**Lesson 4**

**11-12 October 2021**

**Genesis 17-18**

***Another Perspective*:**

**Progressive Revelation –** Last week we introduced the concept of *progressive revelation*, that is, revelation from God that occurs in stages, with God supplying more and more specific details as His plans unfold. We examined this concept as it related to the promise that God would give Abram and his descendants a land of their own. Recall that at first God just said, “Go to a land that I will show you.” When Abram reached Shechem, God revealed to him that He would give him THIS land. Later he told Abram to look in every direction from where he was because He would give him all the land around him, as far as his eye could see. Then in chapter 15 God revealed that Abram’s offspring would one day possess ALL the land “from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates”.

**Progressive Revelation Concerning Abram’s Offspring –** This week we want to look at this concept as it relates to the promise that Abram would have offspring. In Genesis 12:2 God tells Abram that He would make him into a “great nation,” implying that he would have children. (By the way, Terah was the one who gave Abram his original name, which means “father of many.” So the Lord lets Abram know that HE is the one who will see that Abram actually becomes the father of many.) In Genesis 13:6 God tells Abram that his offspring will be “like the dust of the earth” in number, i.e. will be uncountable. In Genesis 15:5 God changes the analogy and tells Abraham that his offspring will be as many as the stars in the sky.

**Why Dust and Stars? –** Why do you think God used two different things, dust and stars, to make the same point? We are not told in scripture, but both objects seem fitting. Remember that Adam was created from the dust of the earth, so God may have used dust to remind Abram that He can provide offspring for him just as miraculously as He created the very first man. Or it may be that God was using Abram’s circumstances at the time to make His own point. (Abram had just seen big clouds of dust as Lot and his large flocks and herds left him, so God may have used that as an object lesson.) Or perhaps God was using two different kinds of objects to communicate that Abraham would have two different kinds of offspring: natural descendants through his sons and spiritual ones in all those who put their faith in Abraham’s God. Yet another possibility is that a compassionate God wanted Abraham to have a visible reminder of His promise any time, day or night.

**Various Methods of Communication –** We have also seen that God is not limited in how He communicates with His people. Hebrews 1:1 tells us that God spoke to the fathers in many different ways, and we have seen some of those ways already: just talking with them, coming to them in a vision, and appearing to them as the angel of the Lord. In Genesis 18 we see God doing a different thing. He appears to Abraham as one of three seemingly ordinary men. During the course of their conversation over a meal, they reveal to Abraham (and Sarah, who was listening in) two new specific details about Abraham’s offspring: Sarah herself will have a son AND she will give birth one year from now! So this incident illustrates *both* progressive revelation and a new means of communicating.

**What’s Wrong with This Picture? –** I found this picture of Abraham and his three visitors on the internet, but as I looked at it, I realized that it isn’t entirely accurate. So, Bible scholars, put on your thinking caps and tell me, “What’s wrong with this picture?”

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***Bible Study Fellowship’s Perspective:*** The following comments were taken from Lesson 11 of the BSF course on Genesis.

* In Genesis 17:1 **God’s voice startled Abram’s ears with a strong statement of His Person and power, “I am God Almighty.”** In Hebrew, the name God disclosed here is *El Shaddai.* Scholars debate about its original meaning, but this context affirms God as the Almighty One. He is the One who possesses unlimited might and before whom all creation bows…Scripture reveals many names for God, enlarging our understanding of the untold vastness of His character. pg. 1
* **God prescribed the sign of male circumcision for Abraham and his male descendants.** Participation in circumcision affirmed each man’s acceptance of God’s covenant personally and as representative for his family. This command fit the cultural context (of the day). Throughout Old Testament times, male patriarchs were responsible to lead their clans or family units. Therefore, **circumcision did not exclude women from the covenant** but confirmed God’s blessing for the whole family unit through the male patriarch…Male circumcision:
	+ was the **outward sign** of the old covenant and the Abrahamic promise.
	+ **distinguished** Abraham’s male descendants from other people as set apart for God.
	+ **confirmed** the covenant blessing for the whole family unit through the male patriarch.
	+ served as the **seal** (promise) of obedience within the community that identified with God.
	+ **symbolized** cutting off the old life of self-effort, failure and sin. pg 2
* **Abraham and Sarah’s story reminds believers that a promise delayed is not a promise denied.** pg 4
* God often waits to intervene until we know that there is no chance or seemingly no hope. Jesus never says, “Figure it out,” He says, “Follow Me”… **When God accomplishes what only He can do, He alone receives the glory.** pg 5

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**Jen Wilkin, *God of Covenant* video #3: *God Visits*, part 1**

**Renewal of God’s Covenant** – It has been 24 years since God first promised Abram that he would become a great nation, i.e. have a son, and 13 years since the birth of Ismael, his son by Hagar. Certainly he feels a great attachment to this son, and perhaps he has even wondered if the covenant might be established through Ismael. God now appears to Abram again to reaffirm His promise, and He also changes Abram’s name to Abraham. This is a significant act, because Old Testament names were meant to be prophetic. Abram means “father of many”, which must have given him pain every time he introduced himself to someone who didn’t know him—and who probably immediately then asked, “Oh, how many children do you have?” For all these years he has had to respond, “I don’t have any.” Now God tells him that his name will be Abraham, “father of a multitude”. This could have felt like God was playing a cruel joke on him, setting him up for further pain and embarrassment, but Abraham responds in faith and worship.

**Covenant of Circumcision** – God has a sign that He wants associated with His covenant: circumcision of all males. Why did God choose this particular sign, when He could have chosen anything? God wanted to make sure that the vehicle of begetting a child bore the sign of His covenant. **The means by which Abraham will become a great nation needs to bear a tangible reminder that it is God’s faithfulness that brings this about.** The male organ is marked as a *reminder* that original sin is passed from father to son. It is marked as a *warning* that those who forsake the covenant would themselves be “cut off”. And it is marked as a *promise* because the seed of Christ will ultimately come through Abraham’s line. Further, circumcision is an *appropriate* sign. It is called a “bloody sign” because it is a reminder of the parting of flesh and the shedding of blood that occurred in the ritual to ratify a covenant that we saw at the end of chapter 15. So the sign makes sense. In contrast, the sign of the New Covenant, i.e. baptism, does *not* involve blood because there is no longer any need for the shedding of blood for the remission of sins. The final sacrifice was made once for all in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. So the sign of circumcision is a bloody one, and it is also incredibly personal. God means it to be that way.

**Abraham’s Response** – God then announces that Sarai herself will have a son, and He changes her name from Sarai to Sarah (“princess”). Abraham does two things in response. First, he bursts into laughter. His is the *joyful* laughter of the man of faith. But then he expresses his longing for his son Ishmael to be acceptable to God and to be the covenant bearer. But God says, “No, *your wife* Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him ‘He laughs’. As for Ishmael, I have heard *(Ishmael’ed)* you. He too will be a great nation—but *I will confirm my covenant with Isaac*.” At the end of this encounter with God, Abraham immediately obeys and has all the males in his household circumcised.

**What’s In a Name?** – When God changed Abram and Sarai’s names, He gave them new forms of their previous names, but with the “breath of God” added. Both of their names now contain that “hah” sound that is to remind them that it is the power of the Holy Spirit of God that will enable them to conceive and have a son together. It will not be their own doing, but a miraculous doing of God. They are enlivened and called to His purposes in a pictorial form even in the way that their names sound!

**Another Encounter** – Chapter 18 opens with a scene in which Abraham is resting in the heat of the day at the “oaks of Mamre” when he sees three men approaching. The *setting* is significant because the pagans worshiped their fertility gods near trees. Abraham has had his own issues with fertility, and he has established an altar to the one true God there. He addresses them as “my lord”, but it is not immediately apparent that he yet realizes just who these three “men” are. “Lord” was a title of respect that would be given to any traveler that passed near his gate.

**“A Little Something To Eat”** – Abraham urges these men to be his guests for “a bit of bread”. And then there is an almost humorous account of how he *hurried* into the tent, told Sarah to be *quick* about making bread and then *ran* to the herd and had a young man *hurry* to cook the calf he had selected for the feast. And the amount of food is extraordinary: he told Sarah to use about 60 pounds of flour for the bread, and he has an entire calf cut up and prepared for these three men to eat! Notice also that he himself stands to serve the meal to them. He has servants, but he does all the serving himself, in line with eastern hospitality.

**Sarah’s Laughter** – God asks about Sarah, knowing that she is listening and will hear what He says. He wants her to hear from Himself that she will have a son very soon. Her response is similar to Abraham’s in that she laughed to herself upon receiving the message, but hers is the laughter of bitterness and hurt, born out of long years of longing, shame and deep disappointment. But then God calls her on her laughter, and she discovers like Hagar did that He is a God who hears our internal conversations and who sees behind tent flaps. She realizes that these are not just three “men” but God Himself. And the Lord, in His patience and long-suffering and compassion, gently asks her, “Is anything impossible for the Lord?”

**Life from Death** – The New Testament has two significant comments to make about Abraham and Sarah’s physical conditions and their faith.

* Hebrews 11:11, 12 says, “By faith Sarah herself, when she was *unable to have children*, received power to conceive offspring, even though *she was past the age*, since she considered that the One who had promised was faithful. There from one man—in fact, from one *as good as* ***dead***—came offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore.”
* Romans 4:19 says, “Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that *his body was as good as* ***dead***—since he was about one hundred years old—and that *Sarah’s womb was also* ***dead***.”

God has Abraham and Sarah exactly where He wants them to be, where the only reason that a child could possibly come from this union would be a miraculous one. **He intends to display to them and to all who witness the event that He is a God who brings life out of death.**