

PATRIARCHS: Lesson Two,
God's Covenant and Abraham's Growth
Genesis 15:1-18:15

Subject: God assured Abram by covenant, adding further assurances after Abram interfered.

Main Idea: Those with saving faith enter a process in which their faith continues to be developed.

Principles:

1. *Salvation is by grace through faith.*
2. *Those with saving faith learn to be God-dependent rather than self-dependent.*
3. *Our trust in God grows as we get to know Him better.*

Introduction

Babies are endearing to almost everyone.

- It doesn't matter whether the baby is a human or a bird or any other kind of animal. Something about their smallness and dependence is just endearing.
- It is not unusual to hear adults say about small children in their family, "I wish they would stay that small forever." But, in reality, no parent ever wishes that his or her child never grew or changed! In fact, a child who grows and develops into a physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually mature person is a delight to all who know him or her.

When we first come to God by faith in Christ, the Bible says we experience new birth. (John 3:3, 1 Peter 1:3, 23)

- And that is a very exciting thing! We have come from darkness into light! We have exchanged guilt for freedom! Previously, we had no hope beyond this life. Now we have eternal life and all its joys to anticipate!
- But it isn't long before "newborn" Christians realize that God has not saved us to leave us as we have been. He plans to transform us!
- Once saved, we enter a process by which our faith continues to be developed.

That is what we see happening in the lives of Abram and Sarai in the chapters covered by this lesson.

- Abram started on his journey with God. He responded to God's call when he left Ur and Harran. But he still had much to learn about God and about a life of faith.
- God did not leave Abram devoid of the information and experiences he needed in order to develop! God graciously appeared to Abram again and again.
- God also allowed Abram to make mistakes. All of us learn from failure, at times.
- But with each experience, Abram's faith matured. Just like every believer today, Abram was in a process in which his faith was being developed.

Our lesson begins in Genesis 15, where we learn that God appeared to Abram in a vision.

I. God's Resolve (The Patriarchal Covenant Ratified) – Genesis 15

A. A Vision at a Time of Fear – 15:1-3

- i. “After this” We are reminded that the account in chapter 15 follows on the heels of Abram's defeat of Kedorlaomer, his encouraging encounter with the king and priest Melchizedek, and his victory over enticement to gain additional wealth from a wicked city and king.
- ii. “Do not be afraid, Abram”
 1. There is only one reason God would have told Abram not to be afraid, and that is that he *was* afraid! Many believers will attest to the fact that spiritual victories are often followed by spiritual attacks.
 2. The enemy of God and every believer, Satan, that ancient serpent, was likely behind the fears, discouragement, and insecurity Abram experienced. He also may have been physically weary – an occasion for all human beings to be prone to discouragement and fears.
 3. A man of faith still has fears. Commentator Matthew Henry has written, *“Where there is great faith, yet there may be many fears.”*¹ Henry also reminds us that it is God's will that we not surrender to such fears.
- iii. “I am your shield and very great reward”
 1. These words, together with Abram's response, probably indicate the source of Abram's fears. Perhaps Abram was fearful over the repercussions of his recent military involvement – but God would be his shield. Abram voiced concern over not having produced a child of his own. Any joy Abram might have experienced over becoming firmly established in Canaan was vanquished because he had no child of his own to benefit from it. Yet God promised him great reward. (We must keep in mind that, while the Earth's population was growing, population growth was not a concern for anyone. Rather, in that day and culture, having sons to carry one's name and to enlarge one's family was considered the most critical life accomplishment!)
 2. At this juncture, the reader is also alerted to what appears to be another possible threat to God's promises: Abram was planning to make one of his servants, Eliezer of Damascus, his heir.
 - a. Some commentators, referencing an ancient custom, believe Abram planned to adopt Eliezer. This practice gave security to a man without children for management of his household in his old age and to ensure someone buried him properly while offering the adopted person the advantages of an inheritance.

- b. With no children of his own, and with Lot seeming an unlikely candidate, adopting a beloved servant was a natural consideration for him. However, it was not God’s plan.
- c. Furthermore, as Abram expressed to the Lord, the plan was far from satisfying to him.
- d. Abram stated his concern honestly, but he was neither sullen nor defiant in addressing the Lord. We know this because of what we read in verse 6 about Abram’s belief (faith). He simply desired greater understanding. He was expressing sincere confusion and concern over how he should understand God’s promise to make him into a great nation in light of his circumstances (12:2).

B. The Word of the Lord to Address Abram’s Fear - 15:4-21

i. A Son from Your Own Body

1. *A Visual to Combat Doubts*

- a. The first thing one notices is that God did not deride Abram for expressing his fears and questions honestly.
- b. The Lord assured Abram that, not only would he produce a son of his own, he would have countless descendants! As a way of making His point, God took Abram outside and showed him the stars, indicating Abram’s descendants would be that numerous. Such a visual, one Abram saw every cloudless night of his life, would be an ongoing reminder to him of God’s promise.

2. *Abram Believed*

- a. Genesis 15:6 says, “Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” This verse is quoted five times in the New Testament (three times in Romans 4, once in Galatians 3:6 and once in James 2:23.) Throughout, the Bible teaches “salvation by grace through faith”.
- b. When the Bible speaks of a human being as righteous, it is speaking about a *right relationship* with God. Only God has absolute righteousness.
- c. By God’s plan of salvation, He “credits” (a financial accounting term) righteousness to every person who, by faith, receives Christ’s death as a substitute for the eternal death we deserve because of our sins, and Christ’s perfect life as a substitute for the righteous life we are incapable of living.

- i. We can never merit salvation. Isaiah 64:6 tells us that even our best efforts fall so short of God’s perfect standard that they appear to Him like filthy rags.
 - ii. God’s plan is to transfer to us (theologians use the word “impute”) what Christ has done on our behalf.
 - iii. The New Testament is clear that we are only saved because of God’s grace, and the *means* by which that transaction takes place is *faith* – faith alone.
- d. In receiving this gift by faith, we are indicating agreement with God that we are sinful and separated from Him and that we can never merit our own salvation. We are indicating our desire to turn from our sins and enter a right relationship with God.
- e. It is important to note that Biblical *saving faith* is the kind of trust that always results in action. James 2 makes this point very clearly.
- i. Even the demons consent to acknowledge God intellectually. Even they fear Him. (James 2:19)
 - ii. It is useless to claim we have faith if we are not willing to act upon it.
 1. The implication of this is that there is no such thing as “private faith.” Any such “faith” is not saving faith. A person who claims their faith is a private matter has never understood God’s message, the gospel.
 2. Abram gave evidence of saving faith by his obedience to God’s instruction to circumcise himself and his household (Genesis 17; circumcision is cutting off the foreskin of the male genitals). Further evidence of his faith appears a few chapters later when he was willing to obediently present Isaac, while he was a young man, as a sacrifice to God (Genesis 22.)
 3. Yet none of Abram’s actions made him righteous. They were only *evidence that he already was* in a right relationship with God, by faith. His faith is what saved him (Romans 4:9-11.)
- f. The New Testament tells us that anyone who exercises saving faith, the kind of faith Abram had, is a spiritual descendant of Abraham, and more importantly a child of God. (Gal 3:9, Ro 4:11, 12, 16-17)

ii. Possession of Canaan

1. Following assurance that Abram would produce a son, God restated His commitment to give Abram possession of Canaan.
2. A second time, Abram questioned God. “How will I know?” he asked. Having received the visual of the stars with regard to his descendants, Abram asked God to also grant him confirmation that he would indeed possess Canaan.
3. God’s answer came in the way of another graphic visual, one that was part of a “covenant of cutting.”

iii. Promises Confirmed by Covenant

1. *Covenants*

- a. Covenants are a very important Biblical concept. A covenant is simply a contract between two parties. Covenants were as common in ancient times as contracts are today. We divide our Bible into the New and the Old Testament. This word *testament* conveys the notion of *covenant*. God has chosen to relate to us in ways we can understand.
- b. Historically, there were different kinds of ancient covenants.
 - i. A parity treaty was a covenant between equals. God has not made any of these since He has no equal.
 - ii. A suzerainty treaty was between an overlord and his subjects.
 - iii. A royal grant was often a gift of land.
- c. Signs often accompanied covenants as a reminder of the gracious provisions of the overlord.
- d. It was normal for ancient covenants to include promise and expectation, as well as consequence of judgment if the covenant was transgressed. In Biblical covenants, the promise plays a very important role.
- e. At least five of God’s covenants with mankind are recorded for us in Scripture:ⁱⁱ
 - i. The Noachic Covenant – God’s unconditional promise to never destroy the earth again by flood.
 - ii. The Patriarchal or Abrahamic Covenant – God’s promise to Abram and his descendants of blessing, land, and descendants.
 - iii. The Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant – God’s conditional promise to take Israel as His own people if they would obey the Law He gave through Moses at Mount Sinai.
 - iv. The Davidic Covenant – God’s unconditional promise that a descendant of King David would be forever on the throne of Israel.

- v. New Covenant – God’s unconditional promise to bring people into a relationship with Him by changing their hearts rather than by obedience to the Law.

2. *God’s Covenant of Cutting with Abram*

- a. It is believed that the “covenant of cutting” described in Genesis 15 was a known form of covenant-making, practiced by parties in ancient times.
 - i. Perhaps the cutting of the animals was a way of putting oneself under a binding type of curse: “May it happen to me as it has to these animals if I do not keep the agreement.”
 - ii. It is believed that both parties would then walk between the slain pieces to seal the agreement.
 - iii. In Genesis 15, only God (symbolized by the fire) passed between the pieces since it was a unilateral covenant – that is, only one party (God) was making the promise, irrespective of the keeping of any commitments by Abram.

3. *Dreadful News*

- a. Prior to this action, the Lord put Abram in a deep sleep and a dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord gave Abram information that was not all pleasant. The Lord foretold that Abram’s descendants would be slaves for 400 years in a foreign land before they returned to Canaan.
- b. Despite the unpleasant nature of this news, it assumed two facts: that Abram would, in fact, have many descendants, and that his descendants would, in fact, return to live in the land God promised Abram. Both the land and his posterity were assured.
- c. God also told Abram this would not occur in his lifetime. And He states that Abram’s descendants will return to Canaan with great riches and “not until the sin of the Amorites has reached its full measure.” This last statement implies Abram’s descendants would be part of God’s judgment on the people living in Canaan once they became so thoroughly wicked that judgment could no longer be delayed.
- d. The emotion brought on by the “thick and dreadful darkness,” combined with the news contained in this dream, surely impacted Abram in a way he would remember!

Summary Statement: God made a covenant with Abram. Abram received God’s promises by faith, and his faith brought him into a right relationship with God. This all happened by God’s grace.

Principle: *Salvation is by grace through faith.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”

For those who did not take the *Beginnings* study, I am including my *Letter On Salvation* with this lesson. My prayer is that it will clear up any confusion you may have about grace, faith, and obedience.

- Abram did nothing to deserve receiving God’s call on his life and God’s promises. These were given to him by God’s grace.
- Abram had concerns about how God’s promises would be fulfilled. God did not have to address these concerns or enter a covenant for Abram’s assurance. Yet He did because He is a gracious God.

Application: How frequently do you acknowledge that you are a recipient of God’s grace?

All of us, saved or unsaved, have received God’s grace.

- “Common grace” is the term theologians use to describe the gifts God gives to all human beings: sunlight, rain, an inner conscience, and many other undeserved blessings.
- It is by His grace that He has also extended to each of us the gift of salvation.
- Do you live with an awareness of God’s grace in your life?

God has saved us by His grace, but what about the “faith” component?

- Do you *believe* God?
- Do you believe Him enough to allow Him to work a faith-growing process in you?

Transition: We discover in the very next chapter that Abram still had a lot to learn about living out his faith. By grace, through faith, he was in a right relationship with God, but the development of his faith was a life-long process.

II. **Abram and Sarai's Growth** – Genesis 16:1-18:15

A. **Growth by Failure** – Genesis 16

- i. Ten Years in Canaan: That Abram had been in Canaan ten years, emphasizes the length of time he and Sarai had been waiting for a son. Since Abram was 75 when he entered Canaan and 16:16 tells us he was 86 when Ishmael was born, we know he was 85 when this account begins.
- ii. Sarai's Plan and Abram's Consent
 1. According to the ancient local custom of the day, a woman who could not produce a child could use a slave to bear a child on her behalf. The child could be claimed by the mistress as her own. Therefore, as strange as it may sound to our modern ears, Sarai's plan was a culturally acceptable alternative in her day.
 2. Hagar may very well have been among those servants added to Abram's household during their descent into Egypt because of the famine – adding to the fallout from that horrible trip!
 3. As with the descent into Egypt, no mention is made that the Lord was consulted in the matter. Abram and Sarai just decided to take matters into their own hands.
 4. Once Hagar was pregnant, she stopped treating Sarai with the respect she should have shown. That Hagar was pregnant and also disrespectful was more than Sarai could handle. Her decision to give Hagar to Abram was already reaping painful consequences.
- iii. Hagar's Flight: Sarai abused Hagar, and as a result, Hagar fled into the desert.

B. **Hagar's Encounter With the Lord**

- i. The Angel of the Lord
 1. In the desert, Hagar encountered the “angel of the Lord.” This is the first mention in the Old Testament of the angel of the Lord.
 2. Genesis 16:13 identifies this “angel” as the Lord Himself. Apparently, what she saw was some physical manifestation of God. Theologians refer to such an appearance by God as a “theophany”. Some scholars believe that an appearance of God in physical form must be an appearance of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. The term Christophany refers to a physical manifestation of Jesus Christ prior to His birth to Mary (which is known as His incarnation.)
- ii. The Lord's Question
 1. Of course when the Lord asked Hagar where she had come from and where she was going, it wasn't because He didn't know her entire story. Rather, He was evoking a confession from her.

2. To her credit, Hagar answered honestly, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.”

iii. The Lord’s Instructions and Promise

1. “*Go back and submit*” was the Lord’s response. The Bible doesn’t support the evil of slavery. God’s plan of salvation is to deliver us from our ultimate slavery – to sin.
2. *Many Descendants* Additionally, the Lord encouraged Hagar that she indeed had a future. She would be the matriarch of many descendants. According to God’s promise, any descendant of Abram would experience blessing.
3. *Name “Ishmael”* The Lord tells Hagar she is bearing a son and is to name him Ishmael. “Ishmael” means *God hears*. He adds, “for the Lord has heard of your misery.” Since verse 15 tells us that Abram did give Hagar’s son this name, it seems Hagar told Abram about her encounter with the Lord when she returned.
4. *Prophecy Regarding Ishmael*
 - a. Finally, the Lord told Hagar that her son would have a wild and unruly nature that would result in disruptive family relationships.
 - b. The prophecy about hostility toward his brothers continues to be fulfilled to this day. Tensions in the Middle East are a fact of history.

iv. Hagar Names the Lord *El Roi*

1. Hagar encountered the Lord, *Yahweh*, the God of Abram. She gave Him a name that indicated her personal experience. He is *the God who sees me*. And, reflecting her personal experience, she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me” (verse 13).
2. Certainly the Lord found Hagar when she was alone in the desert. But, in using this name, Hagar could also have been thinking He saw into her heart.
 - a. He answered her concerns for her future by telling her she would bear a son and her descendants would be too numerous to count (a position of honor).
 - b. He told her to “go back” at a time when she lacked direction and “submit to your mistress” at a time when Hagar was embittered toward Sarai.
3. Social customs teach us to avoid the gaze of a beggar. Thankfully, God doesn’t treat us that way. He is the “*God who sees us*” (*El Roi*) and the God who *hears*!

Summary Statement: Abram, Sarai, and Hagar all acted independently of God. In so doing, they complicated matters greatly. The resulting consequences continue to this day. Yet God can use even our failures to grow our faith!

C. The Lesson of a Sign – Genesis 17

i. God's Appearance and Name

1. *Thirteen years* passed between Ishmael's birth and the Lord's appearance to Abram in Genesis 17.
2. "*I am El-Shaddai*"
 - a. The name used by the Lord in appearing to Abram, *God Almighty*, appears for the first time in the Bible in Genesis 17:1.
 - b. In light of the promises God was about to confirm (and enlarge), the name emphasizes God's omnipotence (He is all-powerful) and sovereignty.
 - c. Abram had entered a process by which his faith was being further developed. The name *God Almighty* challenged Abram to believe that God could do anything!

ii. God's Promise and Instructions

1. *Blamelessness*:
 - a. God told Abram to walk faithfully before Him and to be blameless.
 - b. Our sin nature prevents any of us from perfection. Only God is perfect. Just as the term "righteousness," when applied in Scripture to a human being, refers to one's *relationship with God*, the term *blameless* refers to a condition of complete surrender to and dependence on the Lord.
 - c. Abram was in a process of learning to place back into God's hands matters he had previously taken into his own – a process every believer experiences.
2. *Promises Elaborated Upon*
 - a. *Father of Many Nations*: Previously, the Lord promised to make Abram into a great nation (12:2). Here, the Lord elaborated upon that promise, saying Abram would be the father of *many* nations.
 - b. *Kings Will Come From You*: Furthermore, God specified that kings would descend from Abram.
 - c. *An Everlasting Covenant*: The everlasting nature of God's covenant with Abram is stressed. God's promises to Abram would extend to Abram's descendants.

d. *Sarah Would Bear a Child*: What should have been assumed by Abram before, was now stated explicitly by God: the son of promise through whom God would bless all nations would be born to Abram by his wife Sarai, who was, from that time forward, to be called *Sarah*! More than that, it would happen soon: “by this time next year” (17:21)!

3. *Signs of the Covenant*

a. *Name Change*

- i. Although circumcision is called the “sign of the covenant” God made with Abram (17:11), the changing of Abram and Sarai’s names became a sign of sorts as well.
- ii. God announced that Abram (meaning *exalted father*) would from that point forward be named Abraham (meaning *father of many*). The pronunciation of Sarai’s name (meaning *princess*) was altered to *Sarah*.
- iii. Bill Arnold (*Encountering the Book of Genesis*) points out: *Here we see an important principle that is repeated often in the Bible. Personal names in our modern context are often little more than identification labels. But in the Bible, they signify an individual’s personal character. At times, they can reveal a person’s destiny, at least as perceived by his or her parents at birth. Any midlife change of name is a momentous event that symbolizes a change of that person’s character, and in this case, a transformation of destiny... the essence of their personalities is changing, and so is their role in history.*ⁱⁱⁱ
- iv. In this encounter, God challenged the faith of Abram and Sarai: challenged them to embrace His all-powerful and sovereign nature, as revealed by the name *El-Shaddai*, challenged them to believe His promises were greater than they first believed, and challenged Abram to respond in obedience to God’s command to circumcise himself and his entire household.

b. *Circumcision*

- i. Circumcision became the primary sign of God’s covenant with Abram.
- ii. Both the Old and New Testament make it clear that circumcision is about purity.

1. Deuteronomy 10:16 declares that what God ultimately desired of Israel was circumcision of hearts.
 2. Deuteronomy 30:6 is even more clear, promising that sincerely turning to God would have this result: “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”
 3. Circumcision was an outward act intended to represent an inward, spiritual reality (as baptism does, Colossians 2:11-12).
- iii. In Colossians 2:11, Paul emphasizes that circumcision for the Christian means putting off the sinful nature.
1. Often, the things that need cutting off, for the sake of our purity, are things we hold very dear to us , as a man would his genitals.
 2. The Christian with a circumcised heart is one who is allowing God, in Christ, to make him or her holy by “cutting off” anything that makes us “unclean.” Of course, this includes behaviors. But our behaviors do not change without a heart change first.
 3. Honest evaluation of our sinful nature always leads one back to pride at the root. Our pride is an area of great sensitivity. None of us naturally wants our pride touched. Pride is a condition of the heart, one that God wants “circumcised.”
 4. In order to progress in his faith, Abraham had to be willing to have his pride put to an end. He had to cease living by self-effort and become dependent on God. Nothing cuts off pride like dependency. Learning dependence on the One who created us is critical to the growth of our faith.
4. *God’s Blessings on Isaac and Ishmael*
- a. *Ishmael’s Future:* Abraham boldly requested that God bless Ishmael. God had already promised to bless Abraham’s descendants. In 17:20, He declares that Ishmael *would* be blessed, blessed by becoming a great nation. He would be the father of twelve rulers.

b. *Isaac's Name and Future*

- i. God instructed Abraham to name the child Sarah would bear "Isaac". "Isaac" means *he laughs*. Both Abraham and Sarah (later) laughed at God's announcement that she, a woman already past childbearing years (18:11), would bear a son.
- ii. In 17:19, 21, God made a clear distinction between the blessing He would give Isaac and the way He would bless Abraham's other children. Only Sarah's son Isaac would inherit the fullness of the patriarchal promises.
- iii. Abraham's Immediate Obedience: Genesis 17 ends by telling us that Abraham fully complied with God's instructions: "Abraham and his son Ishmael... and every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner" were circumcised the same day God appeared, confirmed His covenant, and instructed regarding circumcision.

Summary Statement: Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abram. Circumcision was also a symbol of the lesson Abraham was learning: *faith in God means setting aside one's own efforts and learning to depend fully on Him*. This process, in which Abraham's faith was being further developed, was transforming his character, as his new name signified.

Principle: *Those with saving faith learn to be God-dependent rather than self-dependent.*

Application: In light of the fact that becoming God-dependent can involve humbling experiences, how dependent on God are you really willing to be?

What do you hold dear that actually may be an obstacle to saving faith or to making you useful to God?

- Confidence in your natural abilities?
- Confidence in good health, perhaps?
- Confidence in your own wisdom and knowledge?
- Confidence in your goodness?
- Confidence in your ability to persevere?
- Confidence in your bank account?

Transition: Abraham and Sarah learned by failure. They decided to act independently of God and use Hagar to force a solution to their problem. They learned that they only complicated things by relying on their own efforts. They needed to put their confidence in God alone and that became easier as they knew Him better. As we learn in Genesis 18:1-15, the Lord appeared to them again, helping Sarah understand and embrace an important part of His nature.

D. Knowing God Better – Genesis 18:1-15

i. The Lord Appeared Again

1. *Timing*: We can assume that the appearance of the Lord described in Genesis 18 occurred shortly after the one in Genesis 17 since both took place about a year before Sarah gave birth to Isaac (17:21, 18:14).
2. *Theophany*: On this occasion, we are told that three men appeared near Abraham's tent (verse 2). According to verse 10, one of the three said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son," words that echo what the Lord told Abraham in 17:21. Verse 13 specifically indicates that this "man" speaking with Abraham was, in fact, the Lord. He appeared to Abraham in human form, as one of the three men. Therefore, another *theophany* is indicated.
3. *The Angels*: The identity of the other two "men" is not revealed until chapter 19. There, they are identified as angels (19:1). That angels can take human form is taught elsewhere in the Bible (Hebrews 13:2).

ii. Abraham's Hospitality

1. Hospitality is expected of believers throughout the Bible. But in the desert, where Abraham dwelt, travelers were obligated to rely on the hospitality of locals.
2. Abraham's eagerness to provide a full meal for his guests seems to indicate that he recognized these three as worthy of unusual attention. *The New Manners and Customs of the Bible* explains that serving meat was a rare delicacy, and it was even less common to do so in the heat of the day (18:1). "His knowledge of the nature of his visitors is shown also by the fact that he apparently did not consider himself worthy to eat with them, and stood by and watched while they ate (Genesis 18:8)." ^{iv}

iii. First of Two Announcements (By the end of chapter 18, we realize that the Lord came to Abraham on this occasion to make two announcements. The second announcement is the subject of our next lesson.)

1. *25 Years Delayed*: The first announcement the Lord made was that Sarah would have a son "about this time next year" (18:10). Considering that Abraham was 75 when God first promised him descendants (12:4), 86 when Ishmael was born (16:16) and 99 when the Lord appeared to him the year before Isaac's birth (17:1), he and Sarah waited approximately 25 years for the fulfillment of the promise!

2. *Sarah was Listening*: The promise of a son to Sarah within a year is immediately followed by the words, “Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent,” indicating that the announcement given was actually made on Sarah’s behalf. *The time had come for Sarah, the matriarch of the family God would bless, to embrace the promises of God for herself!*
3. *Sarah’s response* was to laugh to herself, for she was past the years of childbearing (18:11). According to 17:17, Abraham also laughed when first told that Sarah would bear a son in her old age. No mention is made in the text that he was reprimanded as Sarah was. Perhaps Sarah’s was the laughter of scoffing and doubt, while Abraham’s laughter was that of amazement and joy. However there is no way to know for sure the reason Abraham laughed.
4. *Sarah’s Lesson*
 - a. The Lord rebuked the listening Sarah, asking why she laughed and restating her unspoken thought: “Will I really have a child, now that I am old?”
 - b. Sarah surely heard of Hagar’s encounter with *El Roi* (the God who sees) in the desert. Now, she experienced this aspect of God’s nature and character herself. He knew her inmost thoughts and had read her attitude!
 - c. After revealing her skepticism, the Lord further challenged Sarah, asking rhetorically, “*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*” (18:14).
 - d. Her husband’s God was revealing Himself to *her* as the One who saw her inmost thoughts and attitudes. But that was not the only thing Sarah was challenged to know and embrace about God. He also revealed Himself as the One for whom nothing is impossible!
 - e. The Bible, never fearful of divulging the failures of its heroes and heroines, tells us that Sarah was so shocked, that she lied and claimed she had never laughed (18:15). But God’s response, “*Yes, you did!*” ended the matter. Sarah also learned that God has the last word!

Summary Statement: Abraham and Sarah were both in a process in which their faith was continuing to grow. As God revealed Himself to them, they came to know Him better. And the more they knew Him and embraced what they knew, the more they trusted Him.

Principle: *Our trust in God grows as we get to know Him better.*

For this reason, *getting to know God is the single most important goal of every believer.*

A.W. Tozer, in his classic *The Knowledge of the Holy*, wrote, “*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.*”

Nothing will further the process of having our faith developed so much as sharpening our awareness of who God is – understanding His character more adequately and accurately.

God has revealed Himself to us in the Bible. It is the primary way by which we can know Him. But growing in our faith takes more than just reading the Bible. It requires that we embrace each new understanding of God’s nature and His promises. As we take what we learn about God in the Bible and act upon it in everyday life, our faith really begins to grow!

Application: God revealed Himself to Abraham and Sarah as *God Almighty*, the *One for whom nothing is impossible*. Do you know God in this way *personally*?

Have you recently (or ever) asked God to reveal Himself to you in fresh, new ways – in ways that will deepen your trust in Him? How far will you go to know God better – more adequately and more accurately? Is knowing Him and learning to trust Him the driving goal of our lives?

Conclusion

God did not save us to leave us as we are! He delights in finishing the process He began in each of us (Philippians 1:6). And that process is one of teaching us to *trust Him* more and more.

ⁱHenry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Ge 15:1

ⁱⁱ Some people include a royal grant God gave His priest Phinehas and a covenant with Adam and Eve (the “Edenic Covenant”) as two additional Biblical covenants.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold, Bill T. (1998.) *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (p. 97). Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

^{iv} Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J. (1998). *Manners & Customs of the Bible* (p. 27). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.