

Message #7
Abraham: A Model of Faith

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ABRAHAM AND THE CHALLENGE
TO COMMITMENT
GENESIS 17

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We are in the midst of the football season. NFL fans are watching closely to see who is going to make the playoffs. I have discovered that, for some reason, there are a few San Francisco Forty-Niners fans around here. Their team is leading their division and looks likely to make the playoffs.

One of their stars from a couple of decades ago was a guy by the name of Ronnie Lott. (PROJECTOR ON--- RONNIE LOTT) He came out of USC where he was an All-American defensive back. He was drafted in the first round in 1981 by San Francisco. In his first year he participated in a team that won the Super Bowl. He went on to have a stellar career which landed him in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Fellow teammate and linebacker Matt Millen said of him: "**Ronnie consistently makes more key plays than anybody I've ever seen. He's not the fastest or the best at any one thing -- except making The Play.**" (*The Washington Post*, 1/25/1990)

In 1985 Coach Bill Walsh asked Ronnie Lott to switch from the position which he had always played, defensive cornerback, to safety. Coach Walsh assured Ronnie Lott that he recognized his ability and his contributions to his team. He acknowledged that switching positions would involve a learning curve and some inevitable mistakes. But he felt that the team would benefit from this change.

Ronnie Lott responded, "**Coach, for what you pay me, and for the sake of the team, I will play anywhere you put me.**" He went on that year to have six interceptions and 105 tackles, which, if you are not a football fan, is very good. Ronnie Lott was truly committed to the game, to his coach, and to the team which signed his contract.

(1 CORINTHIANS 6:20) In 1 Corinthians #6 v. 20 the Apostle Paul tells Christians, "**For you have been bought with a price...**" The Bible tells us that this price was the death of the God-man upon a Roman cross. As a result of this sacrifice for us and His drafting of us onto His team and our response of faith we can look forward to a glorious eternity with Jesus. In our recent study of Galatians we saw that this is a story of salvation by grace through faith alone. There is nothing that we can do to earn any merit with God. The contract has been made. It is a no-cut contract. The money is guaranteed no matter what happens to us. But the question remains: How will we respond to it? Will we serve wherever He calls us? (PROJECTOR OFF)

The God who is there desires to have a dominant position in our lives. A decision to have that priority will regularly be tested. In our study of Abraham we have seen that this Old Testament hero faced continuing tests and challenges to his faith and

commitment. We have seen that the Lord signed a great contract with Abraham. The term which the Bible uses to describe it is a "covenant." This was an unconditional covenant in that the Lord said that no matter what happens He would make sure that Abraham would have a great name, he would have lots of descendants, the Lord would bless His friends and curse His enemies, and He would eventually give his descendants the land of Canaan as a permanent possession.

Today we will find in Genesis #17 a further challenge to Abraham's faith. His response and God's dealings with him will hopefully motivate us to a greater commitment to Him. Last week in #16 we saw that Abraham and Sarah got tired of waiting for God to make of Abraham a great nation. They didn't have any children at all. They decided to help God out. At Sarah's suggestion Abraham took Sarah's maidservant Hagar as a second wife. She bore him Ishmael. Ishmael, however, was not the child of promise. In fact his descendants, the Arabs, were going to become enemies of the promised line. We see that conflict continuing to be played out today.

I.

In our chapter this morning we shall see that the Lord stretches Abraham's faith further. He asks Abraham to make three commitments. First, in vv. 1-3 we find that the Lord issues THE GENERAL CALL FOR COMMITMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE GENERAL CALL FOR COMMITMENT) In v. 1 the author writes, "**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...'**"

Thirteen years have passed since Ishmael was born. Abram and his tribe have been hanging out in Hebron, (HEBRON MAP) which was in the south of what we know today as Israel. Though Abram was 99 years old, he still did not have the child of promise. Everyone in his clan assumed that Ishmael was going to be Abram's heir. Abram himself may have believed that. It had been thirteen years since he had received any communication from the Lord.

But now God Himself appeared to Abram and identified Himself as El Shaddai. (EL SHADDAI). This is the first time that this name for God is used in the Old Testament, and its exact meaning is a bit uncertain. Three hundred years before Christ the Jews translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, and the translators used a term for El Shaddai that means "God Almighty," or "God All Powerful." The way that the Hebrew term is used in the Old Testament is consistent with that meaning. So perhaps those early translators were right in their understanding. Abraham needed a reminder of God's power.

The basis for a call to commitment for Abraham and for us is the conviction that God is indeed almighty, that He is all powerful. He has all the resources which we could ever need. He is sovereign over all of history and over all of our individual lives.

Now the Lord issues a general challenge to Abraham's faith: "**Walk before me, and be blameless,**" or "**in order to be blameless.**" The imagery is that of a shepherd who

guides his sheep. He directs them with his calls. The danger is that the sheep might wander off. Safety lies in obeying the shepherd and staying within the flock.

The Hebrew word for “blameless” means “complete” or “whole” or “upright.” It is a word used of unblemished animals fit for sacrifice. It does not refer to absolute moral perfection. Noah was called a “blameless” man in Genesis #9, but he was not sinless. His life was characterized by commitment to the Lord. He was obedient to the Lord’s directions in his life.

So the Lord here issues to Abraham a general call for commitment. Obey My directions. Trust me. Don’t go wandering off and trying to have children apart from My will.

The basis for the Lord’s claim upon Abraham’s life is the unconditional covenant that He made with him. God promised to make of Abraham a great nation and to give that nation a land. Now in v. 2 He says that He will confirm this covenant with Abraham. This means that He will soon bring it to pass. Abraham will soon have the child of promise.

In v. 3 Abraham responds by falling down in worship. Evidently he is committing himself to the Lord’s call upon his life.

II.

In vv. 3-8 and 15-22 we see that Abram and Sarai respond to THE CALL FOR NAME CHANGES. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE CALL FOR NAME CHANGES) Until this time Abraham’s name was actually “Abram,” a name that means “exalted father.” Perhaps his parents named him that as a reminder of the noble lineage which they had. Yet it also had to be a sore point for Abram and Sarai in that they had no children of their own. Until Ishmael came along, they had no kids.

Now we read in vv. 5 & 6, **“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you...”**

Naming someone in that culture demonstrated authority over them. In the Garden of Eden God gave Adam authority over the animals. Along with that authority He gave Adam the responsibility to name them. In the Book of Daniel the Babylonian king changed the names of Daniel and his three friends, partly in demonstration of his authority over them. Sometimes the Lord Himself names individuals who are to have a special part in His divine program. Last time we saw that he named Ishmael. Today we find that He not only changes the names of Abram and Sarai, but he also gives Isaac his name.

Later we find that He changes Jacob’s name to “Israel.” In the New Testament Jesus changes Simon’s name to “Peter.” The name “Abraham” is probably a variation of “Abram,” “exalted father.” But in Hebrew this change sounds like “Ab-hamon,” which

means "Father of many nations." The Lord is using a play on words that involves the sound of the name.

In changing Abram's name the Lord is claiming sovereignty over his life. This is another challenge to Abraham's faith. Abraham will announce to his tribe that God appeared to him and that now these people should call him "Abraham," because he is going to be the father of a multitude of nations. This name change is also designed to present a more effective witness to the watching world.

Do you suppose that Abram was initially resistant to the idea of a name change? "I've lived 99 years of my life as Abram. Why the need for a change?" There would perhaps have been practical difficulties. Perhaps he had to go to the DMV and get his camel driver's license changed. What would they think about this name change?

Abraham probably recognized that there would be critics in his own clan. "So what is the deal with Abram, I mean Abraham, changing his name?" "Man, I'm afraid that he has gone off of the deep end--- visions of God and talking about being the father of a multitude of nations. It looks like dementia is setting in. He is lucky that he has one son. I am afraid that old age is catching up to him."

But Abraham believed God. He changed his name, and He trusted that God would indeed make him the father of many nations. The new element in this restatement of the covenant in v. 4 was the promise that Abraham was to be not just the father of a great nation, but also the father of many nations. We know from subsequent history that he did indeed become the ancestor not only of the Jews, but also of the Arabs, the Midianites, the Edomites, and several other people groups.

In v.15 we read that God also changed Sarah's name. Previously she had been "Sarai." The meaning of this name is uncertain. Most scholars think that both names mean "princess." The name "Sarah" may simply have been a modernized form of the same name. Perhaps the Lord used this modernized form to mark a new beginning in Sarah's life.

Then in v. 15 the Lord specifically states for the first time that Sarah is to be the mother of the promised child. Furthermore she will be the mother of nations--- plural. The Edomites as well as the Jews ultimately become her descendants.

According to v. 17 Abraham laughs when he hears God promise that he will have a son through Sarah. It seems to me to be an initial laugh of disbelief. For in v. 18 we read, **"And Abraham said to God, 'Oh that Ishmael might live before you!'"** Abraham can't imagine how this promised thing could come to pass. He is content to see Ishmael take the position of the special child of promise. But in vv. 19-21 the Lord is even more specific. He says that Sarah will have a son the next year. This promised child will be called "Isaac," which name means "He laughs." In taking on their new names Abraham and Sarah are taking a step of faith and expressing a belief in the promise of God concerning many descendants.

III.

The first commitment which the Lord calls for from Abraham is obedience. It is a general call to commitment. Secondly, he calls for Abram and Sarai to change their names. Thirdly, He issues THE CALL FOR CIRCUMCISION. (III. THE CALL FOR CIRCUMCISION) In v. 9 God says that Abraham and his descendants are to keep His covenant. At first that may seem to be confusing, because God had made an unconditional covenant with Abraham. Certain promises had been made to Abraham in that covenant, the fulfillment of which was left as the sole responsibility of the Lord.

But the Lord goes on to explain that He is talking about a ritual that will be a sign of identification by the descendants of Abraham with that unconditional covenant. It will be a sign of their faith and commitment. The sign will be circumcision. The promises of the unconditional covenant are sure to be fulfilled, but individual descendants of Abraham will enjoy the blessings of that covenant only if they continue to identify with it and with the God who graciously made it.

Circumcision was already being practiced by other people in Abraham's day. There is evidence that it was practiced in Egypt a thousand years before the time of Abraham. Eventually the Arabs, the Edomites, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Syrians would all practice it. The Philistines would be one of the few nations in this area who would not practice it. That is why David would later call Goliath "this uncircumcised Philistine."

The other nations circumcised males at the time of puberty or just before marriage. The Arabs did it when boys reached age 13. For these people circumcision was a rite of passage in life that signified entrance of boys into manhood.

The Lord told the descendants of Abraham to circumcise baby boys on the eighth day after birth. Modern science has since discovered that a little boy's blood has the greatest ability to coagulate eight days after birth.

Circumcision was to be a sign of identification for the descendants of Abraham with God's covenant with Abraham. God had promised Noah that there would never again be a universal flood. The sign of that covenant was the rainbow. God later made a covenant with Moses and the Israelites. The sign of commitment to this covenant was to be observance of the Sabbath. The sign of commitment and identification with God's covenant to Abraham was circumcision.

The part of the body that was marked would be a constant reminder of God's promise of many descendants and a great nation. Also no Jewish male could marry a pagan woman without being reminded of his covenant commitment to God. Some have also pointed out that there may be spiritual significance to the fact that no male could enter the covenant community without pain and the shedding of blood.

In v. 14 the Lord speaks harshly of those who refuse to observe this ritual: **“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”** The unconditional Abrahamic covenant will still remain. It is certain to be fulfilled. But those uncircumcised descendants of Abraham will not be able to participate in the blessings that come from it.

This direction from the Lord was an additional call for commitment from Abraham. It meant physical pain. It probably required some persuasion of the other males in his clan. But at the end of the chapter we see that Abraham responded in obedience. Verse 23 says that in the very same day he circumcised all of the males in his household.

In Abraham’s life a growing faith required new commitments. The Lord was continually testing and expanding and stretching Abraham’s faith. Abraham was called to leave his homeland and go to Canaan. His faith was tested in Egypt and with his nephew Lot. Abraham was asked to believe that God would provide him with descendants, though he had no children. Again in #17 we find that his faith is tested as he is asked to make new commitments, including a name change.

IV.A.

(IV. THE APPLICATIONS) Let’s consider then THE APPLICATIONS which we can make from this passage. Just as Abraham had a general call to commitment from the Lord, so also do we followers of Jesus face a GENERAL CALL TO COMMITMENT. (IV. A. OUR GENERAL CALL TO COMMITMENT) Abraham’s general call to commitment was based upon a covenant. So also is ours. The new covenant is based upon the death of the God-man Jesus Christ. For all who will trust in Him as their Savior the promise of this covenant is the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

In Romans #12 v. 1 (ROMANS 12:1) the Apostle Paul tells Christians, **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”** God wants us also to be wholehearted in our commitment to Him. He desires to have first place in our thoughts and in our plans and in our actions. He wants His will to be our will. He wants His business to be our business.

The basis for this appeal to Abraham was the realization that God is El Shaddai, the Almighty God, the God who had given great promises to Abraham. The basis for our commitment is also an appreciation that God is El Shaddai. But in this verse in Romans #12 it is also the understanding which Paul has outlined in the first part of the book which describe the mercies of God, all of which are based upon the death of Jesus in our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins.

B.

We can also make an application in regard to OUR CALL TO A NAME CHANGE. (IV. A. B. OUR CALL TO A NAME CHANGE) God’s call to Abraham to change his name

involved a promise concerning the future. It involved a change in his identity. No longer was Abraham to be just an exalted father. He was to be the father of many nations.

When we trust in Jesus and become followers of Him, we also have a changed identity. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:17) According to the apostle's declaration in 2 Corinthians #5 v. 17, **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."** We receive a new nature as Christians. We become part of God's family. We become Christians.

There is also an application here for us as a congregation. We elders have been considering the possibility of a name change for our church. (PROJECTOR OFF) We are thinking that we also might be able to have an effective testimony to our community by considering a name change.

Thom Rainer is a lifelong Baptist. He served for many years as the head of the publishing house of the Southern Baptist Convention. That outfit has also conducted many national religious surveys. He has found that the name "Baptist" is the most negative denominational label in the polling which he has conducted. This kind of finding prompted the Baptist group with which our church is associated to drop the Baptist name from its label. So we are now part of something called the Venture Church Network, rather than the Conservative Baptist Association. As we continue to consider mull the possibility of a name change for our church, we welcome your input and ideas about a new name.

C.

The third commitment that Abraham was asked to make involved circumcision. So we consider thirdly OUR CALL TO THE MARK OF THE COVENANT. (IV. A. B. C. OUR CALL TO THE MARK...) Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. There is nothing in the New Testament which is specifically called a sign of the new covenant. But there are certainly parallels between circumcision and water baptism. Most people became Israelites in the Old Testament simply as a result of physical birth. Newborn baby boys were to be circumcised to demonstrate their identification with the Abrahamic covenant.

People today become part of God's family--- the community of faith, the church--- as the result of a spiritual birth. They are born again. Baptism is intended to be a public demonstration of this spiritual change that has taken place within us. Some might argue that it is a sign of our identification with the new covenant. Baptism is included in what is called the Great Commission.

This is the name given to the charge which Jesus gave to His followers at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. (MATTHEW 28:19) Jesus told them in Matthew #28 v. 19, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."** In the Book of Acts we see the people were baptized by immersion after they put their trust in Jesus. If you have not been

baptized since you trusted in Christ and would like to be, let us know. We would be happy to set that up. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Lord desires His followers to make Him the #1 priority in life. He wants us to expect great things from God, and He wants us to attempt great things for God. He desires us to be committed to Him, to serve wherever He might direct us.

In the late 1980s a French Communist newspaper called *Paix et Liberte* (Peace and Liberty) directed a challenge to the Christian church. The Communists wrote, **“The gospel is a much more powerful weapon for the renewal of society than is our Marxist philosophy. All the same, it is we who will finally beat you. We are only a handful, and you Christians are numbered by the millions... [But] we communists do not play with words. We are realists, and seeing that we are determined to achieve our object, we know how to obtain the means. Of our salaries and wages, we keep only what is strictly necessary and give the rest for propaganda; we also consecrate all our free time and part of our holidays. You, however, give only a little time and hardly any money for the spreading of the gospel of Christ. How can anyone believe in the supreme value of this gospel if you do not practice it, if you do not spread it, and if you sacrifice neither time nor money for it? Believe me, it is we who will win, for we believe in our Communist message and are ready to sacrifice everything, even our life, in order that social justice shall triumph. But you people are afraid to soil your hands.”**

In most of Europe Communism has been discredited. But it is still a political party of some influence in France. It has significant political power in parts of Latin America, especially in Cuba and Venezuela. Columbia has had a decades long conflict with Communist guerillas. But a committed Christian always trumps Communism or any other influence.

Bruce Olson (PROJECTOR ON--- BRUCE OLSON 1) is such a committed Christian. He was a missionary working with an Indian tribe in northeastern Columbia when he was kidnapped in 1988 by a Communist group known as the ELN. He was kidnapped because he refused to cooperate with the Communists and was having a great influence with tribal people.

“My prayer was not ‘God, liberate me,’” he later told interviewers. **“My prayer was to be effective where God had me placed.”** (BRUCE OLSON 2) Initially his captors were antagonistic toward him. But as he was shuffled among twelve different bases, he consistently won the trust of the Communists, teaching them to read, studying the Bible with them, and introducing them to Jesus. Many became Christians.

At one point Olson became sick with an intestinal problem that caused internal bleeding. His captors asked their leaders if they could take him out of the jungle to a doctor. The request was denied, but the guerrillas brought a doctor to him. Several times the guerrillas gave blood for transfusions for Bruce Olson. After eight months of captivity the Communist leaders changed his status from political prisoner to prisoner of war. He was

asked to confess to the murder of many people. When he refused, he was sentenced to be executed. Olson was tied to a tree, and fifteen of his captors were commanded to shoot him. Many had tears in their eyes. They would be killed if they did not carry out their orders. They fired--- only to discover that their guns were loaded with blanks.

Soon after this Olson was released. It turned out that representatives of Colombia's Indian tribes had met with his captors and delivered an ultimatum to free him. The president of Colombia said of Olson, **"This is the first white man to be defended by the indigenous communities in our country, in Latin America."** (missionexus.org "An Interview with Bruce Olson") A national leader of this Communist group told him as he was being released, **"We will never forget you. You are the first person in our camp that we have captured that has been a friend and understood us. We esteem you."** (*Christianity Today*, 9/22/1989) (Bruceolson.com) Soon after this Olson was granted Colombian citizenship. He is eighty years old and continues to live in Colombia and to be involved with Christian ministry to indigenous tribal groups who live there. During these years he has learned fifteen different tribal languages.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Some of us may feel like we are imprisoned by family situations, by work, by school, by health difficulties, by financial problems. A committed Christian prays, as Bruce Olson did, that he may be effective in the situation in which God has placed him or her. How about us? Are we willing to serve the One who has given us an incredible contract, who has promised us eternal life, no matter where he has placed us?