**A NEW NAME, A RENEWED HOPE**

Genesis 16:1-17:27
Key Verse Genesis 17:5 – *“No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.”*

Chapter 16 begins with a stark reminder of their current situation. After 10 years of following God’s command to move to a new land and His many promises to them, Abram and Sarai were still childless. We are very familiar with the effect it had on Abram (Gen 15:2), but we often fail to appreciate how difficult it was for Sarai as well. To be barren in those days was a mark of great shame. Even today, many women struggle mightily with the terrible stigma and all the societal pressures that come with being unable to have children, feeling a sense of loss for being unable to experience the joys of motherhood. Sarai’s heart was very with sorrow for even though she lovedher husband dearly, she could not provide for the both of them the one thing they desired most of all. Who knows for how many years she appealed to God for His help in this matter? But as we see in verse 2a, Sarai’s patience had run out and she decided to take matters into her own hands; **“so she said to Abram, “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.””**Sarai’s words are very telling. She acknowledges that the Lord has prevented her from bearing children but she would be the one who would solve this problem.

It is vital for us to realize that God had indeed sovereignly prevented her from having children, not to frustrate Abram and Sarai, but to teach them of His almighty, life-giving power, patience and most importantly, trust. But Sarai could no longer wait on God’s schedule, allowing her feelings to get the best of her and made a tragic mistake to follow a pagan custom of child-bearing instead of God’s plan for Abram and herself. She may have even though she was doing something noble by helping God out through this act of “self-sacrifice” for, as the saying goes, “God helps those who help themselves.” Sadly, this decision revealed her lack of trust in God’s promise. We often find ourselves in a similar place, frustrated with God’s timing and decide to do things for ourselves. However, this path always leads to many bad decisions and compromise. As we shall see, Sarai was not the only one who failed this test of faith.

Of all the people involved, Abram should have known better. He was the one who God spoke to directly. He was the one who first received this promise of an heir from God. But instead of asking God if this was in accordance with His plan (it clearly wasn’t!), Abram compromised his own faith by all-too-willingly obeying his wife and slept with Hagar. Rather than set an example as the spiritual head of the family, Abram became passive and gave into his own desire for a son by whatever means necessary. It is that same passivity that would cause him to fail in settling the feud between Sarai and Hagar, leading to a pregnant Hagar having to flee from her cruel mistress. As for Hagar, though she only did what she was told, she later became prideful and despised her mistress once she became pregnant, relishing in how she had swapped positions with Sarai. All in all, all three people involved compromised the beliefs and chose something different from what God had intended. The end result was heartbreak, anger and most tragically, a broken family with wounds that have lasted for centuries.

All three of them cared mainly for their own problem but no-one really cared about what God desired. Yet God showed his great affection for them in the middle of all this strife. Take Hagar’s case for example. Hagar’s name comes from the Arabic word meaning “plight” or “flee.” In keeping with her name, she understandably ran away towards her homeland of Egypt for she had nowhere else and no-one else to turn.How fearful must this young, pregnant slave-girl had been? Yet even in the physical and spiritual wilderness, God still found her by way of an angel.Look at verse 8, **“Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”** If He were indeed the angel of the Lord, why would He ask such an obvious question? Shouldn’t He already know the answer? However, as we continue reading, the angel asks this question for Hagar’s sake to (1) lead her to repentance and (2) receive God’s amazing blessing upon her and her unborn child. Look at verses 9-11, **“Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.” The angel of the Lord also said to her: “You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.””** What an incredible blessing Hagar received.

Even though she was running away from her problems, God heard her cries and filled her heart with a promise almost identical to what God had promised Abram. Even though it would be very difficult to turn around and go back to Sarai, God had given Hagar new hope in Him through His blessing upon Ishmael. Even though she was merely a lonely, foreign slave-girl in the eyes of others, God saw her as a mother to a future nation of free people, who would eventually become the Arabs of today. In response to this, Hagar joyfully replies by giving the Lord the name *El Roi* – “the God who sees me”. This scene is very reminiscent of the Samaritan woman in John 4 who joyfully accepted the gift of living water Jesus offered her and lived a new life in Him, freed from all the mistakes and condemnation of her past. We too can take great joy in knowing that we have a God who sees us. He reaches out to us no matter how far away we runor how lost we are in the wilderness of our sins. Let us learn from Hagar to turn to our Lord *El Roi*so we too may receive the rich blessing of freedom that comes solely through Him.

Speaking of turning, let’s turn our attention back to Abram and Sarai. With the birth of Ishmael, Abram at long last had the son he had been waiting for. In spite of the tensions still remaining in his household (Gen 21:9,10), Abram could finally cradle Ishmael as his own, the heir to all his great wealth. All those years of wandering and serving the Lord had been building up to this moment… or so he thought.Abram now turned all his attention to raising Ishmael for he thought that God had answered his prayers. Yet God remained strangely silent towards Abram and would continue to do so for another 13 years. Why? I believe it was because of their decision to take matters into their own hands. Abram was already very old and Sarai was barren so in their mind, what on earth could God do for them? Their situation looked impossible so they decided to compromise and settle for whatever they could obtain through their own ability and methods.And once they received what they thought they wanted, their lives became less God-centered and more family centered.

We too are guilty of this. Although we as Christians have experienced many occasions where God has done something wonderful in our lives, we are prone to forgetting all He has done for us and for what purpose He did all this for. Dr. David Sills will be our guest speaker at the ISBC. While he was a pastor, many people came to him sharing how their lives were spiritually dry and empty despite following and serving God for so many years. To their astonishment, Dr. Sills told them their lives were already full; it’s just they had replaced being filled by God with being filled with things other than God Himself. When we no longer have God as our #1 priority in life, we invariably become self-centered instead of being God-centered as we pursue so many other desires in life. Just like Abram, we become complacent and forget about God’s great purpose for us to be a blessing in life. We no longer pray or seek Him as faithfully as before because we settle for things far lesser than what God has planned and promised for us.

Yet in spite of everything, God is always faithful. God remembers His promises. God remembered His promise to Abram. God broke the 13 years of silence by appearing right in front of his very eyes. For the 24 years Abram followed Him, God spoke to Abram through visions and His own voice but now, for the very first time, Abram was in the physical presence of the Lord Himself. Look at verses 1b and 2, **“I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”**As befitting of this momentous occasion, the Lord introduces Himself for the first time as *El-Shaddai*, God Almighty. Up until now, God was referred to as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe but now God wanted Abram to know Him as the Almighty, All-PowerfulGod and the One in whom there is no such thing asimpossible just as Jesus declares in Matthew 19:26, **“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”**Furthermore, God calls Abram to walk before Him and be blameless (2). Here, blameless does not mean to be perfect or sinless. It means to live with integrity, sincerity and be completely devoted to God. This was a call to Abram to turn awayfrom his petty, family-centered life and walk before the Almighty God who called him and who had a greater purpose for his life in mind.

Let us read verses 5-7 together, **“No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”** God goes another step further in marking this moment by changing Abram’s name to Abraham. From an honourable father to a father of many nations. This was the hope God had for Abraham all along. In spite of his human frailties and limitations, God sought to make Abraham into a blessing for all mankind. Even though Abraham was only the father of one son, God made him into the spiritual father for each and every one of us by renewing His covenant with Him. God wanted to raise a covenant people who would be a source of blessing for all people on earth by sending Jesus Christ as our Saviour. He wanted His covenant people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5,6) so that the good news of forgiveness and salvation through the Savior might be spread to the whole world. God's greatest blessing is the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of a right relationship with God. He sent Jesus, Abraham's offspring, for this purpose and it is this blessing which God has now made available to all nations through the preaching of the Gospel by His people.This covenant is an everlasting promise from God to His people, a promise that will come to its fulfilment in the kingdom of Heaven when Christ will rule for all eternity. God would later sign and seal this covenant (10-14) through the gift of circumcision, symbolizing the cutting away of our sinful desires in favour of remaining spiritually pure and wholly devoted to God.

But God was still not done! Look at verses 15 and 16, **“God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.””** The Lord finally put the last puzzle piece to His plan in place.Sarai was going to be a mother… and not just any ordinary mother. God changed her name to Sarah, meaning “princess”, for she would be the mother of nations and royalty. Even though she was the one who conceived the plan that jeopardized God’s original promise out of her own despair, the Lord God Almighty poured out His grace of forgiveness upon her and would enable her to bear a child within a year’s time! All of this was too much for Abraham who could only laugh at the ridiculous prospect of both of them being parents at such an advanced age. Yet God Almighty, a God for whom nothing is impossible, instructed Abraham to name his son Isaac (meaning “he laughs”) both out of a sense of humour and His ability to change a laugh of disbelief into the laughter of joy. Though the Lord would uphold His blessings upon Ishmael, it would be through Isaac that God’s promise would pass through, something far greater and joyous than Abraham could ever have imagined.

In conclusion, throughout these passages we witness how Our Lord God Almighty works in spite of our weaknesses,our mistakes and our compromises. In doing so, the Lord also fills our hearts with joy as we discover the many blessings He lavishes upon us as well as a new identity as His chosen and beloved people. However, it is important to remember that all these things happen even in the midst of our struggles. Hagar met the Lord while in the middle of the wilderness on the run from her problems. Sarah was called princess and mother of kings even though her womb was still barren. And Abraham was called a father of many nations even though he had yet to receive the child God had promised and was living in a land not of his own. All of these examples illustrate how the Lord looks beyond what we are now and towards the hope of what we will become through Him. This is the ultimate hope we have in Him and the hope that is fully embodied in His Son, Jesus Christ. I pray that we may be continuously filled with this hope, enabling us to remain centered in Him and look towards the great purpose He has for us.