

## Chapter IV

### LESSONS FROM ABRAHAM, THE FRIEND OF GOD

The first mention of Abraham in Scripture is in the genealogy of Shem recorded in the eleventh chapter of Genesis. He appears prominently in the next fourteen chapters of this book, except for one chapter which is devoted to Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This emphasis reveals Abraham has an important part in the revelation of God's plan of redemption. The story of creation also has a part in declaring this truth, but by contrast, in terms of allotted space in Scripture, a lesser part than that of Abraham.

Even with all of the information about Abraham in these chapters, virtually nothing is known of him prior to his departure from Haran at age seventy-five. At that time he is presented to us with this statement, *Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee* (Genesis 12:1). The first part of this verse provides us with conditions that had existed prior to the latter part of the verse. We know that God had told Abraham to separate himself from his father's house and

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kindred and follow His directions into a land that He would show him, but Abraham did not do precisely that. Instead: *Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there* (Genesis 11:31).

This was a definite breach of the explicit command of God, and it was accomplished by Terah when he took command of Abraham's life and changed his appointed destination from Canaan to Haran. Terah's exercise of control over Abraham is important to our understanding of the redeemed. He can be viewed as a character actor in this drama of redemption with the role of *the flesh*, which is called the *old man* in several of Paul's epistles. In this role he was instrumental in preventing Abraham from being obedient to God's specific command. He took the whole family on a side trip to Haran: when God had commanded Abraham, *Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee.*

There certainly were practical and emotional reasons for the family traveling together. This is one of the roles of the flesh, to put human reason before the explicit will of God. This incident reflects the constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the lives of believers. All believers at times are subject to the flesh. Abraham was no exception, and his relationship with Terah reflects this until *the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran* (Genesis 11:32).

Terah's death speaks of the *mortification* of the flesh, which is the subject of Paul's remarks when he wrote about *the old man*. It takes the mortification of the flesh on a day by day,

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case by case basis in order for the believer to effectively function in the will of God. This is the reason the apostle Paul instructed believers to *Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would* (Galatians 5:16-17).

This walk in the Spirit is not as mysterious as some would have us to believe. It is expressed very simply in the statement, *The just shall live by faith. Since faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*, the basis for the walk in the Spirit is faith in the body of revealed truth surrounding Jesus Christ in His Person and work, as found in the Word of God. This makes spiritual sense because *All scripture is given by inspiration of God*. Thus the walk in the Spirit is the believer functioning in accordance with the truth of the Word of God, so that it shapes his thinking and his actions. This is seen in James's argument about faith and works in the second chapter of his epistle. The works produced by a viable faith are based upon the fact that what God has promised, He is able also to perform (Romans 4:21). Thus this is the basis of Abraham's offering of Isaac and Rahab's hiding of the spies.

Since Abraham is called the *father of the faithful* and the flesh was clearly seen in him, it must be concluded that no believer is entirely free from the influence of the flesh in his life. However recognizing the flesh is sometimes difficult. Overt sins are easily recognized as the flesh, but the more subtle aspects of the flesh are not as easily recognized because they can appear, to a mind lacking in spiritual growth, to be the right course of action. Men with good intentions sometimes endeavor to use fleshly expedients in the service of the Lord. They attempt to offer to God the best that the flesh can supply. They do not necessarily do this with evil intentions, but

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are like king Saul saying to Samuel, when he was commanded to utterly destroy the Amalekites and all that they possessed, *The people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice them unto the LORD thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.* This was a rather lame explanation in the light of God's command, so Samuel said, *Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams* (I Samuel 15:22).

After the death of *the old man*, Abraham left Haran and journeyed towards Canaan. This was in obedience to God's command. Sarai (who would later be named Sarah) and Lot went with him. They went to the land of Canaan, the place to which Abraham had been called. However they did not remain in Canaan because of a famine in the land. They kept journeying towards the south, towards Egypt. This appears to be another action governed by the flesh rather than by the expressed will of God.

It is not our purpose to malign Abraham by suggesting this was not the will of the Lord, but to consider the ramifications of his decision to go to Egypt, which in the typology of Scripture represents the world. This does not automatically make Abraham's decision a fleshly decision, but it appears that it was. Later events in the lives of Abraham and Sarah will bear this out. Even so most people, not to say many believers, would consider Abraham to have been wise in avoiding the famine in Canaan. They would consider his move to Egypt to have been the practical solution to a difficult situation. This illustrates the difficulty we sometimes have in identifying the flesh. When it is overt and salacious it is easily identified, but when it is subtle and practical it can be very deceptive, even to the point of suggesting to the uninstructed that it is the will of the Lord.

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Sarah must have been an incredibly beautiful woman, even at age sixty-five. Her beauty became a source of worry to Abraham even before they left Ur of the Chaldees, which led to a pact between them. They agreed, wherever they went, they would tell everyone she was Abraham's sister (which was true) and not his wife. This pact was born of Abraham's fear, and it may have seemed very necessary in the culture of that day. Yet the ramifications of such a pact could have pressed to the limit Sarah's ability to avoid adultery. Even so they were apparently willing to take such a risk, because *the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house* (Genesis 12:14-15).

Job said, *For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me* (Job 3:25); and, as with Job, the thing Abraham feared came upon him. He was not killed for the sake of Sarah, but her great beauty brought her to the attention of Pharaoh. So their fleshly scheme seemed to be working for Abraham's sake, but Sarah was in jeopardy because Pharaoh *entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants and maidservants, and she asses, and camels* (Genesis 12:16).

Pharaoh's treatment of Abraham was cunningly deceptive. It was probably a Satanic attempt to thwart God's purpose to provide, through them, *the Seed* through whom *all of the families of the earth would be blessed*. Consequently God intervened with a plague:

And Pharaoh ... said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister? So I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had. (Genesis 12:18-20)

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With this Abraham departed Egypt appreciably wealthier *in cattle, in silver and in gold* than he had been when he came there. Some could foolishly think the things Abraham did in Egypt had the approval of God because of Abraham's increased wealth, but we must not misjudge the circumstances. This increase was the result of a fleshly plan, which, from the human point of view, put the purpose of God at risk. Abraham would not have wittingly put the promise of God in jeopardy, but his fleshly scheme did just that. Even so God's grace prevailed for them and for all that would be blessed through Abraham's Seed.

This revelation of Abraham's fallibility is not meant to single him out more than any other member of the human family. It is to establish the fact that we cannot, yea, we dare not look for merit in man's relationship with God. Too often the lives of the patriarchs have been used as role models in lessons and sermons. Their virtues have been extolled beyond reality; yet, at the same time, certain aspects of their lives have been carefully ignored, or explained away. The only role model any of them could have actually been was they *believed God and it was counted unto them for righteousness*. Now if we should look to them as role models beyond their faith in the promises of God, we shall find ourselves in a moral dilemma.

Abraham is declared to be the father of the faithful, and yet there is little about his sojourn in Egypt which speaks of faith. He went into Egypt in the strength of the flesh, and he continued to live in the flesh while he was there. Even so God's grace prevailed, and Abraham and Sarah were saved from the results of their fleshly scheme. The truth is there never was a compelling reason for them to leave Canaan and go into Egypt. God was more than able to provide for them, as He later did for Israel: providing food, clothing and water for probably more than two million

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Jews as they wandered for forty years in the desert of Sinai, and as He did for Elijah during the drought of three and one-half years.

Abraham, Sarah and Lot had spent about a year in Egypt before they were expelled. Now, traveling at the pace of their flocks and herds, Abraham had time to ponder God's promise, *that of his seed all of the families of the earth would be blessed*. This, most likely, would have increased his desire to be back in Bethel, the place where he had pitched his tent on his journey south; the place where he had remembered the Lord; and the place where he built an altar unto the Lord. While these things were spiritual and positive, Bethel was also the place where he formulated his scheme to survive the famine by traveling into Egypt. In the typology of Scripture, Bethel is indicative of the choices a believer has in his life whether to *Trust in the Lord with all of his heart*, or whether to *lean to his own understanding*. Since the return to Bethel from Egypt was in the right direction, it signifies a mortification of the flesh and a desire to walk according to the truth of the Word of God.

Even so there was nothing special about Canaan more than any other place in the world of that day. It was simply the place to which God had called him. It was no more of a permanent dwelling place for him than any other place on this earth. The Scriptures tell us Abraham *looked for a city whose builder and maker was God* and, according to the book of Hebrews, the city he looked for was the heavenly Jerusalem. It was not to be found on this earth. Canaan was simply the place where he was to sojourn: just as this world, with its various peoples and nations, is the place where we, as believers in Jesus Christ, are to sojourn. Each of us, like Abraham, has a specific place where God would have us be: where we each can give testimony to the truth of the

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Word of God and function in a local assembly of believers for the propagation of the gospel to a lost world.

With the return to Canaan, Abraham was where God called him to be. Even so Lot was still with him. Lot, like Abraham, was a believer; but in the typology of Scripture, he represents the flesh because he lived his life for himself. As long as Lot was with Abraham, this was analogous to a believer living his life in the flesh. God had told Abraham, *Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house*, but Abraham had not done that. God's desire that they be separated from one another was accomplished another way.

This sometimes happens in the lives of believers because of the influence of the flesh. It is possible for us to be self-willed and not do God's will, but God has a way of taking even the stupid things we do and using them to teach us, or even to accomplish His purpose indirectly because of them: so that it is possible to find ourselves where God would have us be, but not necessarily as a product of our faith. Thus the separation from his kindred, enjoined upon Abraham at the time of his call, came about because Pharaoh had *entreated Abram well for Sarah's sake*. When they returned to Canaan, the land was not able to support the combined herds of Abraham and Lot and resulted in a quarrel between their servants over pasture land:

And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left. (Genesis 13:8-9)

It was then that Lot looked to the well-watered plains of Jordan, *before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah*, when it was like the *garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou*

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*comest unto Zoar, and pitched his tent toward Sodom:* no doubt motivated by the lure of prosperity. He must not have considered that *the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly* because he *pitched his tent toward Sodom*. There, according to the Greek text of Peter's second epistle, Lot gave in to the manner of life of the people of Sodom after a hard struggle; and then he was tormented from day to day by their unlawful deeds.

We will consider Lot in Sodom later, but for now let us consider the differences between the Old and New Testament's accounts of Abraham's life. The Old Testament reveals Abraham exactly as he was a fleshly man who was saved and called of God; but the New Testament reveals him in the light of the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah. This is by right of the vicarious atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ which was applied to Abraham, as well as to all Old Testament believers, after the sacrifice of Christ. The book of Hebrews declares:

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. (Hebrews 10:16-17)

Many regard this covenant to be effective only to those of the New Testament era, but this cannot be. Our Lord said, *I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*. This statement required that the new covenant had to be put into effect when Christ paid the ransom for sin. This is confirmed by comparing the new covenant in the tenth chapter of Hebrews with the lives of the saints recorded in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, and it is also confirmed by the fact that not one sin of an Old Testament saint is recorded in the New Testament. Further it is confirmed by Paul's account of Abraham in the fourth chapter Romans:

For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are

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of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect: because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.

Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.

And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. (Romans 4:13-22, emphasis mine)

This portion of Scripture provides a new covenant view of Abraham. Consequently his faults are not seen. All that can be seen is what he did by faith, because *whatsoever is not of faith is sin* (Romans 14:23); and, according to the new covenant, *there sins and iniquities will I remember no more* (Hebrews 10:17). Since God is not a respecter of persons, and since He is immutable; the new covenant view of Abraham is the view God has of all believers because their trust is in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for justification before God. Therefore Paul wrote: *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory* (Colossians 3:1-4, emphasis mine).

The Lord's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah has made those names synonymous with moral decadence. However the overt moral decadence of those cities was the result of their self-righteous rejection of the truth of the saving grace of God, which had been promised through *the seed of the woman*. Their rejection of the truth is not found in Genesis, but in the first chapter of

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Paul's epistle to the Romans, where Paul wrote of them without naming them:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: who changed the truth of God into [the] lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them. (Romans 1:18-32, emphasis mine)

The conditions described by Paul multiplied in the cities of the plain, yet the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah still would not submit to the grace of God, leaving themselves subject to God's judgment. Abraham asked the two angels, *Wilt thou destroy the righteous with the wicked?* and God promised to preserve the cities for the sake of ten righteous souls; but there were not ten, only Lot, his wife and their daughters:

And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out of this place: for the LORD will destroy this city. But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law. (Genesis 19:14, emphasis mine)

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It is lamentable that one's life-style can influence his testimony before the lost so that they give no credence to the message of God. However anyone who rejects the message of God because of fault in the messenger is a self-righteous fool. Would such a person apply the same standards to one warning him his house is on fire? I think not! As deplorable as the expressions of the flesh can be in the lives of believers, these expressions cannot cause anyone to be lost. The lost may attempt to use them for an excuse, but it will not avail, because:

He that believeth on him is not condemned, but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

Some preachers, with good intentions, have placed a great deal of emphasis upon the personal lives of believers. Despite their motives, this can be dangerous because it can subvert the work of the Spirit of God and promote self-righteousness as it did in Sodom and Gomorrah. The insidious ego of man corrupted the truth of the gospel at Sodom, again at Jerusalem, and it will have a part in promoting the apostasy of the last days. The Scriptures tell us, ... *because [the] iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.*

While technically the iniquity is lawlessness: the lawlessness had its roots in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The iniquity in this text is *a way which seemeth right unto a man*. It is man trying to be God by his self-determination of good and evil. Consequently it magnifies man and not God. Therefore the love of the truth of the grace of God waxes cold when it is emphasized. It has been an integral part of the self-improvement methods of man from the time of the fall until now, and even in the realm of the truth it has had distressing success. Thus Paul wrote of the Cretans: *They profess that they know God; but in works [insisting upon them for*

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*salvation] they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate* (Titus 1:16).

The Cretans' thoughts were affected by this abounding iniquity and so they supplanted the clear, unadulterated, truth of the Word of God with the *doctrines and commandments of men*. This is always the result of magnifying the works of man. Doctrine and truth are replaced with emotion and personal experiences: so with the Cretans and with many of the churches of our day, *What do you think?* and *What do you feel?* replaced and are replacing, *Thus saith the Lord*.

Returning to Lot, we find that the deliverance of Lot and his family from Sodom prefigures events in Jerusalem and Judaea prior to the return of our Lord. The false prophet will place an idol of the antichrist in the temple in Jerusalem and will demand, like Nebuchadnezzar of old, that it be worshiped. Many will be deceived when the false prophet causes the idol to speak. Even so certain Jews will flee Jerusalem. They will recognize this to be *the abomination of desolation*, *spoken of by Daniel the prophet* and referred to by our Lord, when He said:

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whosoever readeth, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains: let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.... For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. (Matthew 24:15-18, 21)

The Jews who flee Jerusalem and Judaea will be preserved of God in the wilderness, where they will be hidden from the presence of the antichrist for three and one half years; but the remainder of the Jews, who fail to flee the city, *which is spiritually called Sodom*, and the region of Judaea will be ensnared by an attempt to save their lives. Many, therefore, will worship the antichrist and will receive his mark in their foreheads or their hands in order to be able to buy and

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sell, but our Lord warned: *Remember Lot's wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it* (Luke 17:32-33).

Lot's wife was so consumed with all that they had left in Sodom and the status which they had held there, that she disregarded God's warning of not looking back when they fled the city. She could not resist one last, long, loving, look towards Sodom. Similarly, much of what Israel has desired and prayed for during the last two thousand years (i.e., peace, the temple, and one they perceive to be the Messiah) will be in Jerusalem when the abomination of desolation stands in the holy place. Israel must recognize that the antichrist could not possibly be the Messiah, despite his *signs and lying wonders*, because the true and living God has always forbidden idolatry and judged it severely. They must not be like Lot's wife. Even so, according to the thirteenth chapter of Zechariah, two-thirds of the nation of Israel will in fact be like Lot's wife and will perish during *the time of Jacob's trouble*, the great tribulation.

As we return to Abraham, we are reminded of an incident which occurred nine years after his return to Canaan from Egypt. Abraham was eighty-five years old and Sarah was seventy-five and they were still without children. Despite Sarah's beauty and youthful appearance, she was barren and had been all of their married life. They began to worry about the possibility of Sarah ever being able to have a child. Then God spoke to Abraham: *Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out*

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*of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:1-6).*

Not long after God had spoken to Abraham and reconfirmed His covenant with him, Sarah apparently began to think about God's promise and about her own barren womb. She must have reasoned that since she had been barren all of her normal child bearing years; and since she was seventy-five years old and no longer had a monthly cycle, it was hopeless to think that she could ever have a child. If God was going to give Abraham a son, it could not be through her. Thus she devised a scheme to fulfill God's promise man's way:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her.

And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband to be his wife. And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. (Genesis 16:1-4, emphasis mine)

Hagar's spite must have been fostered by what she considered Sarah's permissiveness. Beyond the human reasons for her animosity, the Scriptural allegory in the fourth chapter of Galatians reveals that Hagar represents the earthly Jerusalem, the law and human effort for an inheritance in the things of God; whereas Sarah represents the heavenly Jerusalem and an inheritance in the things of God by God's grace through faith, apart from the deeds of the law.

Consequently Hagar felt herself morally superior to Sarah; and, in her disrespect, she was

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not about to hide her feelings from her. Thus she boasted her ability to produce and mocked Sarah's inability. With each subsequent expression of her derision she became bolder, to the point of trying to supplant Sarah altogether. It was then that Sarah had enough of her chiding and drove her off, but the angel of the Lord found her in the wilderness and called: *Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands* (Genesis 16:8-9).

It is significant that Hagar was to remain a servant, because Paul tells us that she represents the law; and he also tells us, *Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith* (Galatians 3:24). These truths enable us to understand why Paul wrote:

[W]e know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind [homosexuals], for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. (I Timothy 1:8-11)

Thus, according to the command of the angel, Hagar returned to Abraham and Sarah and submitted unto them. She then gave birth to Ishmael. After that the narrative jumps ahead in time to when Abraham was ninety-nine years old and Sarah was eighty-nine, and God said:

I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect [honest and true]. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and

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kings shall come out of thee.

And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (Genesis 17:1-8)

Thus God reconfirmed His covenant with Abraham and changed his name from Abram, *a father*, to Abraham, *a father of many nations*. God also added the rite of circumcision as a sign of their covenant. Circumcision was to be performed initially upon Abraham and every male under his authority and subsequently to every male born into his household.

Then God said: *As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her* (Genesis 17:15-16). This statement overwhelmed Abraham. At that moment it seemed beyond belief. Sarah had been unable to produce children in all of their years together, and then, by virtue of her age, she had passed through menopause. So Abraham *fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?* (Genesis 17:17)

The believer must understand, as Abraham came to understand, that God *is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think* (Ephesians 3:20). God cannot be limited to human reason. Otherwise salvation would not be available by grace to God's *enemies*, the *ungodly* and *sinner*s (Romans 5:6-10). Even so for a time Abraham struggled with the concept of Sarah bearing a son. To his mind he had already produced the son through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. So he cried, *O that Ishmael might live before thee!*

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This cry was not much different than the choice of Lot to go into Sodom, or Abraham's decision to call Sarah his sister instead of his wife. Abraham's cry in behalf of Ishmael was the flesh manifesting itself in a believer in one of its most arrogant and ugly ways. At that moment Abraham did not want the son of God's promise, he wanted to be able to boast in the son of his flesh. The cry for the preeminence of the flesh has resounded down the corridors of time and is still resounding.

Even so God understands us better than we understand ourselves. He patiently allowed the flesh to give way to the Spirit. Then *God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year* (Genesis 17:19-21).

Abraham's unbelief was short lived because the Scriptures tell us, *He believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness.* This was manifested by the fact that *Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him. And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the*

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*stranger, were circumcised with him (Genesis 17:23-27).*

Circumcision, like baptism, does not save, but both circumcision and baptism are outward manifestations of an inward faith. Abraham believed that what God had promised, God was able also to perform. Therefore Abraham believed that God had power over his impotence and over Sarah's barren womb and manifested his faith by circumcising all of the males in his household.

As we proceed with our consideration of first and second-born sons in the lineage of Abraham, we will find his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter-in-law, like Sarah, were both barren until the Lord interceded in their behalf. These three women, Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel represent the church in its reproductive role. The church cannot produce the children of God's promise unless the Holy Spirit quickens the Word we preach to those who were foreordained to salvation. Paul wrote the Corinthians, *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.* In the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of John, our Lord said, *Apart from me ye can do nothing.* Consequently any attempts at fruit bearing apart from Him and His methods count for nothing.

The church, of course, does not know who was foreordained to salvation, so it has been commissioned of the Lord to go into all of the world and preach the gospel to everyone. We know from Scripture, *Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* Therefore, like Abraham and Sarah, we are to rest in God's promise and realize He will bless us with children of His promise in His time. We are to recognize Abraham's and Sarah's folly and not attempt to produce the children of God's promise by fleshly schemes. All that can be produced by these schemes are sons of the flesh, like Ishmael a man whose *hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him (Genesis 16:12).*

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Just prior to the destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain, the preincarnate Christ appeared with two angels, all in the form of men, to Abraham as he dwelt in the plains of Mamre. When Abraham greeted them, according to the custom of the East, Abraham invited them to dine with him. He killed a fatted calf and gave it to Sarah, and she prepared the calf and bread, and the angels and Abraham ate together under a tree. Then the Lord said: *Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life, and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him* (Genesis 18:9-10).

Sarah had not been included at the meal with the strangers, apparently because of the customs of the East, but this did not stop her from eavesdropping on their conversation. When she heard that she was supposed to have a child, she reasoned that she and Abraham *were old and well stricken in age; and it [had] ceased to be with [her] after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?* (Genesis 18:11-12)

Even though Sarah was a believer, her first reaction to the promise of the Lord was the many fleshly reasons why it was impossible for her to have a child, but Sarah had neglected to consider that it was the Lord who had promised this child. Therefore *the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son* (Genesis 18:13-14).

The Lord's statement to Abraham is a statement to us, and we must not forget it. We are

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to believe that what God has promised, He is able also to perform. We are to operate according to the truth of the Word of God. When we operate this way, there is nothing consistent with God's will that He will withhold from us. Sarah should have known this, but she had already laughed within herself, so she tried to cover it up by saying, *I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh* (Genesis 18:15).

Abraham and Sarah both came to manifest their faith in the promise of the Lord, but this did not make them free from future fleshly manifestations. Their experience with the flesh, like ours, was something that had to be dealt with daily. Within a very short time of God's re-confirmation of His covenant, Abraham and Sarah made a trip from Canaan to the border town of Gerar. Gerar was on the way to Egypt, but was it not in Egypt. Thus Abraham picked a place to dwell where it was easy to go from one place to the other. Unfortunately this is the common experience of many believers. John wrote, *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is* (I John 3:2, emphasis mine)

Abraham told the men of Gerar, as he had done in every place he and Sarah had gone from the time they left Ur of the Chaldees, *Sarah is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah* (Genesis 20:2). Even though Abraham had learned some spiritual lesson, this did not keep him from resorting to the flesh from time to time; and what was true of Abraham is also true of every believer. Despite our salvation, we will from time to time seek fleshly solutions to spiritual problems.

This will continue until our resurrection and glorification. Then, and only then, will the

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believer no longer be susceptible to the flesh. Thus God came to Abraham's rescue and spoke to Abimelech, the king of Gerar *in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this. And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her. Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine* (Genesis 20:3-7).

In light of the above incident, it is inconceivable to me that anyone could ever conceive of our relationship with God being based upon merit and not upon the grace of God. But given our innate knowledge of good and evil as a result of the fall, we know that some men will conceive such things in spite of the evidence. Even Abraham offered self-conceived moral judgments as an excuse for jeopardizing Sarah's chastity, when he answered Abimelech's question (*What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?*):

And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt show unto me; at every place we shall come, say of me, He is my brother. (Genesis 20:10-13)

Despite Abraham's fleshly excuses, God's grace prevailed and they were delivered safely back to Canaan, where God fulfilled His promise to Abraham. It was God's promise and not

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Abraham's flesh which produced Isaac at the appointed time. Isaac was truly a child of promise, the second-born, by the power of God.

And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him.

And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age. (Genesis 21:1-7)

Thus Abraham had two sons: one born after the flesh and the other born after the Spirit.

Ishmael, the firstborn, was born by the craft and cunning of man. Isaac, the second-born, was by the power and promise of God.