



Sermon – 01/23/2023
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered

Genesis 17:15 – 8:15

Matthew 25:34 – 40

Matthew 19:26

Let me invite you to open your Bibles with me to Genesis chapter 17. As we think about what it looks just like to stand for life on this Sanctity of Life Sunday. And while you're turning there, I just want to say a special word of greeting to our DiscipleNow students. Aren't y'all amazed that they invested the whole weekend to grow in the Gospel? Let's let them know how excited you are that they're with us. And we're also pumped to have our college students back with us as well. And if you don't know, our College Gathering takes place right after this, right out these doors in our Family Life Center starting at 11 o'clock. We want to invite you into that space. And one of the most important moments in American history happened 50 years ago today. Do you know what it was? 50 years ago today was the Supreme Court decision Roe versus Wade that gave a legalized right to abortion on demand in our country. And over the last 50 years since that ruling was made over 60 million lives have been taken. Just put that in perspective, that's more than double the population of the entire state of Texas. And by God's grace, this is the first time we are gathering for our annual recognition of Sanctity of Life Sunday since the reversal of that decision last year by the Supreme Court in the Dobbs case and praise God for that. We're grateful for that reality. But what I want us to come face to face with today is we turn our hearts to Genesis 17 is the fact that just because a unjust court ruling has been overturned, that is not the finish line for us. It's just the start of a new chapter. A start of a next step. We're a church here that's committed to the recognition that every person is made in the image of God. Worthy of dignity and respect, love, and care. And that's why we stand up for the unborn. It's the greatest human rights issue of our day. And this morning as we turn our hearts to Genesis 17, I'm fanned into flame anew after I've just returned back from Washington DC. You'll notice a picture on the screen. I was able to take a small group of church members up to Washington DC for some pro-life meetings. We had hoped to take an even bigger group but it didn't work out for this year and perhaps we'll get to do it again. But there we were right in front of the Capitol Building. After a tour, we got to spend days meeting with pro-life leaders from around the country. We got to walk in the annual March for Life and we got to stand for the truth that we're going to come face to face with right now in this text.

So, follow along with me beginning in verse 15 of Genesis 17 as we ask the question, what does it look like to stand for life? Here's what Moses says to us.

¹⁵And God said to Abraham, as for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of people shall come from her.” ¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Shall Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child?” ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” ¹⁹God 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. ²⁰And 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. ²¹But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah bear to you at this time next year.” ²²When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. ²³Then 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 the foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. ²⁴Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵And Ishmael his son was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. ²⁷And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with them.

Will you pray with me?

Father, as we come face to face with Your word, we're praying now, God, that we would come face to face with You by Your Spirit. That You would show us Your heart for the lost, that You would show us Your heart for the least of these, that You would show us Your heart for life in a way that might call us and equip us to walk even more faithfully as light in this dark world all around us. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

When I was a student here at A&M, there's another student that started about the same time as I did. And she had to pick up a day job in order to help pay the bills and put herself through college. And she started out working at the front desk. And she was working there for several months until one day, they were short staffed in the back and they needed some additional help. And so, they asked her to set down her job there and come back to help in this office building on East 29th Street. You see, she worked at the old Planned Parenthood Center right here in Bryan. And she was normally the front desk worker but they were short staffed. And so they brought her back to be the one that held the wand for the ultrasound so that the doctor could see into the womb for the procedure he was about to perform. And she walked into that operating room that day pro-choice, supporting a woman's right to choose. Comfortable with everything that was taking place there. But as she helped, as she watched, as she got a window into that womb, something changed in her heart. She saw what was taking place. She saw the life that was ended. And this woman who walked into work that day at an abortion clinic as a pro-choice champion walked out of that clinic quitting her job as a pro-life champion. God is in the business of changing hearts. He changed the heart of this woman nearly 20 years ago named Abby Johnson. And since then, she has been a force for the pro-life movement. She spent years coming right out of our community raising up

and investing in others who have come out of the abortion industry and seen the light to recognize the need to stand for life. And the heart behind that in a broken culture like ours is that the only hope we have to stand for life is a recognition that we follow a God who can change people's hearts. It's what we see taking place right here in Genesis 17.

To pick back up in the story since we've been away from Genesis for a period of time. We know that this is the part of the story telling us the narrative of Abraham. That he's been called by God. He's received a covenant from God. And then right before this in Genesis 17, he's confirming that covenant through a sign. A sign of circumcision. And as God visits him in this moment, he is speaking a word of truth, a word of hope, and a word of life. What we're going to notice as we work our way through this passage this morning is that the story of Abraham teaches us three lessons about what it looks to stand for life in a hostile culture all around us. And you'll notice the first one back in verse 17 in the portion of the past we've already read, that we're called to stand for life based on the promise of God. Because right here, beginning in verse 15, we start to see the promise that seemed so distant, so far off, begin to grow flesh. To seem as if it's becoming real, that it's about to take place. He tells Abraham there that in this moment that there is going to be a child to come. And that promise of life prompts Abraham to respond in faithful commitment. The promise of life causes him to stand for life. And so notice how that plays out. You see that when he receives his promise of life, it gives him a new hope. It's what you'll find back in verse 15 when God gives his wife Sarah a new name. Do you see it there at the end of verse 15? It says, her name, and Sarah shall be her name. And in the original language, Sarah means princess. And we see why that is at the end of verse 16 when it tells us, I will bless her and she shall become nations. Kings of people shall come to her. In other words, it's pointing to the royal offspring that will come through this line that ultimately culminates in Jesus Christ. Any of you have ever been to a gender-reveal party before? Yeah, I've been to a handful of those. I don't care a whole lot for 'em. But what I do love is watching gender-revealed party failure videos. Have you all ever seen some of these? Where they try to do something amazing? They go bad. Like there was one I saw. They had the reveal in helium balloons and the father accidentally let go of them and they floated away and you couldn't even see what happened. Well, there's another one where they had made this ball and inside was going to explode on contact. And inside it had the dust to indicate if it was boy or girl. And so this guy's got his baseball bat and he's ready to crank it out of the park. She soft tosses a pitch. He winds up for the swing and totally whiffs. It falls to the ground and it splats open there. It's a boy. And hopefully he can hit than that guy can. But right here in Genesis 17, we have the first gender reveal in recorded history. Because it says to him, you will have a son. There is a promise of life. And when Abraham hears the news, he responds with laughter of delight. He responds falling down in worship at God's feet. There is a sense of amazement that the promise produces. But you'll notice as we go on in verse 18 that the promise of life also produces a new plan. Because when Isaac hears this promise, you'll notice what happens in verse 18. He begins to negotiate with God. Do you see what he says? Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. See, Abraham is wanting to walk by sight and not by faith. He already knows there's a solution in the son he has. You don't need to do anything beyond that, God. He is trying to determine when and how the promises of God are fulfilled in his life. You and I face that same temptation all the time, don't we? Where we try to take God's promises into our own hands to dictate the time and the way that we would feel comfortable with Him meeting those. But God doesn't follow our plans. He gives Abraham a new plan. That Isaac is there to come. That the younger will lead the older. That God will do the unthinkable. And there is still a blessing for Ishmael. In fact, the blessing is very similar to the one given to Isaac. But he is clear that it's not

just any royal son that will do. It is only the one chosen by the promise in this new plan. And look at how Abraham responds. When this, he finally understands that God is going to bring this promise to Isaac. He responds to this promise of life with a new commitment. Right down there in verse 22. You'll see that after God confirms His commitment to Abraham, Abraham confirms his commitment to Him. And he does it by following through on this sign of the covenant. And Abraham at 99 years old and all the men of his household are circumcised. They see the promise of life and they are willing to do whatever it takes to walk in full commitment to it. And the reason for that is this, it's a simple principle we all get. The greater the promise, the greater the commitment. So if I were to just put you all on a spot as an audience in here, as a church gathered and said, "Hey, would any of you be willing to come up here on stage and stand right next to me and sing the song and do the arm motions for the kids song, I'm a Little Teapot." Would anybody be up for it if I offered you \$5 for that? I'm sure some of the DiscipleNow kids would. No doubt about it. Don't get any ideas guys. But what if I told you instead of offering you \$5 to come up here and sing in front of everybody, I offered you \$5 million dollars. Okay, I see a lot more hands going up. Why? Because the greater the reward, the greater the risk you're willing to take. The greater the promise, the greater the commitment you're willing to make. I mean, these men go through something as unthinkable as this act because they are walking in commitment to God's promise to life. And the truth of the matter is that when we follow Jesus, you and I are called to that same reality. To walk in commitment to stand for life. That's why Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow after me." And that has everything to do with the way that we stand for life on this Sanctity of Life Sunday. It's why we open our homes to those in need to adoption and through foster care. There's an amazing couple in our church who are in their seventies who have fostered over 30 children in their lifetime. Maybe some of you are called to that path. But maybe some of you are called just like another set of church members in our community who realize that as this 70-year-old couple gets in declining health, there are times where they need support with those children and there must be special training for you to be a respite for those child, those children and their family. They went through respite training in order to come alongside them to support the work. As a matter of fact, our local pregnancy, our local adoption agency, Aggieland Pregnancy Outreach is telling me that since the reversal of Roe in the Dobbs Decision, they're actually right on the cusp of having a shortage of families in our community that are willing to adopt. Could you imagine right here in Bryan/College Station, a mom willing to take the courageous step to give her son or daughter up for adoption and our pregnancy agency saying, we'd love to help you but we just don't have anybody willing to walk in that level of commitment. We want to stand for life. We need to see the picture that Abraham gives us. That the greater the promise, the greater the commitment.

But the text goes on beginning now in verse 1 with another reality that I want you to notice. It calls us also to stand for life based on the protection of God. So let's pick up with what the text says beginning down in chapter 18 and verse 1.

¹And 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. ²He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold three men were standing in front of him. And when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth ³and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵while 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.”

Now, how many of you know somebody that has one of those ring cameras at the front door of their house? Maybe one of those video cameras where you can see what's going on around you. You can kind of surveil things. Check out who's there before they come up. Well, there was nothing like that in Abraham's time period. And you can imagine this moment where they're in recovery from this very difficult procedure they've just gone through. And all of a sudden, these three unknown men show up. They don't know if they are strangers or dangers. They don't know if there's a risk or if they're seeking help. And what does he do? When he sees these men, he recognizes somehow, supernaturally, it's the Lord and what appears to be two angelic beings. It seems like this passage is in some way a fulfillment of what the New Testament speaks of later in Hebrews 13:2. Do you remember what it says to us there?

²Do not neglect showing hospitality to strangers. For thereby some have entertained angels unaware.

And when they show up, Abraham goes out and seeks them. He offers protection to those he sees that maybe in need. And what happens here is he gives us a glimpse today of what it looks like to be faithful in standing for life. Because the first thing he does is he protects life by seeing the needs of others. So, you'll see back in verse 1. When he recognizes them coming, he responds not with skepticism but in seeing their needs. In verse 2, tells us he welcomes them into the home. Verses 4 and 5 tells us he identifies what they need. It says in verse 4,

⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, ⁵while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves,

There's refreshment, rest, recovery being offered. Now, you men in the church have known, we've been talking for weeks about next weekend's men's retreat. We've got just a few spots left before the deadline happens tomorrow. And what you'll notice here is that when we get together next week, we come together for food, for fellowship, and to seek an encounter with the Lord. And it's as if that's exactly what's happening here with Abraham. It's like an ancient men's retreat. There's food. There's fellowship. And an actual encounter with the Lord. And notice the key reality here in Abraham's life. If there would ever be a time where you could be justified in focusing on yourself, your own needs, your own problems. It's when you're a 99 year old who went through just what he had experienced. But instead of focusing on his needs, he focused on the needs of others. Instead of centering his life on his own problems, he cared for those who were around him. And how much more so should that be true for us in Christ. That God calls us to love, to care, to invest in those around us by seeing their needs.

But you'll see how the text goes on down in verse 6. You see the reality that he doesn't just see the needs of others. He serves the needs of others. You know, there was no such thing as DoorDash back then. He couldn't run to Chick Fil A and grab a nugget tray. He couldn't pick up some pizza rolls from Double Dave. See, instead, turns to his wife and they quickly go in to serve these ones that have showed up who are in need. And we'll see several dimensions of what that service looks like beginning back in verse 6. It shows us how we should serve swiftly. So, it says there

⁶And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes.”

There's a sense of urgency. He moves quickly to action. He serves swiftly. But notice he also serves sacrificially. That's what we find in verse 7 where it says

⁷And Abraham ran to the herd. He took a calf, tender and good and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly.

He doesn't just warm up the leftovers in the microwave. He doesn't just grab the goat that's not very nice and says, “Well, there's strangers will probably never see him again. We'll give him the bad stuff.” No, he takes the young calf. He takes the one who is premier in its quality. He sacrifices from his best in order to serve the needs of others. But he also does this service selflessly. So, notice in verse 8 there where it says

⁸Then 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 he ate.

So, he makes his feast. He does everything to get it all ready and then as they're eating, he doesn't even partake himself. He holds back. He allows them to experience it. That's the essence of being selfless, to put the needs of others ahead of your own desires. If you got a Bible with you, I want you to hold your spot here and turn with me to Matthew 25. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells this parable about the sheep and the goats. And He gives you and I a word this morning that will help Genesis 18 pierce our hearts. Because there maybe be some of you in the room or catching this by video who are looking at the text and saying, well, “Hey, Philip. If God ever shows up in the flesh right in front of me, I'm going to drop everything and serve Him swiftly, sacrificially, and selflessly too.” You're calling me to step up. If I'm in a moment like that, of course, I would. And Jesus has a word to skeptical hearts like yours and mine this morning. Because in Matthew 25, beginning in verse 34, notice what he says.

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

And get this, verse 40.

⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

So what's Jesus saying here? Jesus is saying that you and I today find ourselves in the exact same situation as Abraham all those years ago. That when we serve the least of these, it is as if we are

Abraham standing before God Himself serving the needs of God Himself. Serving the kingdom of God itself. There's this picture that when we pour ourselves out for the sake of the Gospel, for those who are on the margins, for those who are in the deepest need, that we in that act, we're not just serving those made in the image of God. We're serving the one who is the image of God. Just think about that. If that's true, that changes the game for how we stand for life right here in Bryan/College Station. That means when we care for moms in crisis or when we rescue babies that might not have life or we take children and come alongside them when they're in broken homes through foster care or adoption. When we take all of these steps, we're not just serving others; we're serving God. It's one of the reasons I can't wait for a new ministry we're about to launch to help us take a next step to care well for single moms in our community. So, two Wednesday nights from now. Starting on Wednesday nights for the rest of the Spring, we're going to be launching a group called Embrace Grace. I've been friends with the founder of this, Amy Ford, for years. And she's been excited that we're starting this ministry. And the whole heartbeat behind it is we want to come alongside single moms who are pregnant and expecting a child. We want to walk with them through that journey. We're going to take them through a Gospel-centered curriculum that shows the love of Christ and their need of salvation. And in addition to that, we're going to have people in our church who care for them, set them up for success in their efforts to choose life and to raise this child. And you can be a part of that right here in our community. We're going to have some of those leaders right out in the foyer after the service to share with you what that ministry is all about and invite you to take a next step with them. To live out this reality that we see right here in Matthew 25 that's echoing the truth that we see in Genesis 18.

But I want you to notice one final thing with me in this text beginning back in Genesis 18 starting in verse 9. It also shows us that we should stand for life based on the provision of God. We're going to read the passage here and see what happens after Abraham serves those who are in need. It tells us in verse 9,

⁹They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She's in the next tent."
¹⁰The Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will be your wife shall have a son." And Sarah, Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.
¹¹Now, Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" ¹³The lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the Lord?" At the appointed time, I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵But Sarah denied it saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And he said, "No, but you did laugh."

So, back in verse 9, God calls for Sarah. He says, where are you? It's like an echo of when he calls for Adam in the garden. But this time, it's not a question that leads to judgement but one that leads to blessing. And the blessing come again that she will have a son within the next year. This is one of the few occasions in the Bible where a promise of God comes to a woman. And it's a parallel with what we see when the angel of the Lord appears to Mary in Luke chapter 1. Just as He does here with Sarah, He tells her that she will have a miraculous birth. Just as He does here with Sarah, He says that this will be in fulfillment of the promise. And just as He does with Sarah, he tells Mary that what seems like it will be impossible is possible because of the power of God in

her life. Both of them receive an assurance of the promise. So, how does Sarah respond? Well look back there with me at verse 12. She responds with laughter. It says,

¹²So Sarah laughed to herself saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”

This is not the laughter of delight but the laughter of doubt. Do you know how old the oldest woman to give birth in modern history is? The one that I guess would hold the Guinness World Record. She gave birth a few years ago in the country of India at the age of seventy-four. Even crazier than that, it was twins. Can you grandmothers in the room imagine that? 74. It seems unthinkable to the modern mind. And yet it was no less unthinkable in Sarah's day. She's not 74, she's 90. She knows how the biological system of the body works. She knows that she's missed the window for a child. So, of course, she responds to that with a laughter of doubt. There is an uncertainty that's there. But how does God respond to her doubt? You'll see beginning in 13, he doesn't respond with criticism but a question. And what's that question? Verse 13 says,

¹³The lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child now that I am old?’

And get this in verse 14, don't miss it. This question we come face to face with this morning, is anything too hard for the Lord. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Is anything too miraculous? Is anything too great? We know Jesus echoes this type of perspective in Matthew 19:26 when He says,

²⁶With man this is impossible but with God, all things are possible.

You see, we serve a Savior who makes the impossible into a reality. And if that doesn't give us wings when we're standing for life, I don't know what will. There are some of you that are in this room this morning, overwhelmed by the heartbreak of infertility. And we can cling to a promise like this. Is anything too hard for the Lord? And there's some of you that yourselves or those that you love that you know have been waiting for years in a broken adoption system. Waiting to be united with a forever family with a new child. And this reminds us of the reality, is anything too hard for the Lord? When we look around our community and we see broken homes. We see single moms. We see babies in crisis. We see poverty and difficulty. This text confronts us with the question, is anything too hard for the Lord? Unless you and I lose hope, we can look back at our past. We can see the way that by God's power, He closed down that Planned Parenthood Center here in Bryan. Nothing's too hard for the Lord. By God's power, He reversed that decision of Roe versus Wade. Is anything too hard for the Lord? That's why we stand for life. Because we follow a God even more committed to standing for life than us.

But there's a reality in this text that's all of us need to come face to face with and it's this. That some of you may find yourselves this morning just like Sarah. You're trying to fix your problems by doing good things for God instead of actually pursuing God. And God is calling for you this morning. Where are you? And maybe this morning, you find yourself standing at the tent door of your heart listening to the offer of God's promise. And as you listen to it, you find yourself responding in the same way as Sarah; with doubt. You don't know my past. You don't know what I've done. You don't know the sin, the shame, the brokenness that is hidden in my life. Surely,

I'm too much for God. And this text confronts us with the spiritual truth, is anything too hard for God? God is in the business of changing people's lives. He's in the business of tearing out hearts of stone and replacing them with hearts of flesh. He's in the business of ripping off scales from eyes so that blind eyes can see. He's in the business of washing away sin and raising to newness of life. And that offer goes to each one of us. In His Son, He's made a way. He stood in our place. He's paid the penalty we deserved because His desires can overcome our doubts. His Son can welcome us into His family. And we stand here on the Sanctity of Life Sunday, I found myself thinking about Abby Johnson throughout the week as we were at the March for Life. And one of the reasons for that is because Abby Johnson's story was made into a movie called Unplanned. Have any of you seen that movie before? I know our student ministry watched it last year. It tells her story of turning from pro-choice to pro-life. And in the movie, her role is played by an actress named Ashley Bratcher. If you look up at the screen right as I was getting ready to leave town, I was in a picture, I took a picture with a group of ladies that were in the March for Life. And if we can put that picture up there, what you'll notice is the second person from the left and that snow hat there, that's Ashley Bratcher. That's the woman who played the role of Abby Johnson. And maybe some of you this morning who think that you can't make a difference for life in our world. That whatever you do isn't enough, that if you don't earn national recognition, that's not enough. If you don't have a movie made after you, that's not enough. But the call of Genesis 17 and 18 to us this morning to stand for life, is not dependent on us being famous; but us being faithful. Faithful to love. Faithful to care. Faithful to see. Faithful to serve. And faithful to stand for life.

Will you pray with me?

Father, we come to You humbly, recognizing that we are sinners who deserve condemnation. But by Your Son, you have made a way for us to be made right with You. And we recognize the way that You have changed our lives and invited us into Your story of being a part of Your life-changing power, reshaping the destiny of others. And I pray in this moment, God, as we come face to face with Your word that you would use it to refine us, that You would use it to shape us, and that You would use it to make us more like Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.