



Part 38 – A New Name for a Great Promise

Genesis 17:1-8

1. An awesome God

Vv. 1-3

- God is front and center in this chapter. It is God who speaks and reveals himself. It is God who reiterates his covenant pledge. And it is God who commands his servant.

A) God's almighty power

- God speaks by first making a statement of self-identification: "I am El Shaddai" (vs. 1). The word "el" is commonly translated "God." The word "Shaddai" is a bit tricky to translate. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the O.T.) it is rendered "Almighty." Some have challenged that translation preferring instead something closer to "mountain," while others prefer to translate it "blessing." What seems to be a consensus however is that it is a word that emphasizes God's might particularly in contrast to the frailty of man. Before he restates his covenant with Abraham after the passage of some 13 years, God first announces his power which will overcome the frailty of Abraham and Sarai.

B) God's irrevocable will

- Chapter 17 picks up 13 years after the events described in chapter 16. Hagar has returned to Sarai. She has given Abraham a son whom he named Ishmael according to God's command. By the time of the events described in chapter 17 Ishmael would have been reckoned a young man. There is no report of Abraham continuing to long for a son with Sarai. Now that he has a son by Hagar what use could it be to hold on to a dream that cannot possibly come about at this point, Sarai being doubly barren and he being 99 years old?
- God is never in a hurry. His will is irrevocable no matter the passage of time or the changing of human circumstances. The "sovereignty assistance program" initiated by Sarai and Abraham in chapter 16 did not change God's plans one iota. It is true that Ishmael is Abraham's son. But he is not the child of the covenant because God does not alter his will to suit human sin, disappointment, or impatience. Just as God announced previously, the righteous seed will come through barren Sarah. No wonder we are often baffled by God's will. To us, God's will seems to be slow and hard and confounding.
- But slow and impenetrable as it may seem to us, God's will is perfect. He will not change his plans to suit our impatience or lack of understanding. God's will is never contingent upon our actions and attitudes. Rather God's will is the product of his own almighty power.

2. A covenant command

Vv. 1-2

- One of the things that Scriptures make clear about God's covenant with Abraham, from its ratification ceremony (chp. 15) to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, is that it is a gracious covenant. The fulfilling of the everlasting covenant of grace will never depend upon the obedience of God's people. Nor will it ever be nullified by the disobedience of God's people. The conditions for the covenant to be fulfilled rest entirely in the hands of God.
- So it may seem strange that God announces expectations or conditions toward Abraham and all of those who are descended from him by faith. In the covenant ceremony it was made clear that God will keep the conditions of the covenant. But now in chapter 17 God tells Abraham that he must keep the covenant:
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" (vv. 1-2).
- Notice the "that" in verse 2. This is a conditional phrase. God told Abraham that he must walk before him in obedience "that" he may make his covenant. How can the covenant be gracious if it also involves

conditions? Doesn't grace do away with any notion of conditions? Not exactly. It depends upon what sort of conditions we are talking about. Theologians have long distinguished between *meritorious* conditions and *necessary* conditions.

a) A *meritorious condition* is one which earns a reward.

b) A *necessary condition* refers to something which must be present for the goal to be reached but is itself not merited. A living faith is the necessary condition of the covenant of grace. But it is not meritorious because the faith to believe is itself a gift of God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

- In chapter 15 we are told that Abraham "believed God, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (vs. 6). This is the vital distinction between the covenant of works that God had made with Adam and this, now, everlasting covenant of grace that he made with Abraham. Both covenants promise eternal life in God's presence. But the covenant of works depended upon the perfect obedience of Adam. The covenant with Abraham depends entirely upon the grace of God. In the covenant of grace we are to believe God's promise that he will save everyone who trusts in him. In the covenant of grace, it is by faith that sinners are declared righteous. The faith which justifies sinners is a living faith; a faith which produces fruit. However, it is not the Christian's fruitful obedience which is credited as righteousness. Obedience is the evidence of a living faith but it is never the instrument of our justification before God. "Faith is the empty hand that receives God's blessings, not the busy hand that earned them."¹

3. An audacious name

Vv. 4-6

- "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" (Vs. 5).
- The name Abram means something close to "exalted father" or "father of a people." That alone must have been source of pain enough for this childless man with a barren wife. For some 13 years Abram has had a son (Ishmael) by the slave Hagar. But father of a people? Exalted father? No. But God goes one better. He now tells Abram that he will be changing his name to Abraham which means "Father of nations" (as in plural nations!). This man with only one son with no hope to increase that number, he being 99 years old, must have at least considered the humiliation of having to bear such an audacious name with so little to show for it.
- And yet this is precisely what God was going to do. Abraham would indeed be the father of nations both literally and figuratively. Biologically speaking the promise is seen in the genealogies of Keturah (25:1-4), Ishmael (25:12-18), and Edom (chpt 36). But in a deeper, spiritual sense, Abraham will be the father of all the faithful; all of those who will turn in faith to Jesus Christ from among every nation on earth (Ps. 87:4-6; Rom. 4:16-17; Gal. 3:15-19).

4. A precious promise

Vv. 7-8

- God restates the elements of his covenant promise to Abraham. It is a promise involving people, place, and presence. God will make for himself (through Abraham) a people. He will give them a place to dwell in peace (ultimately fulfilled in the new creation). And God will bless his people with his presence. These promises are summed up in that marvelous statement "I will be their God."
- The great contemporary Scottish theologian Donald Macleod writes:
What did God say to Abraham? "I will be your God." What does that mean? It means that God is saying to Abraham, "I will be for you. I will exist for you. I will exercise my God-ness for you. I will be committed to you." There is no way that can be improved upon! There is no more glorious promise: not in Romans, not in Hebrews, not in Revelation, not in the Gospel of John, not in the Upper Room: nowhere! These words of the Abrahamic covenant have never been excelled and never will.²

¹ Jonty Rhodes, *Covenants Made Simple* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2013) p. 60.

² Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By* (Edinburgh: Christian Focus, 1998), p. 251.