

GENESIS

17:1-27

Genesis 17:1-27

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 12th November 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Joshua 24:14-15

Introduction

We are studying our way through Genesis — last week we got as far as chapter 16 — and there is so much we're able to learn from the characters recorded in its pages, with good examples to follow, and mistakes to avoid repeating in our own lives.

Specifically, last week, we saw how in the sadness and desperation of infertility, Sarai took matters into her own hands, offering her maid, Hagar, to her husband, Abram, as his wife, so that he might have a child through her. Abram, of course, was complicit in this — he wasn't merely a bystander — and in fact it was through his *prior* choice to take matters into his own hands that Hagar was around in the first place. And now, it was his choice to listen to Sarai, and act on her suggestion. The result being a son through his own efforts.

Immediately, we saw difficulty and tension in those relationships. Hagar even fleeing at first. And sadly, there was the promise of more trouble to come. And, now, as we get to chapter 17, we see the first heartache arising from that choice.

However, this is not a bad news chapter. Some even say this is the most outstanding chapter of Genesis, for in it God's covenant with Abram is clearly detailed, including the promise of a son through Sarai, who would be called Isaac.

Overview of chapter seventeen

So, breaking this chapter down, there are four distinct parts that I believe we see:

Overview of chapter seventeen

- **v1-8** — God's covenant with Abram
- **v9-14** — The sign of the covenant
- **v15-22** — The son of the covenant
- **v23-27** — The obedience of Abraham

First, from verses 1-8 we see God set out His covenant with Abram, changing Abram and Sarai's names in the process. Then, from verses 9-14, God tells Abraham what the sign of this covenant should be in his life, and in those around him. Then, from verses 15-22 we see God very clearly state how it would be through Isaac (yet to be born), and not Ishmael, that the covenant would flow. Before finally, in verses 23-27, we see Abraham obey God's requirement in setting himself and his household apart through circumcision, the sign of the covenant.

And indeed, the covenant is central to what we read here. For it is mentioned 13 times in 27 verses.

Chapter seventeen

Let's get going then, starting at verse 1:

Genesis 17:1

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless."

So since then end of chapter 16, around 13 years have passed, with no record of God speaking to Abram in that time. Now, with Abram almost 100 years old, and 24 years into his time in Canaan, God appears to him and introduces Himself as *El Shaddai*, translated as *Almighty God* — the first of many times that this name is used in the Bible. And let's take that in... ALL mighty God.

And He says; "you've done your bit Abram, relax, retire, don't worry about following Me". Except, of course, He doesn't, does He!

You see, age is no barrier to God using us. Nor should it be a barrier to us seeking the Lord, and walking closely with Him. And we see here, God tell Abram to follow Him. Essentially, "Be holy, for I am holy" is the command — just as it would be throughout the book of Leviticus. And just as it is in 1 Peter. We read there:

1 Peter 1:13-16

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

And age makes no difference to that. Whether you are 9 or 99, God wants you to follow Him, and honour Him in all you do. If you are in your later years, consider Paul's attitude. He said, even in the face of persecution:

Acts 20:24

But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Let each one of us — whether the end of our race is near or far — commit ourselves to running well, *and* finishing well. Walking before God, being blameless. As God commanded Abram.

Here in Genesis, God continued speaking to Abram, saying:

Genesis 17:2

And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

God is repeating the covenant that He made with Abram in chapter 15, which was a one sided deal, reliant on God's character, not Abram's. Perhaps thinking back to that moment, and realising he had not trusted God as he should, we read:

Genesis 17:3-4

Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.

Not "you might" but "you shall". God was not altering the covenant one bit. But now says something new:

Genesis 17:5

No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.

Now, perhaps we should consider the humour in these names. First Abram means "exalted father", a bit of an ironic name for most of his life when he didn't have children. And now, he has one son, and God changes his name to Abraham, meaning "father of multitudes". But in seriousness, God knows what He is doing, and what He will do in each of our lives. It doesn't have to make sense to us, it only has to make sense to Him. And those names, especially the later, did make perfect sense to God — who sees things that are not yet in place, as if they were. Because His promises are sure.

But also in the detail, we are reminded of the **principle** of the covenant, for it is the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet that is added to Abram's name — 5 being the Biblical number for grace (that is, unmerited favour). And indeed, throughout this covenant we keep reading the words "*I will*". We see that this is God's doing — not because Abram had *earned* His favour, but simply through grace. There is a pattern there that we also see in God showing unmerited favour to us.

Here, God continues talking to Abraham:

Genesis 17:6

I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

And this is exactly what happened, for the Israelites, Ishmaelites, Edomites and Midianites all came from Abraham. In fact, as we'll see, Ishmael had 12 sons, as would Isaac's son, Jacob. The rate at which his descendants grew was indeed exceedingly fruitful.

Genesis 17:7

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.

And we read that this covenant would not stop with Abram, but be passed down through his descendants. Not *time* limited, but forever. *However*, as we'll quickly see in this chapter and beyond, the covenant itself would be specific to one son, then just one of *his* sons, before God would establish a specific **people** that the covenant would apply to.

Genesis 17:8

Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

So, with the covenant would come the land of Canaan, not as a temporary measure, but as a permanent home. Now, Israel would only occupy it under certain conditions — first God would take them to Egypt in the time of Joseph, then he would allow the Babylonian's to take Israel captive when they had fallen into idolatry, before finally they would be dispersed in AD70 having rejected their Messiah. But each time God would bring them back to the land, which was *His* to give in the first place. And He has never declared that this everlasting is somehow no longer everlasting.

Genesis 17:9

And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

The matter at hand was *how would future generations know about the covenant?* — well, this is how:

Genesis 17:10-11

This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.

This is one of those chapters that makes us guys feel a little queasy, right?! And we might ask, what is this all about? In fact, we *should* ask that!

Simply put, circumcision was to be an outward sign of what God had already done. Much like baptism is for us. But it goes deeper than that. J Vernon McGee summed this up well. He said:

Circumcision is the badge of the covenant. The Israelites did not circumcise themselves in order to become members of the covenant. They did this because they had the covenant from God. Circumcision occupied the same place that good works occupy for the believer today. You do not perform good works in order to be saved; you perform good works because you have been saved. That makes all the difference in the world.

J Vernon McGee

That is *really* important to understand. Because many, many people think that being a Christian is doing good things to earn God's favour. But that's the complete opposite of how it works. God has *already* shown us His favour through sending His Son to die in our place, for our sin (that had left us separated from Him, and spiritually dead). And in response to that grace we can't help but do good works! And like the act of circumcision made the Israelites stand out from the world around them, so the circumcision of our hearts should set *us* apart from the world around us. That there would be a fundamental difference, as Peter writes:

1 Peter 4:1-6

Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

Here in Genesis 17, God gives specific instruction:

Genesis 17:12

He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.

Not only was Abraham told *what* to do, but *when* to do it. And this is very specific — stating this should be done on the eighth day after birth. Why then? Well, 8 is symbolic of new beginnings — hence 8 people on the ark, and the 8th note starting a new octave — but furthermore, we now know that Vitamin K, responsible for blood clotting, reaches its peak on the 8th day. How did Abraham know that? Or Moses as he wrote this down? They didn't — but God did! And he told Abraham to circumcise newborn boys on this specific day.

We continue:

Genesis 17:13

He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

That is, there was an expectation that if you were in a Jewish household, you acted in accordance with how that household was run. And so should it be with us — if we have visiting family, friends or lodgers, we should not adapt our lifestyle closer to theirs — skipping church meetings, stopping family prayer times, or compromising in our language, or allowance for what is acceptable on our TV screens. We're to take our walk with the Lord seriously.

Genesis 17:14

And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

In other words, a right response was to be taken seriously. If someone thought that honouring the Lord in the way He had commanded was of little value or importance, they were to be cut off from the nation for their wilful disobedience. Why? That others might not follow them.

And so there is clear application for us here. Our circumcision is not of the flesh, but of the heart — that is, there is not to be wilful disobedience in us toward that which God has commanded *us* to do. So, what has He commanded? To live in a way that pleases and honours Him as our Creator, our Saviour, our Redeemer.

And so, if someone in our midst is wilfully sinning against God — knowing what He says *not* to do, and doing it anyway — then we are to exercise good and proper judgement, and *if need be* cut that person off. What does that mean? It means, if necessary, putting someone out of the church for the **good of the body**, that others may not *learn* to sin in the same way, or use it as *permission* to do so.

We read such an example in 1 Corinthians chapter 5:

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

As hard as it is, there are times where a church *has* to do this. There may be times where *we* have to do this. Consider for a moment that a church is much like a hospital — it is a place where there is new life, where wounds are healed, and joints are put right. A place where the cancer of sin is cut out of our flesh, and the correct course of treatment for our ailments is set out plainly in front of us.

But sadly, not all patients are responding to treatment. And it's a terrible thing to watch someone be given the best care from the Great Physician and His Word, but it have no impact on them.

However, there's one thing more dangerous, and that is a patient so ill that they are starting to infect others. That others are becoming saddled with the same thing that is destroying them. In such cases, for the good of all, that patient is to be put into isolation. And that is what is to be done when someone's unrepentant, even defiant example, is putting others at risk.

However, this is where the hospital analogy stops. Because with God, there is grace. And while one reason to put someone out of a church is for the good of the body, the second reason is for the **good of the individual**. *But how does this help them?!* you may ask. In three ways:

- First, is realisation. That is, they may realise the seriousness of their sin. That it is not a trivial thing to disobey the Lord.
- Second, is reformation. That is, having come to their senses, they may come to Christ. Repenting of their sin and walking honourably before the Lord again.
- And third, is restoration. That is, with their walk with the Lord restored, they may also return into fellowship with the church. As a functioning part of the body, and not a festering wound.

This is seldom done in the wider church today. Far too often because sin is treated too lightly. But where it is done, sometimes well meaning but unhelpful attitudes lead to people saying "oh, that's too harsh on this person" and then going to that person and say "but we still love you" — not realising that they are actually doing them a disservice.

In the most extreme cases, these things split churches — I know of two examples; one where an elder reluctantly had to leave a church they served in because the pastor and other leaders did not want to deal with a worship leader who was sleeping with his girlfriend. And another where the pastor of a church was forced out, and the church split, because he refused to marry a christian daughter of an elder to a non-Christian.

We don't do these things because they are enjoyable, but because they are necessary. For the church, and for the individual.

Of course, God is gracious to us, as He was to Abraham. But like with Abraham, God wants us to respond with obedience — not only for His glory, but our good too.

Now, having made clear His covenant with Abraham, and the sign of obedience that He sought in him, this chapter continues:

Genesis 17:15

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

So as with Abram (who became Abraham), Sarai now becomes Sarah. Again, the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, signifying grace, is added to her name. And I can't help think how our identity also changed when God saved us, as we became beneficiaries of His amazing grace.

Genesis 17:16

And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her."

And God now makes clear that Sarah herself will have a son. Something both Abraham and her may long have given up hope on. And we read:

Genesis 17:17

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

This wasn't a mocking laugh, but one of joy. And I don't know about you, but there have been moments in *my* life where I have seen God do things that I could never have engineered, and all I can do is laugh, smile, and praise God for His goodness and kindness in that situation. That's what's happening with Abram here. How do we know that he wasn't mocking? Because of what we read in Romans chapter four:

Romans 4:19-22

And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Abraham didn't doubt that God could do all that He said. But then, all of a sudden, it seems it dawns on him; that Ishmael is not the one through which the covenant would continue. We read:

Genesis 17:18

And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

Clearly, Abraham loved his son, Ishmael. However, as we know from our study of chapter 16 last week, that Ishmael was born as a result of Abraham and Sarah taking matters into their own hands, rather than trusting God would fulfil the promises He had already made. Ultimately this was a result of Abraham following his flesh — and that's something God couldn't bless.

And all too easily we find ourselves doing the same thing. We start a relationship with a non-Christian, or accept a job that draws us away from the Lord, or try for children through unethical means — and then hope that God will somehow approve of our choices that are contrary to His will and His Word. But rather than asking God to bless our mess, we need to go to Him *before* we make our moves, and pray "Lord, not my will, but Thy will be done".

But here, Abram, does exactly that, and asks the Lord to bless his mess, saying "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!". What is God's response? We read:

Genesis 17:19

Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.

Simply put, God says *no*.

As we'll see in verse 20 in a moment, God is gracious in that He *does* bless Ishmael. But the *covenant* God made, and the blessing that would follow it, could only ever be poured out on the son of promise, Isaac — not on the one of the flesh, Ishmael. And you know, in similar fashion, you or I may make choices that are out of line with God's Word — and on the surface we may even see good things in them. The choices may even make us happy for a time. But they will damage our walk with God, and the sad reality of that situation we have put ourselves in is that it will never match that which God could have blessed us with if we had obeyed Him.

One of the greatest areas of struggle in my own life was holding out to meet and marry a Christian. And it was really hard. But one thing I appreciated along the way was a comment that one lady, who used to be part of our fellowship, said to me about her non-Christian husband — and that was "I really love my husband, but I never should have married him". What she was saying, was that there was a resulting heartache from her choice, as day after day she realised the man she loved didn't love Jesus. And you see that same heartache with Abraham — he really loved his son, Ishmael, but he should never have taken matters into his own hands with Hagar. And now, he realises the reality that God cannot bless Ishmael the way he had hoped.

We read in verse 20:

Genesis 17:20

And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Again, God is gracious here regarding Ishmael. And he did indeed have 12 sons as prophesied here, and recorded in Genesis 25. But, we read...

Genesis 17:21

But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."

So then, Ishmael would be blessed. But not the same way Isaac would be. Likewise, your choice to take matters into your own hands might work out OK in some regard. But God will never be able to bless choices you or I make that are contrary to His will, in the same way as He can bless choices we make in obedience and submission to Him.

And we read:

Genesis 17:22

Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

So, God, having made His covenant with Abraham, explained the sign of obedience that He sought, and then made clear that He would bless Abram's choices of faith, not of the flesh, has nothing more to say to Abraham at this moment. While Abraham *may* have still longed for Ishmael to be blessed in the same way as Isaac, God had made His answer clear. And we never see Abraham ask God to bless the works of his own hand again.

Verse 23...

Genesis 17:23

So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him.

So, Abraham obeys the Lord — not to earn the blessings of God's covenant, but in response to them — and he proceeds to have all males in his house circumcised. I can only imagine the conversations, as his servants said "you want to do what?!". Evidently, he was greatly respected for this to have taken place. But note some of the details of Abraham's obedience here.

First, with Ishmael 13 years old, Abraham could have said "here's a bit of flint, go do this yourself". But rather we see that Abraham took this responsibility upon himself. And as one commentator pointed out, this is a good example for us, dads. We can't just tell our kids to read the Bible and pray. We need to read with them, and pray with them. We need to lead by example.

Likewise, we can't merely *hope* that our kids will grow up to serve the Lord, we need to show them how we serve the Lord. And this does make an impact — for I learned to serve, not through sermons, not through books, but through watching my Dad and Mum. Some of my earliest memories are having babysitters because Dad & Mum were out leading youth club, or serving at the church we were at. And through the years I watched them sacrifice their time to serve in this church. And I saw Mum reading her Bible often, and Dad's faithful commitment to studying to teach — every Saturday night devoted to running through what he had already prepared that week for our benefit on a Sunday morning. And it's not just my parents — look at what we read in 2 Timothy:

2 Timothy 1:3-5

I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day, greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy, when I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.

We have a tremendous responsibility as parents. Next, we read:

Genesis 17:24

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

So another detail is that of Abraham's personal obedience. He didn't say "I've done enough already, I don't need to do this". Even at 99 years old he was willing to submit to what God wanted Him to do.

And we can't sit back in our later years thinking *how nice it is that young people are growing in their walk with the Lord*, but going to Bible studies, prayer meetings, or serving God are beyond us now. What we are physically able to do will look different throughout the seasons of our lives, but God is never finished with us, so we should not have reached a limit in how willing we are to obey, and walk with Him.

And we read:

Genesis 17:25-26

And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael;

As mentioned, Abraham led by example. But not only to Ishmael, for we read:

Genesis 17:27

and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Even in Abraham's daily business, he honoured the Lord. And he required his men to do the same. And there is a good principle we can apply here. For if we manage people, or run a business endeavour, we can set the tone — the tone being that we will hold ourselves to God's standards, even if the world around us doesn't require us to do so. One example to consider is that of the American fast food restaurant Chick-fil-A, that to this day is still closed on Sundays because of their family-run Christian values to set aside a day for rest and worship, despite the additional revenue that would reasonably be expected if they opened.

Simply put, if you are a Christian, then your business ethics should be derived from the Bible.

Looking back at these last few verses, we see Abram's obedience as a parent, as an individual, and as a leader of his household — including of those who served him. And I think our thoughts should be drawn to another godly man, Joshua, that would be one of his descendants, for we read these wonderful two verses in Joshua 24:

Joshua 24:14-15

"Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Conclusion

In many ways, given the things here that we can practically apply to our lives, this chapter is like a part 2 to last week's study. And so, if you missed it, please go to our web site (dcf.church) and catch-up on what we looked at there.

And as we each seek to apply this to our lives, let us be sure to seek the Lord's will in every area of our lives, and then be obedient to what He says. But with that, let me remind you, that understanding the will of the Lord in most cases does not come down to only praying and waiting for the Lord to speak to us, for He already has — through His Word, the Bible.

Note what Charles Spurgeon said:

You may take it as a rule that the Spirit of God does not usually do for us what we can do for ourselves, and that if religious knowledge is printed in a book, and we can read it, there is no necessity for the Holy Ghost to make a fresh revelation of it to us, in order to screen our laziness.

Charles Spurgeon

Application questions

This week, I have three questions that we can each chew on, as we apply this to our own lives:

- Are you asking the Lord to bless your mess, or that His will be done over yours?
 - Are you being obedience to him in all areas of your life?
 - Are you truly trusting Him that He is able to all that He has promised?
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