

Genesis – Lesson 15

Ishmael and the Covenant of Isaac

Read Genesis 16:1-6.

1. (a) Who was Hagar? Where did she come from? How did she become Sarai's servant?

Hagar was Sarai's female servant; she was Egyptian, which implies that she was added to the household while Abram and Sarai were in Egypt during the famine of chapter 12.

- (b) Why did Sarai suggest that Abram start a family with Hagar?

Sarai had not borne any children to Abram; she was barren. According to v. 2, she saw this as the will of God for her, but she was concerned that Abram had no heir (remember 15:3). So, since her ability to give Abram an heir was restricted, she saw an *opportunity* in Hagar to provide this service to Abram. In her mind, any child born to him via Hagar would be an heir, so she saw Hagar as a *means* to accomplish what she could not.

- (c) How did she *react* when Abraham took her up on the offer? Why the *change* of attitude?

Although her *logical* reaction was one of opportunity, when Abram took her advice and had a child with Hagar, Sarai became *jealous*. From that point on, she looked with "*contempt*" on Hagar, for Abram had received from *her* a child, and not from Sarai. The reason for the change of attitude is obvious: Sarai loved her husband, and was jealous for him. Any other woman, who provided something as valuable as a child to him, would come between her and him emotionally, and she could not handle it. Although it seemed *reasonable* (at first) to suggest Hagar as a second wife and mother, the *reality* of that relationship overwhelmed Sarai, and she despised Hagar for taking her place.

Read Genesis 16:7-16.

2. (a) Give two or more proofs that the "*angel*" who appeared to Hagar (v. 7) was actually *God* himself.

First, the angel says things to her that only *God* could say. In vv. 10-12, the angel uses a *personal pronoun* (i.e. "I") to indicate that *he* would multiply the offspring of Hagar, and that the child would be called Ishmael and have certain characteristics. Only God himself is able to make such statements, so it is clear that the angel must have been God. Second, Hagar refers to the angel as "*the Lord who spoke to her*" (v. 13). She believed that she had heard directly from God, and her response indicates that God had indeed spoken to her. It is *highly likely* that the appearance of this angel was the pre-incarnate Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, who takes on a human form and speaks to people in the Old Testament, the same One who would *become* human at the Incarnation.

- (b) List the *commands* given to Hagar. How do they *parallel* the truths of the gospel of Jesus?

The first: return to your mistress; this follows the question about where Hagar has come from and where is she going. The second: submit to your mistress. These commands are *central* to the gospel. In the first place, the gospel asks *us* where we have come from and where we are going. The answer is: we have come from a life of sin and rebellion against God, and we are headed to a destiny of judgment and condemnation. So, Christ commands us to *return*, or to turn around, which is similar to the command to *repent*. Then, Christ commands us to *submit*, which is to submit ourselves to the authority that he has over us. Thus, the gospel message is of our need for repentance from sin and a willingness to submit ourselves to Christ by faith. If the angel who appeared is (in fact) the pre-incarnate Christ himself, then certainly his message to Hagar would be consistent with his message to all humanity.

Read Genesis 17:1-22.

3. Why does God change Abram's name in v. 5? Sarai's in v. 15? What do these new names *mean*?

The change of Abram's name signifies his place in the covenant of God. Before his name simply meant "exalted father," but now it means "father of a multitude." In the same way, God changes Sarai's name to Sarah, signifying that she (too) shall bear forth nations of people. The new names demonstrate the connection of this couple to God; his covenant is now *stamped* in their new names. Whenever these names are spoken or written, they will be reminded of it; that God's covenant is flowing through them.

4. (a) How *old* was Ishmael when God appeared to Abraham again (v. 1)? Why is this *significant*?

Given that Abram was 86 when Hagar bore Ishmael (see 16:16), and that this appearance of God occurs when Abram was 99, Ishmael was roughly 13 years old. It is likely that this appearance of God is necessitated by the fact that Abram had accepted Ishmael as the *child* of the promise God had made to him; for 13 years Abram had loved Ishmael and embraced him as his own child, seeing in him the fulfillment of God's word. But, God has other plans; Ishmael will *not* be the child of promise, but a child coming from the womb of Sarah. So, he intervenes at this point to change the course of Abram's life again.

- (b) What was Abraham's initial *reaction* to God's revelation in vv. 17-18? *Why*?

His initial reaction was two-fold: 1) to question the *reality* of God's word regarding a child coming from Sarah, and 2) to present Ishmael as a potential heir to God's promise. He doesn't really imagine (at first) that Sarah *could* have a child at this point and, he has a close relationship with Ishmael and does not want to see him overlooked by God. Thirteen years had convinced Abram that his child-rearing days were over and that Ishmael had become his son, and the child of promise. But God has different plans.

- (c) What does God's reply to Abraham teach you about the *sovereignty* of God (see v. 19)?

God's sovereignty extends to *everything*, including wombs that are barren and men that are too old (by human standards) to bear children. Nothing is beyond the possibility with God, and he proves this by having 90-year-old Sarah bear a child with a 99-year-old man. If God promises something, he *will* carry it out, even if the circumstances surrounding that promise seem beyond hope. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *condition* of humanity; although the human race is spiritually dead and *incapable* of coming to God, God is *able* to raise people from the dead and draw them to Christ to be redeemed; an impossibility with us.

- (d) What blessings does God promise to *Ishmael* (v. 20)? *Why* does he do this? What kind of *relationship* will the descendants of Ishmael have with the Israelites (compare v. 20 to 16:12)?

Ishmael, although he will *not* be the child of the covenant, will have a number of blessings: 1) he will be fruitful and multiply, meaning that many peoples will trace their lineage to him; 2) he will father twelve princes, meaning that he will be treated as a king to twelve sons who will form twelve nations below him; and 3) he will become a great nation, meaning that many peoples will trace their *ethnic* heritage to him. In fact, many Semitic peoples, including the Arabs, trace their lineage to Ishmael. This accounts for the ancient *enmity* between Israel and the Arab peoples. God does this because he loves *Abraham* who loves Ishmael; the tie that binds Abraham to Ishmael is good, and God grants these blessings to Ishmael because he loves Abraham *his own son*.

Read Genesis 17:23-27.

5. (a) Why do you think Abraham performed circumcision on his *entire* household that day (see 17:10)?

According to God's command in 17:10, *every male* in the household was to be circumcised as a part of the covenant that God was making with Abraham. The *sign* of the covenant was circumcision; every male would be able to see this sign in themselves and remember the promises of God made to Abraham and his descendants. Everyone in the household was circumcised because God's promises extended to *all* of them *through Abraham*; as God treated Abraham, so the others would receive his blessings.

- (b) What is the purpose of Christian *baptism*, and how does it relate to the rite of circumcision?

Christian baptism, according to the New Testament, is an *outward sign of an inward conversion*, a public testimony to the change that is wrought in the believer by the work of the Holy Spirit. In baptism, the regenerated person testifies to the world that he or she has been changed by God, and the waters represent the connection of the convert to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Although paedobaptists see the rite of circumcision *continuing* in the waters of baptism (thus baptizing infants into the household of faith), the New Testament makes a clear distinction between the two rites. While circumcision was a sign that connected *men* in the Old Testament to the "old" covenant (i.e. the Mosaic law), baptism is a sign that connects *all people* in the New Testament to a "new" covenant (i.e. the covenant of grace). All of those who were included in the old covenant underwent the rite of circumcision (i.e. all of *ethnic* Israel), and all of those who are included in the new covenant undergo the rite of baptism (i.e. the elect, by virtue of regeneration and conversion). However, because the new covenant is not a matter of *natural birth*, but of faith, only those who have been changed *inwardly* by the Holy Spirit are eligible to proclaim a connection (through baptism) to Christ and his church. Thus, baptism is reserved for those *professing faith* in Christ, not for those who are simply "born" into the church by virtue of Christian parents; the new covenant is *not* transferable by blood or position, but only by *personal* faith in Christ.