



Post Tenebras Lux Covenant Theology...

Abraham...

Genesis 17:1-27

Thirteen years passed from the time that God made the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 to the scene before us this morning in Genesis 17. Those thirteen years were not uneventful.

It was in those thirteen years, that Abraham and Sarah had grown weary of waiting for God to fulfill His promise. They had decided, rather Sarah had decided and Abraham had agreed, to fulfill God's promise using human wisdom and invention. They decided to use Sarah's Egyptian maidservant Hagar to produce the promised heir. The custom was not a new one.

In the ancient Semitic world, if a wife could not bare a child, she was sometimes obligated to provide a suitable slave girl to produce an heir. One such contract reads:

(Miss) Kelim-ninu has been given in marriage to (Mr.) Shennima...If Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall acquire a woman of the land Lulu (i.e., a slave girl) as wife for Shennima. (Quoted from Understanding Genesis by Sarna, pg.128)

In the case of Abraham and Sarah, Sarah may have thought that since she was barren, she had an obligation to provide just such a girl to carry Abraham's seed. But after Hagar had consorted with Abraham and bore him a son, Sarah became deeply resentful. Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that she fled into the wilderness. There, God rescued Hagar and the child and told them to return and submit to Sarah's authority.

Apparently, after she and Ishmael returned, there was a measure of peace.

Apparently, Abraham's affection toward Ishmael grew and was genuine.

Apparently, Abraham and even Sarah had grown accustomed to the idea that Ishmael would be the one through whom the covenant would be fulfilled.

But all of that was about to change. In Genesis 17:1, God reappeared to establish His covenant with Abraham.

^{NIV} **Genesis 17:1**...When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "**I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.**"

The first thing that I should point out is that Abraham was actually ninety-nine years old. He was not fifty or even sixty; he was genuinely ninety-nine years old. I think sometimes we reinterpret the clear words of the text to conform to mental images that we have gained from either film or literature. Abraham was genuinely ancient and the nomadic life that he had lived had taken its toll.

Secondly, I should point out that he and Sarah had long since passed the time where there was any human possibility that they could conceive and bear children. When Abraham had first heard the voice of God, he had been seventy-five years old. Eleven years later, he had received an additional promise. Now a full twenty-four years had passed and Abraham was nearly one hundred years old while his wife was nearly ninety.

I say that because it is important to understand the nature of their inability in order to understand the importance of the name God used to introduce Himself.

^{NIV} **Genesis 17:1... "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.**

Now the term that we read in English as "**God Almighty**" is the exact same term that we have grown accustomed to singing in the chorus, "**El-Shaddai**". It is hard to know exactly what the underlying Hebrew words meant. Some Hebrew scholars think it comes from the word "**mountain**"; others think it comes from the word "**breast**". Almost all see it as a term signifying strength or protection. It is used 48 times in the Old Testament. Thirty-one of those instances occur in the book of Job. It is used five times in Genesis, three of which occur in the Joseph stories. It is used at the beginning of Ruth. "**El Shaddai**" is the God of the weak, the oppressed, the helpless.

The significance here is that this God, **El Shaddai**, is able to provide strength and succor for one overtaken by human frailty. Whether the pitiful Job, or the helpless Naomi, or the hopeless Joseph, the God who presents Himself to all of them gives his name as "**El Shaddai**". He is the God who is promising to be Abraham's shield. He is the God who is promising to be Abraham's strength.

Now, of course, there is one notable difference between what we read in chapter fifteen and what we read here in chapter seventeen. The difference is that now there is a command. And the way the command is linked to verse two certainly makes it seem like a condition. The real question is, **“What does God mean by blameless?”**

It is a word that comes up earlier in Genesis 6:

^{NIV} **Genesis 6:9**...This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.

In Genesis 6, the word **righteous** is used as a comparative term. It is a man-ward comparison. Noah was a **righteous** man compared to those around him. The second term **blameless** is a God-ward term. Usually it means something akin to being **wholehearted**. Sometimes, the term is attached to sacrifices and when it is it means something like **“without blemish”**. Here, however, it is the first use in view. Notice also that just like Genesis 17; it is linked to the word **“walk”**. That is a biblical way of saying, **“Let this be the pattern of your life.”**

God is saying, **“Abraham, I am the Lord God Almighty. Let your life be a life of constant, wholehearted devotion to me, and...”**

^{NIV} **Genesis 17:2**...**“I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”**

Now literally, the phrase **“and I will establish”** is something more akin to **“that I may grant”**. The point is that God will establish His covenant in Abraham’s obedience, not in spite of it.

Now, you may be asking, **“But I thought you said last week that the covenant that God established with Abraham was unconditional.”** Actually, there is a sense in which that is true. Anytime God reveals Himself to fallen man, it is an act of God’s unconditional grace and kindness. You remember the scene I trust where God came down and walked through he severed animals alone. Abram was lying in a state of exhaustion or terror, depending on how you understand the passage, and God walked through the sacrificial animals alone.

But now in establishing His covenant with Abraham, God is applying conditions. He has accepted Abraham’s faith as righteousness but now He is demanding that Abraham do as He commands.

That notion sometimes causes difficulty for modern believers. We sometimes think that God has no right to impose any conditions on us at all.

We sometimes think, and are usually wise enough not to say, **“God has no right to stick His nose into this particular corner of my life”**. What we usually want from God is something more akin to relief. We want relief from the consequences of our sin or from desperate circumstances. What we are often surprised to find is that God is much more obtrusive than that.

I particularly like the way C.S. Lewis puts it in *Mere Christianity*. Allow me to read you a short passage:

When I was a child I often had toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother—at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she

would give me the aspirin; but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain: but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists; I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth, which had not yet begun to ache. They would not let sleeping dogs lie; if you gave them an inch they took an ell.

Now, if I may put it that way, Our Lord is like the dentists. If you give Him an inch, He will take an ell. Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of (like masturbation or physical cowardice) or which is obviously spoiling daily life (like bad temper or drunkenness). Well, He will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment.

(Lewis. Mere Christianity pg. 171)

You see, when God intervenes in our life, He does give us relief. But He doesn't just leave us there. He imposes His own set of obligations. They are not the reason that He intervenes, but once He does He makes demands. He hems us in. He drives us forward in our sanctification. We are His slaves. Oh, we are slaves of righteousness to be sure, but we are His slaves nevertheless.

Now, in case you find the idea of the covenant obligations uncomfortable, I want you to look at the repetition of a particular phrase. It is the phrase "**As for...**" It occurs in Genesis 17:4, 9, and 15. And in each of those particular uses it has a different person in mind. Look at verse 4:

^{NIV} Genesis 17:4..."As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.

Obviously, what follows is God's statement of all that He will do. In verse 9, however, God turns to Abraham's obligation.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:9...Then God said to Abraham, "**As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.**

Finally, in verse 15, God explains Sarah's role.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:15...God also said to Abraham, "**As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah.**

You see God is laying out for Abraham all that His covenant means. He is telling Abraham what He Himself will do. He is telling Abraham what He expects Abraham to do. He is even telling Abraham what will occur with Sarah. And Abraham has the only response imaginable.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:3...Abram fell facedown and God said to him,

First, God tells Abraham what He will do. Look at verse 4-8.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:4..."As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ 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. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

Now, when you look at the list, you cannot help but see the extraordinary nature of the promises. God promises to:

1) To make Abraham the father of many nations...

- 2) To make Abraham the father of kings.
- 3) To establish the covenant with him and his descendants...
- 4) Give his descendants the land...

But, God doesn't stop there. He goes onto make demands of Abraham and He gives Abraham a sign or a seal of the covenant He has made.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:9...Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner-- those who are not your offspring. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Now lets take a minute and see what Abraham's obligations are.

The first question is, **"What is Abraham supposed to do?"**

The second question is, **"How is Abraham supposed to do what he is commanded to do?"**

The third question is, **"When is this sign to be applied?"**

The fourth question is, **"To whom is it supposed to be applied?"**

The fifth question is, **“What happens if it is not applied?”**

If nothing else, I want you to see this morning that there was a sign of the covenant. That should not be such an unusual concept for you. Almost every covenant that we see around us has an attending sign. We see it when men shake hands. We see it when couples exchange wedding vows. On the one hand there is the covenant; on the other hand there is the sign of the covenant. The sign of the covenant is physical reminder of the truth of the covenant

Once, after my wife and I were married, someone asked her if she was married. Instead of saying yes, she simply held up her left hand and showed them her wedding ring. She showed them the symbol that represented her being married but the sign and what the sign represented were so closely related that holding up her ring answered the question.

Finally, God said to Abraham,

^{NIV} Genesis 17:9, 15-16...Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come..."¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

Now you will notice that with regard to Sarah, there are no stipulations. Instead there is only the promise of blessing. Why was that?

The promise made to Abraham was wonderful. Of course, there were stipulations but they were no terrible that Abraham buckled under their weight.

Instead, Abraham responded with laughter. It was not the laughter of cynicism either; it was the laughter of faith and wonder.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:17...Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

Now, I want you to notice what happened next in verse 18.

^{NIV} Genesis 17:18...And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" ¹⁹ Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰ And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹ But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."

Abraham is asking God to let Ishmael enjoy the fullness of the covenant that God had made with him. He is asking God to let the fullness of covenantal blessing rain down on Ishmael.

The reason I am making the point here is that Ishmael would have the sign of the covenant but not the full blessing of the covenant. Nevertheless, he enjoyed favor from God. He enjoyed physical benefits with being associated with Abraham even though the fulfillment of the covenant would be through Isaac.

How hard that must have been for Abraham. Apparently, he had come to love Ishmael truly. He wanted the fullness of God to be upon Ishmael but he purposed nevertheless to obey God.

^{NIV} **Genesis 17:22**...When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. ²³ On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, ²⁵ and his son Ishmael was thirteen; ²⁶ Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. ²⁷ And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

Now to sum up, we have seen that God initiated a gracious covenant with Abraham. In that covenant, he promised Abraham wonderful blessings. We have also seen that the covenant imposed things upon Abraham and his seed. We have seen that the imposition of those commands was not grievous to Abraham; rather they brought Abraham great joy. We have also seen that just because someone had the sign of the covenant did not necessarily mean that they enjoyed the full blessing of the covenant. Obviously, Ishmael did not have the full blessing that Isaac was going to enjoy. We have also seen that the sign of the covenant was given to young and old, bond and free alike. It was given to those that believed and those who did not believe and that sign was a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, who believed God and had it counted to him as righteousness.

Let's pray.