

4. Abraham, An Everlasting Covenant

Old Testament Heroes

Genesis 17

Warm-up Question: Do you recall a promise that you were given as a child that was never fulfilled?

Alternative Warm-up Question: Can you think of a situation requiring great patience, when you had to wait a long time on something or someone? How well did you cope in that situation?

Surviving the Wait

Waiting is hard. We live in a culture that doesn't want to wait for anything. We buy things on impulse, paying for it on credit rather than waiting until we can afford it. We will often buy food that we know is not the best for us, but hey, we're hungry and we want it now! Everything about the American and European culture is rush, rush, and more rush. It was refreshing for me to travel through Afghanistan, Pakistan and India more than thirty-five years ago. I caught a train from Quetta in southern Pakistan to Lahore in the north. It was incredibly cheap but the thing that struck me was that when the train stopped at stations, it often waited for half an hour while food merchants were going through the train selling curry and rice and other exotic foods before the train got underway again. When I caught a bus from Kandahar in Southern Afghanistan the bus didn't leave at a certain time, it left when it was full! I had to wait more than an hour for it to get going. I also remember visiting a post office to mail an aerogramme (those were the days!) and having to wait for the gentleman behind the desk with his feet up on the counter to have his 15 minute tea break (ahh, the British culture has left some good things behind, ha!). Everything today seems to be designed to have us going from morning till night at a breakneck speed. At one time in American culture, a family could live well on just one income—those days seem to have gone for most Americans. We are constantly challenged to do things faster and more economical than another company or another country. Most of us just want a break. Stop the train—I want to get off! Things were so different in Old Testament days.

¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. ¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ²Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." ³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you (Genesis 16:16-17:6).

When we take a look at the life of Abraham, we see a man who has learned to wait. The end of chapter sixteen points out to us that Abram was eighty-six years old when

Hagar bore him Ishmael, but chapter seventeen tells us that nothing had happened for 14 years until God finally spoke to him again at ninety-nine years of age (Genesis 17:1). What can we learn from what is *not* written about that time?

Why do you suppose God made Abram wait so long? What work does God do in a person through making him or her wait?

Some of the greatest lessons I have learned have been in times of waiting. God does His best preparation work in His servants in the waiting times. The prophet Isaiah gives us a picture of the preparation of a servant of the Lord:

Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. ²He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver (Isaiah 49:1-2).

For every servant of God called to do an important task for the Kingdom of God, there is a preparation time that is compared to the making of an arrow. There is a personal calling, then a preparation of what issues out from his lips, a cleansing of his language. There is closeness to the Lord, an intimacy under God's hand, before a polishing of his character. And then, lastly, there is the concealment in the quiver. During this phase of training and preparation, a man or woman of God is not allowed to do anything that is "seen" by the world, at least for a time. He or she is called to be in hidden ministry that has to wait until the right timing to be shot in ministry from the Lord's bow. Think of Moses and his having to wait forty years while shepherding his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness of Midian. God made him wait until he was eighty years of age before the Lord would use him to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt. He definitely had to endure the hiddenness and waiting of the quiver! Imagine how hard it would have been for him to be trained in the best schools of Egypt, and then do nothing seemingly of value while he shepherded the sheep in the desert. Why would God do that to a man? The greater the task, the greater the training.

The Patience Test

In the time of waiting God takes us through a patience test. This test happens to a man or woman of God when their expectations in God are not fulfilled "on schedule." (Of course, we think in terms of our schedule, not God's!) Patience is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 6:2). This word comes from a Latin word which means, "to suffer." To pass the patience test a person has to yield to the Lord for His will to be accomplished His way and in His timing. Men and women of God down through the centuries have been given visions of what He wants them to do, but almost always have had to wait for God to act. Why is this? God does not want His people to short circuit the process by jumping in and trying to fulfill the vision with their own strength and natural talents. He uses talents and abilities, which He has given to us, but in His own timing and His own way. This is the hard part.

The testing time is different and unique to each of God's servants. After all, The Lord knows each one of His children intimately. He knows what we need to experience in order for our character to be shaped so that we are ready for the task. For instance, Joseph was given a vision of his brother's sheaves bowing down to him (Genesis 37:7). The interpretation was that his brothers would literally bow down before him, but the fulfilling of the vision would be many years in the future. In the waiting period, Joseph's character had to be changed and made ready for his future as the vice president of the nation of Egypt. He had to endure years as a slave in Potiphar's house, before being falsely accused and thrown into prison. While in prison, the dreams of two men of pharaoh's staff were correctly interpreted, but Joseph short-circuited God's work by pleading with the cupbearer to get him out of jail. God made him wait another two years before Pharaoh's cupbearer remembered Joseph's unique talent of dream interpretation to Pharaoh (Genesis 40:23 and 41:1). Sometimes God deliberately makes a man or woman of God wait until things are humanly impossible before He moves in our situation. This is what He did to Abram and Sarai. Fourteen years had gone by and it was now many years since it had ever been naturally possible for Sarai to conceive and bear a child.

Why The Wait?

We know that God was teaching Abram and Sarai valuable lessons in this waiting period. Why did it go on so long? Do we have a part to play and can we delay God's promise by obedience or disobedience? It is impossible for us to know how long Abram and Sarai would have waited if they had never taken matters into their own hands. The "waiting time" is also a time of testing. We need to be alert and aware of the part we play in the waiting time.

[Do you think that we can hasten or delay God's answer by our obedience or disobedience? Think of a time when you felt like you had to learn a lesson over and over again.](#)

The Lord shows up after a fourteen year wait, twenty three years from the initial promise, and tells Abram that from now on he shall no longer be called Abram, which means *exalted father*, but his name from now is changed to Abraham, which means *father of a multitude*. The interesting thing about God's word to Abraham was that the Lord spoke in the present tense and not the future tense. He said, "I have made you a father of many nations (Genesis 17:5). Abraham was asked to believe God's Word about himself before it became a reality. Imagine what that was like going over to Mamre to see his friends, Eshcol and Aner, his allies in the war against the kings of the north (Genesis 14:13). How does a man tell his friends that his name has changed at ninety-nine years of age into *father of a multitude*? Do you think that Abraham corrected people every time they called him Abram? I wonder. Don't you think that Eshcol and Aner would have laughed at him along with many others of his friends? Today we would consider a person like Abraham to be eccentric!

El Shaddai

God also reveals Himself to Abraham by a new name, El Shaddai, translated as God Almighty in the New International Version. This is the first use of this name of God in the scriptures. El Shaddai describes the God who makes things happen by means of his majestic power and might. El signifies strong one, and Shaddai literally means the Breasted One. We should not understand that to mean that He has female body parts, it is a word picture of God as the Strong-Nourisher, the Strength-Giver, Satisfier, and All Bountiful, the Supplier of all the needs of His people. Yes, He is the one who can restore life and fruitfulness to Abraham and Sarah and cause them to have a child, and to fulfill every one of His promises to them and us.

What do you need El Shaddai to do for you—what prayer do you need to ask God about today? It will be a good opportunity to pray about the things shared towards the end of the study.

There is a condition though. Abraham must walk before the Lord and be *Tamiym*, translated into English with the word “blameless” (verse 1). *Tamiym* means to be complete, without defect, faultless, blameless, and having integrity. God has been watching the character of this man evolve over time as the Lord has been working in his life, transforming his character to one whose heart is blameless toward Him. He requires the same of us. Jesus said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Further, God tells him that he will be a father of many nations and that kings would come from him (verses 5-6). What amazing promises God gave to Abraham and to us also as His children. Each of us that have entered into covenant with God on the basis of the blood covenant of the Messiah has been called to walk before the Lord in purity and blamelessness. Do not let this world conform you into its image of godlessness and evil. Walking blamelessly before the Lord sounds difficult, almost as difficult as Jesus’ command to “be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.” How can we fulfill this command? We see elsewhere in scripture where Micah the prophet also revealed what God requires of man:

“He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Do you think it is possible to walk blamelessly before God, and how do you accomplish this?

An Everlasting Covenant of Land

The Lord goes on to speak of an everlasting covenant between Himself and Abraham’s descendants for the generations to come:

⁷I 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. ⁸The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (Genesis 17:7-8).

Do you think that the promises of God still stand today regarding the land of Canaan or Israel, as it is known today? Do you see both a natural and spiritual fulfillment?

God has promised that He would make of the seed of Ishmael and Esau, Isaac and Jacob’s brothers into great nations, but the Lord is clear that it is through Isaac that the promises of the land is to be reckoned. Later on, when there is tension in the family from Ishmael mocking Isaac, Sarah wants for Hagar and Ishmael to leave:

...Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, ¹⁰and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” ¹¹The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. ¹²But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because **it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.** ¹³I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring” (Genesis 21:9-13).

The land of Canaan was promised to the seed of Isaac. It was from this line of progeny that the Messiah, the King of Kings, was to be born along with many other kings of Israel. The Promised Land was given to them as an everlasting possession for the generations to come (Genesis 17:7). Later on, Abraham’s grandson Jacob was promised the land by God just to clear up the matter:

⁹After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. ¹⁰God said to him, “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” So he named him Israel. ¹¹And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. ¹²**The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you**” (Genesis 35:9-12).

Circumcision, the Sign of the Covenant

The people of Israel were required by God to have a sign in their flesh that would remind them of their commitment to the covenant that they had entered into with God. Much as a wedding ring is an outward sign that a person had entered into a covenant with another, so a Hebrew man had a sign on his flesh that was forever with him to remind him of his commitment to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

⁹Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰This 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.** ¹²For 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. ¹³Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. **My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.** ¹⁴Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:9-14).

Commentator R. Kent Hughes says this of the mark of circumcision:

“Significantly, circumcision involved Abraham’s powers of procreation—the area of life in which he had resorted to fleshly expediency—and had so failed. Man’s best plans and strength of will would never bring about the promise. For Abraham circumcision was an act of repentance and a sign of dependence upon God for the promise.”¹

Abraham had tried to bring about God’s will and purpose through doing what he could do (as in the matter of Sarai’s servant girl, Hagar, giving birth to Ishmael), and had miserably failed. God was now showing that He alone could satisfy their every need and fulfill the vision that He had given them. Only He was God Almighty, the great El Shaddai. Abraham had listened to Sarai and tried to bring about the vision by their own means, but now it was time to listen to the Lord and do things His way. He was finally at rest and waiting for God to fulfill His Word and His promises, by doing things His way and in His timing.

Circumcision is a sign upon the flesh saying that the Jewish people are committed to following God’s way in God’s timing. Later on, in the New Testament, we see that circumcision became a matter of great controversy among believers in the early church. When non-Jews became believers, some argued that they should be circumcised as well. Paul argued that this was no longer necessary. His argument followed the reasoning that believers should be circumcised at the heart level, and not focus on that which is physical.

²⁸A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹**No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart,** by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God (Romans 2:28-29).

This is the Sabbath rest of faith. No more do we have to please God by signs on the outward skin of our commitment to keeping the way of the Lord. Now it is a matter of the

inward heart. The Spirit leading and guiding us from within, not by a written code of trying to please God by the works of the flesh, but realizing that God has come down from heaven and satisfied all the demands of the Law. We please God from the heart, not from the flesh. Paul's teaching at this time was radical. Many who listened to him were offended. After all, had God not given the ritual of circumcision as a sign to them? In this case, the symbol had become all-important. Paul wanted them to see that it was a symbol of the truth that these new believers were already circumcised in their hearts, set apart though faith in Christ.

Thank God that we now have a new covenant, which has been sealed with Messiah's blood. He has given us what we need to be perfect and complete. When Christ died for our sanctification, circumcision was no longer required, as He is our sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30). Paul explained it well when he wrote: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Jesus Christ, and who put no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3).

Prayer: El Shaddai, Almighty God, the One who can meet every need of Your people, we bring our specific needs to You today/tonight. Would you come among your people and hear our specific needs expressed in our thoughts or words now? Thank you for all that you are doing in our lives. Cleanse us and continue your work of setting us apart for holy use (sanctifying us). Amen!

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