

ABRAHAM #12 GENESIS 17:1-8,15-21 1-17-16

THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

(Genesis 17) We return to the life and adventures of Abraham, the father of those who believe.

1-8 *Now 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. 2 “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly.” 3 Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, 4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 “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. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. 7 I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. 8 I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”*

This morning I pray you will be able to comprehend with greater clarity what it means to enjoy a covenant relationship with the living God. To help you get there let's look at point #1 on your outline -- Covenant Commitments ®. In Genesis chapter 12, chapter 13, chapter 15 God comes to Abram and makes magnificent promises. He enters into a unilateral covenant with his servant and tells him of the great things awaiting him thru the grace of God. In chapter 17 this happens again, and this time it is the most thorough explanation of the covenant given to Abraham. There are three aspects of the promises, the commitments which God made to Abram and they are all here - the seed, the land and the Lord Himself.

First, we see the reiteration of the promise of a great family. 2-6 *I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly.” 3 Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, 4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 “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. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. Now understand, God had said this kind of thing to Abram before. Back in 13:**16a** *I will make your descendants as the**

dust of the earth. 15:5 He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” Once more then, in our text God repeats this, but also adds to it a new dimension. For here it doesn’t just say that Abram will have many descendants, it even says he will father many nations. There is a bit of a change, a supplement here to the promise and that change is marked by a change in Abram’s name. It was in Act 2 of Shakespeare’s great play that Juliet asked the question, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other word would smell as sweet.” But in that play, and certainly in Scripture, names meant a great deal. That is why we read of God assigning names to certain children before they were born. He assigned the name of Jesus, the name of John, the name of Isaac later in this chapter. And on other occasions the Lord sees fit to change names and to give nicknames. I had a roommate in seminary who called hardly anyone by their real name. With my friend James, everyone got a special moniker. Mine was Hoss. I didn’t get it then and I still don’t get it. His names didn’t always make sense. But the names God assigns do make sense. Jacob became Israel, Saul became Paul, Simon became Peter. These names, given at birth or later, all meant something significant. None more than the names of Abram and Abraham. Those two names tell a great story. For the name *Abram* means “exalted father.” ® And now we look at that and say, “sure.” But look at it from Abram’s perspective and Sarah’s. For the greater part of his adult life this man went around with the name “Exalted Father” which was rather ironic - why? He had no kids. He was like the bald guy whose name is---? Harry. His name became a mockery and, likely for Abram, a source of pain. Caravans and strangers from many parts of the world would likely pass thru the region where Abram was living. They would buy access at his well. They would ask his name and when they heard that he was “exalted father” they would say, “wonderful, how many children do you have?” Zero.

At the time of our story today Abram is 99 years old. Can you imagine then what it must have been like when Abram broke the news to his family and servants that he was now changing his name? They all knew that his former name, *Abram*, had been somewhat of a thorn to him. So you can imagine the stir of interest and curiosity when he announced, “I am going to change my name.” Some must have figured that the old man couldn’t take it any more. After all, to be a father of nobody for 86 years and then to be the father of one half-Egyptian boy, while being named “Exalted Father” must have been rather tough. So, he is going to change his name. I wonder what it

will be. Can you hear the silence of the stunned crowd when Abram announces that his new name will be *Abraham*, which means, the father of a multitude?” ® Behind the scenes there had to be laughter. This is like a man named George Hitler announcing that she had changed his name to Herschel Hitler. I mean, the problem just got worse. But, of course, it wasn't Abram's doing was it? It was God who gave the new name, even as it was God who gave a new promise, that Abraham would be the father of many nations. What does that promise mean? The idea that from one man, and from one family flows forth multiple nations does not initially make sense. I don't think the Jews who interpret the Bible have ever figured it out. But it is explained to us in the New Testament book of Galatians. 3:7 *be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.* And people of faith come from which nations? From every nation. Galatians 3:29 *if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.* Then again, in Romans 4, Paul shows that this is precisely what is meant by our promise. Romans 4:16a *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* Clearly the promise of Genesis 17 is met in the coming to faith of Gentiles like you and I who become, by their believing, the sons of Abraham. The first covenant commitment from God to Abraham is to give him a great family and a name to go with it.

Secondly, we see God restating for Abram the promise of a great land. 8 *I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession.* This is the promise reiterated by Jesus when he said the meek shall inherit the earth. This is the promise to us that the new earth will someday belong to all the saints of God. And since we have spoken of this much in our series, and since the word here is only a restating of the promise made earlier, we will skip over this point today and move on to the third commitment made by God to Abraham and that is the commitment to be for him a great God. Abraham gets a great family and a great land and a great God. At the end of verse 8 he said, “I will be their God.” What does that mean? Isn't He everyone's God? Well, in an objective sense yes, he is. He is the God who makes all men, the God who will judge all men. But what he says here goes beyond that. When the Lord says, “I will be your God.” He is saying that he will enter into personal relationship with them. There will be a communion of man with Maker. They will be his personal, special people. And He will be more to us than just God. He will be more than just *the Good Lord*. He will

be one we can call “my God.” And in the first verse of this chapter we are reminded of just who this personal God really is. In this revelation to Abraham, the first thing said is, “I am God Almighty” The Hebrew term there, is “El Shaddai.” As I studied the term this week I ran across some discrepancy over exactly the significance of it. Most believe that it means, literally, “the great breasted one.” If you were to think of a man, having a great breast, a deep and sizeable chest is an indicator of power, of strength. Some argue though that it has reference to the breast of a woman which is not a symbol of strength so much as nourishment and life-giving supply. In either case, the message to Abraham would be about the sufficiency and ability of God to take care of him and to meet his needs. More than giving his servant a great family and a great land, the Lord now says, “you also get me.”

Those are some great and awesome promises, but there is actually more involved in this covenant. Although the covenant is unilateral in that God does it entirely, and although the covenant is one of grace without any human conditions to establish it, there are responsibilities communicated to Abraham. We will look at these under the heading of Covenant callings. ⑧ What God in His covenantal grace calls his man to do. The first is set before us in verse 1cd *I am God Almighty; Walk before Me.* “Walk before Me.” The word *walk* is just a synonym for *live*. When God says “live your life before Me” what he is saying is that we are to consciously live our lives out in the presence and before the audience of God. Scripture affirms that our God sees all, knows all. Hebrews 4:13 (NIV) *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.* That’s a fact. But living or walking before God means that we do what we do in the consciousness of that reality and of our accountability to God. Now surely you recognize that most folks do not do this. Most of those around us give God no thought at all. The idea that what they have done, either good, bad or indifferent has been seen by the Lord on high never crosses their minds. They’re oblivious. Romans one says they have taken the existence of God and suppressed it, forgotten it, ignored it. How different it is to be with us who are in covenant relationship with Him. We are to practice the presence of God. We are to learn to mentally include God at every point, remembering that He sees our work and our worship and our treatment of others. God knows it all, and to practically live our lives before Him means that we order our steps, we make our choices to please Him and avoid His displeasure. We are doing the will of God because we live in His presence and unto Him.

The adjoining exhortation here is to be *blameless*. That is a word that could be translated as *complete* or *perfect*. This is what God wants from us. He calls us to live without sin. Now immediately many of you will think, “But hey, nobody’s perfect. Everybody is going to sin.” And yeah, that’s true. We all fail to reach perfection, but the calling of God is unto that perfection. The fact that we are disturbed by this language reveals something askew in our thinking. We want to hear God say, “Walk before me and improve a little.” But God calls us beyond that. And it makes me wonder. You don’t like the call to perfection would you prefer a God whose calling was to be flawed? Would you have rather that Jesus said to the adulterous woman, “your sins are forgiven go and sin less?” Our perfect God calls us to be like Him and he is perfect. Jesus said in Matthew 5:48 *Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Philippians 3:12 *Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.* Paul speaks of the purpose for which Christ lays hold of us. That purpose is to perfect us. That’s the goal. Paul denies that he had reached that perfection, but his attitude was different from so many. Paul said, “I haven’t reached it but I press on in my attempt to do so.”

We disagree with those schools of Christian thought which claim that we can reach perfection in this life. We think that is unbiblical; but even more unbiblical is something I call an *indolent imperfectionism*. It is an attitude that says, “we can’t be perfect, so why bother trying. Just get used to your sin and be glad God forgives.” My friend, any true appreciation of the forgiveness, the mercy, the grace of God is an appreciation that will energize us to obey and honor that gracious God who says “be blameless.” Don’t wallow in the mire of indolent imperfectionism. Alexander Maclaren wrote this: *“It is more blessed to be smitten with the longing to win the unwon than to stagnate in ignoble contentment with partial attainments. Better to climb, with faces turned upward to the inaccessible peak, than to lie at ease in the fat valleys.”* We must never confuse our pursuit of a holy life with the obtaining of God’s grace. That grace is freely given to sinners, but with it comes the upward call of God in Christ Jesus to move on in grace and become complete, whole, and mature. Christ Jesus died on behalf of sinners, but He dies for his church, says Ephesians 5, so that she can be holy and blameless before Him. *Walk before me and be blameless.* Live in the light of divine realities and then walk in purity. Is there an order to that you think? I believe so. The

only way to walk in holiness is to walk *before the Lord*. If you desire a more blameless life you must get it thru a sweet fellowship with God, an abiding with Christ that brings forth lovely fruit. Spurgeon says, “*the way to be transformed into the likeness of God is to live in the company of God.*” That personal transformation then, that becoming blameless, involves more than just our efforts to try hard and resist sin. It requires that we get to know the Lord, that we nurture a love relationship with Him, out of which will flow all and any gospel obedience.

Alright, there is another covenant calling mentioned in Genesis 17. It is in that portion we have not yet read, verses 9-14 and it is the calling to circumcise and to be circumcised. This is an important element of the covenant, and we are going to spend all of next Sunday’s message covering what the Bible says about the sign of circumcision. Somebody in Georgia asked me at Christmas-time what I would be preaching in the new year and I said I would be doing a ten-week series on circumcision. They knew I was kidding, but I will do one message on verses 9-14 next Lord’s day.

For today we will move on to the third of our three CCs. This is the covenant child ®. Read on with me in Genesis 17:**15** *Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. The minor change to Sarah makes her name mean Princess, which is appropriate for one who is to be the mother of kings. **16a** I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. This is the first time Sarah is included by name in the promise of a child. **16b-17a** Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed. We often will laugh at that which is absurd. When Yogi Berra said *the future ain’t what it used to be*, we laugh. Abraham found the word of God humorous because it was about a 99 year old father and a first time mom of 90. They might have lived a bit longer in Abraham’s day, but there was nothing like this going on. **17-18** Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” 18 And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” Ishmael was the son conceived by the servant Hagar. He was not the son of promise. He was not the son of miraculous conception. He was the son of Sarah and Abram’s scheming. But he was Abraham’s only boy and his daddy wanted good for him and so he pleads with God to make Ishmael the covenant child. But he wasn’t. Possibly too Abraham was trying to save God the embarrassment of failure. **19-21** But God said,*

“No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. 21 But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.”

The promise has now become much more specific. The mother is named - *Sarah*. The time is named - *this season next year*. The child is named - *Isaac*. And the name *Isaac* means “laughter.” We already see why that is appropriate. His dad laughed at his announcement. Not only that, if you look at Genesis 18 we find Sarah laughing too when she learns of the promise. In Genesis 18 three visitors, one of whom was the Lord, showed up to visit Abraham 18:**9-15** *Then they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” 10 He said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. 12 Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” 13 And the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?’ 14 Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” 15 Sarah denied it however, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh.”* Now there is a great deal of comedy in this story. You have the comedy of the old folks giving birth. Then there is the comedy of Sarah getting caught by a mind-reading God and then arguing with the Lord about it. Don’t you know that God knows everything and can do everything? Don’t you know that debating him is the height of folly? Don’t you know? Sarah forgot long enough to argue with Him. Isn’t that a great question asked in verse **14a** *Is anything too difficult for the Lord?* Anything? Thanks God – no! The final touch of humor would be the boy’s name – *Isaac*, *laughter* because his birth was such a huge celebration. Can you imagine the fanfare around this birth? It takes place in Genesis 21 and there we read **6** *Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”* Is anything too difficult for God? Miraculous births mark the major events of biblical history. Isaac’s birth to Sarah, the birth and preservation of Moses, the birth of John the Baptist and then, of course, the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. God wants it plainly known in these cases, that He is at work and He usually uses the normal means of nature,

but when He desires He pulls a miracle. The angel said to Mary, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” And make no mistake about it. Isaac’s birth was a miracle.

The challenge the angel put before Sarah is the same one given to us. Is anything too difficult for God? Will you rule out the supernatural? Can you not see that when God promises, God can and God will find a way to keep His word? God can make a way where there seems to be no way. On our long drives to Florida and Georgia the last two weeks, Beth and I listened to the Louis Zamperini story, entitled, *Unbroken*. Some of you have read the book. More of you have seen the movie. It really is an extraordinary story but the movie omits the best part – by far the best part. The biography tells the story of a famed distance runner who was taken captive by the Japanese in World War II and abused horrifically. The title of the book is misleading because the abuse actually did break Louis. He lived through the war but was still a casualty, finding himself tormented by fears and dreams and what we now call PTSD. He became a miserable raging alcoholic whose family and life were completely unravelling until one night Christ reached down to him at a Billy Graham crusade, filled his empty heart with faith and he was instantly delivered. Instantly! Permanently! No more drunkenness. No more nightmares. It was the kind of story I have heard all my life but few of those stories were as dramatic as this one. And the stories never get old. God can make a way where there seems to be no way.

Abraham figured that out. He may have laughed at first but he went on to believe God’s promise. Romans 4:**18-21** (ESV) *In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* Boy, I read that, and think, “me too Lord. Me too. Make me like Abraham that, with or without the laughter, I would just take you at your word and trust that you will find a way to do all that you promised to me.” Would you join me now in making that prayer our prayer