

GENESIS—WEEK 13

WAKEUP CALLS



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Hagar Leaves the House of Abraham
by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) On display at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg*

This section is packed with action. It starts with the Angel of the LORD appearing to Hagar, and Abram naming her son just as the Angel had commanded. Then God changes Abram's name to Abraham, tells him he'll have a son by Sarai (now Sarah), and institutes the covenant of circumcision.

Then three men just pop up at Abraham's tent, and he knows he's hosting God almighty.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

Genesis 16:7–18:8 — Wakeup Calls

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1 Genesis 16:7–16 (ESV)

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

The Bible doesn’t tell us how Sarai treated Hagar after she returned, but we have one clue. Abram named the child Ishmael—the name the Angel told to Hagar.

Obviously, Abram got the name from Hagar. She must have told him about her encounter with the Angel of the LORD. Hagar would have to have told the whole story anyway, to explain why she returned.

Imagine the shock this must have been to Abram and Sarai. This lowly servant girl describes a direct encounter with the angel of the LORD. Ding! They had forgotten about God’s guiding hand in all this.

But this clue tells us something else; Abram named the child. That means Abram sees the child as his. This gives Hagar some status as Ishmael’s mother.

Unfortunately, this status will disappear (will even turn negative) when Isaac is born.

Even the father of the faith needed wake-up calls to remind him that God is always running the show. We should strive to not need them, but we shouldn’t get discouraged when we do.

In fact, being frustrated by our own failures is one of the key characteristics of a Christian. Sanctification is a never-ending growth process, and frustration is essential to that growth. When we claim Jesus as Lord, we get a new standard of excellence. Our ability to meet that new standard doesn’t jump instantly, and that gives us fits.

Then our understanding of the new standard keeps growing faster than our ability to meet it. So, it feels like we’re moving backwards.

Praise God for this system! Sure, it’s painful, but it works marvelously. To God be the glory.

2 Genesis 17:1–8 (ESV)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

God changing Abram’s name to Abraham sets an important precedent. This is a powerful portrait of covenantal rebirth. Incremental change is nice, but radical transformation is God’s fingerprint move.

Remember, the purpose of everything is God’s glory. So, what kind of change glorifies Him most?

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. — Romans 12:2 (ESV)

Obviously, confessing Christ as Lord produces radical transformation, but is that a one-time event or can there be many such transformations?

Romans 12:2 implies that multiple transformations are not only possible, they’re the norm. But how can we obey its command? The answer is in the context.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. — Romans 12:1–2 (ESV)

We are to sacrifice all in the service of Christ. This *spiritual worship* is not in conformity to this world. Rather, it leads to transformative renewal of our minds, *that by testing you may discern what is the will of God*.

The ending is confusing at first, but remember that sacrifice is a test. Enduring trials is eye-opening. Those trials, along with our prayers and everything else that accompanies trials, often reveal God’s will.

The great irony here is that sacrificing all for Christ is the normal prescription for incremental change, yet it often produces transformative change. So, “How can we obey Romans 12:2?”

By doing the usual Christian things.

Transformative change is the norm.

3 Genesis 17:9–21 (ESV)

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

In this latest episode of “Dumb and Dumber”, God grants Abraham his heart’s desire and Abraham laughs at Him. Then Abraham starts a mocking argument. Wow. How is this even possible?

Even though this is great news, and even though it’s God Himself who is delivering it, Abraham just can’t accept it. So, instead of jumping for joy, he argues the details. Is something wrong with Abraham?

Yes, something complicated. Red Barber, the legendary sports writer and announcer, once declined to make a Super Bowl prediction saying, “I don’t make predictions because I’ve learned that you don’t just see with your eyes.” His point was that if he made a prediction, it would distort his vision. He would subconsciously “root for” whatever he had predicted, and thus wouldn’t be able to see without bias.

Abraham’s problem is that he and Sarah sunk everything into their plan to obtain an heir through Hagar. God’s plan to have Sarah bear the heir turns the whole thing on its head and mocks their hare-brained scheme. Abraham isn’t mature enough to just say, “Gee, I guess we were wrong.”

The great thing about Christianity is that we can admit when we’re wrong because we’ve stopped pretending we’re perfect (or even okay). Well, at least that’s the doctrine we’ve been taught. But old habits die hard, and admitting our errors takes some getting used to.

We need help with this. Ask God to make us comfortable with our mistakes so we can learn from them.

4 Genesis 17:22–27 ESV)

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

There are two words in this passage that just come flying off the page: “every” and “bought.” Abraham circumcised *every male*, even himself and even *those bought with money from a foreigner*. The covenant is for everyone in Abraham’s household, without regard to race or station. Even foreign slaves are included.

And the context makes this even stronger.

“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” — Genesis 17:14 (ESV)

So, for a slave, *bought with money from a foreigner*, who are *his people*? Is an uncircumcised Egyptian cut off from the Egyptian people?

Of course not. “His people” has to mean the people of the covenant.

This is the opposite of racism, and it’s amazingly early in human history for something like this to occur.

Abraham is generally believed to have lived in the Bronze Age.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronze_Age

Nevertheless, a Stone Age tool was used for circumcision. *At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.” So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth.* —Joshua 5:2-3 (ESV)

Whether Stone Age or Bronze Age, this was at the dawn of recorded history. From the very beginning, God’s covenant sign was not ethnically limited.

Of course, this concept will come into full bloom in the New Testament, where all nations become fully blessed through Abraham. But here the Old Testament is just getting started, and already we see God hinting at where this is headed.

He will make this clearer and more specific soon.

“and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,” — Genesis 22:18a (ESV)

5 Genesis 18:1–8 (ESV)

And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.” And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

This isn't just any three guys. One of them is the LORD himself. Abraham recognizes this instantly. The Hebrew word he uses when he says, “O Lord . . .” is reserved for God Himself. But how does he know?

The key is in the words, “He lifted up his eyes.” The three men aren't walking up from afar; they're *standing in front of him*. They just popped up out of nowhere. That's why the text says, “*behold.*”

At this point, Abraham has no idea why they're there, but he jumps into hyper-hospitality mode.

He's almost frantic to be a good host.

This is a good lesson for us all. We've all experienced those rare moments when we can't tell what God is up to, but we know He's up to something. It is then that we, like Abraham, need to focus.

Wake-up calls are a big part of how God uses us. We tend to think of a wake-up-call from God as the moment when a non-believer first encounters God. But God calls believers in much the same way. Our challenge is to respond well.

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” — Isaiah 6:8 (ESV)

Unfortunately, my attitude is more like, “I'm busy right now, but pretty soon you can send me.” I'm not ready just yet.

The problem is that God doesn't call people to win the lottery; He calls them to dramatic change and sacrifice. Few of us are ready for that kind of action—especially without knowing exactly what it is.

When you are ready, you won't have to ask God to call you. All you have to do is pray, “Okay, I'm ready. Send me.”

He'll do the rest.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Are you frustrated by your slow growth in Christ?
2. How can we, in our “safe” culture, present our bodies as living sacrifices?
3. Recall a case where your (or someone else’s) failure to admit error was costly.
4. Does modern Christianity have a “holier than thou” problem (looking down on others)?
5. Have you ever had an “Okay, I’m ready” moment where you stepped out in faith to do something you were afraid of?