

The promise came first. That's the message of Genesis 17.

An authentic relationship with God can only ever be possible when it's founded, established, forged, anchored, on the promise of his Word.

You might be listening to this message today as someone who has never thought about a living relationship with God.

You could be listening today as someone who has recently had your faith re-ignited.

Maybe you're a long way away. And I don't mean physically. I mean you're a long way away from God. And it wasn't always like that.

Perhaps you're feeling overwhelmed with present challenges. Not much to look forward to. You've tuned in searching for hope in dark times.

No matter what your circumstances, this message from Genesis 17 is for you. Remember these four words: the promise came first.

I want to share with you the content of the promise that comes to Abraham and Sarah in this chapter, as they will be called.

And I want to share with you the content of that promise as it comes to us today.

Firstly, a New Life. Secondly, a new name. And thirdly, a new sign.

## **New Life**

The chapter opens with an instruction:

***“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”***

Twice before this in Genesis, in chapters 12 and 15, the Lord has outlined his commitment to the covenant agreement with Abram. Here the Lord makes explicit Abram's life-long response.

A new life. Characterised by two words in v 1. Faithful. And blameless.

In chapter 15 we learnt that this comes from taking God at his word. Believing God's promises is credited to Abraham as righteousness. The right response that meets God's approval.

God's word is true. It is fixed. It is powerful. It is life-changing. He is God Almighty, as v 1 tells us.

It is word anchored in covenant. God commits to its fulfilment. And he promises Abram a new life.

Is your faith drifting? Is your faith aimless? Is your faith meaningless? Is it a while since you were refreshed by the life-giving truth of God's promises?

All reasonable questions given the course of the last few months.

To be faithful and blameless are the keys to revival. Obedience is the key to enjoying God's promises.

Blameless is not perfection. Blameless is not trying to lay the guilt at someone else's feet. As if you're always the victim.

In a sinful world we'll always be victims of someone. Or something.

We will always be able to claim hurts committed against us. Often they can be deep. Hard to accept forgiveness for.

In Genesis 17 blameless is admitting your own wrong. And seeking forgiveness where it can always be found. From the God we've offended.

He deals with the blame and then equips us to walk faithfully with him.

This is the powerful work of the cross of Christ. The blame is shifted as it's lifted. The one without blame enables us to live the blameless life.

There's a hint of this blameless life in Abram. In v 17 he laughs at God's promise of a child. He is almost a hundred. And Sarah 90.

There's a bit of v 17 in all of us when it comes to taking God at his word. We might not laugh. But we're often loathe to take God at his word.

By the end of the chapter we read about obedient Abram. Doing as God had told him, to quote the words of v 23.

Jesus hints at this attitude when he tells the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21.

The first son says he will not go and help his father and work in the vineyard. But then he changes his mind. And goes to work.

The second son agrees to work for his father, but fails to turn up.

Which of these two did as his father wanted, Jesus asks?

New life in Christ is not about perfection. Not yet anyway. But is about our failures returning us to the one who restores us to faithful living.

The promise came first. God always makes his part clear. When we fail in ours, Christ is there to lift the blame. And replace it with blessing.

### **New Name**

A new life. A new name. Much is made of this second part of the promise of Genesis 17. V 5:

***No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.***

And v 15:

***As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.***

When you enter into relationship with God you are given a new identity. That matches the new life you are to live. A new life God will give.

Abraham and Sarah head a new family of God's people, from whom nations and kings would come.

The New Testament writer Paul tells us we who have faith in Jesus Christ become children of Abraham. We begin to grasp the everlasting nature of the covenant, a word that occurs no less than four times in this chapter.

The promise came first. And through it, says Paul, all nations are blessed.

And when Christ came as the fulfilment of that promise. To all who believed in his name – John 1:12 - he gave the right to become the children of God.

A new identity.

Our tendency is to empty our identity. We forget the promise came first.

Instead of who Christ has made us, he becomes what we make of him.

Christianity Lite.

To be Christian is to do good works. Surely that's what it means. And it does.

To be Christian is to be kind. That would make a difference to others. And it will.

To be Christian is to go to church. That would be a good thing. And it is.

But if this is where we find our identity then we have forgotten that the promise comes first. And it makes our faith much more of a struggle in a season such as the present one.

To be a child of Abraham. A member of the people of God. To bear the name of Christ is to know your new identity is given through the work of the cross.

The promise came first. Forgiveness. Restoration. God's presence by his Spirit. A future fixed. Part of a new family.

A new covenant founded on the sacrifice of Jesus. This new life will be like his life.

It may even be costly. The New Testament writer Peter says:

***If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.***

And the name you bear for Christ is also the name that is written in the book of life. A hope and future this world cannot give you.

Bear the name of Christ in your life. It's the expression of who you have become.

The promise came first. To rely on anything else empties the cross of its power.

A new life. A new name. And lastly, a new sign.

### **New Sign**

With apologies to all the parents and carers who may have to do some explaining, we are introduced to the practice of circumcision in v 10 of Genesis 17.

Circumcision was not an uncommon practice in Abraham's day. Now it would take on a new meaning.

It will be a sign of the covenant, says God. A sign – v 13 - of an everlasting covenant.

The sign of the covenant to Noah was the rainbow. The sign of the covenant at Sinai was the Sabbath. The sign of the covenant with Abraham is circumcision.

And so the chapter concludes with Abraham's obedience to God. All the males in his household, by birth or otherwise, are symbolically set apart as the inheritors of God's covenant promises.

But this rite of the flesh was always and only ever to symbolise an inward commitment to renewal. A sign of the inward work of faithfulness that God brings about as we take him at his word.

Outward signs are only as effective as their inward reality.

And according to the promise to Abraham, a king would come from his line. Calling not for circumcision of the flesh, but of the heart.

The New Testament writer Paul explains in Colossians 2:11:

***In him [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ,<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with***

***him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.***

The promise came first. Those who died with Christ in his death are raised to life with him in his resurrection.

A new life. A new name. A new sign.

Circumcision of the flesh is no longer a practice for God's people. It is a past sign.

If you have questions about the medical reasons for circumcision then please speak to your GP. But there are no grounds in the bible that would require it for the Christian.

Remember too, God never saves through signs.

The new covenant in Christ, delivered through his death and resurrection, has brought with it the new signs of baptism through water. And the practice of the Lord's Supper.

For all their benefit, they are only signs. Outward expressions of an inward reality. If we only grasp the outward and not the inward, all we are doing is emptying the promises and denying the grace of God.

A sign is only as effective as the reality it points to.

In Abraham's descendants circumcision would become a living and life-long contradiction to the outward rejection of God's promises when his people showed their continued unfaithfulness. Their so-called membership of the people of God would count for little.

If you are wondering what is necessary for entering in to an authentic relationship with God and becoming a part of the family of Abraham then four words count for you today.

The promise comes first. No rite. No ritual. No dose of religion is going to bring you into his Kingdom.

Take Jesus at his word. Turn and trust him. Receive the promised forgiveness and renewal. Enter into new life. A new identity. A new future as part of God's family.

And the true sign? The faithful and blameless walk that reflects the inward and transforming work God is bringing about in your life.

I don't know where you find yourself this day as you think about your relationship with God. But in the light of this chapter let me leave you with these four words:

Who is coming first?