

Genesis

Lesson 9: Abram, Sarai and Hagar

The highlighted scriptures support the text, and you (or your children) may like to read some of these out loud as you go through the lesson. It's best to use a good, modern version of the Bible for this.

When we finished our last lesson, Abram was on his way home after rescuing Lot. Lot was Abram's nephew and he had been captured when some warring kings looted Sodom, the city where he lived. The kings and their soldiers had also captured some of the other people in the city and stolen lots of things (like food, money, jewellery, etc). Abram rescued Lot and the other people, and also brought back the things that had been stolen. The king of Sodom wanted to give the recovered goods to Abram (probably as a reward), but Abram wouldn't take them for himself. However, he did ask the king to let the men who'd helped him with the rescue have their share.

A Great Reward

Soon afterwards, Abram returned to his own home and God spoke to him in a vision,¹ **"Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great"** (Genesis 15:1, New Living Translation).

From what God says, we learn that Abram was afraid for some reason. The Bible doesn't tell us why Abram was afraid, but perhaps he was worried that the warring kings and their soldiers would come back and attack him! But whatever Abram was frightened of, he didn't need to worry because God said He was going to look after him and protect him. This must have made Abram feel much better! And it's something we can remember whenever we feel frightened, because God promises to look after us too! (See, for example, Hebrews 13:5-6; 1 Peter 5:7.)

God also explained to Abram that his reward was going to be great. You see, God was watching what was going on and He had seen Abram refuse the "reward" that had been offered to him. He had heard Abram ask the king to let his men and allies² have their share of the recovered goods. And by doing this, Abram showed that he wasn't selfish. He had a *giving*

¹ A vision is a kind of "waking dream" and it was one way that God communicated with His servants and prophets.

² The men who had helped Abram rescue Lot and the other people.

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attitude - and that's probably one of the reasons why God was going to bless Abram with a great reward. This is important for us to understand because God wants us to have the same kind of attitude. And when He sees that we are trying to be unselfish and live the "give way" of life, then He will bless us too! (Acts 20:35; Luke 6:38).

Like Stars in the Sky

But what was the great reward that God had for Abram? Well, it had to do with God's earlier promise to him. If you remember, God had promised to give Abram many descendants who would inherit the land that God had given to him (see Genesis 13:14-17). But Abram didn't have any children, so he didn't know how this promise could possibly come true! So he asked God whether those descendants would come through his servant Eliezer.

You see, in those days if a man died and didn't have children, then everything he owned would be left to his chief servant. Eliezer was Abram's chief servant, so because Abram didn't have children, Eliezer was his heir (Genesis 15:2-3).

But God told Abram that his heir would NOT come through Eliezer. God explained to Abram (again!) that he would have his OWN son. And through this son, Abram would have so many descendants that no one would be able to count them all - just like it's impossible to count the number of stars in the sky! (Genesis 15:4-5).

Now Abram knew that he and Sarai couldn't have children because Sarai was barren. This meant that it was not physically possible for her to have a baby for some reason. But Abram also knew that if God said he would have a son, then he would, because God never lies! (Titus 1:2). So Abram believed that God would keep His promise, and the Bible tells us that because Abram believed "it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). This means that God considered Abram to be a righteous person because of his belief or faith. It's also another reason why God called Abram His friend (see James 2:23).

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Then God reminded Abram that He was the God who had brought him out of the land of Ur and that He was going to give Abram the land of Canaan as his possession. When Abram asked God HOW he could be sure that he would possess the land, God made a *covenant* with him (see **Genesis 15:18-21**).³ This covenant made the promise official and binding, so that Abram would know that the promise was certain and would come to pass.

While God was making this covenant with Abram He also told him that his descendants would end up being slaves in a foreign land for 400 years! But God also explained that He would rescue Abram's descendants and punish the nation that had made them slaves (**Genesis 15:13-14**). We'll learn more about this in another lesson.

Sarai Comes Up With A Plan

Ten years or so went by after God made this covenant with Abram and he and Sarai STILL didn't have any children. They knew that God had promised them a son, but after waiting all this time, they were probably beginning to wonder if it would ever happen. Sarai had even started to believe that it was God who was stopping her from having a baby! So she had an idea. She asked Abram to marry her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, and have a child with her! (**Genesis 16:2**).

You see, it was the custom in those days that servants "belonged" to their masters (or mistresses). So Hagar belonged to Sarai - and any children she had would also belong to Sarai. This meant that if Abram and Hagar had a baby, it would be considered Sarai's baby, even though Hagar would look after it. So Sarai thought that this could be the way she could produce a son and heir for Abram! (**Genesis 16:1-2**).

³ Today we tend to think of a covenant (Hebrew *briyth*) as an agreement, but God's covenant with Abram was a little different. It was God binding Himself to His promise to bless Abram and his descendants with the land of Canaan as their possession. It was a promise that could not be broken (and in this case it was sealed with a blood sacrifice).

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Abram thought Sarai's idea was good, so he married Hagar. (When Abram was alive men - even godly men - often had more than one wife. But this isn't what God originally intended and it usually ended up causing lots of problems, as we shall see.)

Hagar soon became pregnant, just like Sarai hoped she would. But when Hagar found out she was pregnant, she was filled with contempt for Sarai and began to despise her. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly how Hagar showed her contempt, but she probably began to taunt Sarai because she couldn't have a baby.

Of course this was NOT the reaction that Sarai expected! She was probably already sad because she couldn't have children and jealous that Hagar was pregnant, but now she became angry. Especially when Hagar continued to treat her badly! Eventually Sarai took out her frustration on Abram and told him that it was ALL HIS FAULT that Hagar was being so horrible!! (Genesis 16:5).

Abram listened to everything that Sarai said and then reminded her that Hagar was HER handmaid. So Sarai could do whatever she wanted with her! When Sarai heard this, she began to treat Hagar harshly. And she treated Hagar with such harshness that Hagar eventually ran away from her! (Genesis 16:6). She just couldn't take it anymore.

Comforted by an Angel

Hagar ran until she reached a spring of water in the desert. Then God sent an Angel to talk to her. He asked her what she was doing in the desert and Hagar explained that she was running away from her mistress. The Angel listened carefully to what Hagar said, but then he told her to return to Sarai and submit to her. Hagar was to obey Sarai, even if Sarai treated her harshly! Of course that's not what Hagar wanted to hear. But when the Angel explained that God had heard her cry, Hagar probably felt better.

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The Angel also told Hagar that she would have a baby boy, who she should name Ishmael, and explained that she would have many descendants. In fact, she would have so many descendants that no one would be able to count them all! This must have made Hagar very happy. Especially as she must have known this was the same promise that God had made to Abram. She probably thought that her baby was the son that God had promised to him!

But then the Angel told Hagar something else. He told her that her son would live like a wild man! This means that Ishmael would always be fighting with other people and that people would always be fighting with him (Genesis 16:11-12).

God's Promises Come True

Everything the Angel told Hagar came true. Ishmael's children did have many descendants and some of those descendants are still living today. They are the Arab peoples who live around Israel in countries like Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Syria. (You may have heard of them at school or in the news.) And guess what they do? They fight a lot!! Just like the Angel said Ishmael would. You see, God always keeps His promises - and when He says that something will happen it always does!

We'll continue Abram's story in our next lesson and find out whether Ishmael really was the special son that God had promised to him.