

Genesis

Lesson 9: Abram, Sarai and Hagar

Read through this lesson with your parents, looking up any scriptures that you're specifically asked to read. The other referenced scriptures support the text - and you can prove this material for yourself and increase your understanding by taking the time to study these scriptures in your own Bible.

When we finished our last lesson, Abram was on his way home after rescuing Lot, who'd 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 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 mission have their share of the goods.

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).

It seems that Abram was afraid for some reason, so God's first words to him were those of reassurance. 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 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. This is very interesting. You see, God was watching what was going on and He had seen Abram give a tithe of the recovered goods to Melchizedek. He had heard Abram refuse the "reward" that had been offered to him, but ask the king to give his men and allies² their share of the "booty" (Genesis 14:18-24). And God would have been pleased with what He saw and heard. Abram's behaviour revealed that he

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

² Abram's allies were the men who helped him with the rescue mission.

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had a giving and unselfish attitude - and that's undoubtedly one of the reasons why God was going to bless him 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 also bless us (**Acts 20:35; Luke 6:38**).

Like Stars in the Sky

The reward that God was going to give Abram 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, and 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, his inheritance was passed on to his chief servant. Eliezer was Abram's chief servant so he was Abram's designated heir. This meant that if Abram died without having children, Eliezer would inherit his "estate" (i.e. everything that belonged to him). Because of this, Abram assumed that Eliezer and his descendants would also inherit the land that God had promised to him! (see **Genesis 15:2-3**).

But God told Abram that Eliezer would NOT be his heir. God explained (again!) that Abram 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! You can read about God's promise to Abram in **Genesis 15:4-5**.

Abram knew that he and Sarai couldn't have children because Sarai was barren. This meant that it was physically impossible 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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But this wasn't the end of the conversation that God had with Abram! Next, God reminded Abram of who He was and said, **"I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession"** (Genesis 15:7). And when Abram asked God HOW he would know that he was going to inherit the land, God made a covenant with Abram to show him that He was really, really going to keep His promise.

First of all, God told Abram to bring Him a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove and pigeon. The Bible doesn't specifically say this was to be an offering, but it seems likely that it was. After Abram sacrificed the animals, he cut them in half and laid them opposite each other - one half on one side, the other half on the other side. Then he waited to see what would happen, chasing away the vultures that flew down to eat the carcasses. But when evening came and it started to get dark, Abram fell into a deep sleep. And while he was sleeping, God told him about something that was going to happen to his descendants in the future. They were going to end up in a foreign land, where they would be slaves for 400 years. But after that, God was going to judge the nation that had made them slaves, and then they would come out of the land with great possessions! (Genesis 15:9-14). This was a prophecy about what was going to happen to the Israelites in Egypt, and we'll learn more about this in another lesson.

After this, something unusual happened. When the sun went down and it was completely dark, Abram saw a smoking firepot³ and flaming torch pass between the animals he'd cut in half. Then the Bible tells us that "on the same day" God made a covenant with Abram and promised that the land from the river of Egypt to the great Euphrates river would belong to his descendants (Genesis 15:17-21).⁴ This covenant made the promise official and binding so that Abram would know for sure that the promise was certain and would come to pass.

Sarai Has an Idea

About ten years went by, and Abram and Sarai STILL didn't have any children. They knew that God had promised them a son, but after waiting all this

³ A clay pot filled with burning coals that were used to start new fires. (There were no matches then!)

⁴ 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 and confirmed when the smoking firepot and flaming torch passed between the animals).

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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 asked Abram to marry her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, so that Hagar could have a baby for her! (Genesis 16:2).

Although this seems strange to us now, it wasn't then. You see, in those days servants "belonged" to their masters (or mistresses). So Hagar belonged to Sarai - and any children she had also belonged to Sarai. This meant that if Abram and Hagar had a baby, the baby would "belong" to Sarai (even though it was really Hagar's baby and she would look after it, of course). So Sarai decided that this might be the way she could produce a son and heir for Abram (Genesis 16:1-2). Do you think this is what God wanted?

No! Abram and Sarai should have trusted God. They should have waited for Him to solve the problem. But they didn't. Abram thought Sarai's idea was good, so he married Hagar. (In those days 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 that she couldn't have children and perhaps 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 Sarai said and then reminded her that Hagar was HER handmaid. So Sarai could do whatever she wanted with her (Genesis 16:6). When Sarai heard this, she began to treat Hagar harshly. And she treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar ran away from her!

Hagar was obviously frightened and upset by the way Sarai was treating her, but to make matters worse, Abram had done nothing to stop it. So Hagar

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probably thought that she didn't have a friend in the world. But she did! God saw what was happening and when He saw how distressed she was and heard her cry, He sent His Angel to speak to her and comfort her.

Comforted by an Angel

The Angel of the Lord found Hagar by a spring of water in the desert. He asked her what she was doing there and Hagar explained that she was running away from Sarai, her mistress. The Angel listened carefully to what Hagar said. And then, surprisingly, he told her to go back 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 (**Genesis 16:7-9,11**).

The Angel then told Hagar that she would have a baby boy, who she should name Ishmael, and explained that through him 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. Hagar probably thought that her baby was the son that God had promised him (**Genesis 16:10-11**).

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 16:12**).

God's Promises Come True

Everything the Angel told Hagar came true. Ishmael did have many descendants and 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 was the son that God had promised to him and Sarai.