

A Mature Walk

Text: Gen. 17:1-27

Introduction:

1. This chapter again deals with the Abrahamic Covenant. The word 'covenant' occurs 13 times in the chapter. Each time God speaks to Abraham concerning His covenant with him, further Revelation is unveiled to give Abraham a deeper understanding of God's plan.
2. This epoch in Abraham's life teaches us concerning the need to "go on unto perfection" (maturity) in the walk of faith. This is the thread that runs through the chapter.
3. We will divide the chapter into three parts for our study. In this visitation of God to Abraham, we note several truths:

I. THE PERSON OF GOD REVEALED (VS. 1-3)

God again reveals Himself to Abraham (another Theophany – See Vs. 22). Take note of several aspects of this Divine Revelation:

A. The Period when God Revealed (Vs. 1a)

1. Abraham's age is noted as 99 years. This is 13 years on from the last reference to his age mentioned in Gen. 16:16.
2. Abraham has just gone through a long period of silence. During this time Ishmael has grown to 13 years of age. Abraham is attached to the lad and is contemplating that perhaps Ishmael will be the promised seed after all (see Vs. 18).
3. God moves afresh in Abraham's life to grow him further in his walk of faith and to refine his understanding of God's will.

B. The Power of God Revealed (Vs. 1b)

1. God reveals Himself by a new Name – "I am the Almighty God". This Name of God is from the Hebrew "El Shaddai" and is made up of 'El' (the Name of God that speaks of power) and 'Shaddai' (to be strong). The word 'Almighty' is made up of "all" and "might". He can do anything! "El Shaddai" is the name of "the all-powerful and all-sufficient God who can do anything and meet any need." (Wiersbe)
2. It is significant that God would choose to reveal Himself to Abraham by this Name in light of what God is going to reveal next. Abraham would need to believe that God is all-powerful in order to trust Him to perform what He had promised. "God reveals Himself by this Name because he is going to tell his friend Abraham that Sarah would have a son. The Lord wanted Abraham to know that He is the God who is all-sufficient and all-powerful, and that nothing is too hard for Him. God says "I will" twelve times in this chapter; He is about to do the miraculous." (Wiersbe)
3. "The message spoken by God is designed to fit the circumstances of the one to whom it is spoken... God had earlier revealed Himself to Abraham as a protecting shield when Abraham had reason to be concerned about retaliation from the armies he had earlier defeated (Gen. 15:1) and He had revealed Himself as Abraham's reward

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when Abraham had turned down the reward offer of the king of Sodom. Here God reveals Himself as the “Almighty” God to support the fact that the covenant which God has with Abraham would indeed be fulfilled though at the time it looked nigh unto impossible to natural man.” (Butler)

4. Principle: God has a way of revealing the aspect of His character we most need at a given period of time. Those who are faithful to read, study and hear God’s Word will see this time and time again.

C. The Precept of God Revealed (Vs. 1c)

Abraham was exhorted to:

1. Walk in the Presence of God – “walk before me”. This means walking with a consciousness that all I do is under the Omniscient eye of the Omnipotent (Almighty) God and is a mark of Christian maturity. The believer is to:
 - a. Walk after the LORD (Deut. 13:4; 2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chr. 34:31).
That’s followership.
 - b. Walk with God (Gen. 5:22, 24; 6:9). **That’s fellowship.**
 - c. Walk before the Lord (Gen. 17:1; 1 Kings 8:23, 25; 2 Chr. 6:14; 7:17). **That’s faithfulness.** “Would you walk before God? Then let there be nothing in heart or life which you would not open to the inspection of His holy and pitiful eye.” (Meyer)
2. Grow in the Perfection of God – “and be thou perfect”.
 - a. Webster (1828) defines ‘perfect’ as “complete in moral excellencies”. It refers to growth in Christian maturity. It describes the process of sanctification in our lives whereby we become less like the world and more like Christ. This is a significant command given the fact Abraham is now 99 years old! It doesn’t matter what stage you are at in your walk of faith, you need to “go on unto perfection” (Heb. 6:1). Remember this is not perfecting ourselves in the flesh. That will never work! Rather, it is us cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He does the work of sanctification in our lives.
 - b. “A comparison of the various passages where it occurs establishes its meaning beyond a doubt, and compels us to think into it the conception of “whole-heartedness”. It denotes the entire surrender of the being. We would do well to ask ourselves, “Is my heart perfect with God? Am I whole-hearted towards him? Is He first in my schemes, pleasures, friendships, thoughts, and actions? Is His will my law, His love my light, His business my aim, His “well-done” my exceeding great reward?” (F.B. Meyer)

D. The Promises of God Revealed (Vs. 2-3)

1. God had already revealed His covenant to Abraham but over 13 years have elapsed and it was needful for Abraham to be reassured and reaffirmed in the promises of God.
2. These verses give a summary of the covenant, the details of which will be expanded upon at length in the following verses. With each fresh telling of the covenant, there is a repetition of what is already known and then a revealing of more details.

II. THE PURPOSES OF GOD EXPLAINED (VS. 4-22)

God's purposes are revealed in connection with three new names. The new name is symbolic of the new nature. In chapter 16 we see Abraham and Sarah walking according to the old nature. Now in chapter 17 they are exhorted to walk in the light of their new identity. This is Christian maturity.

A. A New Name for Abram – 'Abraham' (Vs. 4-14)

His name is changed from 'Abram' meaning "exalted father" to 'Abraham' meaning "father of a multitude". It would require faith on the part of Abraham to accept this new identity as at this point, he did not yet have even one child by his wife Sarah! We too must accept by faith all that God says we are in Christ.

1. The Significance Connected to the Covenant (Vs. 4-8)

Again, we note the two primary aspects of the covenant touching on:

a. Seed (People) (Vs. 4-7) Observe the two truths revealed concerning Abraham's seed.

i. The Fruitfulness of Abraham's seed (Vs. 4-6)

1. "thou **shalt be** a father of many nations" (Vs. 4).
2. "a father of many nations have **I made thee**" (Vs. 5).
3. "**I will** make thee **exceeding fruitful**" (Vs. 6)
4. "**I will** make nations of thee" (Vs. 6)
5. "kings **shall** come out of thee" (Vs. 6)
6. Principle: Fruitfulness is something produced by the power of God in the believer as he/she walks before the Lord in the maturity and appropriation of the new nature. None of this would be achieved through Abraham's natural strength. God would do the work through Him according to His Divine power. The sooner we learn that fruit bearing only comes by abiding in Christ the sooner we will bear fruit! (See John 15:1-8). The flesh produces Ishmaels. The power of God produces kings!
7. We have nothing in ourselves to make ourselves fruitful (See John 15:5). Vance Havner said, "We say that we depend on the Holy Spirit but actually we are so wired up with our own devices that if the fire does not fall from heaven, we can turn on a switch and produce false fire of our own."

ii. The Future of Abraham's seed (Vs. 7)

1. The covenant would include Abraham's descendants, the nation of Israel – "and thy seed after thee in their generations".
2. The covenant would be permanent – "an everlasting covenant". "God promised that Canaan would be an "everlasting possession"; so it is clear no action on the part of Abraham's descendants can ever permanently sever the land from them." (Henry Morris)
3. The covenant would be spiritual in its focus – "to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee". Note also

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verse 8 – “and will be their God”. This is the most precious part of the covenant; that they would be the Lord’s people.

- b. Soil (Property) (Vs. 8) God again reiterates His promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants. The land belongs to Israel by Divine decree and no human government has any authority to say otherwise!
2. The Sign Connected with the Covenant (Vs. 9-14)

This is new revelation concerning a sign that would be associated with the Abrahamic covenant, the sign of circumcision:

 - a. The Particulars of the sign of Circumcision (Vs. 9-14)
 - i. It was a physical mark (Vs. 9-11). Verse 13 says, “and my covenant shall be **in your flesh** for an everlasting covenant”. The word ‘circumcision’ means “to cut around” and referred to the removing of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ.
 - ii. It was a national mark (Vs. 12-13). It was to be the distinctive mark for the whole nation of Israel, including all who were associated with them (e.g., servants).
 - iii. It was a mandatory mark (Vs. 14). Those who failed to adhere to the rite of circumcision were to be “cut off” from the people, likely a reference to some form of banishment. It is sometimes used in the Bible of capital punishment.
 - b. The Purpose of the sign of Circumcision
 - i. It was NOT for salvation. Abraham had been justified over 13 years before. Paul highlights this point in his letter to the Romans (See Rom. 4:9-13). Sadly, the Jews turned circumcision into a means of salvation but that was never its intent. **Circumcision was for a sign and not for salvation!** In a similar way, so many today look to a religious ritual (s) as the means of their salvation instead of looking to the Christ’s finished work on the cross.
 - ii. It was a sign for the covenant. “Since God’s covenant involved Abraham’s “seed”, it was fitting that the mark of the covenant be on the male organ of generation.” (Wiersbe) Henry Morris explains it well, “The emphasis of the covenant, of course, was on the promised seed, and on the abundance of progeny which would accrue to Abraham. The male reproductive organ is the remarkable, divinely created vehicle for the transmission of this seed from one generation to another. The circumcision (“cutting round”) of this channel would thus picture its complete enclosure within God’s protective and productive will.”
 - iii. Note: In the context of the moral debauchery of the Canaanites, it would also mark God’s people out as distinct and pure in sexual matters in contrast to the depraved practices of the heathen. To quote Morris

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- again, “The ‘cutting’ of the foreskin speaks of a surgical removal, a complete separation, from the sins of the flesh so widely prevalent in the world around them, such sins largely centred in the misuse of the male organ in adultery, fornication, and sodomy. As it directly, therefore, symbolized to the Jewish man that he was a member of an elect nation, a peculiar people, distinctly holy before God, in relation to sexual conduct, so it came indirectly to speak of holiness in every phase of life (note Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6, etc...).”
- iv. Griffith Thomas provides a helpful summary of the purpose of circumcision. The truths connected with circumcision seem to include at least four ideas:
- Designation, as belonging to God.
 - Separation unto Him.
 - Purity in Him.
 - Possession by Him.
- c. The Principles from the sign of Circumcision
- What does circumcision mean for the New Testament believer?
- i. Obviously, we are not bound to physical circumcision as the Jews were. That question is completely settled in the New Testament writings (e.g., Galatians).
- ii. The mark of the believer is not a physical mark on the body but a spiritual mark on spirit. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13) and are spiritually circumcised with the “circumcision of Christ” rather than the “circumcision of Moses”. Col. 2:11 “In whom 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:**”
- iii. “When we trusted Christ to save us, the Spirit of God preformed “spiritual surgery” that enables us to have victory over the desires of the old nature and the old life. Physical circumcision removes only a part of the body but the true “spiritual circumcision” puts off “the body of the sins of the flesh” (Col. 2:11). It is not the “circumcision of Moses” (Acts 15:1) but the “circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11) that is important to the Christian believer.” (Wiersbe)
- iv. Circumcision is therefore not a symbol of baptism as some suggest and then try to argue for the baptism of infants as a New Testament form of circumcision. Circumcision pictures the internal operation of God in salvation where “the body of the sins of the flesh” are “put off” (cut away). It refers to the same truth as Romans 6, albeit under the figure of circumcision. In Christ, the power of sin has been broken in our lives.
- v. Baptism is a New Testament ordinance that follows salvation as a step of obedience, public testimony of

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one's faith in Christ and an outward picture of our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Even if circumcision was a picture of baptism (and it is not) we should be reminded of the fact that Abraham's circumcision was "believer's circumcision", it came after he was justified!

B. A New Name for Sarai – 'Sarah' (Vs. 15-16)

1. Her name would be changed to 'Sarah' meaning "princess". This was a fitting name given the fact "kings of people" would come from her (Vs. 16).
2. God would bless her by giving her a son and making her a mother. We need to elevate motherhood back to the high position it is given by God. To raise a godly seed for the Lord to use is the highest calling a Christian woman can have.
3. Sarah would struggle to believe this possible to begin with (Gen. 18:12) but would eventually come to a place of faith in God's promise as revealed in Hebrews 11:11.

C. A New Name Isaac (Vs. 17-22)

1. God's plan for Isaac (Vs. 17-19)
 - a. Abraham's response to God's plan.
 - i. Abasement – he fell upon his face. For the second time Abraham takes this lowly posture of reverence before God.
 - ii. Astonishment – he laughed and pointed out the seeming impossibility of the situation in the form of two questions that focused on their old age. "Abraham received the new revelation of God with reverence, and yet with a certain trustful astonishment. The laugh is evidently not the laugh of unbelief, but of a faith which, while taking God at his word, considers the news almost too good to be true. God's revelations to His people often seem to be too good to be true, and yet they are true!" (Thomas)
 - iii. Advice – "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" Abraham was still holding on to the thought that God was going to use Ishmael to accomplish His purposes. How hard it is for us to come to the realization that the product of our own energies is not what God is going to use to accomplish His work. So often God has to work on us before He can really begin to work through us! Sometimes our acts of service for the Lord are Ishmaels more than Isaacs. Self is bound up in them and they are produced in the energies of the self-life.
 - iv. Amy Carmichael, missionary to India, wrote to a friend who was perplexed about a painful experience, "I will say what our Heavenly Father said to me long ago, and says to me still very often: 'see in it a chance to die'."
 - v. Perhaps we all need to pray not "Oh that Ishmael might live before thee" but rather "Oh, that Ishmael might die within me!"
 - b. God's reiteration of His plan.

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- i. Sarah would have a son indeed.
 - ii. His name would be Isaac, meaning “he laughs”. A most interesting response from God given the fact Abraham had just laughed. Three different occasions of laughter are associated with Isaac’s birth: Abraham laughed for joy when he heard his wife would give birth to the promised son (Gen. 17:17); Sarah laughed in unbelief when she heard the news (18:9-15); and Sarah laughed for joy when the boy was born (21:6-7).
 - iii. God would establish his covenant with Isaac and his seed. He would be the covenant son of Abraham and continue the Messianic line, not Ishmael.
2. God’s plan for Ishmael (Vs. 20-22)
 - a. God in His grace and mercy heard Abraham’s plea for Ishmael and promised to bless him by making him a great people.
 - b. God has kept this promise. The descendants of Ishmael are a fruitful and populous people.
 - c. Ishmael did not get a new name because he represents the flesh; and the flesh cannot be changed. See Romans 7:18.

D. Summary. God has given out three names in this section:

1. The name Abraham speaks of the faithfulness of God – “a father of many nations have I made thee”.
2. The name Sarah speaks of the grace of God – being called “princess” after her scheme with Hagar is certainly God’s grace.
3. The name Isaac speaks of the power of God – laughter in astonishment and wonderment at what God will accomplish by His power in enabling Abraham and Sarah to have a child at their age.

III. THE PRECEPTS OF GOD OBEYED (VS. 23-27)

These verses speak of Abraham’s obedience to the Lord’s command. Abraham’s obedience was:

A. Prompt (Vs. 23b; 26)

1. Abraham’s immediate obedience is noted twice with the phrase “selfsame day”. This means that Abraham obeyed the Lord the same day he received the command.
2. May God give us responsive hearts to obey the Lord straight away.

B. Complete (Vs. 23-27)

Abraham’s obedience was full and complete. Note the following phrases:

1. “**as God had said** unto him”.
2. “**all** that were born in his house, and **all** that were bought with his money”.
3. “**all** the men of his house...were circumcised with him”.

Conclusion: Are you maturing and growing in your walk of faith or have you become content with the status quo?