

Prayers

Opening prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the great joy we have of reading Your Word. May we never use this precious gift casually or without discernment, but receive its powerful revelation of truth and apply what it says to ourselves and to what we do each day. Then, according to the opportunities given us, may we testify to Your eternal Word and its power to change both people and the world in which we live. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Consider praying briefly under each of these four headings, using the suggestions as you see fit

1. For yourself

What do you truly want from your relationship with God through Jesus? You may answer this question easily or with difficulty; nevertheless, come to the Lord in prayer and seek His blessing

2. For your friends and family

Pray for those you have not seen for a long time

3. For the church and its work

Give thanks to God for the work of those who teach children in Sunday Schools, or similar

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those afflicted by disasters, and those who are involved in clearing up afterwards; for example, after the recent Atlantic storm, or the fighting in Libya.

Meditation

Save us, O Lord, from the sins that oppress us
Because You have loved us and given us life.

Save the poor from being hurt and victimised,
And the rich from the perils of their wealth:

Save the sick from preoccupation with health,
And the healthy from presuming they will live:

Save the bold from unnecessary arrogance,
And the quiet from hiding their feelings:

Save the zealous from rashness of judgement,
And the contented from apathy's dangers:

Save the elderly from glorifying the past
And the young from trying to change everything.

Save us, and create in us hearts of true love
Love, for each other and love for Your world.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 17: 15-22

¹⁵ God said to Abraham,

'As for Sarai your wife, do not call her by this name; her name is Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and more than this, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will be the mother of nations. Leaders of people will be descended from her.'

¹⁷ Then Abraham fell about laughing, and said to himself,

'Can a man who is 100 years old have a son, and can Sarah bear a child at 99?'

¹⁸ Then Abraham said to God,

'I do wish you would accept Ishmael as my son!'

¹⁹ God said,

'Look, your wife Sarah really will give you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will keep my covenant with him and his descendants as a permanent covenant. ²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heard what you said. I will bless him and give him many children and large numbers of descendants; he will be the father of twelve princes, and I will make a great nation of his descendants. ²¹ But I will keep my covenant with Isaac, who will be born to Sarah at this same time next year.'

²² When God had finished talking with Abraham, he left him.

Review

The story of God's Covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 could give the impression that the whole thing was sorted out between Abraham and God. The chapter describes a meeting between Abraham and God, and within it, Sarai is renamed Sarah (17:15-16) as if she had little to do with it! At that time, life in general was dominated by men, and we are left to wonder what Sarai knew about it all. The second half of our passage (17:18-21) is largely a speech by God to Abraham telling him that he would indeed have a son who would be borne by Sarah and become his heir, not just of Abraham's earthly inheritance, but of the inheritance of God's Covenant, by which all Abraham's descendants would be blessed. Sarah was essential to the plan of God, but she was not part of the conversation at this point because God was trying to get Abraham to take his eyes off Ishmael (see 17:18) and commit himself to the divine plan instead of his own desires.

However, if you look at the whole story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, they generally reflect the relationship between a man and a woman envisaged by God in the first chapters of Genesis (1:27ff, 2:21ff), and this is a relationship of interdependence. God's Covenant cannot be fulfilled without Sarai and since the Covenant was given to Abraham (12:10-20; 15:1-15), it seems wrong for us to assume anything other than that a close relationship existed between Abraham and Sarai within which most things were shared. We are simply not told how much or how often they discussed the incredible things happening to them and the great promises of God that Abraham had received; but whenever Sarai (Sarah) comes into the Biblical story she appears fully aware of what is going on and is aware of her own importance as the one who should bear him children to fulfil the Covenant promise by which Abraham would become a great nation. Sarah seems to have been made aware of the promise of a child immediately after this passage (18:1f.), as we will find out tomorrow.

Looking at Chapter 17 as a whole, the conversation between Abraham and God is the third phase of God's Covenant promise to Abraham within the chapter. The first phase was God's confirmation of His promise (17:1-8), the second phase was the command to Abraham that he should be obedient and seal the Covenant with the physical sign of circumcision in his male descendants (17:9-14). The third phase is our story today, in which Abraham is challenged by God to accept that Sarah will play her true role as his wife in the Covenant promise, and this is a challenge to Abraham to trust God, believe in Him and also to respect Sarah His wife, and indeed demonstrate that trust by renaming her 'Sarah', meaning 'Princess'. If circumcision was a physical sign of a spiritual reality of the Covenant for Abraham, then the birth of a son would be the same for Sarah.

Of course, this Old Covenant has now been replaced by the New Covenant through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Circumcision and childbirth each have powerful meaning for people today for different reasons, but not in the same way that they did for Abraham and Sarah! The new sign of the Covenant in Christ Jesus is baptism, which does not distinguish between men and women, or Jews or Gentiles, and childbirth continues to be a blessing for parents who seek to bring up their children in God's ways and so pass on the Christian Faith. But it is still remarkable that the first Covenant, though given in a male dominated society, is described in scripture as a partnership between God, Abraham and Sarah. Some scholarly commentaries on Genesis allude to the importance of Sarah to the Covenant, but many do not mention her significance to the Covenant at all. They sell short both women, scripture, and men.

Going Deeper

- Sarah's part in the Old Covenant
- Abraham laughs
- Isaac and Ishmael

The three phases of chapter 17 are an important starting place for our understanding of this scripture, and the involvement of Sarah is not just functionary. She is integral to the Covenant promises of God as the bearer of her child, Isaac. As we go further into the text, we will look at the meaning of her name change, the meaning of theme of laughter which surround the conception and birth of Isaac, and the relationship of the child to be born to Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar.

Sarah's part in the Old Covenant

Sarah's part in the origins of the Old Covenant are so important that she is the only woman in the Old Testament whose age at death and details of burial are recorded (23:1ff)! We may regret the unseemly male domination of the ancients, but it is remarkable that despite this, Sarah's place in God's Covenant survives to this day through scriptures which come from very ancient times. Whatever we think of male and female issues today, scripture consistently affirms God's creation of man and woman as equal in His sight (Gen 1:27), as it does here.

We know that Sarah's role in childbirth is the third part of the Covenant, because of the words 'as for ...' in verse 15. These words introduced the previous elements of the Covenant, with Gen.17:2 for the introduction to God's part, and Gen.17:9 for Abraham's. The first thing God did was to inform Abraham of Sarai's new name, Sarah. The difference between the two has been debated for centuries, and is only a matter of a small spelling change in both Hebrew and English. Sarai means 'one of noble birth' and Sarah which means 'Princess'. It is best to think of the old name as pointing back to her previous life as the daughter of a nobleman, Terah; but the new name was a subtle variation on this which pointed forward to the new role she would have as the mother of nations, and also leaders of people (v16).

The name change was also important for Sarah because it was a Covenant sign that she was now fertile, not barren. Sarah's fertility was the reason why both herself and Abraham had waited so long for the fulfilment of God's promises given nearly 15 years previously, when they had come to Canaan from Kharan (ch12). God told Abraham in this part of His speech that the time was close for the child of promise to be conceived who would bear the Covenant. Sarah's role was obviously crucial as a mother, but is emphasised in the text by its threefold use (v15,19 and 21), and the words of promise given to Abraham about Sarah in v.16 which echo the promises first given to him at the beginning (12:2,3) 'I will bless ... I will give ...'. We will find out a great deal more about Sarah as a real character in later stories, but we should be in no doubt about her significance now.

Abraham laughs

The response of Abraham to all this talk about his wife bearing a son was enough to send Abraham into fits of laughter (v17)! Some think that the Hebrew text really describes worship rather than laughter, because 'falling down' before the Lord was normally a sign of worship in the Old Testament. However, the Hebrew verb here is different, and I see no reason for us to think of anything other than genuine laughter. Indeed the whole story of Isaac's conception and birth is one that hinges on laughter, as we shall see in the next chapter. Also, the Hebrew word for laughter is very closely related to sexual words for 'fondling' (Gen 26:8) and other words for 'fertility', so the theme of laughter in this story is very strong. We should surely expect this, for the whole story depends upon fertility and sex; Abraham's part of the Covenant was circumcision and therefore not unrelated to sex (as we saw yesterday), and Sarah's part was also highly sexual, for now she could conceive! In Hebrew, the word 'laughter' brought the whole covenant together!

Abraham had waited a long time for this moment, and it was hardly what he expected. He still harboured the hope that Ishmael might be his heir, an issue which persisted in Abraham's relationship with God even after the birth of Isaac (see Gen 21:11ff). However, the conversation between Abraham and God comes across as more congenial and relaxed here than the anxious yearnings expressed earlier (15:2), and the laughter could either be an expression of doubt, or one of sheer humour at the manner of God's deeds, or even both. It was also probably tinged with the concern of a man who was getting on in years, and viewed the birth of a son to him and his wife with caution.

Isaac and Ishmael

From when Abraham said to God 'I do wish you would accept Ishmael as my son', the lives of Ishmael and Isaac were connected. God's reply to this question was to state the work He was about to do with certainty, and give a name to the son whose birth would confirm it; the boy's name would be 'Isaac'. He then

accounted for Ishmael in His governance of the world order, in specific response to Abraham's concern. Firstly now, some comments on Isaac.

It was natural that God should pick on the name 'Isaac', which comes from the Hebrew word for 'laughter'. Many names in Genesis from this point onwards are constructed like a prayer; for example, Ishmael means 'may he hear', which when spoken to God is a prayer ('may God hear' - the prayer probably said by Hagar in the wilderness). The later name of Jacob means 'may he protect', which again forms a prayer which fits a considerable number of situations relating to his birth and his life (more of this later). The name Isaac strictly means 'may he laugh'; and if this is thought of as a prayer to God in the same way, it becomes both a reminder of the announcement of his birth, but also the Covenant promises of God which were rooted in his very life after both his mother and father laughed at the suggestion of his birth and then rejoiced at his conception (18:12, 21:6). In this way, Isaac's name was also a reminder that the Covenant was brought about by God's sovereign authority and miraculous power, and not by human means. Isaac would become the Covenant bearer (v21) who would 'keep' the Covenant by passing it on to the next generation.

The promise to Ishmael (v20) was also God's gracious gift to Abraham. We should remember that at the time of this revelation to Abraham, Ishmael was around 13 years of age, and there was probably a question in Abraham's mind as to whether he should formally bless Ishmael as his heir, as would have been normal at this age. God's words put him straight on this (see also Gen 21:8ff), but instead of a blessing from his father, Ishmael received a blessing as a gift from God, and was not rejected. The blessing of Ishmael is a reminder to us that God has other blessings for other people, but not the same Covenant for the salvation of the world which He established with the descendants of Abraham through Sarah. The twelve princes promised (v20) crop up later in scripture (25:12-16) and settle north of Canaan, not conflicting historically with the occupation of Canaan.

As Ishmael is mentioned in this passage it is worth remembering Hagar. She had been prepared to listen to God's voice (even as a 'foreigner' from Egypt) and return to Abraham's household even though she was mistreated by her mistress Sarah. We do not know the details of this apart from some unpleasant words about this in Gen 16:6. It is worth noting that along with Sarah's own wait for a child, Hagar had been prepared to wait on God herself until such a time as her son received a blessing. Within a short time, and with the blessing secured, she left Abraham's household (21:8ff). Sometimes, oppression must be endured for a higher purpose, and her wait bore fruit in the blessing.

Discipleship

Application

This third part of the blessing of God on Abraham and his wife Sarah completed what He had to say to them about His Covenant, both His obligations and their commitments. Now is therefore a good time to remind ourselves of what God's purposes were from the beginning in choosing both Abraham and Sarah. He began by telling Abraham He would be blessed by being made into a great 'people' (12:2,3) but added that through him and his descendants by Sarah, 'all the nations of the world will be blessed' (12:3). God's patient plan was to build a people based on Abraham and Sarah, to whom He chose to reveal himself; then through their descendants He would bless the whole world. Whilst God's chosen people were but one family, uncertain as to how they would even proceed to the next generation, they were like the 'smouldering wick' which, as Jesus said (Matt 12:20), God would not extinguish, and it is easy to become focussed on their very survival. However, as God built up Abraham's faith, developed his sense of worship, and eventually revealed His miraculous plan for the fulfilment of His promises, we can begin to see the plan unfold.

God works on a broad time plan for the salvation of the world, and one which gives men and women much time. Within this time they can consider His claims, read history, look after their environment, develop it and do all that they see fit; but God still looks for faith in those who respond to Him. In our day, this plan has reached the point where we can be assured of God's eventual defeat of all evil and death itself because of Jesus Christ, who Himself fulfils the Old Covenant we have been studying. He shows the way forward, but we should be careful to remember the original purpose of God in both creating the Old Covenant and in sending Jesus Christ. This is to bring the blessing of salvation to the whole world.

Questions for groups

1. What do you make of 'laughter' in God's presence (17:17)? In what ways might it be appropriate to laugh before God today?

2. Try to imagine what the name Isaac would have meant to Abraham and Sarah's young child. Is it right to 'label' children in this way today?
3. How important is the promise of God to Ishmael? Does this mean anything for us today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Reflect on what God requires of us today as His people, and discuss this with other people you know at church. How does your church practice or advocate obedience to God's promises?*
- *Write down a list of what you believe God has promised you over the years, and what He has asked you to do as a matter of obedience. This can be a good reminder of aspects of our relationship with God that we easily forget!*

Final Prayer

We worship You, Lord Jesus Christ. For You have shown the way of life, a path through the intricacies of the world and its pitfalls; a path of life, not death; a path of love, not hate; a path of wholeness, not despair. Keep us in Your way, faithful God, so that we may never be lost. AMEN
