

What Marks Us?

Gen 17

Call: Ps 25:4-5, 8-10 (NIV)

Scripture: Rom 4:9-12 (ESV)

I. Introduction

We continue our studies today in the lives of Abram and Sarai, two people that God called into a fantastic adventure of trusting him. And, in our text today, we return to the covenant. God had already entered into covenant with Abram back in chapter 15. If you remember that chapter, we saw that Abram entered into a relationship with God through believing God. Abram trusted God, and God said he was in a right relationship with him. God then assured Abram of his promises by cutting a covenant with Abram. It was a bloody ceremony involving cut animals. And, we saw how that ceremony prefigured the cross and the blood Jesus sheds to assure us of the promises of the New Covenant.

God unconditionally binds himself to Abram in Chapter 15. And, here in chapter 17, we get the human response to God's unconditional commitment. God wants Abram and Sarai to be active partners with him in his work. But, what marks out an active partner in relationship with the living God? In our text today, we will see four marks, four identity markers, of being an active partner with the living God.

Chapter 15 and chapter 17 together comprise what is called the Abrahamic Covenant. What is amazing about this chapter is that we get 5 long and elaborate speeches by God, which sets it apart in the entire Old Testament.

So, I invite you into our text, Genesis 17, beginning in verse 1:

II. Covenant Prelude (17:1-3a)

1 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, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." 3 Then Abram fell on his face. (ESV)

A. The Context

This is the covenant prelude. We immediately find out that Abram is now 99 years old. This is 24 years from the time God first made the promises to Abram. Chapter 16 ended with Ishmael being born when Abram was 86, 13 years ago. Could it be that Sarai's scheming with Hagar caused God's promises to delay even longer? Regardless, we can presume that Hagar and Ishmael have been living with Abram and Sarai for these 13 years.

And, the Lord appears to Abram again. He appears as God Almighty, El Shaddai. This name for God is typically found in contexts where God is affirming his absolute power to fulfill his promises.

B. The Blameless Walk

Whereas chapter 15 focused on God's grace and the need for trust alone to enter into a right relationship with God. Here we get the human response to God's grace, summed up in verse 1: walk blamelessly before God. Abram is to walk blamelessly before God.

Walk. How we walk marks us. Walk is used throughout scripture as a metaphor for living life. And it is a powerful metaphor for describing a life with God, for life with God implies action. God chooses his people not simply to breathe; he chooses people for action. As Paul will say in Ephesians, "*We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*" (Eph 2:10). Paul may very well have had Abram in mind when he used the verb "walk." And, walking *is* the perfect metaphor for this fantastic adventure in trusting God.

- For, walking is slow and steady. Almost nothing in the spiritual life happens quickly.
- Walking is purposeful. It is designed to get us somewhere, just like life with God. If you talk to someone who is walking, that person should be able to tell you where they're going.
- Walking is unspectacular. People will probably not even notice you if you are walking. But, if you are running, everyone notices you.

I spent a week with high school students this past summer. And, by the end of the week, I had multiple boys come up to me and wonder what they were doing wrong because they were trying to read their Bibles but they were not have spectacular moments with God every day. They wanted instant transformation in an instant gratification culture. I had to remind all of them that almost nothing in the spiritual life happens in a hurry.

For Abram and for us, walking with God is slow and steady, purposeful and usually unspectacular. But, God himself further defines this walk: Abram is to walk before God "blamelessly."

What does this word blamelessly mean? Well, it does not mean perfection, even though it may sound that way to our modern ears. To walk blamelessly is to walk with reference to God in every single step of our life, the very opposite of what happened last chapter. To walk blamelessly is to orient one's whole life toward God, his presence, his promises and his ways. This word literally means "whole," to be wholly devoted to God, to have no divided loyalties. Jesus says it this way, "*Blessed are the pure in heart*" (Matt 5:8). To be pure in heart is to have no divided loyalties.

How we walk every step of our life marks us. How we talk, how we drive, how we treat our families and colleagues, how we spend our time and money. Every step we take marks us.

C. The Persistence of God

So, in his grace, God shows up again. Notice, he doesn't give up on Abram even after last chapter. God does not write him off, or go looking for another person. Abram is his man, and

God is persistent. Although Abram was “*as good as dead*” as the writer of Hebrews says (11:12), God pursues him (and us!). And, how does Abram respond? Verse 3: He responds in worship. He falls down in worship like a servant before a great king.

D. The Covenant Overview

Next, we get into the Covenant properly, and we get the obligations of each party. God continues to talk, and he gives three aspects to the covenant. See in verse 4, verse 9 and verse 15 the words, “As For?” Verses 4-8 are the covenant obligations for God, verses 9-14 are the covenant obligations for Abram, and verses 15-16 are the covenant obligations for Sarai.

We begin with the obligations of God, verse 3b.

III. Covenant Obligations: God (17:3b-8)

*And God said to him, 4 “Behold [**As for me**], 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.” (ESV)*

A. God’s Obligations

As for God, he reiterates his promises of seed and land to Abram. But in the midst of his promises, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham. This is highly significant. Whereas his old name probably spoke of his nobility and his old identity (as a pagan from Ur), his new name speaks of his many offspring and his new identity, belonging to this God. In other words, “Abraham” marks a change in identity, personality, reputation, destiny and mission. This name change marks out God’s authority over Abraham’s life. Abraham no longer belongs to the culture of Ur or the culture of Canaan. He belongs to God, and his destiny is now tied up with this God.

B. Center of Covenant

But, the very heart of the covenant, repeated in verses 7 and 8 is this:

I will be your God. This is the very heart of the Abrahamic Covenant. God Almighty, El Shaddai, the powerful creator God will be his and his descendants God forever. God himself commits himself to being God to Abraham and his descendants. Derek Kidner says it this way, “Spiritually, the essence of the covenant is personal, like the ‘I will’ of a marriage: so the pledge *I will be their God* (7b, 8b) far outweighs the particular benefits. This *is* the covenant” (Kidner, 140). God promises to be God to Abraham and his descendants.

But, what does this mean practically? What does it mean for God to be his God and by extension, our God? It means that God gives his covenant partners all that he is.

Everything that makes God who he is, is now placed at Abraham's disposal and all of his descendants. God is saying, "All that I am is now yours." And we say, "We trust you God! We need it God! We need all that you are!" This is the life and soul of all the promises!

Essentially, God is saying -

"My grace, says God, shall be yours to pardon you.

My power shall be yours to protect you.

My wisdom shall be yours to direct you.

My goodness shall be yours to relieve you.

My mercy shall be yours to supply you.

My glory shall be yours to crown you.

This is a comprehensive promise, for God to be our God: it includes all that he is" (Brooks in Packer, 115)!

And, we say, "Yes God, we trust you! We need it all!"

This is the essential blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant. God will be our God! And, God will bless the whole world by giving himself to those who will receive him.

Let's see Abraham's obligations, verse 9.

IV. Covenant Obligations: Abraham (17:9-14)

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." (ESV)

A. Abraham's Obligations

What are Abraham's covenant obligations? Not only is he to walk obediently and blamelessly, and to trust God to be his God, he is to circumcise all 8-day old males as an external sign of the covenant. As an active partner in relationship with God, circumcision will be the external mark of the internal reality. God invites Abraham and his descendants to trust him, and circumcision is a demonstration of this trust.

B. Circumcision Meaning

It's an external sign of being set apart to God. And, it is done to the organ of procreation to symbolize that all offspring are set apart to God as well. It is done at 8 days old to give babies

their identity, their mark, from the very beginning. Now, I'm told that circumcision was practiced in other cultures at this time, but typically it was done to mark puberty. Here it is done at 8 days old to mark the children as part of the covenant community from the very beginning. They bear the mark of their identity and destiny and mission to carry on the faith from the very beginning. And, unlike Noah and the rainbow, here, human beings perform the act to show that they are God's partners in the covenant and to show their commitment to the covenant. They are committing to trusting God, demonstrated by walking blamelessly and being circumcised. And, if they are not circumcised, they will be cut off from the people of God. This is serious stuff. God attaches great significance to this mark. It is also important to note that *all* males within the household are circumcised, moving beyond biological lines. With this action, Abraham will bless the nations by bringing them into the covenant community. Also, a lady was considered a member of the covenant by her father or by marriage.

C. Baptism

So what about circumcision today? Must we participate in circumcision today? Answer. No. At the end of Matthew, what does Jesus say: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, "circumcising" them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*" No. He says, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*"

The outward sign today of a commitment to Jesus is baptism.

This is why we are doing a baptism today. And, it is a privilege to have our CityTeamers with us today. This also gives me a chance to say a few things about baptism.

Baptism is the ultimate external marker today of belonging to Jesus. In baptism, we are given a new public name, Jesus follower. It permanently marks us, like a tattoo, not always visible to us, but always visible to God. Luther, when he would face times of doubt and uncertainty, would declare loudly, "But I've been baptized!" This is how to think about baptism.

Baptism is our permanent mark of belonging to Jesus and of his authority over our lives. It also publicly initiates us into the family of God. Communion is the sacrament that integrates us continually into our spiritual family, but baptism publicly initiates it. This means that baptisms are significant community events. It is a way for the person being baptized to tangibly see where they now belong, and who they now identify with. But, baptisms are also a way for the community to tangibly commit themselves to this new person who now belongs in their community. Like at a wedding ceremony, where the observers commit to support the new marriage, so at a baptism, the observers are committing to supporting the baptizee in their new identity and their new walk.

Baptism is called the sacrament of identity because of the symbolized identity change, the new destiny and the public severing of ties to an old life. This is the powerful image of baptism. The going under water symbolizes our putting to death our old self, which will take a lifetime to do. But baptism symbolizes our commitment to doing it, to walking blamelessly. Then we come up

out of the water, symbolizing the putting on of our new self, clothed in Christ, a new creation with a new destiny. Paul will say that we permanently bear the mark of the cross. Nothing marks out our lives more than the death and resurrection of Jesus! And, baptism gives us this brilliant picture.

Well, we now move to the covenant obligations for Sarai, verse 15.

V. Covenant Obligations: Sarai (15-16)

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."

A. A New Name

God now extends the rich covenant blessings to Sarai. As he changed Abram's name, now, he changes her name. As Abram enters into this new phase of life, Sarai does too. Her new name becomes Sarah, meaning princess, which looks ahead to her noble descendants. She is the only woman in the Bible whose name is changed (Waltke, 262).

B. A Clarification

God clarifies the promise that the son of promise will come from her body. This could imply that for the last 13 years, Abraham and Sarah have believed that Ishmael was the son of promise. As John Walton says, for the last 13 years, "all of [Abraham's] love, all of his hopes, all of his dreams have been poured into this boy [Ishmael]" (Walton, 451). So, Ishmael is not the son of promise. A boy from Sarah's old body will be the son of promise.

And, now, God gives one more final speech to Abraham, verse 17.

VI. Covenant through Isaac (17-21)

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."

After the promises to Sarah, Abraham can't believe it! He laughs in incredulity and disbelief. How can a child be born to a 90 year old woman?

After falling on his face laughing, he stands up, then realizes the implications of God's words. In words shot through with pain and disappointment, Abraham asks, "What about Ishmael, God? God, don't you see my other boy?" God responds by telling Abraham Ishmael is not the son of

promise. The son of promise will come next year, and they are to call him Isaac, which means “he laughs.” It will be through him that the covenant will be established, not through Ishmael. God chooses Isaac, not Ishmael. The birth of Isaac will speak to El Shaddai, God Almighty. The birth of Isaac speaks to God’s powerful triumph over barrenness, but also his supernatural grace. Isaac will be the result of divine engineering, whereas Ishmael was the result of human engineering. But, even though Ishmael was a result of human engineering, God repeats his promise to bless Ishmael.

So, how will Abraham respond now? It’s time for action. Will he obey this God of outrageous promises? What will he do? Verse 23:

VII. Covenant Obedience (22-27)

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. (ESV)

A. Abraham’s Obedience

Abraham responds immediately in obedience, doing exactly what God demanded. Notice the repetition of “the very same day.” As one commentator says, “By repeating the phrase ‘that very day,’ the narrator stresses that the day Abraham circumcised his family was one of the turning points in world history, comparable to Noah’s entry into the ark or the exodus from Egypt, for this was the birthday of the [beginning of the people of God] in the OT, as Pentecost is the birthday of the church in the New” (Greidanus, 175). Abraham obeys God immediately, fulfilling his obligations of the covenant. Even Ishmael is circumcised. To this day, the Arabs who claim to be offspring of Ishmael get circumcised when they are 13 (Greidanus, 175).

B. Passing on the Faith

Now what is implicit throughout this text, but will be made explicit in the next chapter is this: Abraham is expected to pass the details of the covenant onto the next generation. He must pass onto the next generation what it means to be an active partner with God. He must pass on how to walk blamelessly, that God is their God and the act of circumcision. He must pass on the faith.

This becomes an expectation of parents throughout the Old Testament. For example, Deut 11:19 says this: *19 Teach them [God’s Words and God’s Ways] to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.* In all of life, talk to your children about God’s Words and God’s ways.

Psalm 78 says this:

2b I will utter dark sayings from of old,
3 things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
4 We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done. (ESV)

Passing on the faith is an expectation of God's people.

And, when we come to the New Testament, the expectation continues. Paul presents Timothy as a primary example, when he speaks of the matrilineal transmission of faith:

5 I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. (2 Tim 1:5).

Now, what is significant about this example is that Paul will go on share with Timothy what it means to follow Jesus. But, Paul is not Timothy's biological father. In other words, Paul is Timothy's spiritual father. So, it doesn't matter if you have biological children or not, we're all family. All of us are invited into the great privilege of passing the faith onto the next generation. So, who are you passing the faith onto?

VIII. Conclusion

So, what marks us out as active partners of God today?

1. Walking blamelessly: Walking step by step with reference to the living God.
2. Trusting: God is our God and we trust him with his promise of giving himself to us.
3. Baptizing: The permanent mark of our inward decision to follow Jesus. We belong to him.
4. Teaching: The invitation to all of us to pass our faith onto the next generation.

These four markers identify us as covenant partners of the living God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We are indeed blessed to be partners with the living God!

But, what is even more remarkable is that God Almighty also marks himself. God is the God of all those who follow in the faith of Abraham. God is our God and we are his people. And, God himself marks our names on the palms of his hands. Isa 49:16 says this, "*Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*" We are not chalked on or penciled on his palms. We are not painted on or even sharpied on. We are engraved on the palms of his hands. If we were chalked or penciled or painted or sharpied on, he could wash his hands of us. No. We are engraved on his palms, as a sculptor engraves a name in granite. We are literally on his hands forever, and no one will ever take us off or snatch us out of his hands (John 10:28). (Most of this paragraph comes from Jones, 24).

Benediction

Now receive the great commission as the benediction (from the MSG): The Words of Jesus: God authorized and commanded me to commission you: 19 Go out and teach everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 20 Then teach them to walk in all I have commanded you. I will be your God and I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20).

Resources

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from Genesis*

Jones, E Stanley. *In Christ*

Kidner, Derek. *Genesis (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*

Packer, JI. *Knowing God*

Waltke, Bruce. *Genesis: A Commentary*

Walton, John. *Genesis (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*