Studies in Genesis - 19

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Studies in Genesis

(Leaflet 19)

A NEW NAME AT NINETY AND NINE

Genesis 17:1-27

Twenty-four years had passed since Abram, at “seventy and five” years of age, had “departed out of Haran” (12:4). How long before that he had seen “the God of glory” (Acts 7:2), and had left his native land of Chaldea, in response to the call of God, we do not know. He had “believed God” and had been justified by faith. He had waited expectantly for the promised son and heir. Then he had foolishly tried to help God, bringing to pass the sad experiences with Hagar and Ishmael, perhaps delaying the fulfillment of God’s promise by his own unbelief.

Thirteen more years passed (17:25). They must have been years that tried the soul of the patriarch. No record is given of an appearance of God to His child. But during these silent, weary years the Lord was preparing Abram’s heart for a further manifestation of His limitless grace. For at “ninety and nine” Abram saw the Lord once more, talked with Him, and received a new name—with all that this involved. Thus “Abram” became “Abraham.” The covenant was reiterated and confirmed. The token of the covenant was established. And the child of promise was named by God Himself, to be born the following year.

Such a manifestation of God’s love and grace and power was worth waiting for, even for many years! And even as he was waiting, Abram was being prepared for yet further service. How often we, too, delay God’s best gifts for us because of our unbelief, or because of our own human efforts! But if we are Christ’s, He will, by His grace, test us and try us and bring us to the end of ourselves, that He may reveal unto us a manifestation of His own glory.
THE GRACE OF THE GOD OF ABRAHAM

The more we consider God's covenant with Abram, and how God dealt with him in the fulfillment of His covenant blessings, the more we are convinced that the lesson of the Bible is grace. We do not study the life of Abraham to find out about Abraham, but rather to see how God dealt with a man who was sinful and erring, who made mistakes, who in every point was just like us. For Abraham was "a sinner saved by grace." The lesson from his life is not his faithfulness, not his high and holy walk. The lesson concerns Abraham's God—how God took a man who made mistakes, and how God in His grace overcame those mistakes and still used His redeemed, yet erring child. And that is grace!

You, too, have been saved by grace, my friend. You belong to the Lord, and yet you make mistakes. As Abraham got out of the will of God, told a falsehood, and tried to bring in his own plans instead of God's, so do you; and so do I. But as God did not give Abraham up, neither does He give us up. We are still the Lord's, and that is grace. Grace not only saves us; grace follows us every moment. If God by grace should take us to the very gate of heaven, and then tell us by our own strength and goodness to step over the portals into the City, we should fall back into hell. That is what we are by nature. "When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). Abraham was "a man subject to like passions as we are." But he believed God; God justified him; and from that moment God never left him.

The Lord Jesus said a very remarkable thing to the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection or in any miracles:

"But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:31, 32).

Then Abraham is alive, whether infidels and modernists believe it or not! God is the God of the living, and Jesus said that He is "the God of Abraham." Abraham is with the
Lord, waiting for the complete fulfilment of the covenant blessings. Abraham is as much the Lord’s today as he was the day he first believed God. And so are you, and so am I. That is grace. Some day in heaven we shall see it. I believe, as I am speaking to you this morning, that we are not conscious of how many times God has saved us during the past week from failure, from sin, from faults. How many times Satan has had a plot laid to entrap us, and God turned us another way! How often Satan’s plans have been foiled! We shall fully know when we get to heaven. There we shall see that it was grace all along the way, from the day God saved us until we looked upon His face. We shall fail to get the lesson of Abraham unless we get the lesson of Abraham’s God.

“ABRAM . . . NINETY YEARS OLD AND NINE”

In our lesson for today we read of how, “when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared” to him (verse 1). We have seen that Abram had believed God’s promise to give him and Sarai a son; and through that son, a nation and a Saviour. We have seen the folly and unbelief of his attempt to help God through his own human efforts. We have seen that for thirteen years Ishmael’s very presence in the home was not only a source of strife and heartache, but also a reminder to Abram of his sin. He loved Ishmael; yet he had to live thirteen years in the presence of his attempt to help God out. Through all this Abram doubtless learned a lesson; for all those thirteen years he knew that he had not followed God’s plan for him. And then God, not giving him up, not setting him aside, thirteen years later visited him again. I have been wondering whether God spoke to him at all during that thirteen years, or just let him meditate. That was a long time. But after thirteen years, God appeared to him again. God was just the same, and God’s plan was just the same. He appeared to Abram and said, in substance, “Abram, do you remember that I told you what my plan is? Now I am going to fulfill it.”

No, God did not set Abram aside. I do believe there is a possibility of a man’s being set aside insofar as his service is
concerned, but never in regard to his salvation! God's grace covers all the penalty of sin for the believer on the Lord Jesus Christ.

**El Shaddai—The All-Sufficient God**

When God spoke to Abram in his ninety and ninth year, He used a name for Himself that He had never used before, saying,

"I am the Almighty God," or "El Shaddai," meaning the "All-Sufficient God."

That is the Hebrew for the new name which the Lord gave to Abram. He had revealed Himself in the beginning of Genesis as "Elohim," "the Mighty One"; that is, "God." Then He had added the name "Jehovah," "Jehovah Elohim." "Jehovah" means "the God who will reveal Himself," "the One who is to be revealed," or "the One who is to come." So when God said, "My name is Jehovah Elohim," He was saying, "The mighty One will reveal Himself." Then Abram had learned another name for God from Melchizedek, "the Most High God." He had never heard that name before; but when he heard it, he used it immediately; for right away Abram said to the king of Sodom, "The Most High God is my God, and only the Most High God can make Abram rich."

Now here in Gen. 17:1 we read of how God revealed Himself yet further to His child as "the God who is sufficient," the God who can do whatever is necessary. You see, that is where Abram had fallen down. He thought that God could give him a son if he helped God out a little; but now God appeared to him and said, "I am El Shaddai, the God who is sufficient. I can do what I have said I will do."

And how we, too, have to learn that! We shall not get very far in the service of the Lord unless we see our fruitfulness does not depend upon us, except as it depends upon our faith. God is sufficient. The God who could keep three million people in the wilderness for forty years, where there were no harvests, no cities, no factories for making clothes or shoes; the God who could keep those three millions clothed
and keep them shod and keep them fed, and give them water to drink, not only for one day or for a year, but for forty years—surely He is “El Shaddai”!

I believe we find the meaning of “El Shaddai” in the twenty-third Psalm. A little girl once said the first verse like this: “The Lord is my Shepherd; I should not want anything.” And as we go through the Psalm, we find God telling us that in every condition He will be to us just what we need. Little wonder the psalmist closed this beautiful Hebrew poem by saying, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” He knew “El Shaddai,” the God who is sufficient.

“Walk before me, and be thou perfect”

Perhaps to remind Abram of his own failure when he acted in self-will, certainly to reassure him of His never-failing presence and power, El Shaddai said to His child, “Walk before me, and be thou perfect.”

Now Abram was a fine man to strive for perfection! And yet God told him to be perfect. But God could not say anything less than that. God, who is a perfect God, when He demands something, demands perfection. That is why we cannot save ourselves, and that is why we cannot add anything to our salvation, because God in salvation demands perfection. A perfect salvation has been wrought out in the Lord Jesus Christ. When we receive salvation from the hand that was nailed to the cross, we receive a salvation that is in every wise perfect, the only one with which God can be satisfied. But now, here God was speaking to Abram concerning his life, and He said, “I am the God who is sufficient; walk before me, and be thou perfect.”

Now was Abraham a perfect man? It is possible, according to the Bible, to have a perfect heart. God is not looking for perfect lives; He is looking for perfect hearts. If God should look for perfect lives, He would not find them; but God looks for perfect hearts, and He does find them.

“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him” (II Chron. 16:9).
My friend, if your heart is perfect toward God, He will show Himself strong in your behalf. But you say, “What is a perfect heart?” A perfect heart, in the Scripture, is a heart that is determined to do the will of God.

I knew a young man who gave up a great deal to be a missionary. I had to live with him for a little while, and I found out some things that I did not expect; we always do when we live with people. And then in his missionary work he made mistakes. Sometimes I used to think he was spiritually proud when he accomplished things in his work. That man had laid down thousands of dollars to be a missionary; he was disinherited. He went through much suffering to be in Christian work. He always determined that whatever God showed him to do he would do; and I believe that he has done that very thing. He is still making mistakes—as you do, and as I do—but I do believe that his heart is “perfect” with God.

If God has called you to a field of service, if God has called you to teach a Sunday School class, and if you have determined with all your might that you will do that thing, however many mistakes you make, and however many people become angry at the mistakes you make, if you accomplish the thing, however poorly it may be done, then God will take care of the results. Abram made mistakes, but his heart was “perfect” toward God. And however many mistakes a man makes, if his heart is set on doing the will of God, if he seeks to please God rather than men, that man’s heart is perfect.

I think that is all God asked of Abram. I believe Abram’s heart was perfect. He made mistakes after this. The fact is that he fell once more into the same mistake that he had fallen into before, when he went down to Egypt and said that Sarai was his sister. As we shall see from chapter twenty, he told the same falsehood a second time, when he should have remembered his lesson. And yet Abram’s heart was set on God. Lot went down into Sodom, but not Abram. With all his mistakes and failures and weaknesses, this old patriarch was walking in high places with God. He was walking before the Lord. And I do believe that, whatever there was in his life, his heart was perfect.
Even so, God is searching for perfect hearts today. My friend, if God keeps you in an office, if God keeps you in a kitchen, your heart can be just as perfect toward the Lord, as that of the one who goes away to a foreign land to preach. If you know that you are doing what God has called you to do, if with all your heart and might and mind you are doing God’s will, God honors your obedience and your faith.

**THE NEW NAME AND THE EVERLASTING COVENANT**

The All-Sufficient God, El Shaddai, gave Abram the strength and wisdom to walk before Him with a perfect heart, even as He reiterated His covenant, saying,

"And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly" (verse 2).

No wonder "Abram fell on his face," in worship, even as "God talked with him" (verse 3)! Doubtless he also felt his unworthiness of the least of God’s mercies, as he remembered his self-will and unbelief; for as the redeemed soul catches a vision of the love and grace of a holy God, he abhors himself in penitence of heart.

The new name which God gave to the patriarch was associated with the covenant, which is referred to in verse 7 as "an everlasting covenant." "Abram" means "high father"; "Abraham," "father of many nations," even as verses 4 and 5 explain:

"As for me," God said, "behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee."

This promise has been literally fulfilled; for Ishmael, Isaac, the six sons of Abraham and Keturah (25:1-4), and "the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had" (25:6)—these became the heads of great nations, "many nations."

But there is an even more significant, more beautiful meaning than this implied by the new name of the patriarch; for he is "the father of all them that believe" (Rom. 4:11), whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free. Indeed, he 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” (Rom. 4:16-18).

“Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen (or ‘Gentiles’) through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (Gal. 3:7, 8).

“... that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ” (Gal. 3:14).

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28, 29).

We must not lose sight of the fact that God’s covenant with Abram concerning his earthly seed, Israel, will yet be completely fulfilled; for the Hebrew nation will be restored, and Christ, the King of the Jews, will be acknowledged as Messiah and Lord by His ancient people. This nation will be honored; and through this people the God of Abraham will make known His matchless name in all the world. But, “thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift” (II Cor. 9:15); for the Lord Jesus Christ, “the Son of Abraham,” is also the world’s Redeemer, “the Prince of Peace.”

In verse 15 of our lesson today (Gen. 17) we read that God also changed the name of “Sarai” to “Sarah”:

“And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.”

“Sarah” means “princess,” God’s first princess. This is all grace. If you study the life of Sarah, you cannot see any reason for God’s doing so much for her. But neither can you
see any reason for God's doing so much for you, or for me! Why is it that God is going to take you and me to glory, and make us like His Son, make us so glorious that all the angels in heaven will wonder at our being like the eternal Son of God? What is there in us that the Son of God should put His unknown name, the name that He alone knows, upon His people in the glory? So shall it be, for you and I shall have "a new name," even as Abram and Sarai were given new names. Think of it! "The father of all them that believe!" God's "princess"! And think of God's grace to us all!

"To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (Rev. 2:17).

Repeatedly God had spoken the words of His covenant to Abram; but now, as if to reassure him yet further, He reiterates these sure words of promise, recorded in verses 6-8. As we read them, let us note the repeated "I will" of the God who always keeps His Word:

"And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and 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."

THE "TOKEN OF THE COVENANT"

In verses 9-14 we read of how the God-given "token of the covenant" (verse 11) was established. And again we turn to the New Testament to see how the Holy Spirit explains the meaning of circumcision, this "seal of the righteousness of the faith" which Abram had long before this "token" or "sign" or "seal" was given. (See Rom. 4:9-12.) Turn with me also to Phil. 3:1-3 and to Col. 2:9-13 for yet further light upon this truth. Here, and in related
passages, we find that circumcision speaks of the putting away of the things of "the flesh" as opposed to the things of Christ. It speaks of the separated life, sanctified, set apart unto God. To the Colossian Christians Paul stated plainly:

"In whom (i. e., in Christ) also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the flesh (R. V.) by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses" (Col. 2:11-13).

In the closing verses of our lesson for today (Gen. 17:23-27) we read of Abraham's obedience to God in accepting this "token" or "sign" of the covenant. With a new name, with a vision of El Shaddai, the All-Sufficient God, with a reassuring repetition of the covenant from God, Abraham acted upon the Word of God spoken unto him. He had learned that "the flesh," as evidenced in his dealings with Hagar and Ishmael, had no place in God's plan concerning the son of promise.

And what is the lesson, in all this, for us today? Surely it is very plain. As we confess our sins and forsake the godless, Christ-rejecting world as a source of satisfaction, we are being obedient to our Lord's command, spoken by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul many centuries ago:

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers . . . Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (II Cor. 6:14-18).

Here again it is "El Shaddai," "the Lord Almighty," who is speaking to us—the God who can satisfy all our needs! To Him we would cry, in the words of one who wrote, saying:
"My Lord, my Master, help me
To walk apart with Thee,
Outside the camp, where only
Thy beauty I may see:
Far from the world's loud turmoil,
Far from its busy din,
Far from its praise and honor,
Its unbelief and sin."

"IN ISAAC SHALL THY SEED BE CALLED"

The continued conversation between God and Abraham, as recorded in verses 16-21, reveals yet further grace bestowed by the All-Sufficient God upon His still-faltering child. Having told Abraham that henceforth his wife should be called "Sarah," God's princess, the Lord added:

"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" (verse 16).

"Then 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? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!" (verses 17, 18).

Thus Abraham, still laughing at what seemed to him an impossibility, was still pleading for his own plan. But there is one thing about this man Abraham; he came out all right in the end. That is one thing about God's people. My friend, if you know one of God's people that is failing, and doing things that you think he ought not do, be careful what you say, because that one is coming out all right in the end. If he is a true believer, he is God's; he belongs to the Lord. Here was Abraham; as God spoke to him, he was laughing within himself, and saying, "How can it be?" And then he plead with God for Ishmael, even though God had already told him that Ishmael was out of the question. How patient is our God!

"And 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" (verse 19).
Now it is necessary for us to see what is in this nineteenth verse, because the sequel comes later. God had said to Abraham, “In Isaac I will give the seed.” And yet there came a time when God said also to Abraham, “Now offer Isaac up.” Well, the God who gave Isaac could have given another; but God had said, “In Isaac shall thy seed ‘be called.’” And when Abraham went up on the mountain to offer Isaac, he had this in his mind, that if he offered up Isaac, God would raise him from the dead, to fulfil this promise, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” (See Heb. 11:19.) Isaac must live and not die. But God told Abraham to offer Isaac; and was Abraham equal to the occasion? Yes, and therefore Abraham stepped on still higher ground in faith. Still failing as he went along, every time God tested him he stood on yet higher ground.

In our last lesson we saw how God kept His Word with Abraham regarding the promised blessing upon Ishmael, foretold in verse 20 of our chapter for today:

“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.”

And then God added another promise concerning Isaac, stating even the date of his birth, saying,

“But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham” (verses 21, 22).

It was in grace and with patience that God thus dealt with Abraham, leading him ever on to a higher plane, ever on to a greater faith. And that this time, as on other occasions, Abraham believed God, we are sure; for the Holy Spirit bears testimony—not to Abraham’s unbelief—but to his faith in God:

“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" (Rom. 4:19-21).

How wonderfully God forgives our sins of unbelief, and remembers them no more forever!

Thus ends another chapter in the life of Abraham. And thus he was prepared for yet another appearance from the Lord, of which we read in the eighteenth chapter of Genesis. Dwelling "in the plains of Mamre," which is in Hebron, meaning "communion," the old patriarch was to be acknowledged as "the friend of God" and intercessor for the weak and faltering. But this comes in our next lesson.

Often failing to give complete obedience, yet ever "growing in grace and in the knowledge" of his Lord, Abraham learned that his own feeble efforts but delayed God's promised blessing; and that El Shaddai, the All-Sufficient God, never failed to satisfy his heart with His best gifts and blessings. Given a new name at "ninety and nine," he went on with God to ever higher ground.

May the God of Abraham, El Shaddai, teach us to trust Him implicitly, even as we keep our garments "unspotted from the world." For we, like Abraham of old, look forward to that day when we, too, shall receive from our glorified Lord "a new name"—and His presence for all the endless ages. With such a hope before us, it is not hard for us to say,

"Oh, worldly pomp and glory,
Your charms are spread in vain;
I've heard a sweeter story,
I've found a truer gain!"