know the promises of God still become disillusioned with God's faithfulness because the fulfillment doesn't look like they thought it would, or it doesn't take place according to THEIR desired timing. Imagine how Abraham and Sarah felt after waiting 25 YEARS for God to fulfill His promise! When it gets hard to continue trusting God's promises, trust His character. He's GOOD, He's FAITHFUL, and He LOVES you.

In the face of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief, we yet again see the BOUNDLESS GRACE of our LORD. Sarah steps out from her hiding spot and DENIES the LORD'S ACCUSATION! Yikes!!! Both Abraham and Sarah have LAUGHED IN UNBELIEF at the notion of a son being born to them, and when the OMNISCIENT LORD calls Sarah out on it, she acts as if she can SNOW HIM and LIED about it. The Hebrew for "denied" literally means *acted falsely*. The NET Bible accurately translates Sarah's action as "lied" (**Genesis 18:15**).

Does the LORD punish them? Does He change His mind and revoke His promise? No. PRAISE THE LORD, when we fail in our sinfulness and weakness, the LORD REMAINS FAITHFUL. As Paul records in Romans...

Romans 11:29

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

God had chosen Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be the ones to MAKE HIM KNOWN throughout the earth, and HE WASN'T CHANGING HIS MIND. Aren't you glad He doesn't change His mind about you? When you fail, aren't you glad He still wants to have a relationship with you and wants to USE YOU to make Him known to the world now? God loves us because He wants to, and His promises are made for the same reason; we don't earn them, so we can't lose them. That's GRACE!

God showed Sarah GRACE, correcting her, and reaffirming His promise. Through Abraham, representing FAITH, and Sarah, representing GRACE according to Galatians 4, God would bring Isaac—and eventually SALVATION—into the world, a work of God over which no one could boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Abraham and Sarah's UNBELIEVING LAUGHTER would soon be replaced with the laughter of JOY and SURPRISE!

This is the second prophecy concerning the birth of Isaac, the son of promise, in a short amount of time. QUICK PAUSE! FAST FORWARD! When Joseph stood before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, how many dreams or visions had Pharaoh had? TWO, right? Pharaoh dreamt of seven fat cows devoured by seven lean cows and seven good ears swallowed up by seven blighted ears. Joseph interpreted the dreams, telling Pharaoh that they were actually one dream about seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

Genesis 41:29-32

29 There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, 30 but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The

famine will consume the land, 31 and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. 32 AND THE DOUBLING OF PHARAOH'S DREAM MEANS THAT THE THING IS FIXED BY GOD, AND GOD WILL SHORTLY BRING IT ABOUT.

The dreams were given to Pharaoh TWICE and IN QUICK SUCCESSION because it meant God was going to BRING IT ABOUT SOON! God told Abraham and Sarah TWICE, IN QUICK SUCCESSION that they would have a son. In how long? ONE YEAR. He was going to bring this about QUICKLY.

We end with this CLIMACTIC SCENE...

Genesis 18:16-21

16 Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. 17 The LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him. 20 Then the LORD said, Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 21 I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.

God felt that it was only right to confide in Abraham about what was getting ready to happen. As we'll see next week, this will end up being another opportunity for Abraham to demonstrate his faithfulness to GOD'S PURPOSE TO BE REVEALED TO THE WORLD THROUGH ABRAHAM. It also does some major setup for upcoming lessons. There's a MAJOR CONTRAST between the FAITHFUL, yet occasionally FALTERING, FATHER ABRAHAM and the PERPETUALLY WICKED SODOM AND GOMORRAH. There's a lesson to be learned here about FAITHFULNESS and a POSTERITY and the WICKED being ERASED and FORGOTTEN.

There's a lesson to be learned here about the PERFECT JUSTICE of God. Though in His omniscience He knew everything He needed to know in order to pass judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, He did right by "going down," just like He did at Babel, and seeing whether the outcry about them was accurate. If God, who is perfect, is so careful in judgment, it's a lesson that we in our fallen state ought to be even more careful in judgment, relying on God's indwelling Spirit as we make important decisions.

AAAAANNND...END OF EPISODE! That's what I say when an episode of a show I'm watching with my family ENDS CLIMACTICALLY. This scene fades to black as we watch these heavenly warriors march DOWN, down into a grotesque, sin-infested pit for JUDGMENT, where we'll pick up in a couple of weeks.

Here, even at the end, we find the LORD demonstrating His faithfulness to His friend, Abraham (James 2:23), revealing to him what He was about to do, just as Jesus told His disciples, **"I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15)**. We can trust the LORD'S promises, no matter how unrealistic they may seem in our circumstances, because we

can trust His CHARACTER. He will never cease to be true to Himself or us. Are you TRUSTING His promises? We have but to look back at all He's done (holding the Bible), all He's done in our lives, all He IS DOING, to receive FAITH that He will continue to be faithful.