

In our Adult Bible class we are studying the book of Genesis. In a few weeks we get to the story of Abraham. We will look at his life in detail then, but the story of Abraham has references to our Epistle lesson from this morning, which we will look at in a minute. But first you need a little background.

In Genesis 12, God made promises to Abraham, then known as Abram. We read in Genesis 12:1-4: *“Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”*

This was the beginning of the covenant or promise that God made with Abraham and his descendants.

In Genesis 15, God restated his covenant with Abram and we read in Genesis 15:1-6: *“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward. But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”*

There was a problem (for Abram, not God) – and that problem was that Sarai, (soon to be Sarah) – his wife was barren, and not only that she was way past child-bearing years. So, as time went on, Sarai decided to “help” God and took matters into her own hands. She gave Abram her maid-servant Hagar, to have a child through her, which she did. His name was Ishmael.

What we see is man trying to take the will and plan of God into their own hands. God says that Ishmael was not the one – he was not the child of promise. In fact, Ishmael would become the father of what we know as the Arabs, any that is why there will never be any peace in the Middle East. But that is another story.

In Genesis 17, God restates again His covenant with Abram – Here God changes his name to Abraham and his wife to Sarah and that they indeed will have the child of promise. But, as we read, Abraham laughs at God – after all, he is 100 years old and Sarah is 90. Genesis 17:17 says: *“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”*

We know that Sarah then gave birth to Isaac. He was, as we saw in our Epistle lesson this, the child of promise – the one that God had promised Abraham, and the one to whom would start all of the descendants, who would be as numerous as the stars of the sky. This was the beginning of what would be known as the nation of Israel and the Jewish people.

I ask that you turn with me to Galatians 4, because it is clear here that we see the two kinds of people in the world – those who are children of promise and those who are not.

As we see from our lesson Abraham had two sons – one by the bondwoman, Hagar, and the one by Sarah, who was, as described, the freewoman. It tells us clearly that Ishmael was born after the flesh, but that Isaac was a child of promise. Ishmael indeed, became the father of many nations, but he was not a child of promise.

Again, we see the implications of all this, as we read in Galatians 4:24, 25: *“which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar; for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children;”*

We can say that because of Abraham and Sarah’s impatience in waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled that it had consequences since that day. Think about it – that since that time to this present day there has been conflict in the Middle East. The tiny nation of Israel is the focus of much of what happens in that area. Every President in my memory has tried to make arrangements for peace in the Middle East. I am not saying that they shouldn’t try – but it just isn’t going to happen.

As we read in Genesis 16:10-12 in talking to Hagar: *“Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.” And the Angel of the LORD said to her: “Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, And every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”*

And later on we read in Genesis 21:13, God says to Abraham: *“Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed.”*

But, Ishmael was not the child that God had promised to Abraham. Isaac was that child of promise. When we talk about the Patriarchs of Israel – who do say: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Ishmael is not included. It started with Abraham, went through Isaac, then Jacob and the 12 sons of Jacob, which then became the 12 tribes of Israel, and then the rest of what we know as the Jewish people.

As Christians we know that it then went through to Jesus. And that is exactly what we see in our passage in Galatians 4:28: *“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.”* What the Apostle Paul is saying that as Christians, we are just like Isaac, children of promise.

God had promised that through Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Think about that for a moment. The people of Israel, as they obeyed God, were a blessing to those around them. They were to be witnesses to the grace of God and that is why God judged them so harshly when they disobeyed Him.

But we must consider the influence of Christianity on the world. We think about those lives effected in a positive way by Christians.

Yes, we know that there are the spiritual blessings for those of us who respond to the Gospel – forgiveness of sins, eternal life, fellowship with God, the privilege of prayer, the fact that heaven is a present possession.

But, we also think of the temporal blessings that God bestowed on even unbelievers through those who are Christians. The scriptures do say that God sends the rain on the just and the unjust.

Think about hospitals, medical missionaries, orphanages, to name a few. My wife was born in a hospital for those with Leprosy in China – because only the Christians would treat the lepers. Think about Rescue Missions, the Salvation Army and others like it – they don't ask if you are a Christian so that you can receive help – they simply help you in the name of Christ.

And then there are the other influences in the world – Music, Art, Books, Buildings – all done by Christians in the name of Christ. Is there greater music than Bach and Handel? I don't think so. Look at some of the great art by Michelangelo and DaVinci and others, and some of the magnificent cathedrals and other buildings that have been built. And the multitude of books that have been written.

I could go on and on – but what we have is that as children of promise we, collectively as Christians, have been a blessing to the world around us. The secular media doesn't report it, but Christians make better citizens.

No, we are not perfect and we have made mistakes, but overall the influence of Christianity has had a positive effect on the world.

Think of those nations where Christianity does not have a major influence – think of the Muslim nations, India with its Hinduism, China with its Buddhism. And what do you see – it's not pretty, in fact, it is downright sad and depressing.

But as Christians we have and continue to make a difference. And if you want to think of something horrible, think of a world without Christianity – it's not hard, because there are many places where there is no influence of Christianity and as I said, it is a sad situation.

So, let us be thankful that indeed, we are children of promise and that we are to be a blessing to the world and think of what we can do to be a continued blessing.