

Promise and Obedience

Genesis 17:15-17

Sunday November 7th Jonathan Skinner

1. God graciously perseveres in his plan for us (15-22)

a. God will not be side-tracked into our man-made plans (15-18; 21)

Abraham knew that God was going to give him children that would become a great nation. But the promise was not being fulfilled; time was passing and Sarai seemed too old to conceive. Abraham reasoned that he should take things into his own hand. So he took Sarai's maidservant Hagar and she conceived, and Ishmael was born. He now still thought that God should work through his plan and bless him through Ishmael (18). But God would not be side-tracked. The Lord reiterates his promise to bless Abraham and he reinforces that it would be through his wife Sarai, who would become the mother of nations and so is now called princess, which is what Sarah means. Abraham still wants to do God's will his way, but the Lord is not giving way.

How often things might seem sensible to us, but they are not exactly what God has commanded. God has his purposes and also his means for achieving those purposes. We might agree on the purpose he has for us but, like Abraham, wish to give him a helping hand, and go about things our way.

b. God's way often seems the impossible way (16)

Abraham took things into his own hands because it seemed as though, if he didn't, nothing would happen. He trusted in his activity rather than God's power. Abram's faith was often transient and its tide flowed in and out, up and down. On one hand (chapter 15:6) he expresses faith in such a way that the NT quotes it as the great OT example of saving faith, but he expresses doubt in the verses before (2), and also in the verses afterwards (8). His peak of faith is surrounded by two troughs of doubt. Then, in the next chapter, we see unbelief grow so that he takes Hagar to bring about God's promises in his own way. The clear point is that Abraham, the man of faith, was not quite as full of faith as we often suppose. The practical point for us here is that Abraham was like us. He sometimes vacillated between strong faith and doubt. Abraham, the father of faith, certainly had his doubts.

But God was still at work in the life and personality of Abraham. Just over a decade later the promised child had been born and had grown into a young lad, and Abraham's hopes were pinned on him. Turn to chapter 22. God told Abraham to sacrifice this son. There, in that chapter, we see Abraham's faith shine. God was gradually developing his faith. It did not all come at once.

We are called to live our lives trusting the Lord for every situation. Before Sarai conceived Abraham must have become hopeless; despair must have crept into his heart. This is understandable, but not justifiable, nor commendable. Likewise, we can feel a given situation is hopeless. God is at work in us to see hopeless situations redeemed. The Lord takes us to the edge. Praying is an act of faith. Obedience is an act of faith.

c. God is gracious to us even when we do go our own way (18-19; 20)

Abraham acted without faith; he did things his way rather than God's; he took a concubine and slept with her. God could have given up on Abraham. But what happens? Exactly the opposite: God promises that Sarai would bear his son and that that son would be Isaac. And God would establish his everlasting covenant with him. God did not treat Abraham as his sins deserved or according to his faithlessness. God acted in grace to Abraham. He renews his promise. He performs his promise: Sarai conceives.

Like Abraham we fail and falter. Our bold claims of faith evaporate under pressure. But God treats us like he treated Abraham; he comes back again – and again; he promises again. There is gentleness here, as well as tenderness and forgiveness. That is how God treats us; that is how we are called to treat each other.

d. God can even turn our errors into a blessing (20)

What of Ishmael, who through no fault of his own was conceived and born and was now growing up in Abraham's household? What of him? Well, we clearly read in verse 20 that God promised to bless him as well. The children of Ishmael were not to be blessed in the sense that they would bring the Messiah, but let us never think that they were not to be blessed. The nations that came from Ishmael would also be fruitful and increase in number. It is thought that the Arab nations are the descendants of Ishmael. They have received the blessing of God.

What does this teach us? It teaches us that God, in a strange way, can even use the consequences of our sin to bring blessing. That's what happened to Abraham. Such is the amazing and abounding grace of our God!

2. God expects immediate and complete obedience from us (23-27)

a. We are to obey God's commands (23-27)

Abraham obeys God in circumcising all those associated with him. He may have had doubts; he may have acted faithlessly; he may have taken things into his own hands, but in the end he obeys God. Whatever his weaknesses he steps out in obedience. Likewise, we must be those who obey the Lord, whatever the inconvenience or pain.

b. We too obey immediately (23; 26)

Verse 23 reads '*on that very day*' Abraham had his family and dependents circumcised. And verse 26 tells us that the circumcisions happened '*on that same day*'. The point is obvious: Abraham had just been told to circumcise all those associated with him and he went and did it straight away. He did not wait; he did not procrastinate; it did it that very day. This indicates the sort of obedience we should have: immediate. It is

very easy to placate our conscience to some extent by pretending to ourselves that we agree that we should obey, and that we will indeed do so – but not quite yet, not just now.

c. We are to obey completely (23; 27)

The next significant verses here are verses 23 and 27, which read that Abraham took *'all those born in his household'* and also that he took *'every'* male in his household and had them circumcised. Those two words, *'all'* and *'every'* indicate the extent of his obedience. Abraham did not just obey immediately, he also obeyed completely. There was no compromise or excuse that limited his obedience. This indicates the type of obedience we should have. We should not be half-hearted or mediocre. How easily we make excuses and cut corners, and do not want to go as far as the Lord wants us to go! Are there areas we need to consider in our own lives where we know we are not living as obediently as we should, some price we are not willing to pay?

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