

• Sarai

The person for whom one sympathizes the most in the Book of Genesis is Sarai. God had been dealing mainly with Abraham. Initially Abraham and Sarai must have assumed that the child would come through them both, but there was no special word for Sarai.

**1. God shows mercy to Sarai**

• God is sovereign

1. **God shows mercy to Sarai.** Most of us have at some time been in a situation where everybody else seems to be being blessed by God but not us! Maybe God is working in a very distinctive way and there are certain manifestations of His presence but we seem to have been passed by. This is what was happening to Sarai. Everything seemed to be happening to Abraham and nothing was happening to her.

• All hope of ever having a child lost

God is totally sovereign in the way He gives His promises and in the way He deals with people in great variety. For over twenty years God gave promises to Abraham but none to Sarai!

After a few years Abraham started talking about adopting a son! He was beginning to believe that Sarai never would have any child and was thinking about adopting Eliezar, his manservant, as his son <sup>□1</sup>. Some years later Sarai had lost all hope of ever having the child that was promised and it was her idea that Abraham should get a child through Hagar <sup>□2</sup>.

• God calls Abraham to higher levels of obedience and enlarges the promise

Abraham was ninety-nine years old <sup>□1</sup>, and Sarai was eighty-nine <sup>□2</sup>. God appeared to Abraham and called him to high levels of obedience <sup>□3</sup>. Abraham responded with gratitude and awe <sup>□4</sup> and then God enlarged the promise. God's promises were renewed. The seed of Abraham would become a multitude of nations <sup>□5</sup>. Abraham would be given the ability to be the father of the seed <sup>□6</sup>. A new fruitfulness would come even into his body <sup>□7</sup>. Kings would be among Abraham's descendants and the promised blessings would go on for ever <sup>□8</sup>. All the land of Canaan would be given to his descendants <sup>□9</sup>. Then God called Abraham to make sure that the sign of the covenant, circumcision, was carried out for every man in Abraham's community <sup>□10</sup>.

• A new name for Sarai – Sarah – 'princess'

Now there comes a further message for Abraham and now at long, long last it has a word of promise for Sarai <sup>□1</sup>! God not only has a new name for Abraham. He has a new name for Sarai as well; from now on she will be not Sarai but Sarah. The names are two different forms of a word meaning 'Princess'. It is as though God were saying 'Now she really will be a Princess'!

• Sarah – totally forgiven receives a miracle

God is sovereign in the way He works and He never promises to deal with everyone alike. Yet when God 'neglects' a person for a while, His blessing when it comes is all the greater. Actually, Sarah received a far greater miracle in her life than Abraham. It is not so miraculous for a hundred-year-old man to conceive a son, but who ever heard of a ninety-year-old woman having a baby! God kept Sarah waiting but when at last He did something unusual for her it was greater than anything Abraham or Hagar or anyone else had ever heard about. God worked sovereignly and mercifully in Sarah's life as well as in Abraham's. He totally forgave her foolishness and impatience in offering her maid to Abraham, and despite all her mistakes the promise came to her as well as to Abraham.

**2. God shows mercy to Abraham**

• Worship and laughter

2. **God shows mercy to Abraham.** Despite his serious unbelief in going to Hagar, God had mercy on him. The lengthy silence that Abraham had to endure was a sign of God's displeasure, but all is forgiven, and God picks up with Abraham again.

Abraham responds with worship and with laughter <sup>□1</sup>. He falls on his face in admiration and worship at the amazing ways of God. He is laughing with joy and astonishment. He is lifted up with glorious and triumphant happiness. After a lifetime of waiting at last the promise is about to be fulfilled.

• Abraham not quite ready for

Yet Abraham is not completely ready for such a sudden answer to his hopes. He had got used to things being as they were, for he had still been entertaining the

□1 15:2  
□2 16:2

□1 17:1  
□2 17:17  
□3 17:1-2  
□4 17:1-2  
□5 17:4  
□6 17:5  
□7 17:6  
□8 17:6-7  
□9 17:8  
□10 17:9-14

□1 17:15-16

□1 17:17

□1 17:18

*the promise to come through Sarah*

idea that Ishmael would be the fulfilment of God's promises. So when a son for Sarah is promised, Abraham says 'O that Ishmael might live before you!' <sup>¶1</sup>. Abraham has got so used to thinking of Ishmael as 'the seed', that he is not quite ready for the promise to come through Sarah. He has got into the habit of being content with something less than what God intended. He is not rejecting God's promise of a son for Sarah yet in his confusion he wants Ishmael to be 'the seed' as well.

• *Two answers – I mean what I say*

God gives two answers. The first is 'I mean what I say.'<sup>1</sup> Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac ("He laughs"). I will establish my covenant with him...' <sup>¶1</sup>. Despite all the wanderings and ups-and-downs in Abraham's life God plans to bless him. Isaac will soon be born. God is still offering to 'establish' the covenant through him <sup>¶2</sup>. The second answer concerns Ishmael. Abraham has become fond of Ishmael and all his hopes have been wrapped up in him. He has been Abraham's only son for more than thirteen years. Is Ishmael to be rejected? It is a question to which we shall return (see Genesis 25:12–18, and the last chapter of this book) but God gives an answer straightaway. Ishmael will be blessed by God but will not be in the line leading to Jesus, the seed of Abraham <sup>¶3</sup>. The covenant will be established through Isaac <sup>¶4</sup>.

• *God's mercy blessing to Ishmael's Arab descendents when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in*

God shows such mercy to Abraham and partially gives Abraham his wishes. He has a future for Ishmael. Although Abraham's folly in turning to Hagar is not going to make God change His mind about Isaac, yet God plans to 'work all things together for good'. Genesis 17:18 will be answered more than in our wildest dreams. The people of Ishmael still exist. The modern Arab nations are their descendants. Not only does the nation of Israel still exist, the people of Ishmael still exist as well! If God has ultimate plans to save 'all Israel' <sup>¶1</sup>, surely God has plans that 'Ishmael might live' as well! If Israel will be blessed 'beloved for the sake of their ancestors' <sup>¶2</sup>, surely the Arab peoples will be blessed as well, beloved for the sake of Abraham who prayed for them. The amazing mercy of God to Abraham will be seen to have a greater fulfilment than ever. When the 'fullness of the Gentiles' comes in <sup>¶3</sup>, the people of Ishmael will be there also.

• *God is sovereign and God is gracious*

The revelation comes to an end <sup>¶1</sup> and Abraham carries out the instruction concerning circumcision for the household <sup>¶2</sup> and for Ishmael <sup>¶3</sup>. The chapter closes with a note concerning his thorough obedience in the matter <sup>¶4</sup>. It is a chapter in which God's sovereignty and grace stand out. He is capable of working all things together for good. He can bless us after long delay and shattered hopes. He can overrule our follies and our stupidities. 'God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that He may be merciful to all' <sup>¶5</sup>.

**Footnote**

1 The Hebrew word used here is translated 'Yes' by the New International Version (NIV), and 'No' by the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)! The sense is 'I mean what I say!'

¶1 17:19  
 ¶2 17:19  
 ¶3 17:20  
 ¶4 17:21

¶1 Romans 11:25–26  
 ¶2 Romans 11:28  
 ¶3 Romans 11:12

¶1 17:22  
 ¶2 17:23  
 ¶3 17:24-25  
 ¶4 17:26-27  
 ¶5 Romans 11:32



Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisko Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



*These specially reformatted chapters "Slices of Bread" produced by Sovereign World Trust are available in three categories as set out below*

Slices for the Nations	Slices for Sponsors	Slices for Everyone / Slice of the Week
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For pastors, libraries and colleges in those parts of the world <b>where resources are scarce and unaffordable</b></li> <li>In the fullness of time the whole series will be made available <b>free of charge</b></li> <li>Weekly emailings of 3 - 4 Slices or available to download from the <i>Slices</i> web site</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For those in more prosperous circumstances who <b>can afford to contribute to the development</b> of this material and its distribution with a <b>small monthly donation</b></li> <li>The same material as <b>Slices for the Nations</b></li> <li>Weekly emailings of 3 - 4 Slices or by download from the <i>Slices</i> web site</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For those who wish to <b>sample</b> the material or dip into it from time to time, a <b>proportion</b> of the PTTB series is available <b>free of charge</b></li> <li><b>Slices for Everyone</b> (as a download) or <b>Slice of the Week</b> (attached to a weekly email)</li> <li>The remainder of the PTTB material is available to Sponsors and those eligible to receive <b>Slices for the Nations</b></li> </ul>

To subscribe please contact: [slicesofbread@sovereignworldtrust.org.uk](mailto:slicesofbread@sovereignworldtrust.org.uk) stating which category fits your situation. Further details are at [www.slices.org.uk](http://www.slices.org.uk)  
 Details of the availability of *Preaching Through The Bible* books and how they may be purchased can be found on [www.ibtr.org.uk](http://www.ibtr.org.uk)