

Genesis – Lesson 17

Abimelech, Isaac, and Ishmael

Read Genesis 20.

1. What *characteristic* of God stood out most to you in chapters 18 or 19?

Although the answers to this question will vary, it is clear that God's *sovereignty* is visible in the events of these chapters. God's declaration that Sarah would become pregnant, his interaction with Abraham regarding the righteous in Sodom, and the rescue of Lot from the destruction of the city all speak to the ordained control of God over the circumstances of their lives. The effect, of course, should be a sense of *reverence*; like Abraham, the effect of realizing the sovereignty of God over all things should humble us before God and cause us to bow to his nature as the Lord of the universe.

2. (a) Compare chapter 20 with chapter 12. What *similarities* do you find between these two events?

Again, we find Abraham and Sarah dealing with a foreign king in a foreign land, and we find Abraham calling his wife his sister (to protect himself as before). Again, we see a foreign king taking Sarah to be his wife, and we see God dealing harshly with the king for doing so. And, again, in the end, we see Abraham and Sarah leaving this situation with great possessions given to them by the foreign king in order to protect himself from God's wrath.

(b) List three (3) things that Abimelech did that showed that he *feared* God. Was his integrity *real*? How does his response *differ* from Pharaoh's in 12:17-20?

Abimelech 1) confessed to the Lord that he had not touched Sarah and pleaded for God's mercy in the situation (vv. 4-5), 2) confronted Abraham and admitted before him that he had been led to sin against God (v. 9), and 3) appealed to Abraham with a sizeable gift to mend the situation in accordance with the threat from God against him (vv. 14-16). It would appear from the story that his integrity was real. He confessed quickly before the Lord the situation, defending what was true but admitting his error. He confronted Abraham for leading him into this temptation, recognizing that his sin was against God. And, he sought true reconciliation with Sarah and Abraham, seeking their forgiveness and prayers before God. None of these things appear to be true of Pharaoh; he simply sends Sarah back to Abraham, but never expresses any sort of remorse before either Abraham or God.

(c) What does it mean in 20:6 that God "*kept [Abimelech] from sinning?*" What does this *tell* you?

God *prevented* Abimelech from touching Sarah. Although Abimelech probably *wanted* to, God prevented him from doing so by either 1) changing circumstances to prevent it or 2) planting the seeds of such prevention in Abimelech's heart and mind. Although God does not *directly* alter the will of human beings (i.e. we are not puppets in God's hands), God can and does sovereignly control even the free-will actions of human beings (a concept known as *compatibilism*). While the sovereignty of God certainly extends to *natural* events in the created order, this passage also shows that God's sovereignty extends even to human personal choices and actions. This passage *denies* the theological nonsense that human beings are perfectly "free" in their wills and actions; the sovereign God, by means known only to him, maintains human liberty to act while, at the same time, orders the actions of free-will creatures to suit his purposes.

(d) How would you *rate* Abraham's response when confronted by Abimelech in 20:11-13? What does this tell you about *faith*?

Once again, Abraham reacts by attempting to *justify* himself. He argues that there is no fear of God in this place and that he (and Sarah) are in danger here. He *assumes* that God either will not or cannot protect him from harm, and he acts (again) as one with little faith in God. Even though he has experienced *and been delivered* from a very similar experience in Egypt, Abraham has (once again) forgotten the purpose of God for him and he attempts to protect *himself*. This tells us, as before, that Abraham was *normal*; he struggled with trusting God in everyday situations *just as we do*. Faith does not have to be *perfect* to be used by God; it is God who gives faith in each situation, and he will *nurture* that faith in us through hardship (see below).

(e) From the events of 20:14-18, what do you think was God's *purpose* in all of this?

At the end of the chapter, Abraham *prays* for the deliverance and mercy of God upon Abimelech and his household. This would indicate that God used this circumstance (as before) to *strengthen* Abraham's trust in God, to *force* Abraham to turn to God as his shield and as his strength. It is *incorrect* to assume that the purpose of God was to "prosper" Abraham (by Abimelech giving him great amounts of wealth); God had *commanded* Abimelech to seek Abraham's prayer, and it is this *prayer* that becomes the focal point of the incident. Abimelech recognized the *wrath* of God coming against him, and he needed an *intercessor* (a redeemer). Abraham acted as that intercessor, and God's wrath was turned away from the king. Thus, Abraham would learn that *his own* life had been granted to him by God's *mercy*, and this situation would (once again), increase Abraham's trust in God and help him see the promises of God acting through him to bring the *ultimate* intercessor into the world.

Read Genesis 21:1-21.

3. (a) What *kind* of laughter does Sarah speak of in 21:6? How is it *different* from 18:12?

In this case, it is the laughter of *joy*. Earlier, Sarah had laughed out of a sense of disbelief, but now her disbelief has been turned into reality, and her response has been turned into one of joy. The child is named Isaac, which means "he laughs" – God had *laughed* at the weaknesses of Abraham and Sarah and done a miracle through them; since nothing is impossible with God, he laughs at what they thought was impossible. This produces in Sarah a response of great joy, as it does in those who also laugh over her.

(b) What *conflict* arose after Isaac was weaned? How did God tell Abraham to *deal* with it? Why?

Ishmael, on the day of Isaac's weaning, appears to be laughing at them *in mockery*. This thirteen or fourteen year-old boy is laughing at the pitiful estate of these two "old geezers," mocking them for having to raise a child at their advanced ages. But, he was also laughing because he believed that *he* was the heir to Abraham's estate, and that Isaac was "secondary" to the household. God instructed Abraham to heed Sarah's instructions to cast Ishmael and his mother out of the tent (even though he didn't want to). Abraham was to *trust God* for the future of his first-born son, and God promised that he would make sure that all of the promises made to Ishmael would be fulfilled.

4. (a) From Galatians 4:22-30, what point does Paul make regarding the two children of Abraham? What does each child *represent*?

Paul treats the two children of Abraham *allegorically*: the first child, born to the slave woman (Hagar), represents the Mosaic covenant, while the second child, born to the free woman (Sarah), represents the New covenant in Christ. The first covenant was a covenant established at Mount Sinai, and led only to slavery to sin and to death, while the second covenant was established on the heavenly mountain and leads to freedom and life. The first child (Ishmael), then, represents the *normal* course of human sinfulness and death under law, while the second child (Isaac) represents the *promised* course of freedom from sinfulness and death through Christ. Paul's point is simple: those who wish to hold to law and works-righteousness are still under a covenant of death, while those who come to Christ by faith alone belong to a covenant that leads to life, *as God had promised*.

- (b) From 21:15-21, list the ways that God *repeated* his promises to Hagar as he did in chapter 16. What is the *point* of this story?

God had promised her in chapter 16 that Ishmael would *live* and would become the father of a great nation (i.e. twelve princes). Although the situation seemed bleak to her, God comes to her *again* in the wilderness and repeats his promise that this child would grow up to be a "*wild donkey of a man*," and God fulfills that promise in him by giving him an expertise with the bow. The point: God keeps his promises, *even to those who are not directly his instrument of redemption*. Although Ishmael is *not* a part of God's redemptive plan of bringing the Messiah, he would still be a *significant* part of history in general, and God's sovereignty over his descendants would be just as specific as it was over his own people. God's rule extends to every nation, not just those who appear to be specifically elect by God.

Read Genesis 21:22-34.

5. (a) What kind of *relationship* did Abraham have with Abimelech? What was the *purpose* of the covenant they made together? What did each *receive* from it?

It would appear that after the events of the previous chapter, Abraham and Abimelech had a *continuing* relationship. Abraham and Phicol (Abimelech's army commander) agreed to treat each other with integrity, and Abraham used this relationship to defend a well that he had dug but that had been seized by some of Abimelech's men. The covenant that Abraham made with Abimelech was designed to *foster* this relationship, demonstrating that Abraham was a man who *kept his word* (particularly, about the well). From the covenant, Abraham received protection under Abimelech, and Abimelech received a promise from Abraham that he would treat him with continuing integrity. This is an example of how men treat one another *when they both recognize the place of God over them*; knowing that God stands sovereign over their lives, they live in harmony with others and *seek peaceful relationships whenever possible*.

- (b) What *name* does Abraham apply to God at Beersheba (see 21:33)? What does this *signify*?

Abraham calls God (by implication) "*Everlasting God*." It is possible that Abraham makes this reference because God has remained faithful to him throughout his life, particularly through events in which *he* has not been faithful to God. Or, it could be a reference to the idea in Abraham's mind that God's promises would be fulfilled because God is everlasting, by nature. In either case, Abraham pauses (again) to worship God, to give him the reverence he deserves as the One who has given Abraham everything.