

GENESIS

Lesson 17 - Chapters 17 and 18

Today we begin Genesis chapter 17. It's a pretty long chapter, so we're going to break it up a bit. We'll start by reading the first 14 verses.

READ GEN 17:1-14

In the first part of chapter 17, we are given a benchmark: Avraham is 99 years old when this appearance of God to Abraham occurs. So, 13 years has passed between the final words of chapter 16, and these first words of chapter 17. Anything that went on in that 13-year period, we are kept apart from.

But, there are few things we can know: 1) Hagar had her son, Ishmael, and he is now about 13 years old. 2) Sarai is STILL without child. She is not just barren of a MALE child, but of any children whatsoever. 3) The clan is still living in Canaan. 4) Very likely, there has been no contact between God and Abraham during that 13-year period. 5) The first covenant Yahweh made with Abraham remains intact.

And, in this new appearance, God adds a covenant to the earlier one He has already made with him, by declaring that Abraham will be the father of many nations. And, by the way, this does not necessarily mean only Hebrew nations NOR, even more importantly, will every one of these nations be of the line of the covenant promise.

The Hebrew word used here for "nations" is *goyim*. The usage of the word "goyim" has changed a little over time, but has held basically the same meaning: *goyim* means nations or people that are NOT of Hebrew descent. Now, it can also have the plain meaning of any nation, Hebrew or not; the context is the key. Today, the most common usage of *goyim* when it applies to a person is "gentile"...a non-Hebrew, or a non-Jew.

Now, did Abraham take the word "goyim", nation, to mean "non-Hebrew" people? No. Abraham was just, himself, becoming the first Hebrew. To Abraham, this simply meant that not only would his offspring be many, but also that they would separate into several people groups, and become several distinct and separate nations. Yet, as we have the benefit of looking back 4000 years, what we will see is that indeed, Abraham fathered both Hebrews AND non-Hebrews. Abraham fathered the Jewish people as well as a number of gentile people groups. We'll see that shortly.

In V5, we see God change Abraham's name (this won't be the last time a person's name is changed): he goes from being called Avram (spell), to being called AvraHAM (spell). That is, from being called exalted father, to father of many...or, in a better translation, father of

multitudes. This is also the point at which one could reasonably say Abraham became a Hebrew. Now, at exactly what point in time Abraham started calling himself, and certain offspring, “Hebrew”, we don’t know. In fact there is even disagreement over what “Hebrew” means. It’s generally accepted in the bible scholar community that it means “one who crossed over”. Bible anthropologists and archaeologists, however, will tell you that it is probable that the word Hebrew was a word that did not come until much later in time. And, it would have come from an oriental word, Ipuru (spell). Ipuru was used in Canaan and other nearby areas as a term simply meaning foreigners, or wanderers that had no specific nation they could be identified with. Certainly, at the point in history we are talking about, Abraham and his clan were betwixt and between: although they came from Ur, they no longer considered themselves Ur-Chasdim, that is, home was no longer Ur of Chaldea back up in Mesopotamia. Yet, Abraham’s clan certainly had not yet established a separate identity, nor could they point to a place in Canaan that they could say they belonged to. For though God promised them the Land of Canaan as their inheritance, they had yet to claim that inheritance.

Now, this covenant in V6 about fathering many nations is another of those permanent, unconditional, covenants; all Abraham could do is be blessed by it, for he had no real obligations within the covenant. But, God was about to make yet another covenant with Abraham, and while this next covenant would be permanent, perpetual, it was most definitely conditional. It was also bi-lateral, as opposed to unilateral: that is, Abraham, and his descendants, had obligations to perform to keep this covenant intact. However, this covenant also was individual; each person of Abraham’s line had the responsibility to accept this covenant for himself, or not. In other words, the person who broke the covenant would only affect the provisions of the covenant as it pertained to himself; the covenant would still remain in effect for each individual who chose to accept it. This covenant the Jews call B’rit milah: we call it circumcision.

Before we discuss circumcision, let’s take a look at verse 8. It says that God is giving the land to Abraham and his descendants forever. I know we’ve talked about this quite a bit, and I don’t want to repeat myself. Yet, I need to make something clear that is so often missed: there is a difference between Israel having been given the land, and Israel living in the land. The Bible term we usually find referring to Israel living in the land is “possess”. Possess doesn’t mean quite the same thing we usually think of; possess means more to “occupy”. It doesn’t really refer to ownership. Let me give you an analogy. You buy a car. The local bank finances it. Until you fully pay for it, THEY own the car. Right? It is NOT legally your car, you are just using it. So, the Bank owns the car, but it is put into your possession until you either pay it off, or default. If you fail to pay, the bank re-posses the car.....that is, they have always owned it, but they now take it from your possession and take possession of it for themselves. That’s why it’s called RE- possess. Yet, notice, that in all cases, THEY have owned the car. It’s just that sometimes you had possession, and now they do!

From the moment God made the covenant with Abraham, the land has belonged to the Hebrews but the time hadn’t yet come for them to possess it. Even for the 400 years Israel spent in Egypt, Israel already owned the land of Canaan.....they just didn’t possess it.....they didn’t occupy it. People tend to confuse things and say that Israel lost ownership of the land when God removed them to Babylon for their sins. And yet again, when the Romans gained

control and destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Not so. The ownership remained with Israel. God simply refused to allow Israel to occupy the land.....to possess it....for an extended time. This is hardly splitting hairs; it is just understanding the difference between possessing and owning. And, it is rather pertinent to those that say, well Israel lost possession of the land for 1900 years, so they don't have a right to it anymore. Wrong. They're the ONLY ones that have right to it, because despite not possessing it at times, they've NEVER stopped owning it. I hope you see this rather critical difference.

Further, the phrase of the promise in vs. 7 whereby the covenant will continue between God and Abraham.....and then it says....."and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant".....the part about the offspring is not a throw-in statement. This was pure legal terminology from that era. Law codes from that era have been found, and it was understood that there were limitations as to how property could be handed down, before it reverted to some king or prince who laid claim to that area. By inclusion of those words "and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant".....it LEGALLY for that day meant that Abraham's descendants kept that property, and could continue to hand it down, without restriction. So, understand, this was legal terminology, not hyperbole.

Now, understand what this new covenant of circumcision means. In the first covenant with Abraham....which God just said remains fully intact....Abraham was just a passive participant. He didn't have to do anything. But, in the new covenant, meant for Abraham's offspring, there WAS an obligation: circumcision as a SIGN that they chose to participate in the Abrahamic covenant; which meant, they gave their loyalty to the God of Abraham. Now, as we will see as time goes on, this covenant of circumcision follows ONLY a certain line of Abraham's descendants. It doesn't mean that ALL of his children will be eligible. Just the "who" is part of what will be called "the line of promise"? Hebrews, which will eventually lead to the Israelites.

Basically, each male following Abraham, who expects to be able to partake in the blessings of the covenants that God gave to Abraham, must AS AN OBLIGATION be circumcised. That is, ACTIVE participation is required.

Now, I don't need to get overly graphic about circumcision, because this procedure of removing the males' genital foreskin is a common practice today in most societies, and thus is common knowledge. And, usually it is done by non-Jewish families simply for medical reasons, and even the need for that is disputed. Jews, to this day, have a bris, a circumcision ceremony, for each male child, on the 8th day after his birth.

The practice of male circumcision existed long before this instruction from God to Abraham.....it was not a new invention, any more than the covenant ceremony we saw God participate in with Abraham was a new invention. Rather, it had been employed in many cultures of that day as either part of the marriage ceremony or, more typically, as a sign of entrance into puberty. One thing God did was to take the trauma out of it by having it performed not on a young teenage boy, but on an 8-day-old baby. Plus, God employed this existing rite as a sort of loyalty oath; and He added great meaning to it. Just as with stars and planets, God used things from nature when He chooses to create a sign for His own good purposes. After all, every one of these natural things owed it's very existence to God.....the sad fact that so many then, as

now, had decided to attach their own meanings, like astrology, to the things God made was simply a perversion.

But, here's the thing: remember that standard covenant protocol required shedding of blood, typically animal blood, and the cutting of flesh, typically animal flesh, and the separating of that cut-up flesh into two groups. Here, with circumcision, the covenant procedure occurred using the male body as the sacrificial flesh; the flesh was cut, blood shed, and the cut-up flesh separated; one part buried in the ground, the other remaining on the body. Quite literally, Abraham and his male descendants WORE the covenant, and WERE the covenant. The penalty for refusing the circumcision covenant was stern: you were to be cut-off from your people. This was both spiritual and literal. When a male descendant of Abraham refused the circumcision, or when a parent refused to have their boy-child have a B'rit Milah on the 8th day after birth, they were physically separated from the clan, and they were spiritually separated from God. They were no longer Hebrews and could claim no right to any of God's promises.

This is why God, through Paul, explained that what God really wanted was circumcised hearts, not circumcised flesh. God wanted our hearts to accept and wear the covenant that came to us at so great a price. By accepting Christ, Paul says we have our hearts circumcised: we are very literally accepting God's covenant protocol upon ourselves. And, since the advent of Yeshua, and the New Covenant He established, we find ourselves in the same position as Abraham: either we are circumcised by accepting the New Covenant which is the blood of Christ, or we refuse it. If we accept it, we are perpetually a part of the chosen of God. If we refuse, we are cut-off.....separated.....from God's people, and from God Himself. While that may startle some of you, Paul's words probably knocked some of those Jews he was speaking to, to their knees. Because they well understood all the in's and out's of covenant ceremony and symbolism. But, because the Church has, for so long, turned our backs on the Jewish nature of the Bible, the impact of things like the act of covenant making has not been understood.

Now, there is a principle and pattern contained in verse 12 that we need to be aware of: that it was NOT just those from Abraham's gene pool that could become part of this covenant. Here, the home-born slave or purchased slave of a Hebrew.....that is a foreigner....could be included in the covenant by being circumcised. Understand, by Law, a purchased slave BECAME a family member. They had almost all rights of a family member.... almost, but not quite. Therefore, a baby born to a purchased slave ALSO became a family member. This is so foreign to the usual picture we have of what slavery amounted to in Bible times, among the Hebrews. The foreign slaves of Hebrews weren't generally mistreated.....because they were family! The concept of slave ownership among Hebrews is VERY close to our modern concept of adoption. And, do not confuse slave ownership to indentured servitude. Being a bond-servant....someone who is your servant only for a period of time while they repay a debt owed to you.....did NOT qualify that person to be a family member. ONLY a purchased slave was a family member. It's kind of reversed from what might seem logical to us.

So, very early on the idea that genetics.....blood lines.....wasn't the sole determining factor for membership in the holy community, was established. Here, beginning with Abraham, a foreigner who was willing to follow the Hebrew ways and the Hebrew God, could be given full

citizenship as a Hebrew, and with it all the covenant rights that any natural born Hebrew would have. This is the same principle that we, as gentiles, rely on by being grafted into the covenants given through Abraham, Moses, and Yeshua.....covenants that were given to ISRAEL, and no one else.

READ GEN 17:15-27

In these few words I just read, we have the basis for the hostility that is going to sooner or later lead the world into global conflict.

The first few verses are basically God conveying to Abraham that Sarah, his wife, is miraculously going to give birth to a child. Why miraculous? She had a dead womb. She was incapable of producing children which is why she gave her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham to have a child in her stead. And, even if her body had been functioning properly she was well beyond childbearing years, as Abraham himself attests; for, at this time, Sarah was 90 years old.

When God tells Abraham that Sarah is going to give him a son, Abraham responds with these infamous words in V18: "If only Ishmael could live in your presence!" I hope you all hear the pain, shock, and desperation with which Abraham uttered this plea. Abraham was happy with Ishmael. He loved Ishmael. He considered Ishmael his firstborn son. He NEVER even remotely thought of Ishmael as anything other than his legitimate, much loved, heir. And, even before God issued His answer, Abraham knew what was coming. In V19, God says "NO!" to Abraham's plea. That the child that Sarah was about to produce would be Abraham's heir, and further, that this boy-child would be the one who God would establish, and continue, His covenant with. And, that this child's name would be Yitzchak, meaning laughter, because both Abraham and Sarah had laughed at the astounding notion that they, at their advanced age, would have a child.

Now, let's be very clear here: God emphatically rejected Ishmael as the one who would carry on the line of the covenant promise that God had made with Abraham. This is not conjecture. Rather, it would be Isaac, Yitzchak, who would be the one. Today, Muslims claim that the scriptures have been modified to reflect Isaac as the favored son, when it should have been Ishmael. Here is another division by God; a separation, and an election. You see, Isaac would be grandfather of the Israelites, who would eventually bring the Savior into the world; while Ishmael would be grandfather to the Arabs. Understand, Islam is not a **race** of people; it is but the **religion** the Arabs adopted some 6 centuries after Christ's death and resurrection. But, the Muslims see no difference for they call Ishmael, and Abraham, the father of Islam.

Yet, how quickly we tend to overlook what God says to Abraham in V20. Referring to Ishmael, God says, "I have blessed him". Or, in a better translation, "I am blessing him". Isaac is the line of promise. But, Ishmael is also blessed.....just not as being the line of promise. In fact, it is noteworthy that just as Israel would consist of 12 princes.....that is, 12 tribes.....so would the descendants of Ishmael be made up of 12 tribes.

It's important to remember that not only is Abraham the true father of the Arabs, just as he is

the true father of Israel; but that Shem, the blessed line of good, is the forefather of both Arabs and Jews. Both of these people groups are Semites.

Has Ishmael been blessed? Well, not only have the Arabs grown into an enormous population, far outstripping the number of Israelites, but look in our time how they have been blessed. 100 years ago the Middle East was looked upon as perhaps the most worthless expanse of land on the entire planet. Yet, there, under the dry desert sand, they have also discovered about half of the Earth's oil reserves, which have made the Arabs among the wealthiest people in the world. Unfortunately, the Arab culture has remained tribal, and so only a few of the most powerful benefit from this vast wealth.

In any case, Ishmael, 13 years old at the time of this blessing, is circumcised, along with Abraham, and every male, free and slave, in Abraham's household.

READ GEN 18:1 - 15

This chapter is a good reminder of the character and essence of the entire book of Genesis; it is the book of beginnings. Or, in a similar light, it is the book of foundations.....foundations of principles, and types, and laws of God.

We could speed through this chapter, but we'd miss the beginnings of several God-principles set down for us. And, these principles will form the basis for how the whole Bible will play out.

The scene we witness in this chapter, takes place in hills of Hebron, from where one can get a beautiful view of practically the whole of the Dead Sea. And, we start right out with a mystery that we likely cannot answer. In Verse 1, it says "the Lord" appeared to Abraham; or perhaps in your bible, as in mine, it says "Adonai" appeared..... to Abraham. And, it's important to get this as straight as we can, because it impacts the entire rest of the chapter. The word "Adonai" is a Hebrew word, and it translates to Lord or Master. So, that much certainly is right. There's just one problem; that's not the word used in the original Hebrew OT manuscripts. The word is actually Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh in the Hebrew Alphabet.....Yhwh in the English alphabet.....and we typically translate it to Jehovah, or in Hebrew we would say Yahveh or Yahweh. Two things: first, the reason we see it the way we do in our Bibles is due to a Tradition among the Jews. And, that tradition is that it is forbidden to say the name of God. It has evolved to the point that among most observant Jews, you also can't say the word "God", or even spell it. So, quite often, if you read something concerning God written by a Jew, God will be spelled G dash D. By the way: nowhere in the Holy Scriptures is there a prohibition about saying God's name, Yahweh, except when using it in vain. That said, Jewish Tradition says that simply pronouncing God's name is to use it in vain. I don't wish to get into some theological argument about this, but I cannot find that it is vanity to pronounce God's name. If God did not want us to pronounce His name why give it to us? Why are we TOLD to call upon the name of the Lord, and then if we do it is sin?

I can also tell you that I have met several Jews who feel that it is not so much a matter of trespassing against God to use His Holy Name, as it is a matter of showing respect to refrain

from using it.

Therefore, I will tell you that as Paul advised, be sensitive to the things that offend others even if you cannot fully understand why, or even might disagree with it. Therefore, as I full well know that practically all religious Jews, and some simply Traditional Jews, find the use of the word “God”, or “Yahweh”, offensive to them, I do my best to say HaShem, or the Lord in their presence, out of respect to them. When I go to Israel, I am particularly careful. Let’s face it; it is certainly NOT offensive to us who find no fault in using God’s name, to hear Him called HaShem or the Lord, so it’s not a difficult trade-off.

In this class, I will use many names for God: God, Jehovah, Adonai, Yahweh.....and for Jesus: Christ, Jesus, Yeshua, Yeshua HaMashiach, Lord, Savior, and a few more. I ask you to try and understand that this is a classroom and I am speaking to quite a varied audience. Further, most Bibles will use those names. And, if I do use code words for God and for Jesus that are totally unfamiliar to many in here, then I’m not communicating or teaching.....I’m just mouthing words. So know that I respect your views and mean no offense.

Now, back to this strange scene that opens chapter 18; the thing is, one of the 3 so-called “men” who appeared to Abraham seems like he must actually have been Yahweh, Jehovah, Himself. We’ll get to the other two “men” in a minute. The thing is, there is no doubt it was some manifestation of God Almighty because the scripture directly says so. It says Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh, Yahveh, appeared to Abraham. On the other hand, we are told insistently, that no man can look upon God the Father and live. Not even Moses was permitted this honor, though he asked for it.

Now, often we are told that what this really means is that this “man” called Yahweh was Jesus. Right? Because here was God, in some kind of visible form, that appeared as a man. And, the general rule in the evangelical Church is, if God has physical characteristics, it’s Jesus. But, wait, when have you ever heard Jesus referred to by the Father’s personal name, Yahweh? Mostly certainly we regularly will call him “the Lord” (which could be one translation of the word Adonai). |But, again, in the original Hebrew the word used to open chapter 18 is Yahweh, NOT Adonai. In V3, however, after we’re told that Abraham looked up and saw 3 men, we DO encounter the word Adonai. Here’s the thing, Adonai is plural.....Adon is singular. Adonai, a plural, is sometimes used to refer to God, and it is referred to as a plural of majesty. In other words, when Adonai is referring to God its not denoting more than one, it’s simply denoting greatness. Here, however, the context indicates that Abraham was addressing all 3 so-called “men”, and therefore verse 3 should likely read: “.....he (meaning Abraham) said, my **lords**, if it please you, do not go on past your servant....”.

This whole thing is complicated by the fact that in verse 2 where it says, “and he saw 3 men standing near him.” The Hebrew word used for men, here, is enosh.....which specifically means men, as in human men; sometimes it is used to indicate mankind in general. But, NEVER does the word enosh refer to spirit beings. The Rabbis and sages are fairly evenly divided on this issue; some think that one of the “men” is a manifestation of God, and the other two are just humans. Others think that one is a manifestation of God and the other two are angels.

Now, let me throw another monkey wrench into the works. All this bowing and scraping Abraham is doing.....calling them lords.....telling his wife to hurry and bring food....foot bathing, etc.....is just typical and traditional Middle Eastern hospitality of that era; and to some degree it exists even today. Nothing Abraham does is out of the ordinary for greeting much welcomed guests. So, his actions don't help us in determining just who these 3 individuals actually are.

Oh, it gets worse. Sarai does as Abraham instructs her.....she brings food and water, milk and curds, even some meat.....and as it says in verse 8: "He (Abraham) took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them (the 3 men); and he waited on them under the tree **as they ate!**"

Not only is it hard to imagine Yahweh eating food, it is equally as difficult for us to envision angels eating food. Josephus, the Targum Jonathan, and the Talmud simply cannot accept that we have here a scene of both God and angels dining; eating bread, meat, and milk. So, they say that it was only that the 3 individuals gave the appearance of eating, but they really weren't.

In the end it is very difficult to know what to make of all this; yet, it is undeniable that something supernatural is occurring here, because we are told directly and undeniably that this was an appearance of Yahweh, and that these 3 individuals had authority, and knew things they should not have been able to have otherwise known....such as Sarah's name or the fact that she was barren.