

## Genesis 17:1-27

### Introduction

At the end of chapter 16, Abram was eighty-six years old. Now, one verse later, at the beginning of chapter 17, he's suddenly ninety-nine years old. Thirteen years have passed. They've been thirteen more years in which Abram and Sarai have been waiting for a child. And they've been thirteen years in which God has been silent. But now, suddenly, the Lord speaks to Abram once again.

We can read the story of Abram and think how wonderful it must have been to receive direct words from God. We might long for the spectacular experiences of God that Abram had. But we need to remember that, even for Abram, those experiences came around very rarely. Since leaving Haran, about 24 years earlier, God had spoken to him only three times. Just three special encounters in roughly 24 years. It's hardly a rush. And they've been for a special purpose; to advance God's plan of salvation. The rest of the time, Abram and Sarai have been learning what it means to live by faith in the ordinary, mundane details of life.

There are some people who are constantly seeking new and exciting experiences of God. Listening to him speak to them in the Bible, and speaking to him in prayer, isn't enough. They want more. They want the spectacular. They look for it around every corner. Without it, they feel discouraged. But normal Christian life isn't like that. The spectacular can happen. But normal Christian life is very unspectacular. It's about learning to trust God in the ordinary, mundane details of our lives. That's what Abram and Sarai have been doing. They haven't had a word from the Lord for thirteen years. They've had to trust the promises already received. But now God speaks to them once again.

In chapter 15, God had established a covenant with Abram. It was an unconditional act of God in which Abram had no part to play and nothing to contribute. It was a one-sided covenant. A covenant of grace. It included the promise of offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. No doubt, it seemed a long time ago to Abram and Sarai. We can only imagine the conversations they must have had together as they grappled with their ongoing childlessness. But now God confirms the covenant. And he spells out the response that's expected from them for the full blessings of the covenant to be enjoyed. Abram's learning to live by faith. And faith must show itself in utter devotion.

I've taken our first heading from the first words of verse 4: 'As for me...' This is what God has promised to do.

### 'As for me...'

Let's read again from verse 1.

**When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.'**

The first thing Abram hears is that self-description: **'I am God Almighty...'** In Hebrew, El-Shaddai.

It's a title that speaks of God's ability to fulfil his promises. In Genesis, it's particularly associated with his ability to provide offspring. Abram and Sarai have been waiting 24 years. By now, Abram is ninety-nine and Sarai only ten years younger. Hebrews 11, verses 11 and 12, says that Sarai was past the age of childbearing and Abram was as good as dead. It's not the most flattering description! Humanly speaking, their chances of having a child were zero. But perhaps that's why they had needed to wait so long. It was to show that the Lord is God Almighty, who can do all that he promises, against all odds. He can even give a child to an elderly couple who are as good as dead. He is God Almighty, who brings life out of death.

That's the God we believe in; the God who brings life out of death. Remember the words of the angels at the empty tomb of Jesus. **'Why do you look for the living among the dead?'** they asked. **'He is not here; he has risen!'** (Luke 24:5-6). It's the miracle that happens whenever someone becomes a Christian. Remember what Paul wrote to the Ephesians. **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... [But God] made us alive with Christ...** (Ephesians 2:1, 4). And we look forward to the day when Jesus returns, and the dead will rise to eternal life, just as he promised. (John 5:28-29)

Our God is God Almighty, who brings life out of death. And so, he says to Abram, in verse 4: **'As for me, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.'**

Abraham means 'father of many' or 'father of a multitude'. We can imagine the jokes people made when they heard he had changed his name. We can imagine them laughing behind his back, as this old man and his elderly wife walked by. 'Father of a multitude? Poor Abram, he's finally lost the plot.' But every time he heard his new name Abraham would be reminded of the promise of God. Look at verse 6.

God says this: **'I will make you fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.'**

In chapter 15, we were told that Abram believed God, and he credited it to him as righteousness. Had he been able to look into the far future, he would have seen the countless millions of Christians around the world who would be saved through faith like his. He would have seen the multitudes of all nations who believe in Christ and look to Abraham as their father in the faith. Paul writes in Romans chapter 4, verse 17: **He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.**

He would be the father of kings. Even the King of kings. His descendants would receive a promised land, which they would possess forever. If he had been able to see far enough into the future, he would have seen that promise fulfilled in a new heaven and new earth, which his descendants would call home, where they would live with their God forever.

What a promise!

It vastly outweighs any ridicule Abraham might have had to suffer. And it vastly outweighs any ridicule we might suffer as we live by faith in the same promise. And it's to Abraham's response that God now turns. I've taken our next heading from the opening words in verses 9 and 15: 'As for you...' and 'As for Sarai...'

### 'As for you... and Sarai...'

Please look down again at verse 9.

**Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those both in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'**

Circumcision was practiced by other nations, but it was performed later in life. It was typically performed on young men at puberty to mark the passage into manhood. This sign, however, was different. It was given to mark the passage not into puberty but into God's people. All were included. Women and girls were included with their fathers, husbands and brothers, thankfully, without the need for any cutting on their part. All male babies were included, whether they were slaves or free, the children of foreigners or of Abraham. And it was obligatory. It was identified so completely with God's covenant that to refuse it was to break the covenant and forfeit God's promises.

The fact that it was given to babies reveals that it was all about what God was saying to them. It wasn't about what they were saying to God because they couldn't yet say anything. It signified the promises made to those who received it. And the New Testament signs do the same. The Lord's Supper, that we'll share later, and baptism both signify what God has done for us.

And Sarai too receives a promise. She too receives a change of name. In her case, it's merely a change of spelling. Both forms of her name have the same meaning. They mean 'princess'. But the change of name confirms that she too has a share in the covenant. She has discovered the hard way that no substitute wife will do. But God confirms that even in her advanced years, she will be the mother of nations. Kings will come from her.

When he hears it, Abraham falls down and laughs. It would be so much easier to believe that Ishmael would be the promised seed. If only he might live under God's blessing. And he will! God confirms that Ishmael will be the father of twelve rulers and will be a great nation. **'But,'** God says, in verse 21, **'my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.'**

And that's God's final word. With that he leaves. And we're told in the final verses that on that very day, Abraham did all that God had instructed.

What God's calling for in this chapter is commitment.

Look back at how it started, in verse 1. God said to Abram, **'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.'**

It's a call for commitment. For Abram to be blameless is not to be perfect but to be whole-hearted in his devotion to God. He has already been declared to be righteous on account of his faith, back in chapter 15. And now, as a result, he's to *live* righteously. He's to be fully committed to God.

That's what this covenant of circumcision was all about. It was about living as one who is fully committed to God. It was an outward sign that pointed to the need for an inner attitude, which the Bible calls elsewhere the circumcision of the heart. Real circumcision is an attitude of the heart.

It's a heart attitude that puts no confidence in the flesh to obtain the blessings that God has promised. Remember what the flesh represents. Knock off the 'h' and read it backwards. It's the Self. Circumcision of the heart is the attitude that puts no confidence in myself to obtain the blessings God has promised but depends wholly on him. That's what Abraham's been learning. Throughout these chapters that we've been studying, he's been learning that the blessings God has promised can't be grasped hold of through human effort and ingenuity. They can only be received by the open hands of faith.

Becoming a Christian involves being cut loose from the sinful desires of the flesh. It's an inner work done by the Spirit of Christ. It's to be freed from the mastery of the flesh. And it's to be freed to live each day in whole-hearted devotion to God.

Of course, that isn't easy.

The flesh keeps niggling away, convincing us that the way to find happiness and blessing is by living according to *it*. But we don't have to give in to the flesh, because God has placed the Spirit of Christ in our hearts.

The way to enjoy the promises of God fully is to walk each day in devotion to Christ. It's to live in whole-hearted commitment to him through the ordinary, mundane details of daily life – through the changing circumstances, the ups and the downs.

And his ways are full of blessing. He calls us to commit ourselves whole-heartedly to him because that is the best way to live. Those using the book of Lent devotions might recall what it says on Day 2:

*Those who follow Jesus are blessed. Those who have taken up their cross are living the best way. Despite all that this world might value and celebrate, the life that is to be envied is the life of following Jesus. The way of Christ is the 'blessed' life: the flourishing life, the good life. (In Quietness & Trust, Matt Searles)*

Christ's ways are full of blessing. We need to ask ourselves whether we truly believe that and are committed to walking in them, in devotion to God. We may find it *hard* to walk in them. But we *can* walk in them, because he has cut us loose from the mastery of the flesh through his death on the cross. And that's what we're going to remember in a moment as we share the Lord's Supper together.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we believe and trust that you alone bring life out of death and have opened the way to eternal life through the cross of your Son, Jesus Christ. We praise you for all your good promises that are ours in him. Please help us to commit ourselves whole-heartedly to following him, not to earn anything from you nor to curry your favour, but in the confidence that his way is the best way to live. And please would each of us discover that to be true in our own personal experience. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.