

Genesis 17:1-14 // Walk before Me and I will be Their God

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[0:00] We're reading from verse 1 to verse 17. And you can find that on page 17 of the Bibles in your seats. So starting at verse 1.

When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. Abram fell face down and God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you.

You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham. For I have made you a father of many nations.

I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations of you and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.

[1:02] To be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give you as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you.

And I will be their God. Then God said to Abraham, As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, for the generations to come.

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

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. 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.

[2:04] Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant. God also said to Abraham, As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai.

Her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and I 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.

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?

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray as we sit.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

[3:08] Amen. In recent weeks, we've been in Genesis in the evening. Genesis, as you all know probably, is a book about origins.

It's about the origin of the universe. It's about the origin of the people of God. And that couldn't be more relevant for us thousands of years later. Because when we come to the New Testament, we are told that Abraham is the father of our faith.

And that as Abraham put his faith in God, he has become for all of God's people, for all time, a kind of a model for faith that we're to live by.

But more importantly than Abraham's faith, we learn as we look at tonight's reading and about the whole of Genesis, how God builds a relationship with Abraham and with us.

In chapter 15, that's a couple of weeks ago, he was told, look up at the stars. On a night in the Middle East, gazing at a countless multitude of stars, God says to him, so shall your offspring be. [4:23] And we heard verse 6, a momentous verse that we hear later on in the New Testament. Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

But then, last week, we heard how Abram and Sarai still had no children. Their challenge was how to wait for God, was how to wait for him to keep the promises he had made.

And last week in chapter 16, we discovered that they couldn't, or at least didn't wait. And they had a bad plan to hurry things along. And this evening, we've gone on another 13 years from last week, from chapter 16.

And the Lord appears again to Abram. And I guess that's an encouragement because it means that the Lord hasn't given up on foolish Abram and Sarai.

Verse 1, when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

[5:42] Now, I think it's worth looking at the links back within Genesis. Last week, as Josh was preaching on chapter 16, he showed us the link between Genesis 3, that's Adam and Eve's sin in the garden, and Genesis 16, Abram and Sarai's sin in the matter of having a son.

On neither occasion did they trust God's word. Our chapter, we have a much more positive link back.

In our chapter, we're linking back to Noah. God said, walk before me faithfully and be blameless. When we think about walking faithfully with God, I guess we might think of two people, particularly in the earlier part of Genesis.

Some of you may jump to Enoch. He may be one of your favorite Bible characters, partly because we know so very little about him. It says that Enoch walked faithfully with God, then he was no more because God took him away.

Enoch and Elijah are the only two Old Testament characters who are taken straight up to heaven directly. But I'm not talking about Enoch tonight.

[7:05] The connection that I want to observe is the one with Noah. Noah, in Genesis 6 and verse 9, it says, was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.

And that's a very close echo of our chapter. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. It's the same word for blameless and the same word for walk, and actually, in the Bible, there's no word for faithfully.

It just says walk with God. The root meaning for blameless is to be complete, to be whole.

Or the blameless one is wholehearted, putting all his energy into one pursuit. Well, that's what Noah did. I think he's a wonderful example of wholeheartedness when you think about his ark project.

But also, it's what Abram has to do. There is a slight difference. I don't know how significant it is, but Enoch and Noah walked with God, we're told.

[8:20] Presumably, that means that God walked beside them and chose the way. Abram, on the other hand, is called to walk before God. Maybe in a way, Abram is rarely able to walk with God.

From the time reference, it's at least 13 years since the last time God spoke to Abram. Ishmael is now a teenager. Abram has to go forward in trust.

Before God could be literal, but I don't think it is. I think the idea of walking before God is to walk under the eye in regard of God.

Walking openly, transparently, where the wholehearted person is happy to be. Abram didn't frequently meet God in a dramatic way.

I think it's important to realize that. Sometimes we imagine these saints having frequent meetings with God. But actually, it's 13 years. Most of the time, he had to go forward in faith.

[9:29] Aware that God sees and cares. And seeking to behave as a friend of God should. One point that some of us in particular need to note is that Abram is 99.

The call to blameless walking isn't just for the young. The church needs to work with the over-60s as well as with the under-30s.

This morning, we heard about ONIX. But we weren't told what ONIX stands for. That's our ministry with older people. And it stands for old, not yet extinct.

I apologize for the spelling of extinct. And then in verse 2, God says, Then I will make my covenant between me and you, and will greatly increase your numbers.

So actually, there's a second parallel between this story and the one of Noah. So blameless walking characterized Noah. It's to characterize Abram.

[10 : 33] But there's also the connection in that they're both involved in covenants with God. Seven times the word covenant is used with Noah.

All in chapter 9. But one in chapter 6. Thirteen times with Abram. All in tonight's chapter. Except one in chapter 15.

I'm not sure that pattern of one, then many, is significant. I'm a mathematician. I always look for number patterns. Otherwise, the word's only used twice in the whole of Genesis.

And each time, it's between human beings. Now, the word covenant means promise or agreement. When the two human beings later on in Genesis make a covenant, they're making a treaty of promises to each other.

When God makes a covenant with human beings, the agreement is less symmetrical. God makes a promise. And sometimes there's a responsive but different promise from us.

[11 : 38] And the Noah and the Abram covenants have certain things in common. In both cases, it's an everlasting covenant.

In both cases, it involves descendants. Noah's one, of course, famously involves multiplication. If you want my favorite Noah joke, I won't tell it now. Ask me another day.

And in particular, in 9 verse 11, God says to Noah, I establish my covenant with you. Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood.

So it's a covenant of protection for Noah. And this is where the two covenants are very different.

The covenant with Abram isn't about protection so much as about relationship.

It's about relationship with God. So at this point, I want to move from talking about comparing this chapter with Noah.

[12 : 44] I now want to compare it with chapter 15. You'll find it all on the back of the notice sheet. So if I get in a muddle, you can sort it out. In chapter 15, God made the covenant and promised a son, countless offspring, and a land.

So how is chapter 17 different? Is this just a reiteration of what you've already heard two weeks ago? I think not. I think it's more and exciting.

Firstly, it's more specific. Verse 4, As for me, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations. Yes, he'd been promised countless descendants.

But now more specifically, there are many nations of descendants. Secondly, there's a new status for these descendants. Verse 6, I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.

Not just any descendants, but there's going to be David and Solomon. There's going to be ultimately the Lord Jesus. And through the Lord Jesus, Abraham is our father.

[13 : 58] That's what Paul says in Romans 4, verse 16. Abraham is the father of us all. As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations. And if you look around tonight, you'll see what many nations involved.

Many nations involves people coming from all nations to be family, together. Children of Abraham.

And thirdly, I think the scale in our chapter is even more staggering than it was in chapter 15. I will make you very fruitful. Do you think that Abraham's neighbors laughed about his new name?

Here was this 99-year-old with one son with a slightly dodgy plan. And now he's going to be the father of many nations. Him. But God's promise is underpinned by new names.

The Lord at the very beginning of our chapter revealed a new name for himself. El Shaddai. It's usually understood to mean God Almighty.

[15 : 11] Kidna says in Genesis, Shaddai tends to be matched to situations where God's servants are hard-pressed and lacking reassurance. Here Abraham needs to know that there will be a land and a son.

It's really going to happen. And it's guaranteed by El Shaddai. It's guaranteed that it's really going to happen. Abraham needs to move on from his untrusting state in chapter 16.

He needs to look to the God who has bound himself to him in a covenant. God is able to do what seems to be impossible. God says to him, I am God Almighty.

I can do it. And that makes all the difference. And should mean that Abraham could wait. And that we could wait. And then El Shaddai gives Abram a new name.

No longer will you be called Abram. Verse 5. Your name will be Abraham. For I have made you a father of many nations. Abraham means father of many.

[16:20] Or ESV says father of a multitude. It's an extension from Abram. Which means exalted father. And these names are a reminder of who God is.

God Almighty. And it's a reminder of who Abraham is. Father of many nations. may may may may
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generations to come, which I think we could all pass in a slightly shorter form.

But it's really clear. It's been me and you and all these descendants are making a covenant with all of you. And I'm going to... And it's also a covenant that involves space as well.

I get to give you the whole land of Canaan where you now reside as a foreigner. At the moment, you haven't got any of it, but you're going to get it all. But actually, it's not that that's really important. What's really exciting is verse 7. I will establish my covenant to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. Or even more exciting and more succinct in verse 8, I will be their God.

[18:01] That's why I chose that as my heading. I will be their God. Because the relationship that God is bringing into being through this covenant is more important than the benefits.

The benefits of the land or all the wonderful things that God is promising. What's really important is that God says, I'll be your God. And the rest of the Bible is there to spell out to us what it means to have God as our God.

To give you three quick examples, Exodus 6, verse 6 and 7, God says, I am the Lord and 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. I will take you as my own people and I will be your God.

That's the climax each time. In Jeremiah 30, verse 22, you shall be my people and I will be your God. And of course, at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21, and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them.

[19:23] They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. The covenant is not just about protection as it was with Noah.

It's about relationship. Now, of course, this is unpacked in wonderful ways in the Bible and we can have whole sermons on God as friend, God as father, God as husband, God as brother.

But we can start here with God as our God. And we can affirm this evening that we're not just called to imitate Abraham's faith, but we're actually part of Abraham's family.

Abraham's God is our God. We've already begun to notice one other difference between 15 and 17. In chapter 15, the challenge to Abraham was to believe. That famous verse, he believed God and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.

[20:35] That's justification. In chapter 17, the challenge is to be holy, walk before me, and be blameless.

That is sanctification. In our section, there's a distinction we can make and it comes out quite nicely in the Hebrew and in the English in two little phrases.

Verse 4, it says, as for me, and verse 9, it says, as for you. God says, as for me, and then he makes promises to us.

Then in verse 9, he says, as for you, and he tells Abraham what he has to do. And I think there's more for Abraham, much more for Abraham to do in this chapter than there was in chapter 15.

In chapter 15, as God makes the covenant, Abraham had to do little other than watch. He had to be there. He had to see the brazier going through between the dead animals.

[21: 41] He did have to drive the birds of prey away. But it was a fairly straightforward task, I think. I've never tried it myself. But here a further response is called for.

One was a response we had at the beginning, which was walk before me. And the other response is spelled out starting in verse 9. As for you, Abraham is given a badge of belonging, of ownership, and membership.

Circumcision was practiced by other people in the Middle East. But as far as I'm aware, it wasn't administered to babies. It could, for example, happen at puberty as a sign of growing up.

And Abraham is given this outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace that he had received as the Lord had become his God.

Taking chapters 15 and 17 together, we have inward faith and outward seal. We have imputed righteousness and expressed devotion.

[22 : 53] Paul makes much of the order. It's faith first, circumcision second. In Romans, he puts it like this. We've been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.

Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised or before? It wasn't after, but before. He received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

Abraham was justified by faith, not by circumcision, but that doesn't make circumcision unimportant. It was a sign, obviously, and a seal to authenticate him.

moreover, in verse 14, it says this, any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. Circumcision is the essential mark of belonging. It's so important that this carries on down the generations.

[24 : 08] It's even, the importance about the generations even comes out in a slightly strange way in the text. I have to read this bit in the King James Version because I want to be able to distinguish between thee and you.

In the As for Me section, it goes, I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations. Whereas, in the As for You section, this is my covenant which he shall keep between me and you and thy seed after thee.

It seems like there's more emphasis on the need to pass it all the way down, all the way down into history. There's one other tiny little detail in verse 14.

It says, literally, any uncircumcised male, that soul will be cut off from his people. We're talking about something in the flesh but it affects souls.

Now, I'm not going to go in great detail into how this ties into the New Testament. Just a few minutes as I draw towards a close. In the New Testament, as you know, physical circumcision is no longer required.

[25 : 29] It was a big issue in the early church because Jewish believers, many Jewish believers said that, you know, it was an essential for everybody.

And in Judaism, Abraham is in a way the cause of division in the world. There are two loops of people. There are Abraham, who are the circumcised, sons of Abraham, the circumcised ones. There are the in people and then there's the uncircumcised, who are the outside people. But Paul says it doesn't work like that any longer. Abraham is in fact the rallying point for all who believe, circumcised and uncircumcised, that we're all in Abraham through faith.

and it actually is the case that in a complicated way circumcision is not physical but spiritual.

Even in the Old Testament people were beginning to see that. In Deuteronomy it says, circumcise your hearts therefore and do not be stiff-necked any longer.

[26 : 45] So it's clear there that circumcision isn't just to be a physical thing, it's to be affect your heart. Obviously not physically. It's about a transformed life.

That's what we're supposed to have. And it's that sense of a transformed life that Paul refers to when in Colossians 2 he puts it like this.

In Christ you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ.

Having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead. Now, that's a whole sermon in its own right but I'm not going there very far.

But what I think I want to say to you now is that when you're born again you put off the old life. You are spiritually circumcised.

[27:47] you don't need to remove a small piece of flesh. Something more important has happened to you. And that new and something that new exciting thing death to sin raised to new life is then symbolised by baptism.

baptism. But I'm not going to go all that far there tonight. What I want to say to you tonight is to go back to my main point. I want to say our passage has two main points.

It's about God's action. God says as for me and God makes himself our God. He's the almighty who brings children and lands into being.

But he's also which is my second point that he calls us to the Christian walk. When you say the phrase Christian walk some people imagine John Cleese in some strange way.

This is some new walk they haven't heard about before. But we're not talking about that. We're talking about living blameless lives wholeheartedly in the sight of God.

[28:56] Living the new life of those who've received the spirit it. But so we have God is for us the promises he makes and then there's the call to wholehearted obedience.

Those are the key things but the sign and the seal matter too. For them it was circumcision. For us it's baptism.

The sacrament matters. I'm looking forward to that in two weeks time. but I'm not going to talk about that tonight. I'm going to stop there. Let's pray as we sit.

Heavenly Father thank you that you are our God. Thank you that all of us who have faith have you as our God.

We're all children of Abraham. We're all one in him. And Lord we rejoice in that. But now we ask that you help us to be ones who walk faithfully before you aware of your presence of your word and wholeheartedly blameless before you.

[30:22] for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. All right.