
The New Names

Genesis 17

Twenty-three years is a long time. Think back to an event that was twenty-three years ago. Some of you aren't even that old. Yet, Abram and Sarai have been waiting that long to have their dreams realized, their promises fulfilled. There have been advances and obstacles. There have been obstacles for faith and for obedience. But now, Ishmael is the age to be recognized as the heir. Their bodies are beginning to fail. How will God keep His promises and thrust redemptive history forward?

God will do it by a great, faith sustaining affirmation of His promises. He will give them new names. No longer will there be questions about Ishmael and doubts about themselves. What happens in this chapter of Abram and Sarai's lives is a great and momentous change.

Verses 1-3 and 22-27 form an inclusion, or bookends. We are signaled this in the text by the giving of Abram's age. The structure of the text then helps us with what God is saying to Abram and is teaching us as well.

A – God Confronts Abram (v.1-3)

B – God Changes Abram's Name Confirming the Covenant (v.4-8)

C – God Seals the Covenant Establishing Circumcision (v.9-14)

b' – God Changes Sarai's Name Continuing the Covenant (v.15-21)

a' – Abraham Obeys God (v.22-27)

Let's listen carefully to God's Word.

God's People are Challenged (v.1-3)

From the context to this text this is God confronting Abram. This why God will appear and will speak. So, will Abram listen? How then does God confront Abram?

17 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.

In Who He is (v.1-2)

Moses leaves in silence the long passage of time between the birth of Ishmael and the final giving of the covenant. It does not take much to recognize the thirteen years of hopes and hardship, of longing for blessing for this son and of watching him becoming unruly and wild. But now at this important juncture in Abram and Sarah's life, God appears to Abram.

God reveals Himself through His speaking and through His Name. He announces that He is the God Almighty. He is God and thus is sovereign over all. He is almighty and thus is able to do what He has promised. While there is weakness in Abram and Sarai's bodies, there is almighty power in God. Their weakness not only is not a detriment to God's plan. Instead, it becomes the very way in which God displays His power. God's name here is meant to challenge Abram to hold fast to the promises God has given.

In What He Requires

The covenant also requires something from Abram. The fulfilling of the covenant is not dependent on Abram's obedience. But Abram must walk with God and be holy before God. This is Abram's commitment in the covenant. The covenant then is going to command, to call for God's people to live in a way that reflects their relationship to Him. This blameless and holy walk with God will be codified in the Law. Later, it will be fulfilled, satisfied and exemplified in the doing and dying of Jesus.

God's character and revelation set the standard for our relationship with Him. God is the one who is establishing the terms of the relationship. Abram does not dictate to God nor, even in the face of promises, decide what terms he will accept or not. That standard is not arbitrary but is grounded in who God is and what He is like. Thus, we do not negotiate with the Almighty. We submit and walk with Him in holiness.

In How We Respond (v.3)

Abram responds by falling on his face before God. This is the proper posture before a holy God. Abram's external posture reflects his internal poise. He is bowed in his heart before God. Does our never doing this corporately reflect that we are not so bent before God? The bowing before God in His presence is not so as to cause our hearts to bow, but because our heart's bowing force our knees to do so as well.

This is the product of a high view of God. We live in a day where God's revelation in Christ and in the Bible is not bowed to. Strangely, we have taken all the verticalness out of our relationship with God and made it entirely horizontal. We have justified this by bringing God down so that He is on the same level as we are and all relationships become horizontal, with peers. God must ever be put on a pedestal, on His throne.

God's People are Changed (v.4-21)

God has moved to reveal Himself and Abram has responded by humbling himself. Now God will finalize and ratify the covenant. Here, through the changing of Abram and Sarai's names, we see that God's people are changed. The changing of a name either signifies a change in status or in character. Notice what God does in how He changes them.

By Affirming His Promises (v.4-8)

³Then 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. ⁵No 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. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷And 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. ⁸And 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."

In the renaming of Abram, we see how God changes his people by affirming His promises to them. God states again all that He will do for Abram. What God is determined to do; He will affirm by changing Abram's name. He will no longer be Abram, that is, *an exalted father*. He will now be Abraham, *a father of many*. So, each time Ishmael and Abraham were called, it had the effect of "Do you listen" and "Father of many", come to dinner! This would be a constant reminder that the Almighty can and will do what He has promised. Otherwise, Abraham's name now is just a cruel joke.

But as though this is not enough, God also promises that many kings will come from him. In other words, he will not only father a multitude, but establish a royalty. This people and their kings will live in the land promised them. And finally, God will be their God. This is the greatest thing in the covenant. God will be their God.

By Establishing their Relationship (v.9-14)

⁹And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²He 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, ¹³both 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. ¹⁴Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

God changes his people by establishing their relationship. Here at the center of the parallelism, circumcision becomes a mark of identity. It is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. It identifies them as the people of God and as being in relationship to one another. God changes them from being a family to a people group through this rite.

Circumcision was a common practice in the culture. God took a familiar practice and invested it with theological meaning. Circumcision in the culture was most often done just before marriage to indicate a change in relationship and status. It was a mark of being separated from one family and united to another to begin a family. This cultural significance, somewhat lost on us today, would have been familiar to Abram and Sarai.

Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, just as the Sabbath is the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. All males were to be circumcised so as to be included in the promises. Only males were to be circumcised pointing us to Christ who is our circumcision. It was done on the 8th day, which has both health significance and resurrection significance. Any one who was not circumcised was not a part of the covenant.

Much confusion has come about because of erroneous teaching about the relationship between circumcision and baptism. I do not have the time to address all the issues here. But let me say this: we teach that baptism and circumcision do not directly correspond to one another in the Bible. Both point to the same thing, the work of the cross cutting us away from the old and setting us aside to the new. This work is done by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we can grow and change because Jesus has died and in that death, our hearts are circumcised. Baptism then is the public affirmation, not of participating in the covenant per se, but in moving from the old to the new so that transforming grace through obedient faith changes us.

God's people are changed by having a growing understanding of our identity in Christ and our relationship to Him. Since circumcision points to the heart work done by the Spirit in the New Covenant, then we are transformed through the once for all great change that occurred at our conversion. Then, the work of the cross, like a scalpel, cuts us apart from the indwelling sin so that it no longer has power over us. While we must have the commands of God to know what to obey, we need the truths from God to know who we are. When we believe who we

are and how we are related to God, through that faith comes enabling grace by the Spirit to obey.

By Correcting their Weaknesses (v.15-21)

God also changes people by correcting their weaknesses. Sarai's name is not changed in its meaning, but in its spelling. She has always been ordained to be a Sarah, that is, a princess. God reminds them that His plan will go forward and His purposes will be accomplished. Sarah will bear her own child.

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." 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."

Verse 17 is so interesting. Abraham is bowed low before God and laughing in his heart. How can this be? This is precisely Abraham's dilemma. He, like Sarah later, laughs in his heart. Now the New Testament in Romans 4, Paul says that at this point, Abraham does not doubt but is strong in faith. He understood that his body was unable. But he had faith in God.

But he still has questions and once again pushes Ishmael forward (v.18). Here is where I get that God is correcting their weakness. Ishmael is the result of impatient faith. Abraham and Sarah just need to continue to trust and wait. So in a wonderful twist of irony, God announces ahead of time that the son born to Abraham and Sarah, one year from now, will be called Isaac. Why is this ironic? Because, Isaac means *laughter*. What smiling, humorous mercy from God! What may cause nervous wondering laughter now will become joyful laughter later. Instead of being reminded that they must listen (Ishmael) they are now reminded that they can laugh (Isaac).

Their weakness is also corrected by the continuing of the covenant as it is established with Isaac, not Ishmael. There is an emphatic point being made here. It is to affirm that the multitude who are the sons and daughters of Isaac are in fact the true recipients of the covenant. It is also to deny that Ishmael has a claim to the covenant, even though he will be blessed because of Abraham.

The upshot of all this is that Israel understands what the covenant and circumcision mean. It means that they are uniquely related to God. That unique relationship grants them privileges and gives them responsibilities. In this they are God's own people. And amazingly, they are allowed to call God their own. This covenantal relationship with this bloody painful rite of circumcision, calls on them to humble themselves before God and to walk with God.

God's People are Compliant (v.22-27)

Abraham moves to obey God.

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.

If Abraham is going to actually participate in the covenant, then he must be a recipient of circumcision. This is the only way. It points us to Jesus, the only way. His bloody, painful death where he was cut away from God and he cut us away from our sins is the only way. If you want a relationship with God, you can only have it the way God says. There is no negotiation. There is only humble, faith compliance.

In Personal Obedience

Abraham has to obey God personally. If he has been changed, then he will obey God. He will also ensure that his household and all his servants obey God. Such is the persuasive power of a personal obedience that every male in his household was circumcised.

It is no good trying to say that we have been challenged by God, changed by God and then are not willing to obey God. The first and fundamental change we experience is the breaking of our wills and the submission of our wants. Then we become a compliant people, an obedient people in the details of our lives.

In Painful Obedience

Do not minimize this. This obedience would have been personally painful. Abraham is ninety-nine years old. Most of his household are old enough that this is going to be painful. Yet they do it. They are committed to the covenant and the relationship it creates. So they will obey God, even when it is unbelievably painful, when every sense and fiber of your being shouts, "No."

So, are you committed to painful obedience? I do not intend to merely moralize this text, but this application is inescapable. Many people who want to believe in God and may even be willing to obey God are often turned away and turned off by the call to painful obedience. I contend that you do really know if your obedience is real submission and compliance until it carries you into pain and suffering.

In Perfect Obedience

Finally, it is a perfect obedience. Jesus' personal obedience to His Father carried Him all the way to a horribly painful death, even death on the cross. Now do you begin to see how circumcision and the cross are related? They are the personal, painful obedience that makes the author of our faith, perfect.

Reflect and Respond

Let me conclude with some closing lessons and challenges.

ARE WE LISTENING TO GOD? I am struck again how important a hearing that heeds is in the Bible. Abraham is confronted by God, is changed by God and responds by obeying God. He is truly hearing with faith.

ARE WE TRYING TO NEGOTIATE THE TERMS OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD? You cannot do this. God does not bargain. God cannot be manipulated. He sets the standard and the terms of the relationship. You can only come to God by the way of the cross. If you try to come any other way, you are not God's people.

DO WE UNDERSTAND GROWTH AND CHANGE? This is not just a matter of moral do's and don'ts as though holiness is primarily a system of ethics. Growth and change arise from our relationship to God and our identity in Christ. The faith that obeys is strengthened to obey by believing all that God has said. That faith believes all that God has said about Himself, about Jesus Christ and about us. Yes, it hears imperatives and is complaint. But it also hears the names of God and our new names, it hears about the character of God and the promises for us. Faith believes the indicatives and obeys the imperatives.

ARE WE COMMITTED TO A PERSONAL, PAINFUL AND PERFECT OBEDIENCE? If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you must take up the cross. This is about shame and suffering. The way of the cross is painful. But is the way of blessing. What painful obedience is God challenging you for today? Will you believe Him and obey Him, like Jesus, even if it means a cross kind of death?

God changes us. What a gloriously wonderful thing. Hesitant, fleshly, doubting, scheming, laughing people can become the smiling parents of Isaac. So no matter where you are sinning; no matter where you are failing, God changes people.