

Genesis 17A (2011)

- Today, for the fourth time, God will appear to Abram
 - And the occasion for the visitation is similar to the previous three visits: God's covenant with Abram
 - But today, God is ready to bring Abram the full revelation of His covenant
 - Including a sign, that Abram will carry in his body to show that God has made this promise to him and his family

Gen. 17:1 Now 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.**

- Abram is now 99 years old
 - By that count, it has been 24 years since God first appeared to Abram in Ur and called him to move to Canaan
 - And it's been 13 years since his son Ishmael has been born to Hagar
 - It turns out that Ishmael's age comes to explain God's timing for His fourth appearance, as we will see later in this chapter
 - This chapter is 27 verses long, and all but 8 verses are the Lord speaking
 - This is the longest speech by God in Genesis
 - It's the zenith of God's revelation to Abram
 - For now, let's look at what God says to Abram as He appears this fourth time
 - He begins by identifying Himself as El Shaddai
 - This is the first time this term is used in Scripture
 - Eventually, we'll see it used 48 times
 - In Hebrew, it comes from a root meaning strength or power

- But the word shaddai originated in an Akkadian word, *shaddu*
- The Akkadian meaning was literally “breast”
- Taken together, El Shaddai means the God Who provides strength to His children
- Since this appearance comes thirteen years after Abram and Sarai turned to Hagar, it seems that God has chosen this name to emphasize two things
 - First, God will provide strength to His children in keeping with His promises
 - But secondly, God seems to be chastising Abram for his misguided attempt to find strength in his own body (through Hagar)
- Next, God tells Abram to walk before me and be blameless
 - God tells Abram “walk before me”
 - But in Hebrew the words are more personal
 - They mean “come before My face”
 - In God’s case, we know this isn’t meant in a literal sense since Abram could not see God’s face and live
 - Rather, it means present yourself before Me, as a servant presents himself before his master
 - Then God says be blameless
 - This is the same word Moses uses to describe Noah in Genesis 6:9 – a man who found favor and was blameless
 - In Genesis 6 we said that “favor” meant grace in Hebrew, and so blamelessness was a reflection of Noah’s righteousness before God in faith
 - Here as well, God tells Abram “be blameless”
 - We need to remember this is the first time God has spoken to Abram since he married Hagar, God’s words are powerful in their effect

- In those intervening 13 years, what must Abram have wondered when his thoughts turned to his decision to marry Hagar?
- Did he feel guilt? Did he wonder if God was upset? Did he worry that God's silence over the past 13 years was a sign He was displeased?
- And what must Abram have felt when he heard God declare that he continued to serve his Master
 - And that Master was still calling Abram blameless before Him
 - Not perfect, not sinless, *but blameless*
- We serve this same Master by the terms of the same covenant
 - We know God's promises to provide for us and never leave us nor forsake us
 - Yet still we go off and make poor decisions and leave Him behind in our actions
 - And we may go weeks or months or even years without a sense that God is speaking to us
 - And in those dark seasons, we might be led to question whether God is still with us
 - Still pleased with us, still willing to accept us
 - We wonder what He will say when He appears
 - Then we read these lines, and we are reminded that God is faithful to His promises
 - He still calls us blameless because Someone else took our blame
 - We are not sinless but we do not carry the blame, the judgment
- From that perspective, God gives Abram a new promise

[Gen. 17:2](#) "I will establish My covenant between Me and you,
And I will multiply you exceedingly."

[Gen. 17:3](#) Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

[Gen. 17:4](#) "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,

And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

- God tells Abram He will establish between God and Abram a covenant and multiply him exceedingly
 - At first glance we assume this is the same covenant God has made from the beginning
 - The one announced in Chapter 12 and confirmed in Chapter 15 with the covenant ritual
 - The one that promises to multiply Abram's descendants
 - But this language speaks of a different covenant
 - First, the language is in the future tense
 - God says this is a covenant that will be established
 - Secondly, this covenant is "between Me and you"
 - This term implies both parties have a role in keeping the covenant
 - So God is promising a new covenant, one that has yet to be established a two-way covenant requiring commitments from both parties
 - This second covenant is related to the first covenant
 - One will be the basis for being counted a part of the other
- At God's appearing, Abram responds as all men would: he falls on his face
 - And God continued to talk with Abram explaining this is a new covenant, yet not one that replaces the first
 - Notice God says "as for Me"
 - He means "for my part, here's what I am promising"
 - Then God reminds Abram that the first covenant is already with Abram
 - To be sure Abram understands, God repeats the entire revelation of the Abrahamic Covenant
 - He will be a father of a multitude of nations

- Of Israel and many Gentile nations
 - And to testify to this one promise, God says He is changing Abram's name
 - Abram means "exalted father"
 - And Abraham means father of a multitude
- Changing names was a common feature of covenants
 - Two people who entered into a covenant might take parts of each other's name and add it to their own name
 - We still follow this same practice today in the way a woman takes the man's last name
 - It was a way of saying I am in covenant with you and we are made one by that covenant
 - In this case, Abram receives a part of God's name
 - In the middle of Abram's name, God inserts the breath sound in the pronunciation of His name in Hebrew
 - Yahweh is pronounced with a distinctive breath sound at the end
 - The name Abram is cut open and that breath sound is inserted in the middle: Abraham
 - Abram is now a man who carries a part of God's name
- God continues to tell Abraham all that He is bound to do by His word

Gen. 17:6 "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.

Gen. 17:7 "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

Gen. 17:8 "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

- As God has said before, "I will make you fruitful and you will produce kings and nations"

- And in v.8 God repeats that He will give Abraham and his descendants the land in which Abraham has been wandering
 - Specifically the land that God outlined in Chapter 15, from the Euphrates to the brook of Egypt
 - We remember these promises as part of the Abrahamic covenant
- But in v.7 we find another reference to a future covenant that will be between God, and Abraham and his descendants
 - A covenant that is not here yet but is coming
 - And one that isn't one-way like the Abrahamic covenant
 - But is "between" Abraham and God, thus requiring both parties keep its terms faithfully
- But we also notice that God is weaving these two covenants together almost as if they were inseparable
 - This is exactly right, but we need to study this next section carefully if we are to understand this relationship properly

Gen. 17:9 God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

Gen. 17:10 "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Gen. 17:11 "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Gen. 17:12 "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.

Gen. 17:13 "A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Gen. 17:14 "But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

- We noticed earlier that God introduced His obligations with the phrase "As for Me..."
 - Now we see God telling Abraham what his obligations are
 - But wait...we said before Abraham had no obligations under the Abrahamic Covenant

- And he doesn't, which tells us that this must be the new covenant God is making with Abraham
 - And since it has terms for both parties, it is a different kind of covenant
 - Abraham will have a choice as to whether he participates in this covenant
- First, God says that both Abraham and his descendants must participate in this covenant by agreeing to be circumcised
 - Trusting that everyone understands what circumcision means, I won't give any details now
 - I can say that this is not the moment that circumcision was invented or established
 - The practice has been found in ancient cultures apart from Israel
 - God simply took this practice and gave it meaning for Abraham and his descendants
 - The practice would be required of Abraham and his descendants, and to those servants brought into the household
 - And the event must take place on the eighth day as an infant
 - We can see God's handiwork in Creation in this direction
 - The body needs a particular vitamin, vitamin K, to allow for proper blood clotting
 - At birth, a baby has vitamin K from the mother but it takes time for the baby to produce its own K
 - After a few days, vitamin K production kicks in
 - By the eighth day, the levels of vitamin K peak at abnormally high levels in the bloodstream
 - After the eighth day, the levels begin to decrease to a normal level
 - So God had the body prepared to handle the surgery

- To understand what God is doing here, let's make some observations
 - First, we notice that this is a covenant that requires Abraham and his descendants to take action, to obey God's commands
 - This means we're looking at a different covenant than the Abrahamic Covenant
 - Secondly, the timing of this action is on the eighth day of life
 - Clearly, this is a cross-generational covenant
 - It is not a covenant with a person, but with a people
 - The people of the promise, the people soon to be Israel
 - No one enters into this covenant on their own since they do so at an age too young to participate willingly
 - The decision to obey or ignore this covenant is made by a prior generation on their behalf
 - When the older generation obeys, their children receive the benefits of the covenant
 - When they disobey, their children suffer
 - Thirdly, the consequence of failing to keep the covenant is to be cut off from his people
 - The term for "cut off" literally means to be destroyed or killed
 - So the penalty for failing to observe this covenant is to cease being part of Israel and to cease to exist
 - Finally we notice God says in v.10 that circumcision is the covenant but in the next verse, God says it will be a sign of the covenant
 - How can it be both a covenant and a sign of a covenant?
 - The answer is God is establishing a new covenant which acts as a sign of the earlier covenant
- What do all these details tell us?
 - Remember since the fall in the Garden, we've been following the seed promise; the promise to bring a Messiah to rectify the sin of Adam
 - The promise has progressed from one son to another to another

- Finally, it landed on Abraham, son of Terah
 - And in Abraham, the promise takes form
 - There would be a people, set in a land, which would bring forth the blessing of the promise on behalf of the entire world
 - All nations would be blessed through this people that come from Abraham
- First it will be bestowed on one son, Isaac, and later another, Jacob
 - But after Jacob, the promise will be extended to 12 sons
 - And from those twelve to countless more
- While the promise of the Messiah is carried forward through only the line of Judah, the promises for blessing and the land are extended to many descendants
 - But what will determine who may participate in these blessings?
 - As Paul taught us:

[Rom. 9:6](#) But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;

[Rom. 9:7](#) nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

[Rom. 9:8](#) That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

- So who will be counted among those who receive the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant?
 - God says that the sign of that covenant will be the covenant of circumcision
 - And those who descend from Abraham and who obey this command of God will be counted a part of the covenant
 - They will receive the promises of blessing in the land and of many descendants

- But if the people of Abraham cease in observing this covenant, then they are cut off from the people of Israel and from the promises to Abraham
- Remember Moses' experience in Exodus?

[Ex. 4:24](#) Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death.

[Ex. 4:25](#) Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me."

[Ex. 4:26](#) So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood" – because of the circumcision.

- Moses was headed back to Egypt to represent God's people, yet his own son had never been circumcised
 - His own child was excluded from the promises of the covenant
 - So God was prepared to kill the child until they circumcised him
- God wants His covenant with Abraham to be witnessed to the nations
 - And He demands that Israel keep the covenant of circumcision in order to be a party to the Abrahamic Covenant
 - To be clear, Chapter 17 isn't teaching that obedience was required to keep the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant
 - Those promises are assured on God's faithfulness alone
 - But entry into that covenant depended on obedience to the covenant of circumcision
 - But then again the obedience was national, not personal
 - The fathers' obedience determined the son's participation in the covenant
 - Once a person was a party to the Abrahamic Covenant, then the blessings were assured based on God's faithfulness to His word alone
 - Finally, personal salvation is not the issue here

- Abraham was counted righteous based on his faith in God's promise under the first covenant
 - Had he refused to take circumcision, his faith would still have made him blameless
 - But he would have been cut off from the earthly blessings God was holding out for him
- So he is to observe this second covenant to ensure his family is included in the covenant's blessings
- More to come...