

“Isaac’s Birth”
Sermon for 8 September 2019
Texts: Genesis 17:15-27

The take-away from Genesis 17 might be summarized in this way:

God is the final arbiter of our lives, our works and our thoughts. We have his word to guide us in understanding his will for us, what it means to live pious, just and holy lives. That is his expectation. Furthermore he demands utter dependence and total allegiance (or loyalty) from us. Across the range of these concerns—our lives, works and thoughts—God asserts that he is the Lord and we are not. He would remind us that just as he freely engineered all of creation, he is both free and able to re-engineer it all at will. He can re-engineer any part of it at any time as he chooses because he is God.

It is a matter of revealed truth that he has chosen to love, be with and indwell whomsoever he chooses. Likewise he has redeemed, saved, forgiven those whom he favors—transforming and translating them whenever, wherever and howsoever he wills because he is the Lord forever and ever. When he says, **I am Almighty God, walk before me and be perfect**, he still means it. When he says, **my covenant is with you and you shall be a father of a multitude of nations** to Abraham, his word stands. He is not like man that he should change. Our assurance in things of faith is secured by his character, his faithfulness.

So, last week we spoke on the Abrahamic covenant—we covered the model of the consecrated life and we focused on vv. 1-8, today we pick up in verses 9-14 and complete the part of the covenant where God outlines what he will do for Abraham concluding with the command to circumcise **every male among you**—or, what God expects in return for these promises. Then, in verses 15-22 God turns his attention to Sarah, **blessing her. I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she will become nations, kings of peoples shall come from her** (v. 16) God is declaring what *he will do for her* who has been barren for over 90 years, her entire life. He will open her barren womb and give her a son. It will be up to Abraham (so re-named for the first time in verse 5) to break this news to her—she is not recorded as being present. Then it is written, **When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham** (v.22) to heaven, confirming that this was indeed was a heaven-sent message, a divine appearing. The remainder of the chapter (vv. 23-27) records Abraham’s swift and thorough obedience to the command of God to circumcise all the males of his household. *Walking before God*, so to speak.

There is a tendency, when we read Scripture, a mere six chapters (12-17) can cover twenty-five years and, in the course of that span there are three revelations—divine communications with Abraham recorded in these Scriptures. A fourth appearance is coming in chapter 18 bringing the total to four appearances in seven chapters. It is, start to finish, a fairly quick read. Very compressed twenty-five years.

Our setting is in or about 2066 BC and Abram is nearly one hundred years old (Sarai is ninety). And it has been thirteen years since the second appearance (in chapter 15) where the

covenant is originally established. This means a rather *thin* distribution of sparse communications¹. Meanwhile the promise of an heir, not answered through the birth of Ishmael(!) has been so strung out that this present visitation seems in part prompted by, or necessitated by a weakening of Abram's hope. A dilution, or attrition? Humanly speaking this is understandable. His walk by faith was tested by the pressure of things seen—and things as yet unseen are made questionable by that pressure. Among those pressures, of course, is the growth of his firstborn son, Ishmael. They are bonding and Abram may have begun to think of Ishmael as a possible substitute. Thus a wavering confidence, and sneaking doubts, could both be answered by a refresher revelation—which this appearing would appear to be. The record also suggests that Abram delighted in his first-born son, Ishmael—even as Isaac would delight in his first born Esau—yet Jacob was preferred even as Isaac had been before him. Coupled with his aging and the fact that both he and Sarai were beyond the ordinary ages for childbearing², we get the frustration. All of us who have been tested in a like manner know what it is to be content with what's in hand, the proverbial "bird in the hand being worth two in the bush." We would prefer that God not remove the possessed goods, our Ishmael's, and so compel us to walk by faith, or live in terms of "good unseen"—but that is exactly what God requires of every believer, ourselves included.

In each of these revelations, the character of God is disclosed and our duties are enumerated right thereafter. Here, as we noted last week, the **I am the Almighty God** (all powerful and unchanging, El Shaddai³) is directly related to Abram's need (remember, his wavering confidence). It is as if God is saying, you have nothing to worry about, son, it is impossible that one word of Mine, of my promises, should fail. In the previous appearance, Abram was, perhaps, anxious that the eastern kings he defeated might organize to retaliate against him. At that point God revealed himself to his servant, **I am your shield**. God remains our shield as much as for Abram (the name is timeless!); but at the time of its original utterance it reflected current circumstances—anxiety over reprisals by the eastern kings he, with God' help, had defeated handily. That is both timely and apt. Anyway this visitation had the effect of rekindling Abram's faith according to Paul who wrote (Romans. 4:21): **being fully assured that, what he he had promised, he was able to perform**. We, in our own times, might take encouragement from this **almighty and unchanging God** as well when the prospect of our Christian hopes

¹ We know each visitation occurred at a specific point in time, and that these occurred in a spaced out chronological sequence—their proper historical sequence. Four divine appearances, over a twenty-five year span. We also know that, from Abram's side, this time was punctuated by prayer and acts of worship (sacrifices etc). We must suppose that these gestures, from Abram's side, were frequent and, perhaps, regular. However, the fact remains that for someone who has experienced no visitations, no dreams or visions even, Abram's recorded encounters would be astonishing, very common. On the other hand, intermittent visitations are not identical with a life of continuous revelation, or discourse such as exemplified in the life of Christ Jesus. Given this, we might conclude that Abram's visitations were sparse, but that one's experience does share one's perceptions.

² Terah, Abram's father, was 70 years old when he began having sons—Abram was his youngest son and born when Terah was 130. The siblings had a 60 year span! If Abram was 70 when he moved to Haran, and Terah died five years later, which puts Abraham at the age of 75 around 2008 BCE—two years or so after the death of Noah (2006 BCE). Noah was 950 years old! The flood would, by this reckoning have occurred in or about 2348 BCE. Terah who was born in 1883 BCE in Ur lived 205 years. Dating is a curious and, admittedly, complicated topic.

³ El Shaddai is not the personal name of God (Yahweh is). God reserves the disclosure of that name for Moses (Exodus 3:14) centuries after this encounter. Shaddai occurs in the plural as in "majesties," not in the singular.

grow dim⁴: “Take my power into all your calculations and take certainty from it as you have need.” What a truth that is to own when we pray the scriptures, and the promises posted therein!

And so the subsequent duties: **walk before me and be perfect** (followed by the promise/consequence of multiplication⁵), do they not remind us of Adam and of Enoch who walked with God? These words are the precis of the whole chapter; everything is framed in their terms. However, here is **before me** not merely **with God**, suggesting an active life, one lived in continual consciousness of divine oversight and scrutiny. We are both naked and exposed to the eyes of the Lord, clothing not withholding. The love of God is an all-knowing love, informed and aware—not sentimental or squishy. We recall that this love is made incarnate in Jesus of whom it is written, **knowing that they reasoned thus** Mark 2:28) in their hearts, or perceiving **what was in a man** (John 2:23-25)! “Omniscient love” makes the compassions of God all the more remarkable, to know that God both knows us as we are and loves us despite ourselves is astonishing. Even the glorified One **whose eyes are as flames** (Rev. 9:12) embodies our God of love.

What manner of life will spring from the dual realization of divine might joined with complete oversight? Will it not be one of exact conformity to his known will—a perfect alignment of wills? One of perfection. We see that our conclusions confirm the **be ye perfect** that ensues—meaning follows **walk before me and be perfect**. The standard of moral excellence and the high mark of perfection are hardly strange to our ears as we consider the impact of this divine visitation. This high aspiration cannot be lowered (to meet frailty and weakness) if it is to promote the desired effect of noble actions and excellence from us. And, again, we are conscious that the **almighty power of God** (such as raised Jesus from the dead!) is in it—it is not merely our longing to win, or our desire to please, but his sanctifying power that initiates and brings to completion God’s *just* demand of perfection. He can (and will) bring about the perfection he asks of us. This is real salt, to borrow from Jesus’ metaphor, which imbues our living with its saltiness. *Towards a high mark (perfection) excels anything and everything lower*. Therefore, our moral perfections, demanded by God, are a testimony to the **almightiness** of God and not simply to self-effort and will power⁶. Our power is nothing to God’s omnipotence but because it reflects his power for us to excel morally, the world may see a testimony to God in our living.

The substance of God’s covenant is unchanged: the land will belong to your seed. That seed will be *numerous*. God himself will be Abraham’s **very great reward**. (Gen. 15:1) And now this word is expanded wider in Gen. 17:7-8:

7 I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. 8 I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning’s, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

⁴ Longing for lost friends and family to be saved, for a prodigal to return home, for justice to prevail, for gun violence to decrease, or for a moral re-awakening in America. . . all qualify.

⁵ As in **multitudes of nations**.

⁶ **Christ in us the hope of glory!** This is bigger, better than the self-actualization (Kohlberg’s “hierarchy of needs”). **Be mine** takes precedence over “Be yourself” in the eternal scheme of things. *To be like Jesus* is more aligned with **be ye perfect** just as glorifying God is superior to glorifying oneself!

This last article of faith (**I will be their God**) is repeated generations later see Jeremiah 31:33:
For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and their God and they will be my people.

Your part, Abraham, is to be submissive, obedient—no longer walk before Sarah, or Hagar, or even your own wisdom. Therefore he circumcises *the next day (new day, new page . . . marked with a permanent, irreversible marker*. Please note that these covenant ideas are not being read back into the record if they are found here at the very beginning of Hebraic monotheism. Even from the beginning the idea of reciprocity, God's possession by us and our possession by God, exists in the depths of the divine heart. God wants us to know we are his possession, his creation, his people.

Then comes a third seal on all parts of the covenant—or so I take it, “the promise of Isaac!” God says of Sarah: v.16 **I will bless her, and moreover, I will give her a son by her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her**. And then God performs it! He says, I will make you *fruitful* and Isaac is the essence of the imputed blessing (See Genesis 1:28; 9:1 and 7. Also take note of Gen. 49:8-12 where the blessing of Judah gets specific about the issue of kings pledged to come forth from her⁷.)

What happens next is quite shocking. Abraham **fell on his face and laughed**. It was not necessarily a pleasant laugh. Maybe it was bitter (What about Ishmael?), derisive (You're joking, right?) . . . petulant (What took you so long?). He responds with incredulity, scoffing unbelief perhaps? That's what I mean by *shocking*. **Shall a hundred year old man . . . shall a ninety year old woman, bear a child?** I can assure you Abraham wasn't thinking about Sarah's health concerns . . . or even the challenges of childbearing on a geriatrics ward! Besides, Sarah and he had taken care of this “heir business” with the surrogacy of Hagar. Ishmael was the product of their “pragmatic” intervention⁸ (their carnal invention, or pagan contrivance). They had contrived to *help God out*. Abraham's thoughts had flown to Ishmael. Why not Ishmael?! Let him be *the child of promise!* The sad heartbreak is apparent as rejection approaches. God found it more useful for Ishmael to remain, as a cautionary and instructive presence in the lives of his parents. He never pressed the recall button. Sin carries with it consequences.

There were several other, deep problems with Abraham's heir stratagem: 1. according to the doctrine of election, Ishmael was not it—Isaac who had yet to be conceived was! 2. Isaac was elect, Ishmael was not. Ishmael was clear evidence of Abraham dual failure of faith and patience. And Ishmael was the outcome of carnal policy (surrogacy, polygamy) which means he was conceived in sin—outside the constraints of God-ordained marriage, the narrow path of one man one woman for life. Polygamy is unholy. It is sinful and there is no way to dress it up into something God-ordained, or morally right. So God declares, This is not the Son of the Covenant I have ordained for you. This is not even the son of the covenant marriage who you

⁷ This whole priest/king, anointing (Chrism/Christos) thing is foreshadowed in the “King's Valley” visitation by Melchizedek in Gen:17-20. It is known as the Christology of Genesis theme. That blessing is here transferred to Abraham's seed by God himself via the blessing of Sarah.

⁸ Ishmael was the seed of Abraham, but not Abraham's seed by Sarah. She is indispensable to the union, not interchangeable. The fruit of her womb by Abraham is the plan! They, like Adam and Eve, were appointed of God to be channels for the blessings of progeny—lots and lots of progeny!

are to have with Sarah. Ishmael was your idea, not mine. He is exonerated somewhat by the fact that he resulted from parental sin and indiscretion. It was not his fault. However, he could not ever be the Son of promise; that was to be Isaac!

The promise of Isaac is in itself a rebuke of Abraham and Sarah's "help." God rejects their carnal contrivance. They wanted God's will on their terms. Isaac, however, is to be conceived the right way, out of the lawful one man one woman marriage of Abraham and Sarah. The Son of promise can only be the outcome of holy sex. The only sort of holy sex there is, biblically speaking, is sex within the bonds of marriage itself. Created and ordained by God, marriage is a divine (and biblically defined) institution, not a social construct, not a sociological category and, we note, marriage was created long before the modern confusions of secular psychology ever even fantasized about. Chaste single-hood and conjugal sex⁹ are exclusive categories. Surrogacy is not condoned; it is adulterous. Polygamy, even if consensual and socially condoned, is outside the pale. Polyandry, too. Unholy sex is extramarital sex; it is a form of sexual immorality known as fornication.

The weight of all that may be what leveled Abraham, **face to the ground**. But he is not glad, not joyful, not thankful—further he is not repentant of his unbelief, nor of his consensual¹⁰ sex sins (against Sarah, with Hagar). Nor is Hagar, the slave girl directly responsible for these transgressions—it fully lies with Abraham and with Sarah. I say this, recognizing that it is very likely that they will blame each other. Abraham apparently believed that he knew better than God—he did not—subsequent history reveals what kind of character Ishmael actually has. Abraham had set all his hopes on Ishmael—that was his problem. He set himself up for heart-ache that never would have occurred if he had waited to receive from God what God had promised. Many of us have repeated the same error. We want to see God's will be our will, and we want it to be done our way, and we want it now. *Abraham understands*.

Of course sin leads to discontent. It cannot satisfy. It always causes disappointment. God never errs. It is a fundamental mistake to assume that he ever has. Thank God that God doesn't do it our way. And we, for our own part, need to yield, submit and let it be done his way. Abraham's protest, Abraham's prayers are the murmurings of a disaffected sinner. We are blessed to learn, reading on, that Abraham doesn't remain in this course. And we should learn that to be willing to take what God is willing, in mercy, love and wisdom to send is the very best course. And what is that course? That in spite of sinful rebellion—and all the misuses and abuses of sin—**God reiterates his promises, keeps his promises: Sarah shall have your son next year; his name is to be Isaac.** Next year?! We have to hear that as someone who has waited a lifetime—not merely 13 years—for a son! Yes, always. God is faithful. Remember his word, remember him:

God is the final arbiter of our lives, our works and our thoughts. We have his word to guide us in understanding his will for us, what it means to live pious, just and holy lives. That is his expectation. Furthermore he demands utter dependence and total allegiance (or loyalty) from us. Across the range of these concerns—our lives, works and thoughts—God asserts that he is the Lord and we are not. He would remind us that just as he freely engineered all of creation, he is both free and able to re-engineer it all at will. He can re-engineer any part of it at any time as he chooses because he is God.

⁹ To be perfectly clear, conjugal sex is related to a married couple—legal spouses.

¹⁰ We may infer this by virtue of the polygamous union and Hagar's later aspirations.

It is a matter of revealed truth that he has chosen to love, be with and indwell whomsoever he chooses. Likewise he has redeemed, saved, forgiven those whom he favors—transforming and translating them whenever, wherever and howsoever he wills because he is the Lord forever and ever. When he says, **I am Almighty God, walk before me and be perfect**, he still means it. When he says, **my covenant is with you and you shall be a father of a multitude of nations** to Abraham, his word stands. He is not like man that he should change. Our assurance in things of faith is secured by his character, his faithfulness.

Further, we note the *contingency* between **Be ye perfect** and **My covenant is with thee** which follows. God's covenant is with those who honor, love and obey him. And so, if Israel breaks covenant with God, she proves herself unfaithful and not that God is faithless; she cancels the covenant by her own discretion and choice. We also see two seals advanced for this renewed covenant: the change of name, and the rite of circumcision; it is sealing of the renewed covenant as if this were the main purpose for this revelation. The change of name, being God's seal, is given to Abram and the performance of circumcision the seal from Abram's side. The first seal is a divine promise condensed to one word: Abraham, Father of a Multitude. It is not a visible thing.

What an irony to bear this name all the while being the father of but one! Surely the Canaanites would mock him with it—even as unbelievers mock today's Christians with their moniker of "saint." The facts are he is one hundred years old and, so far, he has but Ishmael to show for it! Would they write his new name off as senility? Or as presumption? What a farce! Even Abraham might imagine it ironic. But he took it, and he wore it whether it meant ridicule, or assurance. Again, this is not alien to us. God calls us **his children, co-heirs with Christ, sons and daughters** to signify his pledge, or to express his promise—we are a supreme example of his calling **things which are not as if they are**. It is, strangely, wisdom, faith and humility to take these names upon ourselves—even as Abram took on Abraham, and, Sarai became Sarah despite both terms meaning "princess." Imagine, a princess at ninety! Beautifying the beautiful.

Letting our desires to be known is fine, but insisting on meeting them our way is a sure road to disappointment and misery. We are reminded why Jesus urges us to pray, **Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**. This could have been the gladdest moment of Abraham's life, but, due to his rebellion pursuant to his unbelief (and sin), it wasn't. But, Abraham did what he was commanded to do immediately following their conversation. **He elects to walk before God; he chooses to live holy and the rest is history—our history**. It seems that he got a grip. He was ninety-nine and Ishmael was thirteen on the day they were circumcised together. Ishmael was not outside the covenant blessing even though he was not the Son of Promise in that covenant. This obedience is pleasing to God. Sin is not. **Amen**