

CHAPTER 13

The Twofold Promise of "a Seed" to Abraham - Ishmael - Jehovah visits Abraham - The Destruction of Sodom - Abraham's Sojourn at Gerar - His Covenant with Abimelech
(GENESIS 15-20, 21:22-34)

HIGH times of success and prosperity are only too often followed by seasons of depression. Abram had indeed conquered the kings of Assyria, but his very victory might expose him to their vengeance, or draw down the jealousy of those around him. He was but a stranger in a strange land, with no other possession than a promise, - and not even an heir to whom to transmit it. In these circumstances it was that "Jehovah came unto Abram in a vision," saying, "I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" - that is, Myself am thy defense from all foes, and the source and spring whence thy faith shall be fully satisfied with joy. It was but natural, and, as one may say, childlike, that Abram should in reply have opened up before God all his wants and his sorrow, as he pointed, not in the language of doubt, but rather of question, to his own childless state, which seemed to leave Eliezer, his servant, his only heir. But Jehovah assured him that it was to be otherwise than it seemed; nay, that his seed should be numberless as the stars in the sky. "And he believed in Jehovah: and He counted it to him for righteousness." The remark stands solitary in the narrative, as if to call attention to a great fact; and its terms indicate, on the part of Abram, not merely faith in the word, but trustfulness in the person of Jehovah as his Covenant-God. Most touching and sublime is the childlikeness of that simple believing without seeing, and its absolute confidence. Ever since, through thousands of years, it has stood out as the great example of faith to the church of God. And from this faith in the living God sprang all the obedience of Abram. Like the rod of Aaron, his life budded and blossomed and bore fruit "within the secret place of the Most High."

To confirm this faith Jehovah now gave to Abram a sign and a seal, which yet were such once more only to his faith. He entered into a covenant with him. For this purpose the Lord directed Abram to bring an heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, each of three years old, also a turtle-dove and a young pigeon. These sacrifices - for they were all representatives of the kinds afterwards used as sacrifices - were to be divided, and the pieces laid one against the other, as the custom was in making a covenant, the covenanting parties always passing between them, as it were to show that now there was no longer to be division, but that what had been divided was to be considered as one between them. But here, at the first, no covenanting party appeared at all to pass between the divided sacrifices. All day long, as it seemed to Abram, he sat watching lonely, only driving from the carcasses the birds of prey which came down upon them. So it seemed to the eye of sense! Presently even gathered around, and a deep sleep and a horror of great darkness fell upon Abram. The age of each sacrificed animal, the long, lonely day, the birds of prey swooping around, and the horror that had come with the night, all betokened what Jehovah now foretold: how for three generations the seed of Abram should be afflicted in Egypt; but in the fourth, when the measure of the iniquity of the present inhabitants of Canaan would be full, they were to return, and enter on the promised possession of the land. As for Abram himself, he was to go "to his fathers in peace." Then it was that the covenant was made; not, as usually, by both parties passing between the divided sacrifice, but by Jehovah alone doing so, since the covenant was that of grace, in which one party alone - God - undertook all the obligations, while the other received all the benefits.

For the first time did Abram see passing between those pieces the smoking furnace and the burning lamp - the Divine brightness enwrapped in a cloud, just as Moses saw it in the bush, and the children of Israel on their wilderness march, and as it afterwards dwelt in the sanctuary above the mercy-seat, and between the cherubim. This was the first vision vouchsafed to Abram, the first stage of the covenant into which God entered with him, and the first appearance of the glory of the Lord. At the

same time, what may be called the personal promise to Abram was also enlarged, and the boundaries of the land clearly defined as stretching from the Nile in the west, to the Euphrates in the east, an extent, it may be here observed, which the Holy Land has never yet attained, not even in the most flourishing days of the Hebrew monarchy.

Precious as the promise of God to Abram had been, it had still left one point undetermined - who the mother of the promised seed was to be. Instead of waiting for the direction of God in this respect also, Sarai seems in her impatience to have anticipated the Lord; and, as we always do when taking things into our own hands, in a manner contrary to the mind of God, as well as to her own sorrow and disappointment. Ten years had elapsed since Abram had entered Canaan, when Sarai, despairing of giving birth to the heir of the promise, followed the common custom of those days and countries, and sought a son by an alliance between her husband and Hagar, her own Egyptian maid. The consequences of her folly were dispeace in her home, then reproaches, and the flight of Hagar. What else might have followed it is difficult to tell, had not the Lord in mercy interposed. None less than the Angel of the Covenant Himself appeared to the fugitive slave, as she rested by a fountain in the wilderness that led down into her native Egypt. He bade her return to her mistress, promised to the son whom she was to bear that liberty and independence of bearing which has ever since characterized his descendants, and gave him the name of Ishmael - the Lord heareth, - as it were thus binding him alike by his descent, and by the Providence that had watched over him, to the God of Abram. Hagar also learned there for the first time to know Him as the God who seeth, the living God, whence the fountain by which she had sat henceforth bore the name of "The Well of the Living, who beholdeth me." So deep are the impressions which a view of the Lord maketh, and so closely should we always connect with them the events of our lives.

Hagar had returned to Abram's house, and given birth to Ishmael. And now ensued a period which we must regard as of most sore trial to Abram's faith. Full thirteen years elapsed without apparently any revelation on the part of God. During this time Ishmael had grown up, and Abram may almost insensibly have accustomed himself to look upon him as the heir, even though in all probability he knew that he had not been destined for it. Abram was now ninety-nine years old, and Sarai stricken in years. For every human hope and prospect must be swept away, and the heir be, in the fullest sense, the child of the promise, that so faith might receive directly from God that for which it had waited. It was in these circumstances that Jehovah at last once more appeared in visible form to Abram, - this time to establish and fulfill the covenant which He had formerly made.ⁱ Hence also now the admonition: "Walk before Me, and be thou perfect," which follows but can never precede the covenant. In token of this established covenant, God enjoined upon Abram and his descendants the rite of circumcision as a sign and a seal; at the same time changing the name of Abram, "father of elevation" (noble chief?), into Abraham, "the father of a multitude," and that of Sarai, "the princely," into Sarah, or "the princess,"ⁱⁱ to denote that through these two the promise was to be fulfilled, and that from them the chosen race was to spring. These tidings came upon Abraham with such joyous surprise that, as in humble worship, he "fell upon his face," he "laughed," as he considered within himself the circumstances of the case, - as Calvin remarks, not from doubt or disbelief, but in gladness and wonder.

To perpetuate the remembrance of the wonder, the promised seed was to bear the name of Isaac, or "laughter." Thus, as afterwards, at the outset of the calling of the Gentiles, the name of Saul was changed into Paul - probably after the first-fruits of his ministry, - so here, at the outset of Israel's calling, we have three new names, indicative of the power of God, which lay at the root of all, and of the simple faith which received the promise. The heir of the promises was indeed to be the child of Sarah; but over Ishmael also would the Lord watch, and "multiply him exceedingly," and "make him a great nation." Ever since those days has the sign of circumcision remained to bear testimony to the covenant with Abraham. On the eighth day, as the first full period of seven has elapsed, a new period is, as it were, to begin; and each Jewish child so circumcised is a living witness to the

transaction between God and Abraham more than three thousand years ago. But, better far, it pointed forward to the fulfillment of the covenant-promise in Christ Jesus, in whom there is now no other circumcision needed than that of the heart.

While Abraham's faith was thus exercised and blessed, the "evil men and seducers," among whom Lot had chosen his dwelling, had been waxing worse and worse, and rapidly filling up the measure of their iniquity. That judgment which had long hung over them like a dark cloud was now to burst in a terrible tempest. Abram was sitting "in the tent door in the heat of the day," when Jehovah once more appeared in visible form to him. This time it was, as it seemed, three wayfarers, whom the patriarch hastened to welcome to the rest and refreshment of his abode. But the heavenly Guests were the Lord Himself (See Genesis 18:13) and two angels, who were to be the ministers of His avenging justice. There can be no doubt that Abraham recognized the character of his heavenly Visitors, though, with the delicacy and modesty so peculiarly his, he received and entertained them according to the manner in which they presented themselves to him. The object of their visit was twofold - the one bearing reference to Sarah, the other to Abraham. If Sarah was to become the mother of the promised seed, she also must learn to believe. (Hebrews 11:11) Probably she had not received quite in faith the account which Abraham had given of his last vision of Jehovah. At any rate, the first inquiry of the three was after Sarah. The message of the birth of a son was now addressed directly to her; and as her non-belief appeared in her laughter, it was first reproved and then removed. The first object of their visit accomplished, the Three pursue their way towards Sodom, accompanied by Abraham. Now it was that Jehovah Himself (Genesis 18:17) opened to the patriarch the other purpose of their coming. It was to tell him the impending doom of the cities of the plain, and that for two reasons: because Abraham was the heir to the promises, and because he would "command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of Jehovah, to do justice and judgment." From the latter words we gather that the doom of Sodom was communicated to Abraham that it might serve as a warning to the children of Israel. It was not to be regarded as an isolated judgment; but the scene of desolation, which was for ever to occupy the site of the cities of the plain, would also for ever exhibit to Israel the consequences of sin, and be to them a type of future judgment. It is in this light that the Scriptures both of the Old and the New Testament present to us the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. On the other hand, as God had in the covenant made gift of the land to Abraham and to his seed, it seemed fitting that he should know of the terrible desolation which was so soon to spread over part of it; and that in his character as the medium of blessing to all, he should be allowed to intercede for their preservation, as formerly he had been called to fight for their deliverance. It was therefore neither on account of the intimate converse between God and Abraham, nor yet because Lot, the nephew of Abraham, was involved in the catastrophe, but strictly in accordance with God's covenant-promise, that God made a communication of the coming judgment to Abraham, and that he was allowed to plead in the case.

Mercy, indeed, was extended to Lot; but he did not escape the consequences of his selfish and sinful choice of a portion in this world. A second time was he to be taught that it is not in the abundance of the things which a man hath that wealth or happiness consists. Jehovah so far listened to the pleading of Abraham, whose believing urgency reminds us of the holy "importunity," (Luke 11:8) characteristic of all true prayer, that He promised to spare the cities of the plain if even ten righteous men were found in them. But the result of the trial by the two angels who went to Sodom was even more terrible than could have been anticipated. The last brief night of horror in Sodom was soon past; and, as the morning glow lay on the hills of Moab, the angels almost constrained Lot and his family to leave the doomed city. Lingering regret for it led Lot's wife to look behind her, when judgment overtook her also, and she was changed into a pillar of salt. Tradition has since pointed out a mountain of salt, at the southern extremity of the Dead Sea, as the spot where the occurrence had taken place. It need scarcely be said that, like most traditions, which only import a disturbing element into our thinking, this also is not founded on fact. The judgment which descended on the doomed cities is described in the sacred text as a "rain of brimstone and fire from Jehovah out of

heaven," by which the whole district was overthrown. This account in all its literality has been again confirmed by the late investigations of Canon Tristram, made on the spot. The whole neighborhood of the Dead Sea abounds with sulphur and bitumen, furnishing the materials for the terrible conflagration which ensued when the lightning from heaven struck it, probably accompanied by an earthquake, which would throw up fresh masses of combustible matter. Far and wide the smoke of the burning country was seen to ascend; and as Abraham watched it on the height beyond Hebron, where the evening before he had spoken the last pleading words to Jehovah, it seemed like a vast furnace, from which the cloud of smoke rose to heaven.

The basin of the Dead Sea has been specially examined by an American expedition under Lieutenant Lynch. The results of their soundings have brought to light the remarkable fact that it really consists of two lakes, the one, thirteen, the other one thousand three hundred feet deep, - the former being regarded as the site of the doomed cities, and the latter as probably a sweetwater lake, whose waters had washed their shores. In that case, the suggestion is that the catastrophe was brought about by volcanic agency. But whatever changes in the appearance of the country the judgment from heaven may have produced, the most trustworthy authorities have given up the view that the cities of the plain have been submerged by volcanic agency, and are satisfied that the account which Scripture gives of this catastrophe ought to be taken in its utmost literality.

It is equally sad and instructive to notice how little effect mere judgments, however terrible, are capable of producing even upon those most nearly affected by them. Lot and his daughters had been allowed to retire to Zoar, a little town not far from Sodom. But the same weakness of faith which had made them at the first reluctant to leave their own doomed city, now induced them to forsake Zoar, though safety had been promised them there. Far worse than that, they fell into the most grievous and abominable sin, the issue of which was the birth of the ancestors of Israel's hereditary enemies - Moab and Ammon. (Deuteronomy 23:3, 4) But even this is not all. Whether from a dislike to a neighborhood so lately visited by such judgments, or in quest of better pasturage for his flocks, Abraham left the district of Mamre, and traveled in a south-easterly direction, where he settled in the territory of Abimelech, king of Gerar, in the land of the Philistines. Abimelech seems to have been a royal title, like that of Pharaoh. (Comp. Genesis 26:1, 8) But in this instance, as we gather from Scripture, the possessor of this title was far different from the king of Egypt. In fact, he appears to have been not merely true and upright in character, but to have feared the Lord. Accordingly, when Abraham was once more guilty of the same dissimulation as formerly in Egypt, passing off his wife for his sister from fear for his own life, God directly communicated to Abimelech in a dream the real state of matters. Upon this, Abimelech hastened to amend the wrong he had, unwittingly, so nearly committed. In comparison to the Gentile king, Abraham occupies indeed an unfavorable position. He is unable to vindicate his conduct on other grounds than what amounts to a want of faith. But, as God had informed Abimelech, Abraham, despite his weakness, was "a prophet;" and in that capacity, as already quoted, "He suffered no man to do them wrong; yea, He reproveth kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm." The alliance with Abraham which Abimelech had sought by marriage, was shortly afterwards concluded by a formal covenant between the two, accompanied by a sacrifice of the sacred number of seven ewe lambs. (Genesis 21:22) To show that this was intended not as a private but as a public alliance, Abimelech came accompanied by his chief captain, or phichol, (Comp. Genesis 26:26) at the same time expressly stating it as the motive in the public step which he took, that God was with Abraham in all that he did. In similar manner, the sympathy on these points between Abimelech and his people had formerly been shown, when the king had communicated to "all his servants" what God had told him about Abraham, "and the men were sore afraid." In these circumstances we do not wonder that Abraham should have made the land of the Philistines the place of lengthened residence, pitching his tent close by Beersheba, "the well of the oath," with Abimelech, or rather "the well of the seven" ewe lambs, - and there he once more "called on the name of Jehovah, the everlasting God."

ⁱ The expression "I will make My covenant" (Genesis 17:2) is quite different from that rendered by the same words in Genesis 15:18. In the latter case it is "to make" - literally, to "cut a covenant;" while the terms in Genesis 17:2 are, "I will give My covenant," i.e., establish, fulfill it.

ⁱⁱ Others have derived the name Sarah from a root, meaning "to be fruitful."