

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful

Lesson 6: God Almighty and the Covenant Sign -- Genesis 17

Thirteen years of silence. That is the gap the Bible quietly steps over between the end of chapter 16 and the start of chapter 17. After the Hagar episode, after Ishmael was born, Scripture says nothing for over a decade. Abram is now ninety-nine years old. Whatever hope he once had of a son by Sarai has surely faded into something he no longer lets himself feel. Ishmael is a teenager now, and perhaps Abram has made his peace with the idea that this boy, the son of the shortcut, is the best the promise will ever be. And then, after thirteen years of quiet, God appears again.

"I am God Almighty," He says. El Shaddai. It is a name that lands like a thunderclap on an old man who has nearly given up. I am the God for whom nothing is impossible. Then comes the call: "Walk before me, and be blameless." Not perfect in the sense of flawless, but whole, undivided, living every step in the awareness that God is watching with love. And on the strength of that name, God reaches into a situation that is, humanly, finished, and reopens it.

He changes their names. Abram, "exalted father," becomes Abraham, "father of a multitude." Sarai becomes Sarah. God hangs the promise on them like new clothes, renaming them for a future they cannot yet see. He establishes an everlasting covenant, gives the sign of circumcision to mark His people as His own, and then says the thing that knocks Abraham flat on his face: Sarah, ninety years old, will bear you a son, and you will call his name Isaac. Abraham laughs into the dust. A son? From these two ancient bodies?

But here is what should stop us. That same day, the very day God spoke, Abraham took every male in his household and obeyed the painful command of circumcision, beginning with himself at ninety-nine. No delay. No negotiation. The God who is Almighty had spoken, and Abraham, who had stumbled and schemed and waited and nearly given up, simply obeyed. This chapter introduces us to the God for whom nothing is too hard, and to the kind of wholehearted, immediate obedience that such a God deserves.

Group Discussion: God introduced Himself to a ninety-nine-year-old man and his ninety-year-old wife as "God Almighty," and then promised them a son. Why do we so easily believe in God's power in the abstract, yet quietly assume some situation in our own lives is simply too far gone for Him to act? What does it do to our faith to truly believe that nothing is too hard for the LORD?

Personal Reflection: God called Abraham to "walk before me, and be blameless," to live every step in the awareness of God's presence. Think about the gap between how you live when you know others are watching and how you live when you think no one is. Where is your walk before God most divided, and what would it look like to live the next week truly aware that He sees you with love?

Study Questions

1. After thirteen years of silence, God appeared to ninety-nine-year-old Abram and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (v. 1). What does the name “God Almighty” (El Shaddai) reveal about God, and how does His all-sufficient power form the foundation for the covenant and the call that follow?
2. We affirm that God is all-powerful, yet often live as though some situation in our lives is too far gone for Him. Where are you quietly treating a circumstance, a relationship, or a longing as beyond God’s reach? What would change if you truly believed nothing is too hard for Him?
3. God’s call was, “walk before me, and be blameless” (v. 1), a summons to wholehearted, undivided covenant living rather than flawless perfection. What does it mean to “walk before God,” and how does this call to integrity flow out of, rather than earn, the covenant relationship God graciously offers?
4. To “walk before God” is to live every moment aware that He sees. Where is your walk most divided, more careful when others are watching than when you think no one is? In what specific area is God calling you to greater integrity and wholeness this week?
5. God changed Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”) and Sarai to Sarah, renaming them for a future they could not yet see (vv. 5, 15–16). What does this giving of new names reveal about how God grounds our identity in His promise rather than in our past or our circumstances?
6. God redefined Abraham’s identity by His promise, not by his age, his failures, or his empty arms. Do you tend to define yourself by your past, your failures, or your circumstances, or by who God says you are? Where do you most need to let God’s word about you be truer than your own verdict on yourself?
7. God gave circumcision as “the sign of the covenant” to mark His people and their households as belonging to Him (vv. 9–14). What was the purpose of this outward sign, and how does it foreshadow the circumcision of the heart and the New Covenant sign of baptism, which Paul explicitly links to it (Colossians 2:11–12)?
8. Circumcision was meant to mark an inward reality, yet Scripture warns that an outward sign without a changed heart is empty (Romans 2:28–29). Is there any way your own faith has become more about outward form and religious markers than about a heart truly devoted to God? Where does your heart need its own circumcision?
9. God Almighty promised a son to a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman, established the everlasting covenant through Isaac the child of promise (not Ishmael the child of human effort), and Abraham obeyed the costly command that very day (vv. 15–27). How does this chapter hold together God’s sovereign power to do the impossible, His gracious initiative in the everlasting covenant fulfilled in Christ, and the immediate, obedient faith that such a covenant calls for?

10. Look back across the whole chapter. You have met God Almighty, heard the call to walk before Him blamelessly, watched Him rename His people for a promised future, and seen Abraham obey at once. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this part of Abraham's story. What is the single truth about God's power, your identity, or wholehearted obedience that you most need to carry into this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 4:18–21, Abraham grew strong in faith, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised; Genesis 18:14, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"; Colossians 2:11–12, the circumcision of Christ and our union with Him in baptism; Romans 2:28–29, true circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit; Philippians 3:3, we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit and glory in Christ Jesus