

Text: Genesis 17

Title: "The God Who Covenanted with Abraham"

Time: 7/20/08 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The value of a promise is a function of the character of the one who makes that promise. We have had a candidate for president promising the U.S. electorate to bring troops home from Iraq in 16 months after taking office, yet many have questioned the value of that promise in view of the lack of experience of the one who has made it. It so happens that he has no military experience, has never discussed the feasibility of such a timetable with commanders in the field or the leaders of Iraq, nor ever even visited the country to learn first-hand what conditions there are like.

I can remember another president who once said, "Read my lips, no new taxes." Well, he raised taxes anyway and after doing so he no longer bothered trying to ask us to read his lips anymore.

In Genesis 17 God emphasizes the trustworthiness of the promise He had made to Abraham, the Abrahamic covenant, by reminding him of Who it was that made this promise. This is a chapter all about who God is and what God has promised to do. The promises can be believed because God Who made them is Who He is.

I counted God's own references to Himself as "I," "Me," and "My" 32 times in the first 22 verses of this chapter. This chapter teaches us some important things about the God who covenanted with Abraham, and I want us to see three of these this morning.

I. God is absolutely omnipotent, so His promise to Abraham cannot fail (vv. 1-2).

Illustration: When politicians have trouble keeping their promises it is often because they lack the power to follow through on those promises. When the first George Bush got into office having promised no new taxes, he quickly found out that he was only 1 of the 3 branches of government. The power of the legislature was in the hands of those who wanted new taxes, and in the end Bush lacked the power to follow through on his promise. He had to compromise with those who wanted new taxes or they were going to shut the federal government down by not approving the budget. He made a promise without the power to do it.

Application: God wants to make it clear to Abraham that when it comes to performing on His promises, He lacks no power. His power is unlimited, absolute, and His exclusive possession. I want us to notice two emphases of the passage in this regard.

A. God is powerful enough to communicate His promise effectively (v. 1, the Lord appeared to Abram"; "God said" and "God spoke" vv. 1, 3, 9, 15, 19, 22).

Application: Some like to call themselves agnostics so as to excuse their atheism. They claim that they have not concluded that the God of the Bible does not exist; rather, they argue that they simply cannot know for sure.

When you say that you believe that you cannot know for sure, you are saying that you believe that if God does exist He is the kind of god that is not powerful enough to reveal Himself to man, that He has failed to communicate His promises effectively. You are saying as much as any atheist

that the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Moses, Paul and even Jesus Christ Himself does not exist, for this is the God who is powerful enough to communicate His promises effectively. Our passage makes plain that God has this power.

B. God is powerful enough to execute His promise flawlessly. Notice that this kind of power calls for a response (v. 1, "Walk before me, and be perfect [or complete]"). The power of the God who promises calls for certain spiritual perfections in the way we, who are called upon to believe those promises, live. I want us to see three of these perfections or virtues:

1. God's execution is never late, so it calls for the perfection of faithfulness. The execution of God's promise seemed late at times to Abraham (contrast 16:16 with 17:1; the text emphasizes that it had been 13 years between these events). But God is not late – He always has the correct schedule accounted for (v. 21), and it is correct because it is His schedule. He makes no mistakes. What seems too late for you and me is right on time in the eyes of God (vv. 15-22).

2. His execution is never half-hearted, so it calls for the perfection of thankfulness ("exceedingly"; vv. 2, 6, 20). Note the abundance of God's promise: He changes Abram's name (vv. 5, 15); He promises to "multiply" a "multitude" (vv. 2, 4, 5, 20). Still, Abraham struggled with thankfulness, because he focused on that thing that he wanted but wasn't getting (vv. 18-20). Do we also?

Our passage mentions the 12 princes of Ishmael (v. 20). We have all heard about Achmadinejad's belief in the reemergence of the 12th imam as a practitioner of Shi'ite Islam. Aimislam.com (AIM stands for Ahlulbayt Islamic

Mission) explains the relationship between God's promise in Genesis 17 regarding the 12 princes of Ishmael and Achmadinejad's belief in the 12th imam. After citing the Genesis 17 promise, the website explains how it was to be fulfilled:

"Besides the Holy Prophet there was no one, among his companions, who had not been an idol-worshipper, save his cousin, Ali ibna abi Talib, who alone could be rightfully chosen by providence 'to receive the covenant of imamat.' The Holy Prophet, therefore, under the command of Allah transferred the imamat to Ali, and after Ali to the eleven Imams in the progeny of Muhammad and Ali. In this way the covenant of Allah with Ibrahim was fulfilled, and in the progeny of Isma-il the twelve princes, the twelve holy Imams, were born" [<http://www.aimislam.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=5990>; accessed 7/19/08.]

Muslims know Genesis 17:20 pretty well, but they miss Genesis 25:12-18. Long before Mohammed or Ali ever came on the scene, the twelve princes promised Ishmael had lived and died. They too have had trouble being thankful for the blessing of God upon Isaac. God's blessing is never half-hearted, however, and it calls for the perfection of thankfulness in response.

3. His execution is everlasting, so it calls for the perfection of instructing those who come after us ("all generations", "your descendants after you"; vv. 7, 8, 9, 10). Circumcision was a sign that would instruct the people about the essence of God's covenant (vv. 9-14). The sign depicted the need for the removal of original sin, sinfulness with which we are all born, and so the Israelites learned to speak of the circumcision of the heart and the ear as metaphors for regeneration, what Jesus would later call *being born again*.

Application: We need to teach the next generation about the God who covenanted with Abraham. The promises we have received are for them as well. Remember Acts 2:39 from last Sunday evening: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” God is absolutely omnipotent, so His promise to Abraham cannot fail, and that promise of the removal of our sin can be ours in Christ.

II. God is universally sovereign, so His promise to Abraham affects everyone (vv. 3-8).

Illustration: At times it does not matter how much talent you have if you lack the official capacity to use that talent. We have all experienced situations in the work place in which it was apparent, at least to us, that we could offer a better way of doing something if only those with positions of authority would allow the better way to happen. The problem was that we lacked jurisdiction. Talented athletes sometimes have to ride the bench or even get cut from the team, in spite of the fact that they could help their team in the game, simply because a coach has made a bad decision or a political calculation. The athlete cannot get in the game, no matter his talent, because he lacks the position.

Application: God never lacks the position to exercise His unlimited power in fulfilling His promise. He is universally sovereign, the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords. God’s sovereignty over everyone, and the consequent jurisdiction of the Abrahamic covenant to everyone, holds important consequences for us today. Abraham and Sarah are not merely the parents of Israel, they are the parents of a multitude of nations and a host of kings (vv. 3-6, 16 “multitude of nations” and “kings”); contrast Ishmael: “a great nation” and “chiefs” (vv. 20). This aspect of the promise is significant for two reasons:

1. The universal jurisdiction of the covenant shows that righteousness is by faith and not by birth (Rom. 4:9-17a). The church is not a spiritual Israel because it is connected to Abraham. It is comprised of a spiritual USA, and a spiritual Canada, and a spiritual Germany, and a spiritual China, and a spiritual Israel. The saved remnants from each of these nations are the spiritual offspring of Abraham, because the righteousness of Abraham, the righteousness that justifies before God Almighty, is a righteousness of faith, not of birth. It matters not your parents nor your cultural identity. It matters whom you have put your faith in, and that brings us to the next significance of this universality.

2. The universal jurisdiction of the covenant shows that royalty is by faith and not by birth. Abraham's line is a royal line, not because it is connected to the kings of Israel, but because it is connected to Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1-17). Remember that Israel's desire for an earthly king went contrary to the will of God for them. This promise does not speak of godless Israelite kings, but rather victorious millennial kings. 2 Tim. 2:12 promises, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him." Rev. 20:6 promises, "Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years." Verse 8 indicates that settlement in the land of Canaan will be critical to this final victory.

God is universally sovereign, so his promise to save through Abraham's descendant is for you to believe personally for your own salvation, which is our last point.

III. God is compassionately personal, so His promise to Abraham involves a saving relationship with Him (vv. 7-8, 23-27).

Illustration: Imagine with me if you would your pastor stepping on to the first tee of the 2009 Masters golf tournament. If I could possibly get that far, the starter would immediately object and order me handcuffed and ushered out of there. Now suppose that in the middle of this objection I protested and said, "But sir, I am a golfer – this game is my game." That would not do any good now would it. Why? Because when I say "I am a golfer, this game is my game," it means something different than when Tiger Woods says "I am a golfer, this game is my game." He is a professional golfer who belongs at the Masters; I am a duffer who belongs stopping balls in the gallery.

Application: But God's salvation works very differently than the Masters tournament. Every believer can say "I am a believer; this God is my God," in the same way that Abraham would have said it. God is our God in the same way that He is Abraham's God ["I will be their God" (vv. 7-8).] There is no multiplicity of mediators between you and a far-away God. God's promise to Abraham to be his God is the same promise He has made to Abraham's descendants, to us who are by faith the sons of Abraham, the spiritual USA.

Conclusion: Since God is our God in the same way that He is Abraham's God, we should obey Him as Abraham did (vv. 23-27, 14). Note the repeated phrase, "in the very same day" (vv. 23, 26). But then notice v. 14. To fail to obey is to break God's covenant in some sense. A significant mundane usage of the word *broken* in v. 14 occurs in 2 Sam. 15:34 and 17:14, which speak of the way in which Hushai *thwarted* (NASB) the counsel of Ahithophel to Absalom when David was on the run. See also Prov. 15:22, "Without consultation, plans are *frustrated*, but with many counselors they succeed." To not obey God is to thwart and frustrate His promise to save us. To disobey is faithless.

The root idea of the word seems to be *to cause to dissolve or fall apart*. When it comes to things like advice, plans, covenants, and vows, they dissolve when the purposes behind them are thwarted or frustrated.

The form of this verb (hiphil) can be understood in what is called an estimative sense. Understood this way the violation has to do with the lack of appreciation for the covenant on the part of the violator. In his estimation, the covenant is thwarted or dissolved. We might translate the issue this way: "He has declared my covenant void or dissolved."

It is not in fact dissolved, for the Lord has said that it would be everlasting. Nor could it be thwarted, for this is the promise of the omnipotent, sovereign, and personal God of Abraham and his descendants (see Jer. 33:21-26). But the man or woman who considers the Abrahamic covenant thwarted, or lacking jurisdiction, or as issued from a God who is not to be trusted, will be cut off, and this too because Abraham's God does keep His promises. What will you do in response to God's promise to Abraham?

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*