

Genesis 17 — Covenant

January 31, 2016

Welcome to CrossWinds. It is great to have you. If you are married, before we jump into our study, I want you to think back to your wedding day. Men, it was a time when your wife wore an amazing dress. She looked incredible. Ladies, it was one of the few times you will see your man in a tux. Family and friends gathered to witness you making your vows before God to one another. You entered into a marriage covenant. You made vows, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do you part that you would faithfully love your spouse. You vowed before God, family and friends to have undying love for your spouse. You made a vow that even if your spouse was not faithful to us, you would be faithful to him or her.

For the fun of it, let me show you my wedding photo. As you can see, Cindy hasn't aged a bit. If anything, she improved over time. As for me, I look like I am in high school. Cindy was the cradle robber.



A lot of water has gone under the bridge since that picture was taken in 1993.

When we were in marriage counseling, I remember the pastor telling us he was more in love with his wife 20 years after his wedding day than on his wedding. I thought he was nuts. Today, I think he was right.

While our wedding days should be one of the best days of our lives, it is only after the marriage covenant is beat up by the hard knocks of life and the cords that bind us are nibbled at by the gnawing boredom of life and we sin against our spouses, yet their love still holds strong, that a new love for a spouse can be birthed. It is a new love that can only come from a covenant that is tested and endures. Do any of the married couples understand what I am talking about?

As a church, we are studying our way through Genesis. For the last few weeks we followed Abram and his walk with God. In Genesis 15 God entered into a one-way blood-oath covenant with Abram. God promised to give Abram a son and the Promised Land, no matter what happened, God would be faithful and come through. While God promised to be faithful to Abram, no matter what happened, by Genesis 16, Abram put that covenant to the test. Abram messed up big time. He slept with the maid and conceived a son out of wedlock. God had just promised to be faithful and in Genesis 16 Abram was faithless. It would seem appropriate for God to write Abram out of his plan. It would seem appropriate for God to give up and walk away. God's promise was tested with infidelity.

Today, in Genesis 17, we learn that in spite of Abram's failure, God didn't let him go. God stayed true to his covenant love to Abram. In the same way, he will stay true to his covenant love to us. In Genesis 17, God reaffirmed and expanded upon his covenant love to Abram. As we study God's faithful covenant

love to Abram, we will learn a bit about what it means for us to have faithful covenant love to our spouses, even when it is hard. Let's begin in Genesis 17:1.

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, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Genesis 17:1–2 (ESV)

The first thing we need to notice is Abram's age. He was 99. Last week, when chapter 16 closed, how old was Abram? He was 86. Ishmael was now 13. There are 13 years between these chapters where God was silent.

When we read the Bible, it seems like God is doing something miraculous on every page. It looks like God shows up in a miraculous way every 10 minutes. We forget there are large gaps in time in the Bible. We covered five chapters with Abram's life. You can read those chapters in 15 minutes. Those five chapters cover 24 years. Thirteen of those years are between chapter 16 and 17, when God was silent. Just like there were long periods in Abram's life when God was silent, there will be long periods in our lives when God is silent, when life is routine. We get up and eat the same breakfast, take the dog for a walk and start a week that was identical to the last. That is normal. Don't expect to see God showing up in powerful ways every five minutes. That is not the way it happened in the Bible. That is not the way it usually happens in real life.

When God is silent, that doesn't mean he has forgotten about us. God hasn't forgotten about Abram. He hasn't forgotten about you. God has good reasons for times of silence and for times of waiting and patience. As we will see in a few moments, God had a good reason for a long period of silence.

God also revealed a little about himself. This was a serious “ah ha” moment. God said, “I am God Almighty.” While you don’t see it in the English, God literally identified himself by the name *El Shaddai*. In the Bible, the different names of God reveal the character of God. This is the first time God uses this name to describe himself. *El Shaddai* means the God of all power and might. It means the God who can do anything no matter what the opposition or the circumstances. God uses this name for himself 48 times in the Bible. Thirty-one of those times are in the book of Job. God revealed himself to Job as the one that no matter how hopeless Job’s situation felt, no matter how bad his life had become, because God is “all powerful” and in complete control of everything, he can turn around any situation we face. “Job, don’t look at your circumstances. Don’t look at losing your kids, your business and your health. Don’t listen to the wife that is telling you to curse God and die. Look at your God and know his name.” God says his name is *El Shaddai*. He is the hope when you are at the end of your rope; no matter what the situation looks like, God can turn it around. He specializes in rescuing people who are in hopeless situations. He is the God that powerfully rescued the Israelites out of Egypt when they were forced to kill their children. He is the God who parted the Red Sea when the Israelites had the armies on Egypt on one side and the sea on the other. Who finds that encouraging?

Here is the point. God was using Abraham’s life to reveal to Abraham, and to us, what we need to know about God’s character. This is why God never gave Abram and Sarai a child when they were younger. If God gave Abram and Sarai

a child when they were in their 20s, God's character as the one who can rescue any marriage, overcome any obstacle and transform any situation would not be known. This is why God let Abram and Sarai get really old so Sarai's body was as good as dead. She was 90. Abram was 100. All natural hope was lost when God decided to step into action and cause Sarai to conceive. God wanted it to be known through their lives that he can overcome any obstacle and rescue from any situation.

God had never forgotten about Abram and Sarai. One of the great purposes of their lives was to showcase God's ability to rescue no matter what the odds. How God overcame the insurmountable obstacles in their lives is to be an encouragement to us when we face insurmountable obstacles in our lives. We have a God that specializes in rescue.

Folks, what happened is happening. God didn't just allow Abram and Sarai to face hopeless circumstances. We will also face hopeless situations when we need to know God's name is *El Shaddai*, the God who rescues those at the end of their ropes with no hope.

As you get older, you will develop a short collection stories of God's rescue that are not just in the Bible. They are in your own life.

In our family, one of those rescue stories is my wife. A little more than 10 years ago Cindy noticed black streaks under her fingernails. Soon some of her finger tips started turning black. On a few of the fingers the flesh turned black and rotted. We went to specialists but the doctors had no cure. She was diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder. For months she laid on the couch

curled in a ball holding her hands in pain. The flesh on one of her fingers was so rotted that her finger nail looked like a black lollipop on the end of a withered black stick. That was all that remained of that finger. They warned us about her possible death if the rot of her fingers went into her hands and entered her body. We were at the end of our rope. We had three little kids in the house. While we were at peace with God because God had graciously given her life and we knew that if she died, she would be with Jesus, I desperately did not want to lose her. Cindy desperately wanted to be around for her family.

In the church we prayed for her and anointed her with oil. I will admit that I did this out of obedience to the book of James and trusting in God's mercy but I never expected significant change.

When we went to the next doctor appointment to schedule the amputation of some fingers, the doctor was stunned. The rotting flesh stopped progressing down her fingers into her hand. Over the next months the flesh slowly regrew up her finger. The doctor was stunned. The specialist literally had no explanation. I wish I had my wife on video for the last doctor visit. She had an explanation and she wasn't afraid to let the doctor know it. When there was no hope and we were at the end of our rope, El Shaddai came to the rescue. What happened in the Bible is still happening. That is what it means to have a God named *El Shaddai*, the God who can rescue anyone from anything.

Let's get back to the text.

God also promised to enter into a covenant relationship with Abram. This was not a new covenant relationship. It was simply an expansion and

restatement of the covenant oath we read about in Genesis 15. There are many parallels between what happens when God reaffirms his covenant love to Abram in this chapter with what happens in the covenant of marriage. Let me show you.

In Genesis 15 we learned that God entered into an unconditional covenant with Abram. In marriage, you enter into an unconditional covenant with your spouse. In Genesis 17, we learn that while the covenant was unconditional, it required obedience for Abram and his descendants to enjoy the blessing of the covenant. Abram had to live in a way that reflected the covenant that existed between him and God to enjoy the blessings of that covenant.

In the same way, in marriage we are to live in such a way that reflects the covenant we have with our spouses. When we don't live that way, we will not enjoy the blessings of that covenant. Married men, that means you don't go out picking up chicks. You don't do that when you are in a covenant with your wife. You don't flirt with ladies at work or have a lunch or breakfast alone with another woman. Why? You are in a covenant with your wife so you live in a way that reflects it. When you live in a way that reflects the covenant, you enjoy the blessing of the covenant with your wife when you come home. When you live ignoring the covenant and you go out with the rest of the single guys to the bar to pick up chicks, it will not go well when you come home. When she has a rolling pin in her hand, that is not a sign of a blessing.

The same thing is true of Abram's relationship with God and our relationship with God. God is looking to unfold the blessing of his covenant

promises to Abram, but to enjoy those blessings, Abraham needed to live in the covenant.

The covenant is not based on obedience but it requires obedience.

I told you there are many parallels between God's covenant with Abram in Genesis 17 and the way a marriage covenant works today. In a marriage covenant, people get new names to show their new covenant identity. That same thing happened with Abram and Sarai.

Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "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 have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 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. 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." Genesis 17:3–8 (ESV)

Last week we learned that Abram meant "exalted father" or "super dad." Then God was expanding on what it meant to be in covenant with him. God decided to change Abram's name from "super dad" to "father of multitudes." I find this funny. The childless 99-year-old man got a name change from "super dad" to "father of nations." Could you see the people at the Social Security office looking at him when he did the name change? I am sure they couldn't keep a straight face. God has a sense of humor.

As we will see in the next few chapters, God is true to his covenant and his word. Abraham became not just the father of a son but the father of nations. Numerous nations look to him as their father — the Edomites, the Ishmaelites, the Midianites and the Israelites. In the New Testament, it also says Abraham is

also the father of all those who are made right with God by faith. That means Abraham is also ultimately our father. The new name is appropriate. Abraham did become the father of nations.

Just as Abraham got a name change, so did Sarai.

And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 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.” Genesis 17:15–16 (ESV)

This has a little more mystery. Last week we learned that Sarai means “princess.” She is apparently a high-maintenance woman. Sarah also means “princess.” It is not clear the exact nature of her name change. Some scholars believe that Sarai means princess because she came from royalty while Sarah means she will mother royalty.

This is like a marriage covenant. Just as the marriage covenant is such a big deal it changes our name, God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah was such a big deal it changed their names. The similarity between a marriage covenant and God’s covenant with Abraham continues.

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 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, 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. 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.” Genesis 17:9–14 (ESV)

Here goes the fun part of the sermon. If I am going to put my foot in my mouth, this is where I will do it. If you see the elders waiting for me at the door, you know this section did not go well.

In marriage, there is a sign you are in a covenant relationship with your spouse. It is called a wedding ring. In the Bible every covenant has a sign that goes with it. After the flood, God gave Noah the Noahic covenant. The sign of the promise that God would not flood the earth again was the rainbow. In the New Testament, God gave us a new covenant with Jesus Christ. The regular sign that we are in a covenant relationship with God through Jesus is communion, which is bread and wine. That is why we take the bread and wine together.

In the same way, circumcision was the sign Abraham and his descendants were in a special covenant relationship with God. I am sure Abraham wished he could switch with Noah and get the rainbow instead of circumcision as a sign of the covenant but no switching is allowed.

Incidentally, this is not the first time circumcision took place in history. Circumcision dates back to Syria in 2800 B.C.. As God often does, he takes something that is existing and he breathes into it fresh meaning. God breathed fresh meaning into bread and wine to make it a sign of the covenant with Jesus. In the same way, God breathed new meaning into circumcision.

To help us with this, let's do a little Q&A on circumcision. I am asking the questions. If you guys ask the questions, I will lose my job. To have a little fun and make the winter pass faster, we have the Winter Games, when people play

on a frozen lake. To make the winter pass faster at church, we talk about circumcision. That gets your mind off the cold.

Why did God choose circumcision as a sign of the covenant? Why not give everybody a nose ring or a tattoo around the belly button? I don't know. I have a few ideas. Abraham's problem was procreation. The sign of God's covenant promise was on that part of his body. Every time a man in Abraham's household looked at his body he was reminded that he was in a special relationship with God. He was reminded that he was sexuality different than other men around him. He was set apart for God's purpose. His sexuality was set apart to honor God. He was to father children that were also part of God's covenant love.

Incidentally, when this part of a man is set apart to the Lord, it means the rest of a man is set apart to the Lord. It is with this part of his body that a man can do incredible evil or incredible good. When a man sees this part of his body, he is reminded his sexuality is set apart for God.

God said "If anyone in your household refuses to be circumcised, he will be cut off from the people." That was a little God humor, not mine.

Does God just want men circumcised in their bodies? While God is insistent that everyone in Abraham's house was circumcised and that all of his descendants that are part of the covenant are circumcised, God was not just looking for physical circumcision in his men. God doesn't just want a sign on people's bodies that they are set apart for God, he wants our hearts actually set apart for God.

Sometimes Christian men ask me about tattoos. They want to get a big cross or a big Bible verse tattooed on their bodies so everyone knows their lives are set apart for God. I remind them that they may already have the original biblical sign they are part of the covenant on their bodies so a tattoo of a cross may be redundant.

I also remind people that more important than a sign on your body that you are set apart for God is your heart. God wants your heart set apart for him more than a sign on your body.

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. Deuteronomy 10:16 (ESV)

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. Deuteronomy 30:6 (ESV)

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. Romans 2:28–29 (ESV)

More important than a tattoo of a cross to let people know you love Jesus is your heart. More important than a Christian T-shirt that says, “Jesus is the choice of a new generation” is a heart that actually loves him. More important than a Christian bumper sticker that says, “Honk if you love Jesus” is the heart that actually loves him. That is what matters.

Why did God want Abraham’s men circumcised on the eighth day?

I don’t have a definitive answer. I suspect it is because it points forward to Jesus. The Bible is insistent on a literal seven-day creation week. The eighth day symbolizes the first day of the new creation week. Jesus rose on the eighth day, the first day of the new creation week. Paul said if anyone is in Christ, he is

a new creation and part of that new creation week. It seems appropriate that God has the sign of the covenant, the sign of being part of the new creation given to children on the eighth day.

While the Jews circumcise their children on the eighth day, to follow this command, the Arabs also circumcise their children. They traditionally circumcise their children at age 13 because that was the age of Ishmael when he was circumcised. This might explain why you have so many angry young Arab men. If that is what they do to you on your 13th birthday in the Muslim world, I would be protesting in the street too. I think that would scar a guy for life.

Do Christians need to be circumcised? That is a good question. Some people think Christians should be circumcised. Genesis 17 says it is the non-negotiable sign of the covenant people.

If you study the New Testament, you see that question kicked off a huge debate in early church history. Many Jewish Christians insisted Gentile Christians adopt the sign of the covenant community and be circumcised as adults, which wasn't very popular. You could picture how this went when it came to the end of church membership class. Very few gentile men were interested in joining the church.

One of the first church councils in the Bible met in Jerusalem to discuss this very issue. You can read about it in Acts 15. They came to the definitive conclusion that you do not need to be circumcised to be a Christian.

What brought them to this conclusion? In Acts 10, Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile, became a Christian. God gave him the the Holy Spirit

and God showed no distinction between circumcised Jewish men who followed Christ and uncircumcised Gentile men who followed Christ. If God showed no distinction, how could they insist on circumcision for Gentile men to become Christians?

Unfortunately, this church council didn't settle the matter for many people. Paul spent considerable time in his letters insisting that we are saved by God's grace alone through Jesus, not by God's grace through Jesus plus circumcision. The physical act of circumcision doesn't make anyone a better Christian or a stronger Christian.

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Galatians 6:15 (ESV)

Is there a sign of our covenant with Jesus that corresponds to circumcision today? In the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign you were part of the covenant community. If that is no longer necessary, is there a sign you are part of the covenant community following Christ today? Paul taught us that baptism, and by extension communion, are the signs we are part of the covenant community. Let me show you this by looking at what Paul said about baptism and circumcision.

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, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses... Colossians 2:11–13 (ESV)

While different church traditions perform baptisms different ways, we typically perform baptism by immersion. Paul hinted this was the typical way it

was done in the early church. People were put underwater to symbolize their burial with Christ, then they were pulled up from the water picturing their resurrection with Christ to a new life. Baptism functions like New Testament version of circumcision. They are both signs of the covenant.

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?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" 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. 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. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year." Genesis 17:17–21 (ESV)

We don't expect to find Abraham on his face laughing about this. Was this a mocking laugh? I don't think so. Romans 4:20 says Abraham didn't have unbelief. I think Abraham was having a hard time getting his mind wrapped around the enormity of God's promise. How can Sarah, the woman who cleans her dentures with Polident and who uses a walker to get across the room become pregnant? How can this be true?

What Abraham was struggling to understand is what it means to have a God whose name is *El Shaddai*, the God Almighty who delights to do things that are impossible. While Abraham and Sarah understood God's plan, their laughter shows they can't imagine the extent of God's saving power.

How many of us are right there? Maybe you are looking for a job, but nothing comes up. You are wondering if God is listening. You wonder if God cares. For Abraham, God was silent for 13 years. You are at the end of your rope. You can't imagine how God could save you.

The next struggle was Abraham still cared about Ishmael. He was a good father. Abraham cared so much about Ishmael that he proposed God use Ishmael instead of Isaac. God couldn't use Ishmael. Remember that God's purpose for this was to bring Abraham and Sarah to the end of their rope and to put them in a position where there was no hope for a child so when God gave them a child everyone would know about God's power to rescue.

Amazingly, even though Ishmael was not to be part of the original plan and even though he was not the child of promise, God still cared for him. God promised to make Ishmael into a nation and to bless him.

This is a great reminder that even when we mess up, God is still very gracious to us in spite of our sin. Even when a child is conceived in sin, that doesn't mean God writes the child off. He is often very gracious and compassionate to that child. I find that incredibly encouraging.

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. 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. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. Genesis 17:22–27 (ESV)

I love Abraham's swift response. Once Abraham knew what God wanted him to do, he got busy doing it. He didn't procrastinate. He called all of his employees down to the break room at work and told them they were getting circumcised over the lunch hour. You have a 99-year-old man with a shaky hand that couldn't see and needed glasses doing mass circumcisions. This is funny.

How many men did he circumcise? Earlier in Genesis we learned Abraham had a personal army of 318 men. I am sure there were additional guys on staff. Did we have 500 circumcisions that day? 1,000? I don't know.

There is a lesson for us.

When you know what God wants you to do, don't procrastinate, even if it hurts.

When you realize you need to ask forgiveness of someone, do it right away. When the Holy Spirit is prompting you to make a visit or an encouraging phone call, don't put it on a list, put it on your calendar and get it done.

Applications

What did we learn?

1. **When God is silent, it doesn't mean he isn't working.** Abraham went through long period of silence from God. This one lasted 13 years.
2. **God is El Shaddai, God Almighty. He loves to save us against insurmountable odds.** God specializes in saving us in hopeless circumstances.
3. **A covenant is not based on obedience but it requires obedience.**
4. **God cares about the circumcision of our hearts more than the circumcision of our body.**
5. **When I know what God wants me to do, don't procrastinate, even if it hurts.**



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