



This past week, I was talking with Jonathan briefly on what God means when he says “soon.” Jonathan had brought up a certain passage of Scripture where the apostle Paul is encouraging Timothy to endure and trust the Lord because God’s justice would be “soon.” But Jonathan and I both began to laugh because for Paul, and ultimately the Lord, the word “soon” doesn’t seem to have the same immediacy that we feel when we hear “soon.” Although, I think young children can think this way with their parents. I can’t count how many times a child of mine got frustrated or felt so bored because my “soon” wasn’t soon enough. Even if I thought 30 minutes was soon, to them it felt like eternity. As we get older, we have a different perspective on the word “soon,” but we can still get impatient with God, can’t we? Yet, many times in our lives, after things happen we say, “That happened so fast.” Or, “That went by so quickly.” Think about older people talking to you about your children. What do they often say? Don’t blink too long! They grow up before you know it. This perspective on time and the idea of “soon” and “quickly” makes me wonder what it’ll be like when we actually are face-to-face with God in eternity. I can only imagine that we will then say, “That happened so fast.” All the waiting and enduring in this life will then seem like a mist that quickly disappears.

But, as we go through time, it can feel long. And, I’m so thankful that the Lord doesn’t angrily respond to us and say, “Buck up! It’s not a long time. Stop acting like a child.” Instead, he comes alongside of us and consistently share with us what the reality is and he also promises to work in us even in the midst of the waiting. This idea of waiting is a huge lesson in Abram’s life. We come to Genesis 17 this morning, and by this time Abram has been living 24 years in the land that God told him to enter. Did you hear that? Twenty-four years is a long time, and we can think to ourself, “What has happened in the 24 years?” Expecting that many of God’s promises have come about. But guess what? Abram hasn’t secured the land for himself and Sarai hasn’t had a child. Twenty-four years ago, God made a promise. Twenty-four years and Abram is still waiting.

Maybe you are right now in the waiting and you feel so confused. I simply want to say to you right now that Abram, who will be renamed Abraham in this text, who becomes the father of Judaism and the Father of Christianity – and who is also claimed by the Muslims as well (three of the largest world religions). This man is not known for doing spectacular things. He’s most known for his *waiting* on the Lord. Waiting matters to the Lord. It’s in the waiting that we find we’re drawing closer to him and believe him with greater fervency.

This almost doesn’t make sense, does it? To wait increases a believer’s faith? But why do we wait? Why did Abram wait? To add to this, why did Abram continue to listen to the Lord when God would correct him in his sin? God hasn’t given him the land or a child. Why should he obey? Sometimes we can think like this, too, right?

So, why did Abram wait and obey the Lord? Why do we wait and obey? The answer is that God has promised himself to us. When the author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham was looking forward to a city whose builder and maker is God – we see that Abraham wanted to live with God. If you're persevering in the waiting, you know this yearning. You want to be *with God*. God is worth more than anything else. He has made a promise of himself and of a glorious eternity that matches God's worth. So, what else can we do? He's done all and we get to know him.

Some of you may not understand what I'm saying here, so I'm just going to jump into the text. Before we begin reading though, the main idea of the sermon today is: **God's covenant promise empowers and requires a sanctified life to those who trust him**. In other words, God made a promise to Abram. God's promise enables and also requires Abram's growth in obedience if he actually trusts the Lord. And, the same is true for us. Now, how do we see this played out in Genesis 17? How do we see this in the context of a man who has been waiting on the Lord for 24 years? Let's jump in:

1. God's covenant promise. . . (vv. 1-2).

Verses 1-2 give the context for the remainder of the chapter; so, let's read these verses first: When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ²that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³Then Abram fell on his face.¹

From chapter 16 to these verses is 14 years! Abram is now 99 years old, and we're told that the Lord appears to him. As is always the case in the Bible, when God appears to someone, there is a physical response. Abram lays down on the ground with his face down. He's prostrate before the Lord because he's come into contact with Creator and Lord!

But notice what God says. First, God reveals a certain characteristic about him. He said, "I am God Almighty." The Hebrew is El Shaddai. Our English translations often, if not always translate this "God Almighty," but that's more-so because of the Vulgate's translation of El Shaddai. Jerome, who compiled the Vulgate argued that El Shaddai means "God Almighty." Having said that, there's still a lot of speculation on what El Shaddai actually means. While it does communicate the power of God, it seems to communicate the unique miraculous power of God because this name is often associated with God's power over the curse. One man wrote that "**Shaddai evokes the idea that God is able to make the barren fertile and to fulfill his promises**" (Wenham as quot. in Waltke, p. 259). So, it's not just that God has the most power. It's that God *is* power, and he unites his promises with his power. He is El Shaddai.

This is the God on whom Abram has been trusting. And then the Lord says in verse two that he is going to make a covenant with Abram in order to multiply him greatly. At this point, you might be a little confused because you are thinking, "Didn't God already make a covenant with Abram in chapter 15?" This sounds oddly familiar. So, did God forget he already made a promise? No. Actually chapter 15 and 17 are stating one covenant. And, I believe this because if you look in Nehemiah as he speaks of this covenant, he merges 15 and 17 into one in Nehemiah 9.

But, what we do see in chapter 17 is that God is expanding his covenant promises. In chapter 17, God states he will commit himself to Abram and his **descendants forever**. He also promises **land forever**. In addition, he calls Abram (and his people forever after) **to walk before him**. So, **the one who is power and will act in ways to fulfill his miraculous promises for us, will commit himself to Abram and his**

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 17:1-3.

offspring. But, as just stated, God also calls Abram and his offspring to walk before him. Which leads to the next point:

2. God's covenant promise empowers and requires a sanctified life. . . (vv. 2-14).

God says in verses 1-2, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ²that I may make my covenant between me and you. . ."² If you think about the covenant in chapter 15, God did not require Abram to walk between the cut up animals. Do you remember why? Because this is a promise of God that only God can fulfill. Then we come here and it sounds like God is saying that he won't keep up his promise unless Abram walks before the Lord and is blameless. Do you see that? Walk before me. . .so that I may make my covenant. . .

Wait a second. Who's the covenant dependent on? God or Abram? This is where things become even more beautiful to me. God puts requirements on Abram, but the entire chapter is surrounded by God telling him what he's going to do. Even in this verse, my ESV says "that I may make my covenant," but I think it's better translated, "that I might give my covenant. . .". The emphasis is on El Shaddai who is giving. And so, I think we see something here that we see throughout the Scriptures. God's promises never lead to people being apathetic towards him. God's promises to save always lead to people's lives being transformed.

Merging chapters 12 (where Abram's called) with chapter 15 and 17, we see that when God saves someone, it's not just a past tense thing. It's a present tense reality. Meaning, if God has rescued you from your sin in the past, he's going to continue his work in the present time. And that's what God is saying to Abram here in verse 2. Abram already has a reconciled relationship with the Lord. But this covenant involves the whole of Abram's life, from the past on into eternity. With this understanding, let's see what God says in this covenant.

Requirement: Walk before El Shaddai and be blameless. To "walk before" means to live completely in light of God presence with you always – aware of his promises and demands. This goes back to what Caique said in the call to worship. We are called by God to live *Coram Deo*: before the face of God always. Do you know that God is always with you? Do you know God is your life and freedom? Do you know El Shaddai is causing all things to work for his promises for you?

If you fail to walk daily before God, you will buy into the lies of temptation. You'll believe that living for money, living for your reputation, living for your children, your marriage, lust, or you-name-it is the goal. But sin always leads to death. No matter how small you think it is. Only God can satisfy because he *is* life. So, God calls Abram to embrace and live in the freedom of the relationship he has with El Shaddai. Then he calls him to be blameless. This word blameless could simply mean to have integrity. It doesn't have to signify moral perfection. But it can. Having said that, it's not just a term referring to our actions. It's actually a relational term. It refers to a wholeness in relationship with God (see Walktke, p. 259). And, keep in mind, this call isn't just for Abram. Verse 7 says that this covenant is for Abram and all his offspring. So, as I think about this, I can't help but think about us. If you meet someone who says they are saved, but they live without care for Jesus, then they must have thought that being saved just means praying a prayer or going to church. But they have missed faith. Because we know what the apostle James says, ". . . faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."³ God saving us has present

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 17:1–2.

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jas 2:17.

ramifications! Do you believe that? Do you trust him that he has given you his power to do miracles of killing sin in your life and empowering you to love and enjoy him?

Now, getting back to Abram, how is he going to maintain wholeness in relationship with God? Well, ultimately because of the Lord. That leads us to verses 3-8 where God emphasizes his work in, through, and for Abram. Abram's name-change is a reminder that God is over all of this.

Reminder: Abram's and Sarai's name-changes (vv. 3-8, 15-16). Let's first read verses 3-8: ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." ⁴

Here is where we read that Abram is going to be given eternal land and eternal offspring. It's very important to note that there are literal and spiritual understandings of these phrases. For example, to be a "father" of nations doesn't mean that those nations had to literally be biologically connected to Abram. Later in Genesis, Joseph is referred to as being a father to Pharaoh in Genesis 45:8. In addition, at the end of this chapter, it's not only those biologically connected to Abram who will be circumcised, but all men in his household, whether biological or not. I say all of this because the ramifications of this covenant are much bigger than just one people group. The promises here have global ramifications.

Therefore, God gives Abram a new name: Abraham. This name takes Abram's focus from off his past and on to his future. Abram means "Exalted Father," which probably refers to his father, Terah. The new name refers to him being the father of a multitude. Again, the term "father" doesn't just mean biological. It includes spiritual. This is a global promise that will extend into eternity future! So, now Abram is no longer simply identified by his past. Abraham is his identification – which points to his future glory!

The same is true for Sarai. Verses 15-16 say, ¹⁵ "And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." ⁵

The names Sarai and Sarah are almost identical. They both mean "princess," but God changes the name in order to emphasize that she's a different kind of princess now. He's like the Queen Mother. Similar to Adam naming his wife Eve as the Mother of all Living – looking forward to the promise of God being fulfilled; so God names Sarai Sarah to emphasize that she will mother a prince, and then there will be a posterity that will come from her womb first! She is to be known by God's promise, not by her human past.

How glorious that God's salvation gives his people a new hope and a new identity. We too, who trust Jesus are to be known by our future hope and not our past as well. We follow in the covenant of Abram as his offspring – even though most are not biological. We are spiritual. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 17:2–8.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 17:15–16.

God is continuing this covenant, calling Abraham to walk before him and be known for God's promises towards him. And then God gives a sign of this covenant to Abraham. A "sign" is simply that. It's something to remind you of reality. The reality God is speaking is that God is giving Abraham a child, and nations on into eternity. So, the sign actually fits the idea of having children. It's the sign of circumcision.

The Sign: Circumcision (vv. 9-14). Let's read verses 9-14 now: ⁹ And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." ⁶

This is to be a perpetual, generational reminder. Why? Well, as what was just stated, it speaks to the reality of future generations of people that will be Abram's offspring. So, we have this physical sign that reminds us of physical procreation. In addition, it's a physical picture of this covenant when people dishonor the Lord. In verse 14, we're told an uncircumcised person is cut off from his people and has broken the covenant. They are cut off from God's people. So, this physical sign reveals El Shaddai's powerful goodness and also warns people who don't trust him. And that leads us to the third point:

3. . . .those who trust (vv. 17-27).

Let's read verses 17-27 now: ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" ¹⁹ God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. ²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹ But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year." ²² When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. ²³ Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. ²⁷ And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. ⁷

Is Abram trusting the Lord here? I say "yes," but I can't help but wonder if this is a "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" moment. Notice, he calls his wife Sarah! So, he does have trust in the Lord. But he laughs. And this laughter could be disbelief, but it can also be shocked belief that leads to laughter. I think we can relate to that kind of laughter.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 17:9–14.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 17:16–27.

But you might be confused by Abraham's concern for Ishmael. He begs for Ishmael to have the blessings of the promise, and must trust the Lord – like Hagar did – with knowing Ishmael will not. Yet, at the same time, God says he hears Abraham. Remember, that's what Ishmael's name means. God hears! God hears Abraham's broken heart. And God promises blessings to Ishmael, too. He will have kings and princes. And, guess what, I believe that there have been many in Ishmael's line who have become spiritual offspring of Abraham. But God did establish the covenant with the son Abram's having – Isaac. And Isaac's name means laughter.

How awesome! What a story for Abraham to tell his son. What laughter that came in shocked amazement that God has miraculously given them a son. So, we see trust from Abraham. And then that trust is expressed in his obedience to the covenant sign. His entire household is circumcised in anticipation of God's covenant. And so, looking at chapter 17, we see that God's covenant promises empower and require a sanctified life from those who trust him. Now, **what does this chapter have to do with us?** I've spoken some application to us, but we need to really get back to this idea of circumcision. And you might think, "Really?! We do?!" Circumcision is gross, bloody, vulnerable and uncomfortable. It's such a weird thing to read that God would require of Abraham and his people. But, in addition to the physical realities this sign points to, circumcision is also a physical picture of a spiritual reality. In Deuteronomy 30, God prophecies a day where he says, **"⁶ And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."**⁸ What does it mean to have a circumcised heart? It's a heart set apart for God. You see, God isn't just interested in having a large kingdom of people that he can say he owns. He owns everything now. He wants hearts. So, the eternal offspring of Abram are those who can all Abram Father spiritually. Those people have had their hearts circumcised – set apart for God.

Now, how is it possible for people to have circumcised hearts? It's through *the offspring* of Abram, Jesus, who walked before the Lord and was perfectly blameless. We read from Colossians 2 earlier in the service, and now I want to explain why. In Colossians 2:11, we read this: **¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. . . .⁹** What is the circumcision of Christ? It's not talking about his circumcision as a child. Paul goes on to talk about Jesus' burial, resurrection, and also how Jesus took humanity's sins on himself, in their place. How is *that* circumcision? And how does that save us?

Well, Jesus took the curse of the covenant. Any of those who wouldn't accept the covenant were cut off. And what did Jesus receive on the cross? He was cut off from mercy. He experienced judgment. He became vulnerable on the cross, naked, and bloodied so that we could have our sinfulness cut off from us. He, the blameless one has now brought a new covenant – a covenant completely dependent on him. And that covenant fulfills Deuteronomy. If you turn from your sins and trust Jesus, you are now Abraham's offspring. You have circumcised hearts. And with these new hearts, you can grow in walking blamelessly. You can grow in your godliness. And, Jesus also promises the eternal home someday. He's gone to prepare that place for us and is coming again. Do you believe it? If so, live out the freedom Christ has purchased for you. As Paul says in Philippians says, **" . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."**¹⁰

God's covenant promise empowers and requires a sanctified life to those who trust him. Let us live before the One who has saved us, is saving us, and is coming again!

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Dt 30:6.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:11.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 2:12–13.