

GENESIS 17:1-22

A NEW NAME

This is the final installment, if you will, of God's covenant with Abram. It brings into clearer focus all of God's promises to Abram that have been given to him previously in Genesis.

Let's back up and look at what God has told Abram up to this point. God first came to Abram was when he was 75 years old and living in Ur of the Chaldees – "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Genesis 12:1-3). Abram obeyed God and moved his wife, nephew and all their possessions to the land of Canaan. There God came to Abram again – "The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land'" (Genesis 12:7). So, he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. A third time God spoke to Abram – "The LORD said to Abram, 'Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you'" (Genesis 13:14-18). Time goes by. Abram was 85 and still childless. So, God came to Abram a fourth time and reassured him that He is sovereign and will keep His promise – "'A son who comes from your own body will be your heir.' And He brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And Abram believed the LORD, and God counted it to him as righteousness. And He said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to

possess.' On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates...'" (Genesis 15:4-5).

There are three major aspects to God's covenant with Abram in Genesis. They are the SEED (physical offspring that will produce a great nation that will enjoy God's special favor); the LAND (Canaan, the Promised Land that one day the nation will possess); BLESSING (spiritual in nature, fulfilled in the coming Messiah, the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3:16 Paul makes this connection: "Now the promises were made to [Abram] and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

Well, when nothing happened right away Abram and Sarai concocted a plan. They decided to help God out. They reasoned together that Abram's promised son must come through some another woman other than Sarai. One of Sarai's Egyptian servant girls, Hagar, was selected to be the one to bear Abram's promised heir. Their plan was carried out, Abram had relations with Hagar and she became pregnant. But this was NOT God's plan and it proved disastrous. A rift formed in Abram's household between Sarai and Hagar. Hagar, now pregnant with Abram's child, looked with contempt upon a childless Sarai. In turn, Sarai treated Hagar harshly. Hagar eventually fled away into the desert. There God had compassion on Hagar and her unborn child. Through an angel God told Hagar to return to Sarai. He promised to multiply Hagar's descendants. The son born to her, Ishmael, would be a free-roaming, solitary man. There would be continued hostility between him and his brothers (Abram's other descendants).

Which brings us to today's lesson...

READ Genesis 17:1-2

Abram is now 99. Thirteen years has passed since Ishmael was born. At this point Abram is thinking that the child of promise, the one that will

be heir to God's promise is Ishmael. But as we will see this is not the case. God will fulfill His promises, not by human effort, but by God Almighty (Hebrew "El-Shaddai"). He is going to do the impossible!

What God expects from Abram: "Walk before me" (live in the knowledge of My presence with you); "Be blameless" (wholly devoted to the Lord, sincere).

READ Gen 17:3-8

God changes Abram's name from Abram (meaning "exalted father") to Abraham (meaning "father of a multitude"). Then God underscores His covenant promise to Abraham. Notice God says "I will..." This phrase appears 12 times in Genesis Chapter 17. Notice that it is an "everlasting" covenant. What does "everlasting" mean? Does this covenant still apply today or not?

John Phillips in his commentary on Genesis says, "This is an absolute, unconditional, binding, irrevocable agreement in which all the initiative, all the intent, and all of the insistence are God's. No failure on Abraham's part, no flaws, no forgetfulness on the part of his [descendants], can annul the decree."

READ Gen 17:9-10

What God expects of Abraham and his family – obedience ("you shall keep"). God's promise to Abraham is unconditional but his enjoyment of those blessings was conditional. You see this played out throughout Israel's history. Periodically God had to punish His covenant people for their disobedience (idolatry, violating His direct commands, not following His leaders, etc). Even us today, as His children, God often has to deal with us in our unbelief and disobedience. Eternally secure, yes, but not enjoying all that can be ours in Christ.

God directs Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household, which he does. This is God's appointed sign of His covenant with His

people. It is to distinguish those who believe in God and follow Him from those who do not.

READ Genesis 17:15-16

Sarai's name is also changed from Sarai (meaning "my princess") to Sarah (meaning "a princess"). Kings will come from her. She is no longer just Abraham's princess but she is the mother of royalty. Sarah will be the grandmother of Jacob and Esau, the patriarchs of the Israelite and the Edomite nations.

READ Genesis 17:17

Our commentary (Wayne Van Horne) says this: "Abraham fell face down. Yet this show of reverence, if that is what it was, was accompanied by a laugh of skepticism. Abraham knew his circumstances. He would soon be 100 years old. Sarah would be 90. God's renewed promise accompanied by a change of name for his wife seemed to overwhelm Abraham and rattle his frail faith. Clearly Abraham's laughter revealed a skepticism with which he received the news that he and Sarah would have a son."

John Phillips, however, says something quite different: "Abraham laughed out of sheer joy. The glorious impossibility of it!" He goes on to say, "And he laughed the laughter of faith as Romans 4 makes perfectly clear." Then Phillips quotes Romans 4:19-20: "He [Abraham] 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. **No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God**, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God."

I don't see Abraham as skeptical at all. He believes God and laughs out of pure joy.

READ Genesis 17:18

Abraham obviously loves his only son and does not want him to be left out. But God had other plans.

READ Genesis 17:19-22

God's covenant with Abraham involving all the elements we discussed earlier – seed, land and blessing – will come through Isaac and not Ishmael. God will bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation, but he and his descendants will not enjoy the covenant blessings God promised to Abraham. God terminates his conversation with Abraham. End of discussion.

Several applications from this lesson:

- (1) God takes ordinary people and makes them extraordinary.
- (2) God's blessings and promises may be unconditional (for example, our salvation: once we accept Christ we are eternally secure), but our enjoyment of our relationship with God in Christ is conditioned on our faithfulness and obedience to His Word.
- (3) God is sovereign. He has a plan and it will not be thwarted.