

What's the Message – Lesson Eleven

Today's study teaches us about the faith of Abram.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. May the Lord open your hearts so that through this study you might also walk in the footsteps of faithful Abram. Amen.

Last time we saw how Abram acted in response to God's call, and took his initial steps of obedience. Our study continues with verses 5 and 6 of chapter 15 in Genesis: *And the Lord brought Abram outside and said, "look toward heaven, and number the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be." And Abram believed the Lord, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

This is followed by an event that may seem strange to us, but it was one that was in common practice in Abram's day. It was a sacrifice, filled with much symbolism, to seal the covenant that God had made with Abram.

We emphasize that Abram was a man of faith, but the biblical account also gives us several examples when Abram was less than perfect, when he tried to take matters into his own hand. Chapter 16 gives us the story of one of those times.

Abram had been promised a son, but nothing had happened for ten years since they came to Canaan, so Sarai initiated a plan to have her maid, Hagar, become a substitute for her. And Ishmael was born. But this was not part of God's plan and promise, and this interference had unpleasant consequences, as is detailed later.

But then God acted. As we read in chapter 17, *When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "Behold, my*

covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

It had been 24 years since Abram entered Canaan in obedience to God's call, and he and his wife had eagerly looked forward – with patience that had broken down once – to the fulfillment of the promise of a son. But now God comes and says that this promise will be fulfilled soon. Before this chapter ends we learn that the birth of Isaac will take place “in the next year.”

Furthermore, God changes their names to signify the future role that their lives will play. The name Abram means, “exalted father.” His new name, Abraham, means “father of a tumult, or multitude, of nations.” The name Sarai means, “the princely heroine.” But the name Sarah means, “princess.”

Now, what do all these events mean to us? Teacher, what's the message for our day that we should take from these accounts?

First, Abram's faith in the promise of God is the important element here. It was not a promise that he had earned or deserved, but was a gift of grace. As St. Paul spells out clearly for us in Romans chapter 4, verses 1 through 5: *What shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.*

For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

It should be very clear that the doctrine of justification by grace, through faith, is NOT strictly a New Testament doctrine, but goes all the way back to the covenant God made with Abram. It has always been the essential part of God's plan.

Second, what does the strange sacrificial ceremony sealing this covenant signify? In this ancient practice, the two halves of each sacrificial animal were placed opposite each other so that the blood would drain into a gully between them, and the two equal parties to the covenant would walk through that blood to signify their unity of agreement and the acceptance of the duties of each party.

But note in verse 12 that a great dread came upon Abram, for he realized that he was not a party equal to God, and could not fulfill his part of the covenant. There is much symbolism here that we do not have time to go into, but the important point is to see the parallel here with the New Testament.

Since Abram cannot keep his half of the covenant, God does it for him . . . as is seen by the symbols of the fire pot and torch passing between the pieces. The parallel with the New Testament is that since we are unable to keep God's Law, Jesus has done it for us through the sacrifice of His own blood on the cross, just as the Father had kept the covenant for Abraham. The more we learn about the Old Testament, the more clearly we see the unity between the two proclamations . . . and that the New Testament is the fulfillment of what is initially set forth by the Old.

Thirdly, we must step back and let God be God, and not try to play the role of God. When Abram and Sarai tried to intervene into God's plan and substitute their own version, it produced negative consequences. This is the one thing we can be sure of; when we try to play God, we will mess it up badly. Far better that we trust in Him, and be content to wait on His timing.

Next time we will tie it all together with a review and summary of these first eleven lessons.

This series has been developed and written by our director of teacher training, Mr. D. A. Senter, and is copyrighted by Lamb of God Lutheran Church in Flower Mound, Texas. Your narrator is Dale Gaus.

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