

11. THE TOWER OF BABEL

First: Chapter 10 is so called “chapter of nations”. It describes how all the nations in the world are descended from Noah’s sons. The most successful at first was the family of Ham, who founded powerful cities, nations and cultures. Africa and Palestine belonged to them as well. The family of Japheth spread to the region of the Mediterranean, for instance to Greece and to the north of that. The family of Shem remained relatively small and their territory was a mountainous region between the regions of Ham’s and Japheth’s. But it was of the very descendants of Shem that the seed of the woman and the bruiser of the snake’s head would be born.

Verses 1-3. It was the fifth generation of Noah that started the building of the tower of Babel. It is probable that Nimrod acted only after the tower was already built (10:8-12). Shinar means Sumeria, which is the name of the oldest culture known in Mesopotamia. Now the mass migration to the plain of Shinar had started. Apparently there were descendants of all Noah’s sons and ancestors of Abraham as well among these people.

- Imagine what it was like to live in a world, where people only spoke one language.
- If any of you knows anything about the making of a brick, let us know about it.
- In what respects did the ability to make bricks influence human life?

Verse 4. On a historical preserved tablet one of the kings of Babylon mentions the restoration of the tower of the temple as early as in 2250 B.C. The tower is apparently a step pyramid. On its wall was a stairway leading up to the top where the temple was situated. It may have been situated on the location of the original tower of Babel.

- Why didn’t the people living on the plain of Shinar like the idea of other people moving further around the world?
- How did the building of the tower and the city change the economy of the people living in Shinar.
- What was the connection of the tower and the city?
- What was their political and cultural aim when they started to build the tower?
- In whose honour was the tower built? (Why did mankind all of a sudden want to have a name/ a reputation?)
- What was their aim, when they wanted the top of the tower to reach the heavens? (What was the religious purpose? What does it prove that the Lord wasn’t mentioned at all when planning this project? If they were planning to build a temple on the top of the tower, in whose honour was it?)
- What sort of know-how was needed to be able to build a tower made of bricks as tall as the Stadion tower in Finland, 72 metres? (How much did they need labour or bricks? How did they try to make the tower strong enough to withstand earthquakes etc. etc.)
- Real believers, in other words the descendants of Shem, presumably did not participate in this project. How do you think they felt having to listen to the stories about the tower reaching higher and higher.

- What would have happened to mankind if the building of the tower had succeeded?
- In what different ways has mankind tried to make God useless during its history?
- What are the towers of Babel our generations are trying to build?

Verses 5-7. Language is an extremely important part in both God and human's being. "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1)

- How did the Lord evaluate mankind's first project together?
- What did the words of the Lord at the end of verse 6 mean?
- Whom does the pronoun "us" refer to in verse 7?
- How do you think the confusion of languages took place in practice?

Verses 8-9. Babil means the gate of gods' in Akkadian language. In Hebrew babel = to confuse.

- Why didn't God want this mankind's first big project to succeed?
- The tower must have reached pretty high, but not to the heavens anyway. Why didn't they complete the building of the city?
- What would have happened to the real believers, if the tower and the city had been made complete?
- Think of positive and negative effects of the confusion of languages on mankind's history and culture?
- What's the significance of a language to the identity of man and a nation?
- How did the right and the wrong religion spread when the confusion of languages was taking place?
- Why did idolising spread from the tower of Babel all over the world while only a few stuck with the real faith?

Verses 10-26. (There's no need to read these verses aloud. It's enough to look at them in the Bible.)

- What do you notice when you look at the genealogy of Shem?
- Why is there only Shem's genealogy and not the genealogies of Noah's other sons? (What is the main point of this genealogy?)

More questions: What sort of comfort does this chapter bring to us, who want to be building God's temple instead of the tower of Babel?

- What happened to the confusion of languages on the first day of Pentecost?
- Why won't Jesus come back before all the nations and tongues have heard the gospel? (Approximately how long will it take?)
- A trick question: What language do they speak in Heaven?

Finally: The situation changed completely on the first day of Pentecost. The Christian

Church was established then, and all its members of all nations and tongues were sisters and brothers. Together we build the Kingdom of God and the Temple of the Lord, the Christian Church (The Acts 2:1-11). In Heaven all the tongues are represented and all the redeemed from all the nations praise the slain Lamb in unity - each of them in their own language (Rev. 7:9-10).

12. ABRAM LEAVES FOR THE GREAT UNKNOWN

Genesis 12:11-27- 12:9

First. The Tower of Babel was most probably located in Ur, Mesopotamian, which was one of the cultural centres of the world. The country was ruled by Sumerian kings. The most famous of them must be Hammurabi. In Mesopotamian people did not worship Abram and Noah's God but for example moon god Sin which demanded human sacrifices. We do not know if Abram's forefathers were also building the Tower together with the Hamites. Anyway, in Joshua 24:2 it is told that they, including Terah, worshipped other gods. Terah's family were pastoral nomads; they had a house in a town, but they grazed their cattle outside it.

Questions to start with:

- Why didn't Terah's family live together with the other Semitic people but had moved to Mesopotamian among the Hamites?
- How is life different as a pastoral nomad compared to a traditional nomad way of life?
- What was it like to live in a country where human sacrifices were offered to gods?

Verses 11: 26-30. Abram (later called Abraham) married his half-sister Sarah (20:12 and 22:20), and his brother Nahor married his niece. At that time a sisterhood marriage was not forbidden by law.

- What could be a reason for marrying someone within the family?
- How did childlessness affect the life of a married couple at that time? (Why was it especially hard for Sarah, why for Abraham?)
- What does it tell that Abraham did not take a second wife or participate in fertility rites in a false god's temple even though it was usual at that time?
- According to the Bible Sarah was stunningly beautiful. How, in general, does a woman's stunning looks affect her life?

Verses 11: 31-32. See Ur and Haran on the map. There is about 1000 km between them along the river. (Note that Abraham's brother is also called Haran.) Chaldea means Babylonia.

- Why did Terah want to leave Ur in Chaldea and its easy and comfortable life and go to look for a new habitation? What options could you find for that?
- What is it like to leave a place of birth and many relatives behind for good?
- A camel walks about 30 km a day, but suckling animals no more than 10 km. How long did it take for Terah to move from Ur to Haran?
- What does it tell about Lot that he left with his uncle Abraham to Haran and did not stay in Ur with his other uncle and his sisters (27-28, 31)?

- What did Lot mean to this childless couple?

Verse 12:1. According to Hebrews Abraham “went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). At that time a family was the only protector in one’s life and it was the source of one’s identity as well.

Without a family people were unprotected against bandits and robbers.

- After Noah’s time (during the next ten generations) people did not hear God’s voice. How did Abraham realise who was talking to him?
- What had Abraham and Sarah’s relationship with living God been like by now? (What does it prove that they had kept their marriage monogamous?)
- What would you say or do if God asked you to go somewhere you don’t know anything about?

Verses 12:2-3. Remember that the Tower of Babel was built to save “the name of man” in history.

- What did God actually promise to Abraham?
- What does God’s blessing include according to these verses?
- What does “a great name” mean?
- How does God curse those who curse Abraham?
- How would all peoples on earth become blessed through Abraham?

(Answer outside the Text.)

Verses 12:4-5.

- What was Abraham’s faith like when he agreed to leave for an unknown destination?
- Terah died at the age of 205. He was 145 years old when Abraham left Haran (11:26, 32, 12:4). One son was already dead, one was in Ur, and now even the third one was about to leave. Why didn’t Terah go along with his son to Canaan, even though he had come from Ur to Haran?
- What was perhaps the hardest thing for Abraham in leaving his father in a situation like that?
- What was Sarah probably thinking about it? Terah was her father as well.

Verses 12:5-6. See Abraham’s route on the map and calculate its length. In Hebrews Abraham’s life in Canaan was described like this:” By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents (11:9).

- What did Abraham and Sarah perhaps think when they realised that the promised land was already inhabited?
- Compare the everyday life and standard of living in the promised land to living in the cities of Ur and Haran.
- What was it like to live in the promised land as living in a foreign country?

- In what sense do we Christians also live as strangers and foreigners in our home countries?

Verses 7-9. In verse 8 Abraham called again on the name of the Lord which is a communal worship.

- As we remember offerings were burned on the altar to be forgiven of sins. Why did Abraham want to build altars everywhere in the promised land?
- What does it tell that Abraham started communal worships only after arriving in the promised land?
- What did the Gentiles perhaps think about worshipping the invisible God?

Finally: the Lord promised Abraham: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (12:3b). So, the blessing was not only meant for Abraham and his offspring, Jews, but the whole world. If you are baptised into Christ and you have faith in Jesus, the same Abraham’s blessing belongs to you as well (Gal. 3:27-29).

13. TRIALS IN ABRAHAM AND SARAH’S LIFE

Genesis 12:10-13:18 and 20:1-13

First. Because of border checks nobody could enter Egypt secretly. As we mentioned earlier Abraham’s family was quite unprotected because the rest of the family was not around to protect them through blood revenge. The distance between Negev and Egypt is about 300 km. See the map.

Verses 12:10-13

- What options did Abraham and Sarah have when they were running out of food in the promised land? (Why didn’t they go back to Chaldean?)
- What do you think about a husband who asks his wife to do as Abraham did in verses 11-13?
- Peter writes about Sarah: “For this is the way the holy women of the past...They were submissive to their own husbands – like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master (1 Pet. 3:5-6). What does it mean in practice that a Christian woman is submissive to her husband? (What is going to happen in an intimate relationship if it is the wife who dominates the family?)
- In what kind of matters had Sarah already been submissive to her husband? What might she have been thinking about this proposal?

Verses 14-16

- Did something happen to Sarah in Pharaoh’s palace or not? (What does it tell that Pharaoh gave Abraham cattle and servants?)
- Did Abraham know beforehand where the lie would lead? Did it really mean nothing to him that his wife might end up in Pharaoh’s bed? Explain your answer.

Verses 17-20

- How did Pharaoh find out the main reason for all the diseases in his household? (Who perhaps told him and in what situation that Sarah was a married woman?)
- How must Sarah have felt the time in the Palace if she loved Abraham from her heart? And how did she get over the fact that Abraham did not defend her chastity?

In verse 20 it is told that Abraham behaved the same way again in Canaan. Read verses 20:1-9 in silent.

- What does it tell about Abraham that he acted in the same way again, for the second time?
- What might Sarah have felt when she was again put into danger to end up in bed with a stranger?
- What does Abimelech's reaction tell about Abraham's behaviour?

Verses 20:10-13. We can now notice that Abraham asked his wife to tell only a half-lie, not the whole lie. Because Moses's law was not yet in force, sisterhood marriages were possible. For example, Pharaohs in Egypt quite often married their own sisters.

- Does that general habit make Abraham's request more understandable or perhaps even worse? Explain why.
- How can Abraham be called "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4:11) after all these happenings?
- Paul describes Abraham's relationship with God like: "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). So, how was Abraham saved?
- Why is this episode written into the Bible?

Verses 13:1-4. Check on the map of Egypt – Negev – Bethel – Ai. In verse 4 it is said that Abraham called on the name of the Lord. It means that at that place they held a service and sacrificed a sin offering.

- What does it tell about Abraham that he wanted to hold a service and sacrifice an offering right after getting away from Egypt?
- How do sacrificing and righteousness belong together?

Verses 13:5-9. We know that Lot was Abraham's late brother's son who had inherited his father's property. At some point Lot had married a secular woman.

- What was perhaps Abraham and Lot's relationship like at that time? (What might have been Lot's opinion on his uncle's trip to Egypt? Quite obviously Lot took part in that trip as well.)
- What options did Lot and Abraham have when they realised that the land was not big enough for both of their cattle?
- Why didn't Abraham use his right, as the eldest in the family, and take the better land?

Verses 10-13. It appeared later that Sodom's "depravity" meant homosexuality. Lot settled into town and soon he was a part of a council. The tent life was over.

- What does that choice tell about Lot?
- It is not told that Lot would have built any altars in his land. Why didn't he build any?
- In his letter Peter says about Lot: "For that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard." (2 Pet. 2:8.) Why did Lot stay in Sodom though he suffered from its godlessness? Why did he even let his daughters get engaged to men of that town?

Verses 14-18

- What comfort did the Lord's words give to Abraham?
- Why does the Lord want to repeat the same promises to us as well, time and time again?

Finally. The Hebrews reveals us something important about Abraham's faith as he travelled from one place to another. "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents (...) For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (Heb. 11:9-10.) So, beyond the land of Canaan Abraham saw yet another homeland and a city built by God Himself. It is the same New Jerusalem towards which we all are on our way as well.

14. ABRAHAM MEETS MELCHIZEDEK, THE KING OF PEACE (HEB.7:2)

Genesis 14

First: In the previous chapter Lot settled in Sodom in the hope of a wealthy life. Kedorlaomer and three other kings from Mesopotamia had taken control over five city-states in the expanse of Jordan (Jordan valley), among others Sodom. For twelve years those states had paid taxes to Kedorlaomer, but then they rose in rebellion. When the kings of Mesopotamia heard about that they marched over a thousand kilometres to start a battle. On their way they defeated many peoples, for example Rephaites (the giants) and Amalekites (the warlike Nomads living in the desert). Remember that Abraham and Lot also came from Mesopotamia a few decades earlier. Some of the names mentioned in this chapter have also been found in some inscriptions of that time.

Verses 1-7. See the places mentioned here on the map.

- How was it possible that these five kings dared to rise in rebellion against the kings of Mesopotamia?
- What conclusions can we draw about the army of the other three kings?
- How was the maintenance of Kedorlaomer's forces organised on that long journey?
- What did Lot perhaps think when he noticed that the war was threatening the place where he had hoped to become rich and wealthy?

Verses 8-10. It is still dangerous to walk in the surrounding area of the Dead Sea because of petroleum pits. They are not easy to notice. In chapter 18 we can notice that the residents of Sodom and its allies were immoral.

- Describe in your own words what happened in the battle between Kedorlaomer and his allies against the five kings?
- How much did the moral decay in cities of Jordan valley contribute to the result of the battle?

Verses 11-13

- What might have been Lot's thoughts when he, his wife and his property were taken back to the country where he was from?
- What did he think of his future? (Did he expect help from his uncle Abraham anymore?)

Verses 14-16. The distance between Mamre and Dan is about 130 km. From Dan to the rear of Damascus it is a bit more than 80 km. Take a look at the map.

- How did Abraham dare to chase Kedorlaomer even though his army was a lot smaller than Kedorlaomer's army?
- Why was Abraham able to move faster than Kedorlaomer and his men?
- What was the clever strategy Abraham used? (How was he able to beat the army which had beaten the whole Middle East?)

- Why did Abraham chase Kedorlaomer and his men still more than a hundred kilometres away from Dan, far behind Damascus?
- On his way to Egypt Abraham behaved cowardly but now he turned out to be a brave war leader. What is the reason for that change? (In Egypt it was about Sarai and now about Lot. Could that explain something?)

- What did Lot perhaps think about his uncle's rescue operation?

Verses 17-20. Salem (=peace) means Jerusalem which is now mentioned in the Bible for the very first time. Melchizedek = King of righteousness.

- What kind of a picture do you get of Melchizedek, the king of Salem? (Where did he get the idea to come and feed Abraham and his men who were passing by? Why did he want to bless Abraham? Why did he thank God for Abraham's victory?)
- What was common in Abraham and Melchizedek's faith?
- What does it indicate that Abraham paid a tenth of his catch to an unknown king?
- The "tenth" is now mentioned for the first time in the Bible. What do you think, is a Christian supposed to give a tenth as well? Explain your answer.
- It is said about Jesus that He is the priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 5:6). In what sense Melchizedek is Jesus's premonition? Try to find as many examples as possible.
- Why is it important that Jesus is not only a king but also a priest? (Find your answer outside this text.)

Verses 21-24. The subservients of the Sodom's king are now in Abraham's camp. In a situation like that the liberator of the prisoners was apparently allowed to keep the war catch; the goods and the prisoners.

- Why didn't the king of Sodom take part in chasing Kedorlaomer together with Abraham?
- Compare the two kings who came to Abraham to each other, the king of Salem and the king of Sodom. What differences can you find?
- What do you think about the request of Sodom's king? Is it reasonable? Explain your answer.
- Abraham had taken people and goods from Pharaoh. Why didn't he accept those from the king of Sodom? (What would the consequences have been like if he had accepted the proposal and kept the goods? What would people have said about the war in that case?)

A final question. Jesus said: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." You are not yet fifty years old, "the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:56-58) Many Bible explainers say that Abraham saw Jesus in Melchizedek. What do you think about this interpretation?

Finally, Melchizedek was either the preview of Jesus or Jesus himself. Jesus is our high priest, not as a Levi's descendant, but in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus took his own blood to his temple in Heaven as an offering for our sins, and he is there now, acting and working for us all the time. "Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." (Heb. 7:25).

15. RIGHTEOUSNESS IN FAITH

Genesis 15

First: The Lord had already promised Abraham to make him into a great nation and to bless him as he left Mesopotamia for the unknown country. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. (Gen. 12:2.) The Lord had also promised to give the land of Canaan to his offspring (12:7). Ten years have passed since those promises.

Verses 1-4. Eliezer was a servant from Damascus. The name Eliezer means "a man who is helped by God".

- What was surprising in the Lord's words in verse one? (What did the Lord mean with the shield or the reward?)
- What did Abraham mean with his words in verses 2-3? (Why was his will like that? Why didn't he let Lot inherit his estate? Think about different options.)
- How did Abraham now understand the promise that Lord gave him in Mesopotamia ten years earlier considering the blessing and the offspring?
- Is it possible to match verses 2-3 with the following words from Romans: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations (...) without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead (...) Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." (Rom. 4:18-21).
- Why didn't God admonish Abraham for lack of faith but patiently repeated his promise to him?
- Can you see anything in common in these verses with the struggle with faith in your own heart?

Verses 5-8. The thing that one's faith can be credited to him as righteousness is now mentioned in the Bible for the very first time. "Credit as righteous" was a term used in the court as the judge declared someone innocent.

- What did the stars in the sky look like as Abraham looked at them?
- What things made it hard to trust the promises God had given to Abraham?
- On what basis was Abraham able to believe in such an incredible promise?
- How can we notice that Abraham was credited as righteous by faith, not by deed?
- How can we know that we have the right kind of faith that will lead us to Heaven?
- Why does God, in this situation, say about himself like He does in verse 7?
- At which point did Abraham himself understand that he was righteous, innocent in the face of God?
- What does the question in verse 8 tell us about Abraham?

Verses 9-12 and 17. This is an ancient way to make a covenant. The carcasses were cut in two and the parties to the covenant passed between the pieces. That was the habit still at Jeremiah's time, over 1000 years later (Jer. 34: 18-19). In verse 17 the covenant is mentioned again.

- What is the atmosphere like in verses 11 and 12 and why? (What made it dreadful?)
- Compare this covenant with the "new" one Jesus made with his followers. Is there anything similar in those? How do they differ from each other? (Give your answer outside this text.)
- What was the meaning of the blazing torch in that situation (verse 17)?
- How does crediting someone righteous belong together with sacrificing carcasses?

- Why is the sacrifice with blood needed to make a covenant between sinful man and God?

Verses 13-16. In the Bible the concept “debt of sin” is important. Jesus called sin a debt as he taught how to pray to our Father in Heaven. Amorites, also called Canaanites, increased their debt of sin with unmoral sex life and child sacrifice.

- Imagine God saying to you: “For 400 years your descendants will be living in Siberia and be enslaved, but then I will let them go.” How would you accept that prophecy?
- Why did God want to tell Abraham about the slavery time in Egypt in advance?
- What might Abraham have thought when God gave him the promise in verse 15?
- Why couldn’t Abraham’s descendants get the promised land straight away? See verse 16.
- Why is the word “debt” a good description of people’s sins?
- What do you think about the debt of sin when you look at your country’s people?

Verses 19-21. The people mentioned here lived in Canaan at those days.

- Israel has owned the whole land mentioned in verses 18-21 only in David’s and Salomon’s days. Is that promise still valid? Why is it or why is it not?

Final questions:

- What kind of an answer did Abraham get to his question in verse 8?
- What kind of misunderstandings are there about righteousness among modern Christians?

Finally, this is Paul’s explanation of this chapter: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (...) to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” (Rom. 4: 3-5.) So, Abraham was not credited as righteous because of his good deeds but despite his bad deeds.

16. SARAI ASSISTS GOD

Genesis 16

Background: Abraham was now 85 and Sarai was 75 years old. Throughout their half-century marriage, Sarai had no competitors. She and her husband had accepted their childlessness from the Lord. Sarai might have just begun experiencing menopause, and she couldn’t believe she would have children anymore. (Menopause might have occurred later at a time when people lived twice as long as they do now.) The Lord had just assured Abram that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Verses 1-2. Hagar was apparently given as a gift from Pharaoh. Her age could have been 20-25 years. There was a significant age difference between her and Abraham.

- Imagine what Hagar's childhood and youth were like as a slave in Pharaoh's Egypt.
- Hagar's parents were probably left in Egypt; perhaps they were slaves as well. How might it have felt for Hagar to be separated from her family and homeland?
- Originally, Hagar worshipped Egyptian gods and idols. How might Abraham's family's worship at the altars of sacrifice have influenced her? (What might have surprised her in those rituals?)
- Consider why Sarai chose this particular slave girl from among dozens of slaves; what qualities might have made her suitable for bearing Abraham's child?
- What dreams might Hagar have had about her marriage before Sarai's proposal?

- Surely Sarai had heard of her husband the promise that was mentioned in the previous chapter. What did she think about it?
- What do you think about Sarai's decision – how can it be defended, and in what way is it difficult to understand?
- What might the Lord have expected Sarai to do in this situation?
- In your opinion, how did Abram handle his responsibility as the head of the family in this situation?

Verses 3-4

- Consider the feelings and relationships of these three people after Abram had a sexual relationship with his maidservant. What was most challenging for each of them?
- Were Abram's feelings involved? What about Hagar's?
- What do you think are the chances of success in a polyamorous or “open” marriage, where there can be more than one spouse or sexual partner?

Verses 5-6

- What do you think about Sarai's outburst in verse 5?
- Look at Abraham's response to his wife in verse 6. What can we see about his relationship with these two women and the unborn child?
- What kind of chastening might have caused pregnant Hagar to flee into the desert? (What might have been Hagar's sin that led Sarai to treat her harshly?)
- How might Hagar have thought she and her child would survive when she fled from Abraham's camp?
- What do you think Abraham and Sarai were thinking during the time Hagar was away from the camp?

Verses 7-9

The way to Shur led through the Negev toward Egypt. We don't know how far Hagar had already walked along it.

- Why did Hagar only answer the angel's first question?
- Why didn't the angel set Hagar free from slavery but instead told her to return and accept her situation? (What good things resulted for Hagar and her child by returning to Abraham's camp?)
- Why does the Lord lead His people into situations where they must humble themselves and accept their lot? (What have you learned from such situations?)

Verses 10-11. Ishmael became forefather to 12 tribes, just like Jacob. His name means “God hears”.

- Why did the Lord want to make a great nation out of Ishmael?
- How is it evident that Hagar no longer believed in the Egyptian gods?
- What does it mean for a suffering person to realize that someone has heard their cry?
- What did Ishmael's name mean to his mother for all the years to come?

Verse 12

- What do you think Hagar thought when she heard the prophecy about her son?
- Ishmael became the forefather of the Arabs. What does verse 12 reveal about their mentality?

Verses 13-14. Hagar believed herself to be completely alone during her flight.

- What do you think of the name Hagar gave to Abram's God?
- What change occurred in Hagar's relationship with God during her flight?

- How do we see that God loved Hagar and her son?
- Do you think Sarai continued to mistreat Hagar when she returned to the camp? Explain your opinion.

Verses 15-16. Hagar told Abram what had happened in the desert and what name their child was to be given.

- What do you think Abram might have thought about God's promise after hearing Hagar's story? Look again at the Lord's words to Hagar in verse 10.
- Certainly, Abram was emotionally attached to his son. What might Hagar's relationship with Sarai have been like after the child was born? (Why didn't Ishmael become Sarai's adoptive son, compare to verse 2?)

Concluding questions:

- Sarai ultimately regretted the whole episode with Hagar. Reflecting on this chapter, what should a person do when one sees the consequences from their wrong choices?
- How can God turn even the consequences of our wrong choices and sins into something good for us?

Finally: God has heard your cries too. He has seen all the harm done to you, but also the harm you have done to others. For this very reason, he wants to send his angels to show you the way you must walk. You will have to humble yourself and confront your sins, but at the same time, God's grace in Christ will become even more precious to you.

17. THE COVENANT AND THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT

Genesis 17

Background: We discussed the concept of a covenant first with Noah. The Noahic covenant was established between God and all of creation, and its sign was the rainbow. Now the Lord enters into a covenant with Abraham and the nation that will come from him.

Preliminary question

- Why has the term «covenant» lost its meaning in Western cultures?

Verses 1-5. Thirteen years have passed since the birth of Ishmael (compare to verse 25).

- Why does God want to be in a covenant with people? Why isn't a «free relationship» sufficient?
- Look at the footnotes for the meanings of the names and consider why Abram's name was changed to Abraham at this point.

Verses 6-8. Note that Abraham is not only the forefather to the Jews but also to Christians.

- Compare these promises with the promise God gave to Abraham when speaking to him about the covenant previously. See 15:18. What new things does God promise him here?
- The Lord speaks of several nations that would be descendants of Abraham. What is he referring to with these nations?
- In what ways have these promises of God been fulfilled in the history of Jews and Christians?
- Abraham's descendants were promised the land of Canaan as an everlasting inheritance. What is the land promised as an eternal inheritance for Christians?
- God promises twice that his covenant will continue with Abraham's descendants (7b, 8b). What did this promise mean for Abraham and what does it mean for Christian parents?

Verses 9-14

- God's faithfulness in the covenant was shown so that he kept his promises. How was the faithfulness of the people supposed to be demonstrated?
- What is the biggest difference between the sign of Noah's covenant (the rainbow) and the sign of Abraham's covenant (circumcision)?
- What might have happened to Israel over the centuries if there hadn't been such a sign for the covenant?
- What does it indicate that boys were circumcised at such a young age? Why weren't they allowed to grow up and decide for themselves whether they wanted circumcision or not?
- What do you think about the fact that women weren't marked in any special way as members of the covenant?
- What does verse 14 indicate about this covenant?
- What do you think about the fact that in our European country, many people would like to prohibit male circumcision for Jews and Muslims?
- Baptism is called a covenant in the New Testament, based on Jesus Christ's resurrection, and its sign is water. What does it mean to you that you are in a covenant relationship with the Almighty God?

Verses 15-16. Sarah was now 89 years old. For the last 13 years, she had observed Ishmael's growth and her husband's relationship with the boy and his mother.

- What might these years have been like for Sarah? (What did she now think about God's promise?)
- What might Abraham's relationship with Hagar have been like during these years; no other children had been born?
- What does the name «princess» tell us about Sarah? (Why such a royal name?)
- What do you think childless Sarah thought when she heard her new name?
- What does verse 16 tell us about the woman's role in God's plan? (Why was it relevant who was the mother of the promised child?)

Verses 17-18

- What did Abraham think now about the promise of the Lord, which he had waited for so long to be fulfilled?
- Why didn't the Lord ask Abraham the same question he later asked Sarah: «Why did you laugh?»
- If God measured blessings for his children only according to their faith, how would things have turned out for Abraham at this point?
- Once again: how can Paul claim that Abraham did not weaken in faith or doubt God's promise in unbelief, even though he knew that their childbearing years were over? (Romans 4:19-21)
- What is the difference between disbelief and doubt?

Verses 19-22

- What was the difference between the promises God gave to Isaac and Ishmael?
- God promised to bless Ishmael, too. How does this appear in the history of his descendants, i.e. the Arabs?
- Why did God want to announce the birth of Isaac a year before it happened?
- In what way had God met Abraham this time (22)?

Verses 23-27. We remember that Abraham had 318 trained men in his camp a few years earlier. Now there could have been even more.

- What does it show that Abraham circumcised all the men in the camp already on the same day?
- The leader reads Romans 4:11. How does Paul justify that circumcision is not a matter of salvation?
- On his last evening, Jesus established a new covenant with his disciples: *And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, «This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.» And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, «This cup that is poured out for you is **the new covenant in my blood.**»* (Luke 22:19-20) Compare the old covenant with the new covenant.

Finally: Around the time of Jesus' birth, the priest Zechariah said: *«Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember **his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham...**»* (Luke 1:68-73)

Zechariah saw that Jesus' coming to this world meant the fulfillment of the covenant God had made with Abraham. That covenant is still valid. Its other party now includes the Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus and are baptized in his name.

18. ABRAHAM AS A PRAYER INTERCESSOR

Genesis 18

Background: This took place in the same year when Abraham received a new promise of a child's birth (compare to 18:21). Now Sarah also had the chance to encounter the Lord and hear that she would indeed become the mother of the promised child – at the age of 90. Abraham's household had settled in the oak grove of Mamre near Hebron.

Verses 1-5. Note that Middle Eastern men never run, especially not during the hottest time of the day.

- What was unique about the Lord's appearance this time?
- The Letter to the Hebrews refers to this visit by saying: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* (13:2). Did Abraham know at this point who the visitors were, or did he perhaps treat all passersby this way? Give reasons for your opinion.
- Jesus explained how we can also host him as a guest: by receiving the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, or imprisoned, we are actually receiving him (Matthew 25). What do you think of these words?

Verses 6-8. A seah is about 12 liters.

- Why was Abraham in such a hurry?
- Observe closely what was offered to the visitors. How long did it probably take to prepare the meal?
- Why did Abraham want to personally serve these visitors? Why weren't the servants or Sarah suitable for this task?

Verses 9-12

- Which of these two options do you find more probable: a) Abraham had told Sarah about the promise God had made him about the child during their previous encounter (27:15-16), but she hadn't believed him. b) Abraham hadn't told Sarah about the promise concerning her.
- If Abraham hadn't told his wife about God's promise, why do you think he hadn't?

Verses 13-15

- How did the visitors know who had laughed?

- Whom did Sarah laugh at? What does her laughter and the white lie reveal about her faith?
- What was Sarah afraid of when she claimed not to have laughed?
- Apply this verse to your own life: *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* (14a). What does God want to say to you in your current situation?
- However, the Letter to the Hebrews gives this honorable mention of Sarah: *By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.* (11:11) So, despite everything, what was exemplary about Sarah's faith?
- Sarah **doubted** God's promise. What would she have done if she had been completely **overwhelmed by disbelief**?

Verses 16-21. It becomes clear in the following chapter that Sodom lacked all norms of sexual life. For instance, gang rape was considered acceptable.

- What do these verses reveal to us about the relationship between God and Abraham?
- According to verse 19, what are the responsibilities of a family leader (father)?
- Whose outcry is mentioned in verses 20-21, and what was the content of the outcry?
- Think about what kind of outcry and from whom, rises from your country to the heavens when your nation has now forsaken God's commandments? (Who suffers the most from the absence of sexual norms?)

Verses 22-33. Remember that Abraham had become acquainted with the people of Sodom when he rescued them from captivity (chapter 14).

- Based on these verses, consider what Abraham thought about Sodom and its corrupt inhabitants. (If Abraham had wanted to save only the righteous from destruction, how would he have prayed?)
- What did Abraham believe about God when he started bargaining with him (25, 30, 32)?
- Think about why Abraham ceased his negotiation at ten people.
- What do these verses teach us about prayer? (What things can we pray for as persistently as Abraham did, and what things should we not?)
- As Christians, we are often scorned in our cities and workplaces. However, what is the significance of a few believers for their city and workplace even today?

Finally: Abraham knew that God loves also the people of Sodom because they are his creation. That's why he was so persistent. Jesus confirmed this by saying: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

19. THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM

Genesis 19

Background: This chapter contains the Bible's first reference to **homosexual behavior**. After this, the Bible refers to it as the «sin of Sodom». **Lot** had apparently taken a wife after leaving Ur, and about 25 years had passed since then (see 12:4; 21:5). He had two engaged daughters, who were therefore under twenty. Lot had lived in Sodom for at least 15 years (13:11; 16:3). Sitting at the city gate indicated his membership in the city council. We remember that Abraham had saved the people of Sodom from captivity over a decade earlier. (Other Bible passages about homosexual behavior: Leviticus 18:22-30; Romans 1:26-28; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10.)

Preliminary questions

- What does it show about Lot that he didn't set up an altar for himself at his dwelling place?
 - What does it show about Lot that he engaged his daughters to the men of Sodom?
- Verses 1-3.

- Compare the treatment the visitors received at Abraham's place (in chapter 18) with the treatment they received at Lot's place. What does this treatment reveal about Lot?
- Where were Lot's wife and daughters when Lot was serving his guests? Consider different possibilities.
- Why did the visitors initially plan to spend the night in the open?

Verse 2.

- 2 Peter 2:7: Peter says about Lot: *And if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.* What else should Lot have done instead of just enduring?
- Why didn't Lot leave Sodom?
- How should we respond to the godlessness that the world (especially social media and the media) offers in our time?

Verses 4-5. Here we speak about ALL the men of the city.

- By all indications, how was sex regarded in Sodom?
- What is surprising and horrifying in these verses? (What caused the men of the city to become consumed with lust for Lot's visitors?)
- Imagine the situation of children and young people in a city where sex was approached in this manner.
- What would Sodom's future have been like if it hadn't been destroyed?

Verses 6-8. The fact that the guests had got shelter under Lot's roof obliged the host, according to the mindset of the time, to protect them, even with his own life.

- Consider what would need to happen for a father to make the proposal in verses 7-8. (Did Lot know that his guests were heavenly beings? Justify your opinion.)

Verses 9-11.

- What did the inhabitants of Sodom have against Lot? (Why were they angry with him? Compare to accusations made against believers today.)
- The angels had come to investigate Sodom's situation in person. What had they found out?

Verses 12-17, also verse 29.

- Is Lot's sons-in-law's reaction understandable? Why or why not? (How much do you think they knew about their father-in-law's religion?)
- Why didn't Lot's family flee for their lives immediately but rather procrastinated?
- Consider what was most challenging for Lot's female family members in this situation.
- Why didn't the Lord give up and leave Lot's family in the doomed city? (What do these verses teach us about the influence of believing relatives on the destinies of their households? See verses 16 and 29.)

Read verses 18-22 without commenting on them. These verses explain the existence of the city of Zoar on the shore of the Dead Sea.

Verses 23-26. Lot's wife apparently dropped behind her husband and daughters (verses 23, 26). It's been thought that toxic gases were emitted from the ground crack, which she inhaled. Gradually, she became covered with salt crystals.

- What message do verses 24-25 have for our time? (What does the destruction of Sodom reveal about God's love?)
- Why did Lot's wife look back?

- Jesus said: *Remember Lot's wife.* (Luke 17:32) What is he warning you and me about today? Read verses 27-29 without commenting on them. Abraham stood in the same place when Lot separated from him and moved to Sodom.

Verses 30-38. Note that Lot's daughters' mother and fiancés had just died, as had all their friends. Lot himself had lost his wife and all his property. Look up the meanings of the names Moab and Ammon in the footnotes.

- What did Lot fear when leaving Zoar?
- Why didn't Lot return to Abraham's camp?
- Do you think Lot's daughters would have acted this way if they had been raised in Abraham's camp instead of growing up in Sodom? Justify your answer.
- Why did Lot's life go so wrong; what was his worst mistake?
- Why do you think this case of incest is written in the Bible?

Concluding Questions

- There are many Christian homosexuals in the world who want to obey God's word and live in celibacy. Think about how we in our churches could support them in their struggle.

Finally: Jesus was not a homophobe, as we can see from his words: *And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.* (Matthew 11:23-24). If only Lot had proclaimed God's word in his city, so that its inhabitants could have had the opportunity to see their sins, believe in the Lord's mercy, and be saved!

20. THE BIRTH OF THE PROMISED CHILD

Genesis 21

Background: 25 years had passed since the promise was given, when it finally came true. The Lord himself determined the name that would be given to this child. In that culture, the son of the main wife, not one of a concubine, was considered firstborn.

Verses 1-7

- What challenges might have been involved in Sarah's pregnancy and childbirth at an advanced age?
- According to verses 3 and 6, what was the significance of Isaac's name (which means «he laughs»)? Read verse 6 in two translations (for example ESV and NIV).
- What do the words about Sarah in verse 7 convey?
- What do you think was most delightful for Abraham and Sarah as they witnessed little Isaac's growth and development? (Did they worry and fuss over their child more than younger parents?)
- What if Abraham and Sarah had had a child immediately after getting married? What might they have missed learning?
- What would you think if you had to wait a quarter of a century for God's promise to be fulfilled?

Verses 8-13. Ishmael was 13 years old, when Isaac was born. Weaning a baby happened in the age of 3-4 years, and that time Ishmael was 16-17 years old. Deportation from home meant also losing his whole inheritance. Some kind of inheritance would belong to concubine's son, too.

- How might the relationship between Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, and Hagar have changed after Isaac's birth?

- Consider what made Ishmael laugh or mock at his younger brother's weaning feast.
- What do you think about Sarah's command in verse 10?
- Why did God make the woman the mediator of his will in this situation (verses 11-13)?
- What might have caused Abraham the most anguish in this situation?
- Paul quotes Sarah's words from verse 10 in Galatians 4:30. He applies them meaning that the son of the slave woman refers to those under the law, and the son of the free woman refers to those born through faith. Those striving for salvation through the law are driven away from God's kingdom and are left without an inheritance in the new creation. Who could be those that are under the law in our time?

Verses 14-16. Locate Beersheba on the map. The wilderness of Beersheba refers to the northern part of Negev.

- What does it show about Abraham that he took action already early in the morning? (What would have happened if Abraham had refused to obey the Lord in this matter?)
- What do you think Abraham might have said to his son when he sent him away from home without money, with only bread and a skin of water?
- What might Hagar have thought about the couple of decades she had lived in Abraham's camp?
- Imagine the emotions of the mother in the situation described in verses 15 and 16. What was the worst part?
- What might Hagar's relationship with God have been like at this point? How about Ishmael's?

Verses 17-19. This is the second conversation Hagar has with the angel of God. The distance of a bowshot is estimated to be 20-60 meters.

- Verse 17 contains a wordplay, as Ishmael's name means «God has heard». What did the angel's words mean to Hagar and her faith?
- Apply verse 17 to your own children, especially to the one you worry about the most. What does it say to you in this context?
- Why do you think Hagar didn't immediately notice the nearby well?

Verses 20-21. The wilderness of Paran is located in the central part of Sinai. See the map. Ishmael had twelve sons, and he is considered the forefather of the Arabs (25:12-18). The Ishmaelites were identified by their golden nose rings, they were skilled camel breeders, and their caravans traded between Egypt and Canaan.

- Imagine Ishmael's life from this point onward, first with his mother, then with an Egyptian wife and a growing number of children.
- What does it mean that God was with Ishmael?
- Hagar apparently never remarried. What do you think about this woman's fate? (What were the good sides to it? And the bad?)

Verses 22-24. Abimelech is one of the kings who took Sarah into their court, thinking she was Abraham's sister.

- Why did king Abimelech insist on making a covenant with Abraham?
- What aspects of Abraham's character and life might have impressed the original inhabitants of Canaan despite his mistakes and fails (also see 20:15)?

Verses 25-34. Beersheba means «well of the seven» or «well of the oath». During the kingdom period, it was the southernmost city of Israel and Judah. Apparently, the person who dug the well also owned it.

- Consider how wells, several meters deep, were dug in that time and what was the significance of wells in a nomadic culture.
- What is the significance of Abraham's planting of a tamarisk tree and his prayer in this context?

Finally: We meet Ishmael once more, burying his father alongside Isaac. The connection between the brothers wasn't completely severed. When Jesus said: *Make disciples of all nations*, he also meant the descendants of Ishmael. He died on the cross for them too.