

Genesis Chapters 15-17 **God's way or my way?**

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Today, we will continue looking at the Book of Genesis and specifically the history of Abraham, the man of faith, in chapters 15-17. The title of this talk is "God's way or my way?" This title addresses an issue we constantly face as Christians: Do we choose God's pathway for our lives or take our own path? It does this in the context of the childless marriage of Abram and Sarai. A context within which God unfolds His majestic grace and faithfulness.

I have headed these chapters as follows:

- Chapter - 15 God's Way: Abram listens to God
- Chapter -16 My Way: Abram listens to Sarai
- Chapter - 17 God's Way: Abram becomes Abraham

In chapter 15, we discover God's remarkable grace towards Abram. In chapter 16, we see Abram's lack of faith when he listens to his wife Sarai's poor advice instead of trusting God. Finally, in chapter 17, we see how God's grace overcomes Abram's unbelief, re-establishing him on the pathway of faith and preparing him to receive God's greatest blessing.

In our previous talk, we saw how God called Abram (Genesis 12:1-3). In the New Testament, Abraham is listed in the gallery of Old Testament men and women of faith in Hebrews chapter 11. In verse 8, we read of Abraham's complete trust in God.

Abram left his city roots in the Ur of the Chaldees to live a nomadic life of faith before God, who promised Him a land. His faith was bright, and he walked in God's way and built an altar to the Lord. But when famine came, Abram went his own way. Instead of trusting God through the famine, he fled to Egypt to escape it. His experience in Egypt was not happy. God had to intervene, saving him and putting him back on the path of faith; he returned "to the place of the altar which he had made there at first" (Genesis 13:4).

In chapter 14, Abram demonstrated his faith in God by separating from Lot, after which God reaffirmed His gracious promises. The chapter ends with Abram building an altar in Hebron.

Abram continues to live in the light of God's grace and powerfully acts in faith to rescue Lot from captivity. This leads to God blessing Abram through the ministry of the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem, described in Hebrews as "king of righteousness" and "king of peace" (Hebrews 7:1-3). Hebrews also describes how this great man is an outstanding type of the Person Christ.

Melchizedek blessed Abram, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth" (Genesis 14:19). After this blessing, Abram continued to live before God in the simplicity and confidence of faith.

So let's go to Chapter 15, God's Way: Abram listens to God

At the beginning of chapter 15, we see the direct intervention of God in the patriarch's life when he appears to his servant in a vision. God reassures Abram, declaring, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward" (v.1). We all need reassurance as we walk in faith. It makes sense when we read of God providing such reassurance in the challenging times His people pass through. But it is also vital to see that God reassured Abram when he exhibited great faith in God. We need to know God's presence, as Paul teaches us in Philippians 4:11-13 in times of fullness and need.

"Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

God's reassurance reminds us that Christ is our strength and keeps us close to Him, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." God was Abram's "shield", protecting him daily, and He was his "exceedingly great reward", his promised certain future. God did not simply give Abram protection and promise hope. God was his protection and his hope, reminding us that Christ is our Saviour and hope.

But something troubled Abram. He had no heir, so how could God's promises be fulfilled in him? God's reassurance gave him the confidence to open his heart to God about his concern (v.2).

It is essential to see how Abram seizes the opportunity to appeal to God about having no child. God's response was very clear (v.4).

"This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir".

It is beautiful to see how God speaks to Abram and, as it were, takes him by the hand, leading him outside his tent to view the stars.

"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."

God caused Abram to look towards heaven and assured him of the vast company of people that would be his descendants (v.5). God caused Abram to look beyond the world to the God of all creation, and "he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (v.6). God further reassures his servant, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it" (v.7). God causes Abram to look back and remember the way the LORD had led and protected him on his pilgrimage of faith.

When we are having difficulties, we tend to concentrate on the present and can be inclined to forget how God has kept us. Paul didn't make this mistake. He remembers the faithfulness of Christ in present testing circumstances: "The Lord stood with me" (2 Timothy 4:17). Paul also explained to the Philippians that he was "confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

Abram's confidence in God grows, and he asks, "Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" (v.8). This question was not a lack of faith which required a sign but an outcome of his faith, the desire to understand the fulfilment of God's promises. Abram had in mind one person, his heir. God had in mind the vast company of the people of God. God was looking beyond the present to fulfilment of His promises and purposes.

What follows is complicated and full of objects and imagery that are difficult to understand. I am going to pass over these details now, but my comments can be found on the full transcript of this talk, available from the Truth for Today website.

I will move on to verse 12 where God describes how the nation, Abram would father, would go into Egypt and suffer slavery for four hundred years before being redeemed (vv.13-14) and then experiencing a great salvation.

God promised Abram he would die in peace at a good old age (v.15), and his people would eventually inherit the land God gave them. Also, the enemies of God would be judged in the fullness of time: "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (v.16).

This was the day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and promised his descendants the land where Abram lived in faith with God. God's covenant with Abraham was founded on God's grace alone.

Abram's experience of God's reassurance of his presence, protection, promises, and the revelation of his purposes encourage our faith. We believe in the Lord Jesus and stand in the righteousness of Christ. Our Saviour who died for us now lives for us. Our Father protects and cares for us. The Holy Spirit uses the word of God to reveal and assure us of all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ. And He tells us of "things to come" (John 16:13). The certainties of faith are founded on the covenant of God's grace revealed and secured in our Saviour. A loving parent never tires of reassuring and encouraging their children, and God never tires of reassuring and encouraging us in the love that will never let us go. This should lift our hearts in worship and increase our daily trust in Him.

Chapter 16: My Way: Abram listens to Sarai

You might have thought that Abram would have sat down with Sarai, his wife, and explained that they needed to be patient and wait for God to fulfil His promise to provide an heir. But when we look back to chapter 15, we do not read of Abram speaking to God about Sarai at all, never mind the problem of her being childless. He says to God, "I go childless" and "You have given me no offspring." He did not say, "Sarai and I are childless" or "You have not given Sarai and me an heir." It was not the first time Abram did not consider the interests and welfare of his wife. It was short of the demand placed on us as Christian husbands, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Sarai was distressed by her condition, and in an act of sacrifice and poor judgment, she offered her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, to her husband (Genesis 16:1-2).

It is interesting to compare Sarai with Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, who was also childless. Hannah had a good husband who loved her deeply but failed to understand her broken-heartedness. Hannah went by herself to the house of God to pray for a male child, and God answered her prayer and gave her Samuel, arguably Israel's greatest judge. We don't read of Sarai's prayers; we only read about her practical solution and fatalistic outlook. These were profound human experiences that caused both women to have bitterness in their souls. Hannah's distress drove her into the presence of God. Sarai's distress caused her to look for a human, imperfect solution with disastrous consequences.

But Abram "heeded the voice of Sarai." He could have rejected his wife's proposal immediately or paused and asked God for help and guidance. He appears to have done neither. We should never accept advice simply based on our relationship with the person giving it, even if that person is our wife or husband. This is especially so when proposals emerge from unhappy and unsettling circumstances we are trying to escape. Advice should be tested in the light of God's word. Time is also essential. Abram does not seem to take any time to think about Sarai's advice. He simply accepts it without question. We cannot be sure that Hagar was a legacy of Abram's dangerous

journey into Egypt, but many commentators think this was the case. Evidence suggests how that journey spiritually damaged Lot and provided the person at the centre of Sarai's ill-thought-out proposal. These events have much to teach us about spiritual decision-making.

Sarai's proposal was an important event in Abram's journey of faith. It was a test of faith, a test Abram failed. The tests of faith within families should not be overlooked; they require humility, thoughtfulness, and a willingness to wait on the Lord in prayer. The best way to deal with bad advice is to reject it immediately. If we are uncertain then take time to consider things in the presence of God and in the light of His word. There is no record of Abram going into God's presence to seek His will, as he did about Eliezer in Genesis 15:2. Instead, Abram meekly takes his wife's advice. Our greatest mistakes are often caused by thoughtless and hasty actions not carefully considered in God's presence and judged by his word. Although we can recover from such errors, the harm they cause can be considerable. As soon as Hagar conceived, she despised Sarai (v.4).

It was a terrible mistake. But what is more surprising is how two godly people blame each other for a situation of their own making, ruthlessly punishing Hagar and causing her to flee into the wilderness.

It was a reversal of what happened in the Garden of Eden. There, Adam blamed Eve in Genesis 3:12).

“The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”

Sarai blames Abram for a situation she put him into (v.5).

“Then Sarai said to Abram, “My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.”“

Abram shows little regard for Hagar's plight (v.6).

“So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.” And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.“

None of those involved came away with any spiritual dignity. Hagar despised her mistress, Sarai blamed Abram, and Abram was uncaring. Lack of foresight, recrimination, and poor behaviour damage relationships.

The Angel of the LORD found Hagar by a water spring in the wilderness on the way to Shur (vv.7-8). I love how the Angel of the Lord says to Hagar, “Where have you come from, and where are you going?” These are two questions we sometimes need to pause and ask ourselves in the presence of God when we have made poor judgements. “How did we get here and where is it leading?” Is that how you feel today? If so go into God's presence to discover His guidance and be empowered by Him to retrace your steps in humility and submission to His will. What sorrows and distresses can be overcome by taking our bad decisions to the Throne of Grace and learning afresh, “I am the LORD who heals you.”

At the end of Exodus 15, Israel went into the Wilderness of Shur after passing through the Red Sea. They travelled for three days and found no water until they reached the bitter waters of Marah. There, Moses prayed to the LORD, and God showed him a tree. When he threw it into the waters, they became sweet. A remarkable illustration of the healing power of the Cross of Christ. Then God encouraged His people to be faithful and declared, “I am the LORD who heals you” (v.26).

Afterwards, the people came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees. God showed His people at the beginning of the long wilderness journey that he would always provide and care for them. Centuries before this response of God to the need of a nation, God listened to the cry of one woman and led her back to her mistress with His promises in her heart. God also gave **Abram** Hagar's child a name, Ishmael, which means "God hears." It brought a response from Hagar, and she called the LORD El Roi (El Roy) "You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees". Out of unhappy and unpleasant circumstances caused by the failures of a man and woman of faith, God sovereignly intervenes to meet the needs of the afflicted. This episode in the life of Abram is a great warning to us not to allow our disappointments to lead to bitterness and cause harm to ourselves and others. It teaches us to test the advice we are given, no matter who gives it, in the light of God's word and in God's presence. It encourages us to trust God's promises in difficult times and not look for our own solutions.

Chapter 17 God's way; Abram becomes Abraham

The unhappy circumstances outlined in Chapter 16 highlight two beautiful features of God's character: God hears and God sees. This is demonstrated through Hagar's experience. We are impressed when we read about these pivotal moments in Scripture describing God's care and purposes for a single person or a whole nation. God's words to Moses in Exodus 3:7-8 are a great example of this,

"And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

What is expressed in such verses isn't confined to the pressures and afflictions that manifest God's mercy and grace. It proves that God always hears and always sees. We learn about the faith of men and women of God through specific events. But in doing so, we can overlook that God was listening and watching over them every moment of their lives. We see this most clearly in the life of **Abram**. And it is true in our lives.

No significant events are recorded in Abram's life between the end of chapter 16 and the beginning of chapter 17. Abram had continued to live in simple faith before God in all the ordinariness of life. We should never forget that we are constantly in God's heart. Abram was ninety-nine years old when the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am Almighty God (El Shaddai); walk before Me and be blameless." These words encouraged Abram to continue to walk before God, knowing His eye was upon him for blessing. God said, "I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly" (v.2). In response, Abram fell in worship. God "talked with him", assuring Him afresh of His covenant. God changed his name from Abram, "Exalted Father," to Abraham, "Father of a Multitude," and promised to make him "exceedingly fruitful."

The sign of circumcision was given as a mark of separation, and God's promise of a future nation dwelling in the promised land is confirmed. Sarai is also given a new name, Sarah (Princess), and God most astonishingly promises her a son. Abraham fell on his face again, but in his heart, he questioned how he could have a son when he was a hundred years old? His doubt causes him to pray to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" (v.18). God immediately answers Abraham's prayer, "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac" (v.19). God had blessed Ishmael. But God's covenant would be established in Isaac. God sometimes answers our prayers with an emphatic "No!"

The first record of Abraham's faith in the gallery of faith in Hebrews 11 takes us back to Genesis chapter 12 when the LORD said to Abraham, "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you" (v.1). We are told Abraham came from the Ur of the Chaldeans. We know his family background but little more. Nothing is said initially about him sacrificing like Abel, walking with God like Enoch, or building like Noah. All this is described later.

The emphasis at the beginning of his history is on the grace of God, who worked sovereignly in his life. He was transformed from being a city dweller with roots in this world to becoming a pilgrim travelling from place to place under God's direction.

We learn so much about faith from this remarkable man. God called him, "And he went out, not knowing where he was going." This was not blind faith but obedient faith. He did not travel aimlessly. He followed God's direction and lived the rest of his life as a stranger on earth and as a friend of God in heaven. James writes of him, "'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'" And he was called the friend of God" (James 2:23). We are simply told Enoch and Noah "walked with God" (Genesis 5:22,24 and 6:9). Abraham teaches us in detail about how he walked with God. Abraham's life is the landscape of a journey that begins and ends in obedience. It was a lifelong journey of valleys and hills of profound experiences with God. Abraham made mistakes and some bad decisions but grew in faith. Obedience was foundational to this process.

At the same time, we learn about the grace and faithfulness of God. We discover the intricacies of what it means to walk with God in obedient faith. In Genesis, God does not disguise Abraham's failures and imperfections. But alongside these, God acts to recover, restore and develop Abraham's obedient faith. But in Hebrews, God does not highlight Abraham's shortcomings. Instead, He delights in His obedient faith and complete trust. We are reminded of Abraham's daily faith expressed in "dwelling in tents" and shared with his children and grandchildren Isaac and Jacob. We are reminded too of his hope as he "waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

There are three great aspects to Abraham's faith. The first is described in Hebrew 11:8, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." He believed God when the way ahead was unclear. The second is "By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise" (Hebrews 11:9). He believed God day by day and taught his family to do the same. The third is found in Genesis 22:2, when God told him "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." That day he knew where he was going to face the greatest test of his life. He went unflinchingly to the place of sacrifice knowing God would honour his faith.

In our lives there will be times when the way ahead is unclear but Jesus is the Way. There will be ordinary days when we learn day by day Jesus is the Truth. And there will be times when our faith is tested in the crucible of sacrifice and we shall learn Jesus is the life.

Abraham's life was in the hands of God. All that God promised to Abraham, He fulfilled. Abraham is in the gallery of faith to encourage us to have obedient faith and confidence in the God who declares, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Genesis chapters 15-17: God's way or my way? Talk number T1383.

Additional notes on Genesis 15:8-17

This passage is complicated and full of objects and imagery that are difficult to understand. Because of time constraints, I passed over them in the main transcript. However, I thought providing some reflections on these verses and what is being conveyed was worthwhile. We begin

to understand such information when we compare these details with other occasions recorded in the Scriptures.

God told Abram to bring “a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” These are all animals later described in the various sacrifices to God in the Pentateuch, each expressing, in type, a facet of Christ’s sacrifice and the offeror’s appreciation and wealth.

Wealthier people presented larger animals for sacrifice, and those with lesser means presented smaller ones. But all were valued by God, who looked into the heart of the offeror. Including all these animals reminds us of God’s embracing grace towards all who come to Him in faith, like Abraham.

The heifer, female goat, and the ram were three years old. A period of three years reminds us of the length of Christ’s public ministry, which demonstrated His perfection as the Son of God. A similar example is the Passover lambs, which were kept not for three years but for three days to ensure they were without blemish (Exodus 12:1-6).

“On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb. ... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight” (vv.3,5-6).

Joseph and Mary made an offering when presenting Jesus in the temple, fulfilling the law, “A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24). God’s grace toward humanity is based upon His divine grace manifested in His Son, Jesus Christ. The Old Testament looks forward to Christ’s revelation, and the New Testament records it. All the animals were cut in two, except the birds. When people made a covenant, the parties involved passed between a sacrificed animal divided into two. This ritual confirmed their agreement to the covenant. This practice is referred to in Jeremiah 34:18-19 when covenants before God were not honoured.

“And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it— the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf.”

The Lord made a covenant with Abram and promised his descendants the land where Abram lived before God in faith. God’s covenant with Abraham was founded on God’s grace alone, not on two parties passing between the parts of the animals. The “smoking oven and a burning torch” (see Exodus 19:18) that passed between the pieces seems to indicate that God, in holiness, righteousness, and faithfulness, would alone ensure the covenant’s fulfilment. This reminds us of how God established the covenant of grace in Christ at His own cost.

Such details can always be debated, and we should not insist on what is not openly explained by the word of God. The meaning and interpretation of unusual passages of Scripture should always be approached with humility and recognition that the Bible is its own interpreter.

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