



ARE YOU MARRIED OR JUST LIVING TOGETHER?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 17:1-14

Ninth Message

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Do you ever wonder whether couples you meet in social settings are married or merely living together? It's not the kind of question one is likely to ask, yet it's one that lies just beneath the surface in a culture that seems terrified of commitment.

For some couples, living together appears much easier than marriage. They feel they can enjoy all the benefits of marriage without the cost that commitment demands. But can they really give away the most intimate part of their lives without a lifetime commitment? Is it possible to really be "one" on a part-time basis, or do roles and identities crumble over time in a confusion of blurred boundaries? What happens when sickness, sorrow, and death strike? And most tragically, with whom do the children, either existing or new, identify as the anchor of their world? In the event of separation, do both parties feel the loss is any less profound than if they had divorced? Are you married or just living together? is a pertinent question for our generation.

Marriage vows are designed to do something to us which merely living together can never accomplish. Several things happen in the wedding ceremony which ratify and confirm all that has occurred during the courtship. Bride and groom renew private promises in the form of public vows, in the presence of God and a multitude of witnesses. This raises the stakes for both parties' commitment and how they value each other. It has the effect of sealing their integrity. Then comes the exchange of rings, permanent symbols of fidelity, the name change, the public kiss, and the signing and witnessing of the marriage license. Only then, within the context of covenantal vows, can the sexual relationship thrive. Only then can true oneness can be enjoyed and children conceived.

All through the Bible, the covenantal vows of marriage are designed to be a mirror of our love relationship with God (Eph 5:22-33). With that in mind, the question I want to ask each one of you this morning is: Are you actually married to God or just living in a casual relationship with him? Do you regard God as your covenant partner or merely your "significant other"?

We have seen that God has been faithfully courting Abram with astonishing promises during the patriarch's journey. Three different times (12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15:1-21) God has spoken to him. On each occasion he has renewed, expanded and strengthened his commitment to him. In the midst of these revelations Abram's trust in God has grown deeply. But now it's time for the courtship to end. The wedding must begin so that children can be born.

I. God's Invitation to the Wedding: Vows Summarized (Genesis 17:1-3a)

Now 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.
And I will establish My covenant between Me and you,**

And I will multiply you exceedingly."

And Abram fell on his face, (Gen 17:1-3a, NASB)

Chapter 17 is framed with this reference to Abram's age. Thirteen years have passed since Ishmael's birth. The patriarch is now ninety-nine years old. For thirteen years Sarai has had to live with her barrenness, and Abram his responsibility for conceiving a child with Sarai's maid. In our day many Christians abandon commitments under the guise of following God and his kingdom, but this text gives quite a different voice. Let us never use God's kingdom as an excuse for irresponsibility. God makes Abram fulfill his responsibility for a past choice, poor as it was, before the patriarch can continue with the divine program. For thirteen years God waits in silence while Abram takes care of business at home. Finally, upon Ishmael reaching the age of puberty, God speaks once more.

How easily have Abram's affections and hopes taken root in this son Ishmael (17:18; 21:11), while the promises of God have faded into the background. But now, God speaks out of the deafening silence. This is the fourth time that God has spoken to Abram of his promises. On this occasion the promises will not only be renewed, they will be expanded and ratified into a formal covenant. It's time for the wedding. The courtship is over. Abraham must now take his wedding vows and publicly identify with his God. The covenant that God had unconditionally inaugurated in chapter 15 must to be confirmed by Abram.

God begins the ceremony by summarizing the vows for both parties. He opens with the announcement of a new name for himself, "El Shaddai." *El* is the common name for God, but the exact origin and meaning of the term *Shaddai* is uncertain. The etymology of the Hebrew is "he who is adequate" or "sufficient." This term is always found in contexts in which God is affirming his absolute power to fulfill his promises, like making barren wombs fertile. Most translators consistently render the word pair as "God Almighty." This name will become the bedrock of Old Testament theology. The implication is that whatever God asks from us, he promises to do in us. Even today, the three Hebrew letters for *Shaddai* (*sh-d-y*) can be found engraved on small boxes, called *mezuzahs*, on the doorposts of Jewish homes around the world.¹

The God who promises to be Abram's adequacy now requires Abram to reciprocate. God tells him to "Walk before Me and be blameless." Like Enoch of old (5:22, 24), Abram is asked to walk in such a way that he takes every step of his life with a keen awareness of God's presence and direction. The result is that his way should be "blameless." What a very high demand. "Blameless" doesn't imply a sinless life. It speaks of a complete life, one that is *sound* because one's heart is wholly God's. There must be no loose ends in Abram's commitment, no divided loyalties, no secret life beneath the surface. A life of integrity is what is required, a life that one can count on. The last person in the Bible who is said to have "walked blameless" before God was Noah (6:9), a man of such integrity that his whole family could count on his obedience to God to sur-

vive the flood. There were no loose ends in Noah's construction of the ark.

With this commitment God's covenant will be ratified, and Abram will find himself blessed with fertility beyond measure. I wonder if this might be one reason why couples today seem so scared of commitment. They have never met a God like this who longs to bless them beyond their dreams. Hearing God's words, Abram is choked in awe. He collapses face down before his Creator-King. Reverential, silent awe is the only appropriate human response to such a holy moment.

God then explicates the covenant for each of the three parties involved: first, himself, "*As for me*" (vv 4-8); second, Abram, "*Now as for you*" (vv 9-14); and finally, Sarai, "*As for Sarai*" (vv 15-22). This morning we will cover the first two parties. God's covenant has an exacting clarity in the identity of relationships and delineation of responsibility. There are no blurred boundaries or shifting centers of responsibility. In the words of that famous Jew, Tevya, "Everyone knows who he is and what God expects of him" (from *Fiddler On the Roof*).

II. God's Holy Vows: "As for Me" (Genesis 17:3b-8)

A. Abraham's Seed: Unparalleled Fertility

**and God talked with him, saying,
"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,
And you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.
No longer shall your name be called Abram,
But your name shall be Abraham;
For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.
And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will
make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from
you. (17:3b-8)**

The legal solemnity is heard in the opening language, "*As for me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.*" Just as God took a new name, so now he gives Abram a new name to signify what he will do for him. Abram ("*exalted father*") now becomes Abraham ("*father of a multitude*"). When God first spoke to Abram he promised he would make him "*a great nation*" (12:2). Later, he expanded this to "*as numerous as the dust of the earth*" (13:16); and then "*as many as the stars*" (15:5). Now God expands the promise even further, promising to make Abraham's line so fertile that he will bear a multitude of nations, even kings. This promise anticipates Israel's history of kings, and the focus at the end of Genesis (49:10) on the line of Judah.

Not only is the extent of the promise expanded, its results are now guaranteed. The command to "be fruitful" formerly was made to Adam and Noah. Now Abraham stands in their shoes at "the beginning of epoch making history."² But, as Wenham notes, with Abraham the command "*to be fruitful*" becomes the promise, "*I shall make you fruitful.*" This means that God's original blessing, which he gave to Adam and Noah, and which they failed to achieve, will now be guaranteed to all humanity through Abraham's descendants.

Continuing, God further strengthens his commitment, using unprecedented language.

B. Their Relationship: Eternal (17:7)

**"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you
and your descendants after you throughout their genera-
tions for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and
to your descendants after you. (17:7)**

All that God is to Abraham is now promised in full to all of Abraham's descendants. Individual yearnings become national promises, national promises become universal blessings,

and universal blessings become land-locked in eternity. Tracing the history of God's salvation, one can't help but be awestruck at how his grace keeps expanding in breadth and depth over time. What a stark contrast to the lack of love that is so evident in many marriages. A courtship that begins with promising one's beloved the moon, all too soon, following the delights of the honeymoon, declines into a survival mode of merely putting up with one's mate. But the fire of God's love never grows cold. Its fierce heat intensifies with the years.

But there is still more. God promises Abraham a land to call home.

C. The Land: Eternal (17:8)

**"And I will give to you and to your descendants after
you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan,
for an everlasting possession; and I will be their
God." (17:8)**

God now reaffirms and strengthens the promise of "land" to Abraham. First, it was called, "*this land*" (12:7), then it became "*all the land which you see*" (13:15), and finally, natural borders were delineated, "*from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates*" (15:18). To that expansive promise God now adds, "*I shall give to you...the whole land of Canaan as a permanent holding*" (17:8). Therefore the land where Abraham has been wandering as a stranger will one day be his in its entirety, and forever. Just as the covenant abides forever, so shall the gift of land. The expansiveness of the promise gives Abraham a lens through which he sees heaven itself, and with it a sense of contentment to live as an alien on earth. This is why the author of Hebrews says, "By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land...for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:9-10).

So in this text we find that God is so eager to love us and give us everything, he will not rest until his promises are sealed in a formal covenant of "marriage." And notice there is no clause that says, "until death do us part." These vows continue for eternity.

Now that Abraham has heard all that God has promised to be to him, it is time for him to reciprocate.

III. Abraham's Holy Vows: "As for you" (Genesis 17:9-14)

A. The Sign of Circumcision (17:9-11)

**God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you
shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after
you throughout their generations. This is My covenant,
which you shall keep, between Me and you and your de-
scendants after you: every male among you shall be cir-
cumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of
your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant be-
tween Me and you. (17:9-11)**

God writes all the vows in this wedding. There is no negotiating different levels of commitment and no pre-nuptial agreements. The reason, of course, is that God is promising the universe to Abraham. All he asks in return is fidelity. But instead of a *vow* of fidelity, Abraham is asked to wear a *sign* of fidelity, the rite of circumcision. He must undergo a bloody mark on his flesh, one that cuts him as deep as his sexuality. When God first inaugurated the covenant, Abraham cut animals in two (15:10), but only God, represented by a burning torch, passed between the animals, indicating that the fulfillment of the covenant depended solely on him. Now, however, God asks Abraham to reciprocate with his own blood to *ratify* what God had early inaugurated ("*ratify*" is a key term

in our text; it is used three times, vv 7, 19, 21).

Circumcision probably was not practiced in Mesopotamia, where Abraham was born (Ezek 32:21-24), but it was a common rite among many of Israel's neighbors. In Egypt, only priests were circumcised as a symbol of being set apart to God. But in Israel, every male was set apart as holy. To Abraham, circumcision was a penetrating symbol signifying that the fertility which God promised would arise out of the weakness (*"cutting off"*) of his own flesh. What an apt reminder, since the rite of circumcision follows Abraham's inappropriate use of his sexuality in an attempt to fulfill in his own strength the promise of God. Cutting off the foreskin of the male sex organ would now be a powerful reminder that God's promises are perfected in weakness. This would be a sign from which no Jewish male could escape at any point in his life, one which would constantly prod them to *"walk blameless"* before their God.

B. The Extent of Circumcision (17:12-13)

"And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. (17:12-13)

Not only is Abraham asked to bear the mark of the covenant in his flesh, he is also given the mantle of spiritual leadership for his home. No longer can his faith be merely personal and privatized for the love of his soul alone. The sign now becomes mandatory for every male in Israel. No one would be exempt. Parents would be urged to bring the covenant rule upon every child immediately after birth (eight days). If a man truly belongs to God, then he will not be lax or casual in the spiritual instruction of his children.

It is by no accident that the reality of this truth became the backbone of theology for all Jews in the Torah:

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." (Deut 6:4-7)

The word *"diligently"* comes from the Hebrew root for *"tooth."* Used adverbially, it means to do something *"incisively,"* i.e. *"with bite."* But that is not all. God commands that the sign be imposed not only on one's flesh and blood, but also on every member of the household. No servant was exempt, whether he was born in the home or acquired through purchase. This implies that servants were never to be treated as mere property. They were to be given a spiritual education that dignified their souls and made them full members of the covenant community. The implication is clear. If Abraham is going to be faithful to his covenantal vows, then his home is to be thoroughly infected with the love of God. No one is to be left out.

A whole New Testament book, Philemon, is dedicated to this theme. The apostle Paul rebukes Philemon for not doing this very thing with his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul converts Onesimus, and sends him home no longer a slave, but a beloved brother (Philem 16). This is a very good word for employers. Do you give your workers the dignity of knowing

the love of Christ, or are they mere tools in your service?

What if someone will not comply with the command? God answers firmly.

C. The Seriousness of the Sign (17:14)

"But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant." (17:14)

The covenant sign was to be taken very seriously. When someone refuses to wear their wedding ring in public, that small act reveals much about the fidelity of the heart. In the same way, if a male in Israel would not submit to the wounds of the knife, God said he would be *"cut off"* from the covenant family. The knife is inevitable. The only question is whether we submit to it now or later. One operation is painful, the other unimaginable. It is like a doctor telling a woman with breast cancer she must submit to the knife or she will die. In God's covenant, self-effort is a cancer that must be rooted out in order to save our souls.

Thus the seriousness of the covenant is sealed with a severe warning, just as when the pastor, following the wedding ceremony, proclaims, *"What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate"* (Mark 10:9).

So Abraham has just heard his wedding vows.

I want to conclude today by asking, Are you married to God, or just casually living with him?

IV. Are You Married or Just Living Together?

A. The God of Abraham Wants To Marry You

Many of you have known God for years, some of you a lifetime. Like Abraham, you have been touched by God's promises and experienced his miraculous deliverance. You have felt him deeply in your soul and sensed your bones tingle with awe in his presence under the starry night. But have owned him as your own? Have you taken your wedding vows? Have you renounced self-effort and called him LORD? Or have you remained a casual lover, living privately with him but never acknowledged him publicly?

B. Are You Ready To Take Your Vows?

If that is the case, then I appeal to you to take that all-important step. In a wedding, the point of taking vows is not to enslave us but to free us. Within the context of absolute commitment we can enjoy love more deeply and fully. The good news is that God is so madly in love with you, he will give you everything if you will commit your life to him. That does not mean that you have to get circumcised, like Abraham. When God renewed the covenant in Christ, a new initiation rite, baptism, was adopted. *Baptism* replaces circumcision in the New Covenant. Instead of taking the knife to yourself you descend into a watery grave. As Paul wrote,

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision means anything, but a new creation. (Gal 6:15)³

And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Col 2:11,12)

If someone objects, "Baptism is not costly, since no blood is involved," Paul answers quite powerfully that identifying with Christ may in fact draw blood — the blood of persecution: "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear

on my body the brand-marks of Jesus" (Gal 6:17). In 1964, the Romanian pastor, Richard Wurmbrand, made the same declaration before the United States Senate during their investigation of religious persecution by the Romanian communists. Pointing to eighteen deep scars on his neck, chest and back, he said, "My body represents România, my country, which has been tortured to a point that it can no longer weep. These marks on my body are my credentials."⁴

C. Are You Enjoying the Gift of Children?

Though our commitment may cause us to suffer, as Abraham's children we learn that suffering increases our fertility. In fact, in the New Covenant our spiritual fertility far exceeds the number children we could ever produce physically (Is 54:1; 66:8). Consider the apostle Paul, of whom God said, "He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15,16). This sounds like an ancient echo from the days of Abraham. How many spiritual children do you think the apostle will see in heaven?

Are you enjoying the gift of children? Nothing brings more joy to the heart than birthing children. Without question, the happiest day in my twenty-nine years of marriage to Emily was the time I laid our firstborn son on her breast. That was a holy moment that transcended all romantic love. And yet, think of the joy when one sinner repents and all the angels in heaven rejoice (Luke 15:10). God wants to marry you so that together you can give birth to a new generation that has never heard of his love. Why delay? Won't you consider taking your holy vows today?

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you

As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to'another due,
Labor to'admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly'I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, 'untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

--John Donne⁵

1. The *mezuzah* contains a portion of the scriptures and is displayed in obedience to Moses' command to write the scriptures on the doorposts of one's home (Deut 6:9; 11:20).

2. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), 22.

3. See also Paul's words in Gal 5:6 "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love."

4. Michael Yockel, *The Romanian Reverend vs. the Beast of the Apocalypse*, New York Press, Vol. 14, No. 11.

5. Charles M. Coffin Ed, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New Yor.; Random House, 1952), 252.

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