

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 13, The Covenant Ceremony and Covenant Sign, Part 2

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This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews in his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 13, The Covenant Ceremony and The Covenant Sign, Part 2, Genesis 15:1-17:27.

Today is lesson 13, part two, a continuation of our discussion of what we find in chapters 15, 16, and 17.

Last time we spoke of the covenant ceremony in chapter 15, and now we want to conclude this important section in chapter 16 with the birth of Ishmael. Then in chapter 17, the covenant sign. When it comes to Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 16, we find that it has been 10 years since Abraham and Sarah entered into Canaan.

Chapter 16, verse one describes Sarah, Abraham's wife had born him no children. So, this brings forward what we learned in chapter 11: that she was barren, and she continued to be so. The verse that follows, says, Abraham agreed to what Sarah said.

So, after Sarah, I rather Abraham had been living in Canaan 10 years. So, you can see now that Sarah is 75 years of age. And Abraham is 85 years of age.

So, they choose in a desperate move to offer a different plan whereby a child would be born. And so, you will remember that in chapter 15, where there was the proposal of adoption of Eliezer, a servant in the household of Abraham, God responded by saying in chapter 15, verse four, a son will come from your own body, who will be your heir. Well, that is what we find with Hagar and Ishmael a proposal for having a child by Sarah herself meets that expectation because Abraham will be the father, Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant, will be the mother, and then will be considered the offspring of Abraham, Sarah.

So, when it comes to the custom of adoption by a surrogate mother, this is something that must have been acceptable. And something that Sarah and Abraham had chosen because Abraham agreed to what Sarah had said. So, he slept with her, we are told.

In verse four, he slept with Hagar, and she conceived. Now, if you look at the previous verse, notice what it says, using the language of Genesis three on the part of Eve, who took the fruit and then gave it to her husband. This is what is recounted in Genesis three.

So, this is what is said in verse three of chapter 16. So, after Abraham had been living in Canaan, 10 years, Sarah, his wife, took her Egyptian maid servant, Hagar, and gave

her to her husband to be his wife. This may be an intentional reflection of what occurred in the garden.

And so, the human condition continues. In a troublesome doubting of God's Word, part of the spiritual journey, part of growing in your relationship with God is when we do stumble, that God does not abandon, but rather he rescues. And we will find that, in this case, there is another step taken by God to rescue the plan.

There's a threat to the promise here because Hagar is a foreigner, an Egyptian. So, echoes of Eve's sin then will set us on alert that the procreation promise is going to be realized, and God is going to see to it. So, what occurred as a consequence was a rivalry between the two women, Sarah and also Hagar.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. So you can see that the very strong tradition of a woman's identity in antiquity was having children. And if you did not have children, then you were looked down upon by society.

And so there was always prestige associated with women who had multiple children. And then, of course, a diminishing of the value of a woman if she did not have children. This, of course, was a custom and not a biblical demand, nor was it a biblical precedent.

And so, we do know, of course, there are women who don't have children, either by choice or perhaps by the inability, either by husband or the woman herself, to conceive and have a child. But that is not to be understood as something to be despised. Nor is it to be understood that this is God's punishment.

That is something that was a custom in antiquity during these early years of Israel's experience and is not to be applied universally to Christian women today. Then we find that Sarah responds with, really, a charge against Abraham. It's really a charge against Abraham, but it's not a charge against Abraham.

It's a charge against Abraham. Rather, shifting the blame when she says, you are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me.

May the Lord judge between you and me. And so there is a sense, I think now, of suffering from the decision that she has made. And she recognizes, or at least charges, Abraham with being a co-participant.

May the Lord judge, and she rightly gives it to the Lord to determine who is at fault. And I think we can say confidently that both are to be understood as at fault—verse 6. Your servant is in your hands, and so Abraham said, do with her whatever you think best.

This must have been of great sadness on the part of Abraham because, after all, Hagar was carrying his child. So, it says that Sarah mistreated Hagar, so she fled from her. Now we have, again, evidence of God's great mercy.

As in verse 7, we learn that the angel of the Lord, this messenger of the Lord, found Hagar near a spring in the desert. And he said, Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going? And she says, I'm running away from my mistress, Sarah—verse 9. Then the angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her.

And the angel added I will so increase your numbers that they will be too numerous to count. We have certainly heard this before—promises made to Abraham.

Numerous offspring, like the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. And now we have the promise extended by the Lord based on the relationship that this child will have with Abraham. God so blesses and enriches the life of Abraham.

And even this one, Ishmael, who was not in conformity to God's perfect will, is nonetheless blessed with great progeny. And he will become the father of 12 nations. This genealogy of Ishmael will be presented in later chapters.

Now, the angel Lord does describe this character of Ishmael. And this is found in verse 11. The angel Lord said to Hagar, you are now a child.

You have a son and you shall name him Ishmael. Now, this is striking because the name Ishmael means God. That's the E-L.

Ishmael, God hears. Ishma, God hears. So that's the explanation.

For the Lord has heard of your misery. And so, God is merciful and attentive to the needs of the Egyptian slave woman. And that he will protect and provide for her and her child.

And that is, it says that the Lord here is going to provide great progeny for Ishmael. And in verse 12, it says, this is his character. He will be a wild donkey of a man.

In other words, he will be living on the margins of society. In the arena of the wilderness, he will also be a very hostile figure. His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him.

And he will live in hostility toward all his brothers. And that is what takes place. Just as we saw the hostility between Sarah and Hagar, this will be passed on to their descendants.

And there will be rivalry between the offspring of Ishmael and the promised offspring of Isaac. And we will see this throughout the long history of the nations that emerged from Ishmael and then Israel. Now, there is another play about Hagar's experience.

We have here language that has to do with seeing. And if you look at verse 13, you are the God, she says. She gave the name to the Lord, who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me.

For she said, I have now seen the one who sees me. Now, El Roi, E-L, God, is the one who sees me. That's the word Roi.

Some versions will actually have the name El Roi. Here in the New International Version, it is translated, and it is translated, the God who sees me. So that is why she named the spring, or the natural well, Beer-lahai-roi, which means the well of the living one who sees me.

This became an important way of identifying the location with her experience. And it is a tribute to God, as she can best understand it, as an Egyptian woman, using that generic term for God, El. But what God has chosen to do is to extend his mercy and kindness, even to what we might call outsiders.

And we'll see this again in the life of Esau and the Edomites, that God has a plan of mercy for all the nations, a blessing for all the nations, even the traditional enemies of Israel, as we saw in the Table of Nations. Verse 15, So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael. So, upon returning, there must have been an explanation Hagar gave to Abraham, and he complies by naming the son Ishmael.

Then we have a date here on the age of Abraham. So, this is very helpful to us in the chronology and measuring this journey on the part of Abraham. And we will find that Ishmael is 13 years older than Isaac.

Let's continue now with the covenant of circumcision, which is found in chapter 17. This is an important chapter for us because it has to do with one of the chief identifying markers of Abraham's offspring in Israel, and that is the covenant sign of circumcision. If chapter 15 pertains to the ratification by ceremony, then chapter 17 is the confirmation by sign of circumcision.

There are some scholars who believe that it's a different covenant. It's identified as the covenant of circumcision because you have the explicit stipulation in verse one that reads, The Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. And then here would be walk before me and be blameless.

Walk before me and be blameless. But I think that there is a parallel between chapters 15 and 17 that indicates, at least in my mind and those of other commentators, that this is a continuation of the same covenant. Because in chapter 15, verses one and seven, you have the I am statement.

And then, in chapter 17 here, we have the I am statement. I am God Almighty. So here we have the Hebrew El Shaddai, God Almighty.

What we want to see in chapter 17, and I hope to bring this repeatedly to our attention as we are tracing and applying the spiritual journey of Abraham, is that there is a developing closer relationship between God and Abraham. This is part of the way in which God is training and teaching Abraham about himself, that is, the Lord, and then also about Abraham himself and the nature of the promises, the certainty of the promises. And how God is going to use these promises in an unfolding way to provide for a deliverer.

So, we need to keep that in mind, a closer relationship is evolving. Also, we want to see this chapter, and we've seen this before, but I bring it to your attention now that God wants to make himself known. You could say God wants to make himself seen and heard.

This comes out of the abundance of God's love; we've spoken of this, how he chose to create because of the overflow of his love, his desire to create a special people; he calls the special people his own possession. How he wants to share his life, all of the marvelous awesomeness of God, life, life everlasting, perfect love, perfect joy, perfect peace, all these wonderful aspects of God's life, he wants to share that with people who want to receive it. And who do receive it by faith and trust in God's revelatory word? God makes himself known in a number of ways of revelation; we've seen direct speech, and then we've seen visions take place.

And so, when it comes to chapter 17, we see another appearance on the part of the Lord, making himself known and making himself heard. We may recognize as Christians that so devoted and committed is the Lord God to creating for himself and rescuing special people for himself that he has chosen to come himself in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the letter to the Colossians indicates, the fullness of all of the Godhead, all of God, is found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And so, God has chosen to come himself in the second person of the triune God, the Son of God. He has come not as a rescuing angel, as we have seen here in chapter 16. And he has come as a baby, a child, a promised child, who grew up as humans do, and he was fully human and fully God.

What a unique mystery is the identity and the character of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so it is that this is such a closer relationship by virtue of our Lord's humanity,

experiencing what we experience so much, and yet he remained perfectly faithful to the Lord. He voluntarily took on the sufferings and woes of life and death for all of us, absorbing the pain and the losses and yet overcoming our arch enemies of the devil, Satan, and of disease and death.

And coming to new life and making that possible for us. If we receive the offer of entering into the kingdom of God by faith, entering into the life of God. So, he appeared to him and said, I am El Shaddai, God Almighty.

We don't know exactly how to understand Shaddai. There have been some suggestions. The translations in English typically follow the Greek rendering, God Almighty. But this is one of the El names, just as we saw with El Elyon, and as we saw with El Roi, and others.

This is one of the El names that were often spoken by the patriarchs in identifying the Lord God. Now the language, walk before me and be blameless, will remind us then of Enoch in the Sethite genealogy, who walked with God and then was translated into the presence of the Lord in heaven. Noah is said to be a godly man walking before the Lord.

We remember in the Job story that he's identified as blameless. So this is a call then for Abraham to walk closer to the Lord, and he has to do so by devoting himself to the right faith in the Lord and the right behavior. Now, this language, blameless, doesn't mean that he is perfect.

Rather, what is a term that's used for completeness or wholeness? Being a person is the exhortation in my covenant to have a life of integrity, have a life of faithfulness, and godliness. So, I do not think that what we have in mind here is that he's earning covenant, or he's earning righteousness, for after all this has been declared the case.

But rather what he's saying to him, and what I think we can take away from this passage, is that we, by God's enabling grace, make an effort to have a life that is devoted in faith, in trusting ourselves and all that we have, all that we are, to God's good keeping, believing in his promises, believing in his protection, believing in that he will sustain us and bless us. We will continue to live in a way that pleases him, a lifestyle that is a life wholly committed to him in the right moral behavior. So, he says then, I will confirm my covenant in chapter 17 between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.

So, we come back to the same issue, which is the major issue, the major tension, and that is birthing children. Now, I might say about the change in the names that will occur here for both Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, that the change of a name is a way in which to signal a new identity. And so, let's look then at the language that's used for Abram and Abraham.

Abram means exalted father. Ab means father, and ram means exalted, exalted father. He's going to change his name to Abraham, and he explains that name.

I have made you. In other words, this is a promise that from the perspective of God is as good as done. I have made you.

So, this is a declaration with ongoing consequences, a father of many nations. Raham means father, Raham means many, father of many. And so, we have then in his name, Abraham, embedded the idea of many nations, which would, of course, remind us of how Abraham and his offspring are the response of God to the Tower of Babel, where many nations are formed, but not because of their faithfulness.

They wanted to make a name for themselves out of pride and reputation. But rather, Abraham humbly submits to God's promises, who tells Abraham in chapter 12, I will make your name great. So, Abraham does not seize for himself a name illicitly, but rather, God blesses him by giving him a name and reputation.

And continuing, he says in explanation, I will make you very fruitful. Now, doesn't that remind you of what we've read before? In Genesis chapter 1, verse 28, in Genesis chapter 9, verse 1, and then what we have discovered, the language of fruitfulness. And then he goes on to say, I will make nations of you.

Now, this is an additional aspect in verse 6, and kings will come from you. And that is certainly the case as you read the story of Genesis. Ishmael's tribal kings, Esau's Edomite kings, and then from Isaac and Jacob and the 12 sons out of Judah will come the great kings of the Davidic dynasty.

So, kings will come from you. This all having to do with God's intervention, God's work. The I wills are so prominent here.

And notice that the covenant will be everlasting, forever, between me and you and your descendants, for all the generations to come. Now, the only way that this is possible is through an offspring who is that anticipated deliverer, who can secure for Abraham and his descendants this permanent relationship to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And that it might be everlasting.

The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, a sojourner, a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you, and I will be their God. This reminds you of chapter 15. Remember, in the opening verses, we spoke of how there's a promise of descendants like the stars of the sky.

And then there is the ceremony of the covenant with the splitting in half of the animals that are taken for sacrifice. And in that context, a discussion of how God will

give Abraham the land of Canaan after his descendants have spent 400 years, four decades in Egypt. Then they will be delivered.

They'll return to the land of Canaan. Their land would be a part of Abraham's inheritance. That's what we also find in chapter 17.

Reference to the progeny of Abraham and then the land that has been promised. All set here within the idea of a commitment on the part of God to Abraham and in turn, Abraham's relationship to God. This is what covenant is.

I want to bring it to your attention again. The importance of covenant as the relationship. Now, the sign of the relationship will be circumcision.

And it's an appropriate sign for this relationship between God and Abraham and his progeny. Because it's made in the male organ, the sex organ that produces offspring, and so this is part of the sign of commitment on the part of Abraham that he has received in all of his descendants this great promise of blessing.

Now, circumcision was not unique to Israel. Their neighbors practiced circumcision. But in this case, it has to do not with a puberty rite, but rather with any hygienic purpose.

But rather, it signals the promise, even a mark in the body. Sarah's name is also changed to Sarah. And from her simile, she will be the mother of nations, and kings will come from her.

Sarah means princess. And again, Sarah also means princess. Well, what was Abraham's response? It's not a heroic response.

He laughs. Because at his age, 99 years, and if she becomes pregnant, he says, can a man 100 years old be the father of a child? And then he exclaims, if only Ishmael might live under your blessing. And God promises him, as we find in verse 20, I will take care of Ishmael.

This son whom you love, I'll take care of him. And he too will increase because of you, Abraham, because of my covenant with you.

And he will become the father of 12 rulers, just as we will see. Isaac becomes the father of 12 rulers. So, God specifies in verse 21 that the name of the child will be Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.

So, the identity of the son in verse 19 is said to be Isaac. And Isaac is going to his name play on the response of Abraham, and as we'll see in chapter 18 next time, the

response of Sarah, who also laughs at overhearing that this will be the case, she will give birth. Isaac means he laughs, or he will laugh.

So, on the one hand, the name Isaac reflects the doubt and hesitancy of his parents, Abraham and Sarah. But on the other hand, it speaks to the great joy that the child will bring to this aging family. So, we're told that Abraham took his son Ishmael and circumcised him and everybody else in his household.

And it says in verse 24 that he was circumcised. The chapter concludes by saying that everybody who lived in the household, in other words, under the umbrella of the covenant, experienced circumcision. So, Ishmael also is blessed.

He's an outsider. And this brings us to the appropriate setting for understanding Sodom and Gomorrah. And next time we will move on to lesson 13, chapters 18 and 19 regarding Sodom and Gomorrah.

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