

Genesis 17

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99 and counting

"And I will bless you and make you fruitful "

[For those online, there is the text of Scripture at the end]

Introduction

Getting older helps a man to make decisions. Recently I was preaching in an Eastern suburbs venue and a man there celebrated his 40th birthday. He found out that I was a decade older than he was and came over to ask my advise. He wanted to know what his next 10 years would be like. Although I can predict some things, such as the length of this sermon, I have no way of knowing what this man's next 10 year will bring him. What I went through is not necessarily prescriptive for all folks, but I did have some normal life choices that hit me of late. One is the reality of growing older and the ease of decision making. Things still take time to decide; causes need to be weighed; life throws more at you it seems. However, there is a 'who cares what they think?' attitude that grows in these years. Of course, the overage or pendulum swing too far in this regard is evidenced in the crotchety lambasting that old folks give in their villages and homes, without regard or care for those with whom they speak.

In our story today, in Genesis 17, Abraham is 99 years old. Last week in our story, he was 86, so we are well down the road of God's promise to him. Back in Ur, God gave Abram his word that he would be bountiful. That had not yet happened, but Abram still held that to

be true and believable. We would be wise to hold fast to what God has said no matter how long it takes for Him to accomplish it.

Our story today may be marked by the outline as follows: A new name, a new custom and a new choice. Or in another way of saying it: Same players, changed names; circumcision the rite of the covenant; and God chooses Isaac and not Ishmael.

Read Gen 17.

1. A new name: Same players; changed names

Let's begin from verse one.

I am the Almighty God— אֱלֹהֵי אֲנִי ani El shaddai, I am God all-sufficient; from שָׁדַח ṣhadah, to shed, to pour out. I am that God who pours out blessings, who gives them richly, abundantly, continually. It could also come from the Hebrew Shadad, meaning breast. And the all sufficient breast of a mother giving suck to her young might be in view. Or the more popular opinion, and the one I hold to, is that it is a contraction of יֵשׁ דַּי Yesh Die (there is enough). This means that there will always be enough from God. He says, this is who I am. I am all sufficient. There is never a time when you cannot count on me. I will always supply. The bank is always open and supplied. The refrigerator is always stocked. The pond will always have fish. Don't worry, Abram. I am here to take care of you.

Walk before me— הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי hithhallech lephanai, set thyself to walk — be firmly purposed, thoroughly determined to obey, before me; for my eye is ever on thee, therefore ever consider that God sees you. Who can imagine a stronger incentive to conscientious, persevering obedience?

Be thou perfect.— תְּמִיִם תִּהְיֶה veyeh thamim, and you shall be perfections, i.e., a together perfect. Be just such as the holy God would have thee to be, as the almighty God can make thee and live as the all-sufficient God shall support thee; for he alone who makes the soul holy can preserve it in holiness. Our blessed Lord appears to have had these words pointedly in view, Matthew 5:48: You SHALL BE perfect, as your Father who is in heaven is perfect. But what does this imply? Why, to be saved from all the power, the guilt, and the contamination of sin. This is only the negative part of salvation, but it has also a positive part; to be made perfect. To be perfect as our Father who is in heaven is perfect, to be filled with the fullness of God, to have Christ dwelling continually in the heart by faith, and to be rooted and grounded in love. This is the state in which man was created, for he was made in the image and likeness of God.

Verse 5. Your name shall be Abraham— Abram אַבְרָם literally signifies a high or exalted father. Ab-ra-ham אַבְרָהָם differs from the preceding only in one letter; it has הֵי hey before the last radical. And it's the addition of the letter Hey which makes it a combination, probably a contraction again, meaning Father of a multitude of nations. (more at the end for you online)

This name change is not insignificant. The man is 99 years old. He's going through some serious passages (with allusions to Gail Shechey) here with a new son on the way, with a bris on the horizon, and with a God who is fairly high and exalted talking to him again. Abram is now the first of dozens of biblical characters whose names will be changed, not to protect the innocent, but to identify them as something different. Their names will be changed to announce something about God and them. Listen to these verses from Isaiah and the book of the Revelation:

Is. 62:2 And the nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the LORD will designate.

Rev. 2:17 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him

a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

Rev. 3:12 'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.

The Bible is a consistent book with the theme of the new name being a mark of a new nature. Abram, though 99, is given a new nature, and commandment to walk before God and be perfect, and the clear assurance that he will be a father over multitudes again. What a reminder of God's faithfulness to the old man Abraham. The reiteration of the covenant earlier told (Chapter 12) about the land, the blessing, and now the seed, is a continual reminder that God doesn't forget what He promises. What has he promised you and what is it you need to remember about what God has said?

Y'shua was doing that regularly, wasn't he? Always reminding the people of His day to bring back into their mind the purpose of God in creation and in commandment. Jesus was relentless in reminding the Jewish people of the covenant we had, and that all due to Abraham.

2. A new ceremony: Circumcision

Not only is God faithful to His word, but He also puts demands on us to comply. The second part of our lesson today then is about circumcision. The mohel is the ritual circumciser in the Jewish religion. There are not usually very many in a town. One day a man stopped in to a shop in a village. He asked to get his watch repaired. "I don't fix watches" the man behind the counter replied. "Wait a minute, you have clocks in your window. You mean to say you work on clocks but not on watches." "Nope," the shopkeeper replied. "I don't fix clocks either." "Then what do you do here, mister?" "I'm a mohel" replied the shopkeeper. "Then why the clocks in the window?" The mohel said, "What would you put in the window?"

Like Ishmael at the end of today's chapter, many Arabs, who consider themselves descendants of Ishmael, are circumcised at the age of 13 (v. 25). For them, as for other

peoples, it serves as a rite of transition from childhood to manhood, thus into full participation in the community.

Circumcision is basically saying, "If I am not loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut me off and my offspring (see v. 14) as I have cut off my foreskin."

The story is told of two young boys in hospital, lying on beds next to one another.

The first one says, "What are you here for?" The other replies, "To get my tonsils out- I'm a little nervous."

The first one says, "You've got nothing to worry about. I had that done when I was four. They put you to sleep, and when you wake up they give you lots of jelly and ice cream. It's a breeze." The second one asks, "What are you in here for?"

"Circumcision" says the 1st.

The second responds, "Whoa, good luck, mate. I had that done when I was born. Couldn't walk for a year."

Whatever else is going on in this passage about the cutting of the foreskin, it's clear that God is seeking to demonstrate to Abraham and all who will follow after him, that Jews are marked people. We get a new name and now a new ceremony. Yes, other groups and cultures were circumcising in those days, but not for covenantal reasons.

The church community actually celebrates on 1 January a special day on the calendar. It's called the Feast of the Holy Name. We know this is the 8th day after Christmas and thus is the day of the circumcision of Y'shua. The day of the holy name is a sanitized way of saying the day of Circumcision. If as they say the only marks on Jesus we will see in heaven will be those caused by human volition (like the nail prints, etc), then He will still be circumcised there.

3. A new choice: God's chooses Isaac and not Ishmael

The irony of Abraham's response is evident. His laughter became a verbal sign marking the ultimate fulfillment of the promise in Isaac. Throughout the remainder of the narratives surrounding the birth of Isaac, a key word within each major section is "laughter." Sarah "laughed" (18:12); Lot's sons-in-law laughed (19:14); all who heard of Sarah's birth to Isaac would "laugh" (21:6); the son of Hagar laughed (21:9b; NIV, "was mocking") at Isaac. Finally, Isaac's own failure to trust in God (26:7) was uncovered when the Philistine king saw him "laughing" (26:8b; NIV, "caressing"). Thus the power of God and the limitations of human faith are embodied in that most ambiguous of human acts, laughter.

Now we deal with the choice of Isaac over Ishmael. Let's be clear from the beginning here. Choosing the covenant blessing to carry on through the later son, Isaac, does not in any way mean we should have antipathy towards Ishmael and those of his nations. (12 just like Israel later. (25.13-15) In fact, the cry of Abraham about his firstborn should be our prayer as well, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before you!" May we have such love and devotion to our natural families.

Although Ishmael is excluded from the covenant with Abraham, Ishmael and his descendants are still to live under the blessing of God. In fact, in his blessing of Ishmael, God reiterated both his original blessing of all humanity in 1:28 and his blessing of Abraham in 12:2. No one should be so outside of our concerns that we fail to extend God's love to them.

Paul cites the choice of Isaac (and not Ishmael) as one proof of God's sovereign right to choose to save by grace alone (see Ro 9:6-8) But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

When we think about God's choices, we always need to remember that God wants all people of all places to know Him. Reading in verse 6, we see Abraham is to become fruitful. This is a reflection of the original command to Adam and Eve (1.26) and again of the earlier

promise to Abram in chapter 12. The hebrew is " **בְּמֵאֵד נְאֻד** " "I will make you exceedingly fruitful. Or literally "I will make you fruitful, with very much, very much." The idea is that God would increase the progeny of Abraham and as Haameck Davar says, "this blessing was to assure him that his descendants would be present on every corner of the world in sufficient numbers for them to instruct the nations in the true Faith." Obviously, the intention of God in fruitfulness was so that the world would be a better place. Sharing God's message with those in the world is part of God's plan for our fruitfulness today. That's something Jesus taught ever so clearly in his message. It's not about you for you to enjoy God's bounty; it's that we might share it with others. Look to extend the love of the Lord to others, to outsiders, won't you?

Summary

Here are some things I see as we conclude today, and some things I want you to take with you after the songs from today's service are just faint memories.

- 1) God will be known around the globe even through unlikely sources such as us
- 2) The sign of the covenant is not the agreement itself. Don't be distracted with externals in dealing with your walk with God.
- 3) Pray for those who are members of your family for them to live before God
- 4) Your new identity as a child of God will be visible to those yet outside the covenant. You will be marked out as a different one.

Dear friends, we have eternal life due to the Saviour, due to His love and forgiveness. His Resurrection has proven His new covenant. His teaching is great, but it goes well beyond that to His life and death. No amount of good works will give us enough information to help us overcome evil. No amount of information will help us overcome our own evil inclination. Only the messiah can repair our relationship with God, which will in turn give us pleasure with Him.