

Genesis 17:1-8 **A Name Change**

One of the challenges in studying the past is that it happened so very long ago. That may seem like a simple thing to say, but what I mean is that we have a very limited perspective of time. I teach high school and college age students, and none of them have any real memories of the 9/11 attacks. What seems like it happened so recently to me, is as much a historical event of the past to them as the Vietnam war, or the invention of the telephone, or ancient Greece. It all blurs into a hazy mist of long ago. As humans with such a relatively limited lifespan, we simply have no real perspective of time. Fifty years is an eternity.

Perhaps that is why being patient is so difficult. We live in the moment. We expect things immediately. When we want God to act in a particular area, we want Him to act now. And if He does not act as quickly as we would like, we can be tempted to intervene to bring about His plans and purposes as we see them. As we have seen (and no doubt experienced ourselves) this rarely works. Yet, if we are patient, if we do wait on the Lord, He has never been known to fail. Nor has He ever been known to not bring about His perfect will in His perfect time.

The themes that have been the focal point of the Abrahamic narrative thus far are that of land and seed. Abram had been promised both, and the security of one was dependent upon the occurrence of the other. That is, while Abram could acquire land in Canaan, he could not rest secure in its maintenance unless he could father an heir by whom the land would be inherited. Having been promised both land and seed by God, Abram, fatherless and apparently without hope of progeny, first proposed that an adopted household servant, Eliezer of Damascus, be his heir. God rejected that option and reminded Abram that a descendant would come from him directly, and not through a social convention. Then Sarai and Abram used Hagar, Sarai's servant, as the vehicle by which the child would be produced. This did meet the requirements of Abram directly fathering the child, though at the cost of violating God's clear commands regarding marriage. Though that plan created family tensions on such a scale that Hagar fled, God intervened, restored Hagar to the family, and Ishmael was born.

But we must begin by noting that though it is but a verse, thirteen years have passed in the interval between chapters 16 and 17 in Genesis. At the birth of Ishmael, Abram had been eighty-six years old (Genesis 16:16). Now, He was ninety-nine years of age. What may seem like consecutive events to the reader, the birth of Ishmael and this particular appearance of God to Abram was separated by more than a decade. Years had gone by, Ishmael had passed from precarious infancy, to becoming a toddler, to a growing little boy and had now become into a young man capable of helping his elderly father with all the chores of the family business of raising and marketing livestock.

Also, we should consider that since Sarai remained barren, the tension between she and Hagar had likely not dissipated. In addition, since Sarai remained barren, it must have been that Abram concluded that Ishmael was to be the promised heir. After all, the original promise made to him was when Abram was seventy-five. He had lived in Canaan for twenty-four years. Now at ninety-nine, it is impossible to believe that Abram waited for another child. Surely Ishmael must be the one.

The Covenant Renewed

Again, God appeared to Abram. “Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram” (v. 1). It was God Who did the talking in the passage. Though it may seem as if Abram must have grown accustomed to God’s presence in this way, again we must remember that the four appearances to Abram that have occurred thus far had been spread over many years. The first came when Abram was seventy-five years old and living in Haran (Genesis 12:1-3). Then, a few years later, perhaps when Abram was about eighty, God again reminded Abram that the land which Lot had not chosen would be given to Abram and his descendants (Genesis 13:14-17). Sometime later, but before Abram was eighty-five, God again appeared to Abram, assured Abram that an heir would come from Abram himself and not an adopted household servant, and ratified His covenant with him in an extraordinary display of His power and majesty (Genesis 15:1-21). Now, some fourteen years after that theophany, Abram again heard from God.

And when “¹the Lord appeared to Abram [God] said to him,
“I am God Almighty;
Walk before Me, and be blameless.
²I will establish My covenant between Me and you,
And I will multiply you exceedingly” (v. 1-2).

God began by identifying Himself. This was not uncommon in covenant documents from the period. It was regular practice for the two parties entering into the covenant to state at the beginning who they were and announce their titles, lands, and other credentials. In this case, God referred to Himself as God Almighty, *El Shaddai*. The name is used in the Old Testament forty-eight times, most often in the book of Job (thirty-one times). Jerome’s Latin *Vulgate* translated the name *omnipotens*, which gives the reader a good understanding of its meaning. God was presenting Himself to Abram as the omnipotent God. The emphasis was on God’s unlimited majesty and power. As Job discovered,

“Can you discover the depths of God?
Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7).

This attribute was worth emphasizing, when we consider that what God was promising Abram seemed impossible.

The etymology of the word combines two concepts. The first is the idea of sufficiency. The second is that of overpowering. Taken together, the meaning of the word is that God is sufficient because there is nothing that can restrain Him from acting as He wills. Interesting, too, is that the name El Shaddai is used six times in Genesis, and in five of those occurrences, it refers to God’s promise for offspring.

God frequently began His conversations with Abram by giving him a command. Consider, “go forth from your country” (Genesis 12:1), “lift up your eyes and look “ (Genesis 13:14), and “do not fear” (Genesis 15:1). But this particular command was ethical. God commanded Abram to “walk before Me and be blameless” (v. 1). As with the original appearance of God to Abram, Abram was given something to do that would participate in the fulfilling of God’s promises. God had promised to make Abram a great

nation, but to do that Abram had to leave Haran. So, here, God would multiply Abram's descendants, but Abram was to walk in God's ways.

While the biblical writer had used the term 'covenant' before (Genesis 15:18), this is the first case in which God, Himself, used the term. The Bible uses the term 'covenant' in two different ways. One way is that of a conditional covenant. In this case, the covenant would be declared invalid if one of the parties did not meet the conditions required. For example consider,

¹Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ²All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God:

³Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

⁴Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.

⁵Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

⁶Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out"

(Deuteronomy 28:1-6).

The other kind of covenant was the unconditional or eternal covenant (Hebrew, *berit 'olam*). This kind of covenant was made by God alone, and since God can never go back on His word, this covenant was eternal. That is the kind of covenant represented here. Though there is a command to Abram to walk before God and be blameless, that command did not make the covenant bilateral. Nor did it mean that this was a second, or different covenant than before. The commands to Abram were to compel an affirmation of the covenant on his part. It was still God's covenant. As God said, "I will establish my covenant between Me and you" (v. 2). God was establishing His covenant with Abram regardless of any conditions or behaviors on the part of Abram. Just as God chose us unconditionally, so too He chose Abram.

But, as with us, for our relationship with God to be healthy, it was important that Abram, and us, walk before God and avoid sin. Admittedly, the obligations to "walk before Me" and to "be blameless" correspond to two outcomes, "establish My covenant" and "multiply you exceedingly." But again, these are not so much conditions, as the spiritual preparation Abram needed to participate in the covenant God was establishing.

The particular expression to "walk before" reflects the idea of the service and devotion of a servant to their king. It could include submission to either a human or divine ruler.

The Queen of Sheba to Solomon, "how blessed are your men, how blessed are these your servants who stand before you continually and hear your wisdom" (1 Kings 10:8).

"Now on the tenth day of the fifth month, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan the captain of the bodyguard, who was in the service [stood before] of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 52:12).

“Then Enoch walked with God [stood before] three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had other sons and daughters” (Genesis 5:22).

“At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to serve Him and to bless in His name until this day” (Deuteronomy 10:8).

Abram was to be blameless. This expectation was first applied to Noah (Genesis 6:9). It was also applied to the parents of John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zacharias (Luke 1:6). But for these others, the characteristic was stated as if it were an already accomplished fact. That is, for Noah, Elizabeth, and Zacharias, they *were* considered blameless. For Abram, it was to become his lifelong objective. This sentiment reflects the hopes found in Paul’s prayer for the church at Thessalonica,

“¹¹Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; ¹²and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; ¹³so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13).

For an Old Testament parallel, we need look no further than the requirements for the animals brought to sacrifice before the Lord. “Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats” (Exodus 12:5). Thus the word, *tāmîm*, can refer to either the physical or moral side of a creature. In the case of Abram, obviously God was speaking to the moral element of his nature.

Abram’s response was predictable, “Abram fell on his face” (v. 3). As we have noted before, this was the typical response to experiencing the presence of God.

Details of the Covenant

God continued, giving Abram many of the details of the covenant.

“⁴As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,
And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

⁵No 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.

⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. ⁷I 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. ⁸I 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” (v. 4-8).

In this second speech, God renewed the covenant by emphasizing four elements. First, God reminded Abram that he would be the progenitor of a multitude of descendants, “you will be the father of a multitude of nations” (v. 4). So significant was this element of the covenant, that God repeated Himself for emphasis. The descendants of Abram would spread out around the known world. To signify that, Abram’s name was changed to Abraham. The meaning of the name Abram is best rendered as “he is an

exalted father.” The meaning of the name Abraham can best be stated as “he is a father of many.” The point is that Abraham, as we may now call him, is not exalted in and of himself, but rather Abraham is exalted *because* he is the ancestor of many peoples. Despite the fact that the remainder of God’s speech in this chapter involved the ceremony of circumcision, thus setting apart Abraham’s people from all others, implicit in the promise is that Abraham would be the father of all those to whom the covenant extended, regardless of their particular ethnic group. To put it simply, Abraham was to be the father of many peoples, not merely the father of many Hebrews. As Paul later expounded,

“¹⁶For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷(as it is written, ‘a father of many nations have I made you’)” (Romans 4:16-17).

A second element of the covenant was that of abundance. The promise of Abraham’s fertility was reminiscent of that promised in the Garden of Eden. He was to be “exceedingly fruitful” (v. 6) as Adam and Eve had been commanded (Genesis 1:28). The same expression had been used for Noah after the Flood (Genesis 9:1) and later would be used with Ishmael (Genesis 17:20) and Jacob (Genesis 28:3). Being fruitful was the common biblical metaphor for progeny.

And this fruitfulness would lead to abundance in another area. Abraham was also told, for the first time, that his descendants would be kings. That is, independent nations would result from the many offspring of Abraham. Thus, he was not merely to be the ancestor of many people, but some of those people would rule. This would be true of not only the elect line of Abraham’s descendants, but the non-elect line as well.

“¹²Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Abraham; ¹³and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam ¹⁴and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, ¹⁵Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. ¹⁶These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives” (Genesis 25:12-18).

Also the line of Esau. “³¹Now these are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the sons of Israel. ³²Bela the son of Beor reigned in Edom, and the name of his city was Dinhabah. ³³Then Bela died, and Jobab the son of Zerah of Bozrah became king in his place. . . .” (Genesis 36:31-33).

But of course, its main application was to the chosen line,

“The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
Until Shiloh comes,
And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Genesis 49:10).

As a sojourner in the land of Canaan, where he migrated about managing his flocks, such a promise must have seemed as improbable as that of having additional children.

The third element had to do with the duration of the covenant. God again emphasized that this was His covenant with Abraham. This covenant was ‘established’ by God (v. 2, 7). He had initiated the covenant and, as it was His covenant alone, He would fulfill it. That was why the covenant would be an “everlasting covenant” (v. 7). That was why the possession of the promised land was an “everlasting possession” (v. 8). We must note that while the covenant was between God and Abraham, it was also between God and Abraham’s descendants. One thinks of the later Mosaic covenant.

“¹⁷You have today declared the Lord to be your God, and that you would walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and listen to His voice. ¹⁸The Lord has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments” (Deuteronomy 26:17-18).

Perhaps this emphasis on the eternity of the covenant was appropriate for a conversation in which Abraham had been tasked with walking blamelessly before his God. Surely Abraham knew he could not succeed. His own memory betrayed a recognition of past failures (think of Egypt, think of Hagar). If any part of the covenant was conditional upon his being blameless, Abraham knew he was doomed. That was why God stressed the eternity of this unilateral covenant. The covenant would last eternally because only God was required to be faithful to it.

A point worth noting here, though, is the relationship of the covenant to circumcision. That is, if the covenant was to be everlasting, and if the sign of the covenant, as we will see, was circumcision, then what are the obligations of circumcision for Christian believers today? It is important to remember that circumcision was the *sign* of the covenant, it was not the essence of the covenant itself. Ultimately it was spiritual allegiance to God that was required. Some circumcised members were not among the elect, Ishmael for example. Under this covenant, circumcision was required as an entry point into the covenant, but it did not assure salvation. This was understood even by the Old Testament saints.

“¹²Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the Lord’s commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. ¹⁵Yet on your fathers did the Lord set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. ¹⁶So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer” (Deuteronomy 10:12-16).

“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord
And remove the foreskins of your heart,
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Or else My wrath will go forth like fire
And burn with none to quench it,
Because of the evil of your deeds” (Jeremiah 4:4).

And it was emphasized by New Testament writers as well.

“⁹For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; ¹¹and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; ¹²having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:9-12).

“²⁵For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? ²⁸For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:25-29).

The final element of the covenant was land. As with descendants, Abraham had been promised land before (Genesis 12:7, 15:18). What was distinctive in this rendition of the covenant was the added note that regarding Abraham’s descendants, “I will be their God” (v. 8). That meant that the promise of land was reserved for the elect line only. Neither Ishmael nor Esau would share in that part of the inheritance. They may have controlled certain areas of Palestine, but theirs was not the Promised Land.

Takeaways

God is ever faithful. But He is faithful to Himself, not to us. He is faithful to keep His promises in His good time. He knows what is best for us, and He knows what brings Him the greatest glory. As with Abraham, God will fulfill His perfect plan for us in accordance with His timetable. So, let us ask God for grace in being patient with His timing in all things.