

First Things – Genesis

Genesis 17

“Covenant 2.0”

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1. On November 20th, 1985, a young but ambitious computer technology company, *Microsoft*, shipped the first version of its new operating system called *Windows*.

2. The first version was identified by the number 1.0. In 1987, it was followed by *Windows 2.0*, which was followed shortly after in 1990 by *Windows 3.0*, and 3.1.

3. Since then, *Windows* has gone through no less than nine different upgrades, and today, almost 90% of home computers run on some form of the *Windows* operating system.

4. Back in Genesis 15:18, it says, *“In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram...”* That covenant was given to confirm the promises that God had made to His servant Abram.

5. It is the first mention of what is known as the Abrahamic Covenant. It is what you might call “Covenant 1.0”.

6. Chapter 16 records the sinful shortcut that Abram and Sarai attempted with their servant, Hagar. Some thirteen years after that, God appeared again to Abram, and expanded upon His original covenant.

7. This “Covenant 2.0” is recorded for us in Genesis 17. This is an important chapter in the book of Genesis, and also in the whole of Biblical revelation.

8. Though we as Christians are living under the New Covenant, mediated by Jesus Christ, we are still very much interested in the record of this Abrahamic Covenant.

9. Galatians 3:29 says, *“And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*

10. The truth of this covenant still touches us today, and in the record of it we learn some things about our God, and how He graciously deals with His people.

11. Look over this great chapter with me, and let's consider what we learn here about our Lord and His covenant work in our lives. First of all, we see here that:

I. GOD APPROACHES US ON HIS OWN TERMS

1. In one of his recent books, D.A. Carson writes about the covenants of God in the Bible. He titles that chapter, "The God Who Writes His Own Agreements."

2. Carson describes how very often in history a covenant would be imposed by a greater nation upon a smaller one. It was a "top-down" sort of covenant, where the terms were all decided by the greater power.

3. He goes on to say, "Similarly with God: he is the God who writes his own agreements, his own covenants..."ⁱ

4. That is certainly the case with the expanded covenant before us in chapter 17. Some nine times in this chapter, God refers to this agreement as "my covenant".

5. We are reminded here that our relationship with God must be on His terms. He comes to us by grace, and we can respond to Him only according to the terms of His agreements.

6. Consider the terms of the covenant in this chapter. Notice firstly that:

A. God performs the primary responsibility

1. Chapter 17 opens with a special appearance of God to Abram. God calls Abram into the covenant saying, "...walk before me, and be thou perfect [literally "blameless"]. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly."

2. Abram's response is a fitting one for anyone who finds themselves in the presence of the Holy God. Verse 3 says, "And Abram fell on his face..."

3. Over the next four verses, God promises as His part of the covenant that He will make Abram the father of many nations, the ancestor of Kings, and the inheritor of the Promised Land.

4. He also says in verse 7, that this covenant is not only to Abram, but to his seed after him, "...for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee."

5. We see here that the responsibility of bringing about the results of this covenant rests upon God. Abram has a part of obedience, but the covenant overwhelmingly depends upon the work of God.
6. Eleven times in this chapter we find the Lord saying, "I will." The real work of this covenant was something the Lord Himself would do.
7. We are reminded here that our relationship with God does not depend upon our work. We must "walk before him" and submit to His authority, but the blessings of the covenant are His to do and His to give.
8. Abram had nothing with which to bargain and negotiate with God, and neither do we. If anything comes from our relationship with God it will be because of His work and His grace!
9. As we live today under the New Covenant, we are reminded in this Old Covenant that, *"...by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."* (Ephesians 2:8)
10. As God approaches Abram with the terms of His covenant, we see not only that God performs the primary responsibility, but we see also further that:

B. God prescribes the participant's responsibility

1. Technically, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. That is the case in this covenant as well. In verse two, God describes it as, *"...my covenant between me and thee..."*
2. After God has laid out His promises in the covenant, He says to Abram in verse 9, *"Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations."*
3. What was Abram's responsibility in keeping this covenant? Look at verse 10: *"This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised."*
4. Up until now, God's promises to Abram had been unconditional. Nothing specific was asked of Abram apart from simply believing God.
5. Now, however, a sign and symbol of Abram's agreement with God is given in the form of circumcision.

6. The sign itself testified of a truth regarding the relationship between Abram and God. Circumcision is a cutting back of the flesh. It reminded all who underwent it that they were not to depend upon their own flesh, but upon the work of God.

7. Notice what God says about this sign in verse 14. He states that whoever does not submit to this sign, "*...that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.*"

8. In other words, only through this symbolic act could someone enter into the blessings of this covenant with Abram and His descendents.

9. This was God's way, and there was no other way that a man could enter into agreement with Him.

10. Today, our covenant with God is based upon the work of Jesus Christ alone. Colossians 2:11 says, "*In [Jesus] also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.*"

11. If a man wants to enter into the blessings of a relationship with God, He must do so only through the way God has prescribed, and that is through Jesus Christ.

12. There are not many ways to God. We don't choose the way in which we deal with Him. We must come to Him on His terms, or we cannot come to Him at all.

13. In Acts 4:12, Peter preached Christ saying, "*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*"

14. R. Kent Hughes says, "How this flies in the face of conventional religious culture, which imagines that it is God's duty to accept us...as long as we are doing our best."ⁱⁱ

15. God is not like ancient Rome. All roads do not lead to Him. We come His way or we do not come at all.

16. Looking further at this text, we see here not only that *God approaches us on His own terms*, but we see also secondly that:

II. GOD ADDRESSES US WITH HIS OWN TITLES

1. Several years ago, my dad preached a series of messages on the book of Genesis. He entitled his sermon on chapter 17, "Three Brand New Names"ⁱⁱⁱ.

2. In this chapter God reveals some new titles, both for Himself and for His people.

3. In these new names we are reminded of who our God is and of how He controls the lives of those who put their trust in Him.

4. Consider these new names that God gives in this chapter. First of all, in the name He uses for Himself, we see:

A. How He reveals His character

1. Look back with me to the opening verse of this chapter. It says, *"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God..."*

2. Notice the title "Almighty God". This is the first of some 48 times this particular name of God appears in the Bible. It is the Hebrew name, *El Shaddai*.

3. The name speaks of the all-sufficient power of God. It is a title He used to confirm to Abram that He was able to do everything He would promise in His covenant.

4. Need I remind you that the God who revealed Himself to Abram as *El Shaddai* - the Almighty God – is the very God we have a relationship with through His Son, our Lord Jesus.

5. He is the God who changes not, and who still today is omnipotent, able to do "exceeding, abundantly" more than we can even think to ask!

6. Comedian Steve Allen once told of a man who had a terrible time remembering names. On one occasion he was trying to recall the title of a famous poem. He said, "You know! Only 'whatshisname' can make a tree!" The title of the poem is, "Only God can make a tree".

7. As we live in a covenant relationship with God through Christ, let us not forget His name! He is *El Shaddai*, and He has the power to keep His Word to us!

8. As we see God giving His own titles in this text, we see not only how he reveals His character, but we see also:

B. How He renames His children

1. Look now at verse 5. God says to Abram, *"Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee."*

2. The name "Abram" means "exalted father", which is kind of funny seeing he had no children for so long. But if that seems like a strange name, it is nothing compared to the new name God gave him.

3. The name "Abraham" means "father of multitudes". At the time Abraham had only one son, and he was not even the promised son.
4. Look now at verse 15. It says, *"And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be."*
5. While the meaning of the name "Sarai" is not exactly clear, the name "Sarah" means "princess". What does a princess do? She gives birth to kings.
6. What we have here is God naming His people, not according to their present condition, but according to what *will* be true of them by His grace and power.
7. Is that not what God does for us as well? In the New Testament, we who are sinners by birth are called "saints" by the new birth. We who are originally children of the devil are called the sons of God!
8. I Peter 2:9 says that we are, *"...a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people..."*
9. Because God sees us in Christ, He identifies us not by what we are or were, but by what we can and will be by His grace!
10. When my wife married me, she took my last name. According to the law, she is now Angela Lee Trivette. Truthfully, nothing in her DNA changed. She is still very much a McNabb. However, her relationship with me has changed her name forever.
11. In much the same way, when we are joined with Jesus by faith, we receive a brand new identity in the family of God, based solely upon our relationship with Him!
12. In this great chapter, we learn not only *that God approaches us on His own terms, and God addresses us with His own titles*, but we see also that:

III. GOD ANSWERS US IN HIS OWN TIME

1. Look with me now at the latter part of this chapter. After God renames Sarah, he says in verse 16, *"And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her."*
2. It had been some 23 years since God originally promised Abraham a descendant. It was more than a decade before when Abraham had asked in chapter 15, *"...Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless..."*

3. This answer to God's promise and Abraham's desire was a long-time coming. Nevertheless, it was coming.
4. We are reminded here that God operates on His own divine schedule. When we trust in Him, we must remember that He does things His own way and in His own time.
5. Consider how God answered Abraham, and what it means for us today. Firstly, notice that when God answers us, it is:

A. Not according to our plans

1. We will look at Abraham's initial response to this answer from God in a moment, but notice first the request he makes in verse 18. It says, *"And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!"*
2. Though God is talking about a new son, and a new blessing, Abraham cannot forget his own son, and the work he had tried to do himself.
3. Look at verses 20 and 21. God says, *"And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year."*
4. God was gracious to Abraham and to Ishmael, but He would not change His will for Abraham's. He was working according to His sovereign plan; not Abraham's selfish one.
5. As we read this, let us always remember that God doesn't need our advice. He doesn't call us to help Him run the universe, or set out the strategy for the future.
6. Right now you may be pleading with God to allow something in your life, and He may simply tell you, "No."
7. If it is not a part of His plan, He is not inclined to change courses because you want something else.
8. We are reminded here that God does not answer us and work in our lives according to our plans. Notice further that when God answers us, it is also:

B. Not according to our powers

1. I love the exchange that takes place between God and Abraham in this text. God tells us Abraham that Sarah is going to give birth to a son.

2. How does Abraham react? Look at verse 17. *"Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?"*

3. Abraham is not laughing at God here. He is laughing at himself and Sarah. He knows that it would be physically impossible for either of them to have a son on their own.

4. Though God does not laugh, He does take note of Abraham's laughter. Look at verse 19. God said, *"Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac..."*

5. Do you know what the name Isaac means? It means "laughter". It is as if God said, "I will give you something to laugh about, alright!"

6. The point is this; God didn't need a young, fit, and fertile couple to do His will. In fact, God didn't *want* a young couple.

7. His plan was for this old couple to have a child so that they and all who would follow them would know that God's work is not dependent upon the power of man!

8. What God does in our lives is not dependent upon our abilities! He does not need us to be powerful. *He* is all-powerful and displays that the most when we are powerless!

9. I think of what Paul said in Romans 5:6, *"For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."*

10. Just as this Old Covenant was based upon the power of God, so also the New Covenant, by which we are saved. It is based purely on the power and grace of God!

11. God will keep His Word to us! We can trust Him, but we must wait for Him to work in His own sovereign time.

1. Genesis 17 is an updated version of the Abrahamic Covenant. Though we are no longer under this covenant, we are still a part of it.

2. The last of the kings that would come from Father Abraham and Princess Sarah was none other the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

3. He has sealed a New Covenant with His blood, and we come to God today based solely upon the terms of that covenant.

4. Though we live under a new covenant, the God with whom we have agreed is the same! He is God Almighty, and we can trust Him with our lives!

5. Though, like Abraham, we have often failed Him, He will never fail us. We can trust completely in Him for the salvation of our souls and the ordering of our lives.

ⁱ Carson, D.A., *The God Who Is There*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010), *Amazon Kindle Edition*

ⁱⁱ Hughes, R. Kent, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2004), p. 249

ⁱⁱⁱ Trivette, Ken, "Three Brand New Names", www.kentrivette.com, accessed 6/9/11,
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