

Genesis 17 Rededicating ourselves to God

Introduction

If only....I am sure that all of us in our private thoughts could complete this sentence with particular circumstances from our past experience. Things we have done that we might not have done; things we neglected to do that we would eagerly agree to carry out if the opportunity arose again. Does that memory for you relate to your spiritual faith journey? If it does then remember that God can forgive all our past failures and wipe the record clean. We cannot change the past, but in the remaining years God has for us on earth we can use every moment for His glory through the choices that we make. In Psalm 103:10-13, David declared: *He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.¹³ As a father has compassion on His children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him;* Never think because of your past, whatever it may be, that God cannot use you in significant ways for your God and His glory in the present and the future. Here the covenant renewal was with an old man and an old woman; he was older than anyone in this congregation and her not a great deal younger! God keeps His promises. The timescale is often far longer than we imagine, but remember He is on the throne and in control. Do you need to be reassured about that fact this morning? We may live with numerous questions of ‘why this’ or ‘why that’ in our personal or collective circumstances, but we learn with Abram here that though we may have memory lapses He never does. Therefore the remarkable words of Genesis 17:1-2 can come with fresh power and encouragement to us today. Let’s look at them once more in the light of who He is and His faithfulness to us as His people.

1. The Confirmation of the Covenant (Genesis 17:1-8)

(a)**The Declaration** (Gen.17:1-2)*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be blameless. ² I will confirm My covenant between Me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.* Thirteen years had passed since Ishmael had been born (Genesis 16:16). It may be one verse in the Bible, but if your only baby has become a teenager then you are out of the habit and custom of changing nappies, sleepless nights (at least for the routine of young babies!) and all that goes along with child-rearing. If you were an older parent the first time round that gap has become a gaping canyon, as the possibility of further children becomes less likely. We must remind ourselves that the birth of Ishmael was never intended by God as part of His purposes for Abram and Sarai. Although God will bring good out of that situation, it may be that the wait for the conception and birth of Isaac was longer than might otherwise have been the case had they patiently waited for God’s purposes to be fulfilled. I think God waited until there was no human possibility of this couple naturally conceiving a child, and their acceptance of that reality, before He stepped in with an extraordinary miracle of grace. Romans 4:19 hints in this direction: *Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead— since he was about a hundred years old— and that Sarah's womb was also dead...* In a similar fashion after the Israelites left Egypt they were pursued by the Egyptian army and hemmed in by the Red Sea with nowhere to go and no-one else to whom they could turn. Exodus 13:10 records that *they were terrified and cried out to the Lord. ¹¹They said to Moses: ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?... How did God’s servant reply? Moses answered the people, Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you*

will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again.¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still. In the purposes of God the time had come, a new chapter in the lives of this couple was about to commence when they thought their most significant days were well and truly over. This fact reminds us never to underestimate what the Lord could do through each one of us –never think you are too young or too old or too whatever... He is able to accomplish His purposes through whoever is available to be His man or woman. God declared I am *El Shaddai (God Almighty)* –the one for whom nothing is too difficult. This compound name has an association with might or strength, yet the root Hebrew word behind it is *shad* which is the Hebrew word for the female breast [J.M. Boice, *Genesis* vol.2, p.137]. This adds a new dimension to this image of God, not only one who is all powerful, but also one whose nurture and care for His children is truly important as well. In verse two is the reassurance that God will keep His promises. He never forgets what he has agreed to do for His children.

(b) **The New Name** (Gen.17:3-8) *Abram fell face down, and God said to him, 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.* Verse 3 is a picture of worship not shock or the wrong sort of fear; *Abram fell face down* in a sense of awe and reverence and a sign of his acceptance of what God had announced to him. After this step of obedience was taken Abram received the blessing. This is a biblical pattern of obedience by faith when we cannot see the blessing then God honouring our steps of obedience. What did God say here? *You will be the father of many nations.* This seems an unbelievable thing to say to an elderly man! However, God took a further step and changed his name in Genesis 17:5: *No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.* Chinese evangelist Leland Wong had three biblical sentences on his headed notepaper. *The sun stood still* (Joshua 10:13); *The iron did swim* (2 Kings 6:6); and *This God is our God* (Psalm 48:14) [Boice, *Genesis* vol.2, p.128]. This was to constantly remind him of the greatness of God who can do what is humanly-speaking impossible.

However, names in that culture were highly significant with respect to their meanings. The majority of Bible commentators understand Abram to mean ‘exalted Father’ or in ordinary language an ‘important dad’! In the social conventions of the day when travellers passed by there would be all kinds of lengthy enquiries about health and family circumstances, not because there was a particular personal interest, rather because it was the social convention to show an interest in your guest or your host’s personal circumstances. This entailed enquiries about things we would today consider out of bounds and private to all except close friends and family. It is not difficult to imagine the comments on his name as enquiries were made concerning the number of children he had fathered. At first until the birth of Ishmael it would have been humiliating to admit- actually none so far! That’s’ called a conversation stopper! Maybe a joke would be made to cover the embarrassment, but it would begin to weigh heavily on his mind whenever such conversations began. What a relief when Ishmael was born. Now thirteen years later there is a fresh revelation from God to a ninety-nine year old man *God said to him, 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.* Abraham means ‘Father of many’. Can you imagine the thoughts of his family and employees when they gathered together for the announcement of his name change. God has changed my name from ‘exalted Father’ to ‘Father of many’. From a human point of view his servants must privately have laughed. They could not have been unaware of the struggles of Abram and Sarai to conceive one child in the past few decades. All of us in the course of our lives will have days when it is really tough to stand up for our faith because of some particular pressure or other. This had to be one of Abram’s toughest moments. To

declare what God had said to him left him no place to hide as the evidence would be absolutely clear one way or the other. Either he would be vindicated or humiliated; there was no middle ground here. This is emphasized in verse six. *I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.* The reference to *kings* here is unclear. However, if we assume knowledge of Matthew's genealogy where he lists the royal line of Jesus back to King David this would be a sufficient explanation.

(c) **The eternal covenant** (Gen.17:7-8) *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.* This is a repetition of the promise made by God to Abram in Genesis 15. The stakes then and now are very high. His claim on the Holy Land then in legal terms was nil. He did not purchase his first bit of land until after the death of Sarah when Isaac was in his thirties (Genesis 23). Even then a field with a cave in it to serve as a burial site must have seemed far short of what God had promised to give to him and his descendants. In the world's eyes, in his lifetime, it must have appeared foolish to make the claims he did. Only after his death, hundreds of years later did his descendants obtain an inheritance in the land in the time of Joshua. Time and again the Bible challenges us to work on a timescale greater than we want to imagine, so that purposes far bigger than we may be seeking will be fulfilled for the glory of God. In a world today when things must happen 'instantly' or they are forgotten, it is a completely different perspective on reality. We like Abraham are called to live by faith knowing that we will be honoured for standing firm for Him over the longer term even if in the short-term things seem very different.

We need to remember that God's covenants are one-sided He sets the terms. They are not bargained for like a human agreement. His covenants are also eternal and as a result never change. Hebrews 6:16-18 makes this clear: *Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.* ¹⁷ *Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath.* ¹⁸ *God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.* They are also gifts of His grace to us. We have no entitlement to them. However, covenants are also contracts between two parties. Genesis 17:4-8 *as for Me...* indicates what God promises to do and then in vs 9-14 *as for you...* indicates what Abraham and his Jewish successors were required to perform to fulfil their obligations to the Lord. Notice here in Genesis 17:1-8 God's seven declarations that: *I will...* do a variety of things for Abraham and his successors. It is no surprise that when God through Moses reminded the Israelites four hundred years later of His covenant that He confirmed it with a sevenfold declaration in Exodus 6:6-8: *Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'* ⁷ *I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.* ⁸ *And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.'* In response to His commitments in Genesis 17:1-8, verse nine onwards turns to the party with whom God is making this agreement. God says, *you must...* God is sovereign in His world, but we are also responsible for our actions. In the New Testament era the Holy Spirit opens our hearts and minds to sense of our need of Jesus, but we are responsible to yield to His promptings to trust the Lord. A person in whose life God is at work will show evidence of that work. A person whose words claim a Christian profession but whose lifestyle is at variance with it must by definition call into question their claims. We are saved by grace alone, but saved unto good works (see Ephesians 2:8-10).

2. The Sign of the Covenant (Genesis 17:9-14, 23-27)

(a) **The Explanation from God** (Gen.17:9-14) *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. Why can God move on to this next part of the encounter? Simply because Abraham had believed and accepted the promise from God. Paul emphasizes this point in Romans 4:18-22: Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, So shall your offspring be.*¹⁹ *Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead— since he was about a hundred years old— and that Sarah's womb was also dead.*²⁰ *Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,*²¹ **being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised.**²² *This is why it was credited to him as righteousness.* What extraordinary words. What incredible faith. His words remind us that increasing age provides no excuses for doubting the promises of God. Impetuosity in youth can tempt us to be impatient regarding the promises of God; a lack of evidence of the fulfilment of His promises could tempt us to be cynical or doubtful as the years pass by. Abraham made some huge mistakes which are clearly acknowledged in the Scriptures. However, in the light of that reality we must take great encouragement that such a fallible man could also accomplish so much for the Lord on his spiritual journey. His trust in God in old age was as profound here as that of a little child in their parents. To follow up the confirmation and explanation of the covenant God gives a sign of the covenant –circumcision. The act of circumcision was not unique to Israel. In fact of the neighbouring peoples only the Philistines were not practising this rite (details in Hamilton, *Genesis* Vol.1, p. 469). Proof that this rite was being carried out in the region is found on bronze statuettes in northern Syria as early as 2,800BC. In those wider cultures this rite was a social one carried out at puberty or at the time of marriage. However, in Israel it has religious significance declaring allegiance to the God of Israel and carried out when a male child was only eight days old. What is most significant is that there was no distinction between the highest social classes to the lowest of servants or slaves- this agreement was applicable to all equally. A male person in Israelite society who did not fulfil his commitment to the covenant was ‘cut off’ from the blessings of God’s favour to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:14).

(b) **The Obedience from Abraham** (Gen.17:23-27) *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.* This outward sign was evidence of inward obedience. Old Testament language in a number of verses illustrates this point. Deuteronomy 30:6 does so in a positive manner: *The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.* Leviticus 26:41 illustrates the mercy of God to those Israelites who had turned their backs on the Lord: *...when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin (through exile from the land),*⁴² *I will remember My covenant with Jacob and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.*

How long did it take Abraham to carry out this step of obedience? *On that very day...* This is why Abraham was known as a man of faith because of His willingness to take prompt action at these critical moments in his life. In 2000, during the Republican primaries to select their candidate in the US Presidential election, senator John McCain made a memorable speech in New Hampshire on 2 February that year. Speaking of George W. Bush, whom he defeated in that primary, he declared: ‘he is good at talking the talk but not good at walking the walk’. However, within three weeks the race was over as Governor Bush won the nomination as the Republican voters in several southern states took a different view, concluding that Mr McCain was the one whose actions were less consistent with his words than his rival candidate. This challenge though comes to all of us as Christians. How consistently do I seek to live in a way consistent with what I profess? Or in the words of James from his letter: *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*²³ *Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror*²⁴ *and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.*²⁵ *But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it— he will be blessed in what he does* (James 1:22-25).

3. The Evidence of the Covenant (Genesis 17:15-22)

(a) **The New Name** (Gen.17:15-16) *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.* The covenant blessings were also for Sarai and her descendants also. Her name would be changed to Sarah (meaning ‘princess’), in honour of the son that would be born from her womb. Here was another announcement that would astound the gathered crowd around Abraham’s tent. My wife has a new name in honour of the son she will bear next year at the age of 90! Even Abraham laughed at the extraordinary nature of this event. Some things in life are mathematically improbable, like the McCauley family from North Carolina who won the US lottery for the third time in July 2011, having previously been successful in 2007 and 1991 [BBC News website 27 July 2011]. Yet when God makes a promise He keeps it. This promise to Sarah is a parallel promise to that made to Abraham in Gen.17:6. God wants to make it crystal-clear that it is not through Ishmael that the covenant will be confirmed. God does not make mistakes. May He help us to honour our promises.

(b) **The New Son** (Gen.17:17-22) *Abraham fell face down; 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?*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.*²² *When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.* We can join with Abraham in his amazement at the way God works. We too have difficulties in understanding why God works in particular ways at times. Abraham had tried to resolve his problem by taking Eliezer his servant as a surrogate son; then by producing an heir through his wife’s servant-girl Hagar. Yet God meant what He said. Many of us have struggled with the issue of guidance from God at the time of key decisions in our lives. This is not so much an issue in contexts of right and wrong. We know God’s view in those situations even if we would have preferred the alternative! However, in many other situations there are options or choices that might in principle all be possible. There are further situations where we are distracted by what is going on in someone else’s life rather than giving the necessary focus to what God would have us do. Simon Peter was a

classic example of this scenario when he met with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee in John 21. Instead of concentrating fully on the profound things Jesus was saying to him, Peter noticing John nearby asked: *Lord, what about him?* Jesus' reply was blunt and clear; Peter that's none of your business. Your task is to follow Me on the pathway to which I have called you. If we sincerely dedicate or rededicate our lives to follow Jesus then He will not lead us in the wrong direction. I have many times taken much assurance from two verses in Proverbs: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;* ⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths* (NKJV). May God help us to trust Him implicitly with our lives as Abraham did with his so many years ago, for Jesus' sake, Amen.