

Faithful One: the life of Abraham, Episode 6

Sermon of 2021-09-19

Major Brian Coles

[slide 1, blank - read slides 2-12 with sound on. Slide 12 finishes with "Abraham was ninety-nine years old when..."]

[slide 13] Welcome to our continuing series on the faithfulness of God and the faith of Abraham.

Each time God has meet with Abram about the covenant, or agreement, he's establishing with him, there's more information being given to him.

Now, in c.17, God gives Abram even more information, more details, about the covenant. This time it includes a visible sign.

Perhaps Abram is thinking, "Oh, a visible sign! I remember the visible sign God gave Noah, that magnificent rainbow. What sign will he give me? I think I'd like a beautiful sunset."

But no, the sign given is circumcision. This is the first mention of circumcision in the bible and Abram has to process this new information.

"Oh, wait. There's now something I need to do to fulfill this covenant, this agreement, between you and me Lord? And you want me to do what?"

Yet he does it. He responds in obedient faith.

So welcome to circumcision Sunday here at Southmount Citadel. You picked a great Sunday to be here.

We want to look at this sign of circumcision today and discover what life lessons we can learn from this story in Gen. 17.

We also want to filter those life lessons through the lens of the NT to see what it teaches about circumcision.

One thing to look out for as we work our way through this story, is to see how God can use our bodies to engage or connect with him.

God didn't make us disembodied spirit beings. He made us human beings, beings with bodies and a spirit.

And he values how our bodies, and our spirits, interact with one another and with him.

So, there are ways we can use our bodies, to engage or connect with God.

Keep that in mind as we work through this story today. O.K., here we go.

We've read through most of the passage already on the screen, so let me start by highlighting a few things, beginning in v.1.

"When Abram was 99 years old, [so 13 years have elapsed since Hagar bore him Ishmael, but he still has no son from Sarai, his wife]

the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless."

So, when God appears to Abram this time, he reveals a new name to him. The LORD says, "I am God Almighty."

[slide 14] In Hebrew, God Almighty is *El Shaddai*. This is the first time God reveals himself in the bible as El Shaddai.

[slide 15] "El" is a proper name for God. Shaddai, relates to the Akkadian word Shadu, meaning "mountain."

So, "El Shaddai" would literally translate into English as "God of the mountain" which gives us a picture of God as being mighty like a mountain.

[slide 16] But the Hebrew 'Shad', in Shaddai, means "breast." Which tells us God is God of the breasts. Now that's unusual. You didn't expect that, did you?

But when we put those two terms together, Shadu and Shad, the name "El Shaddai" is capturing both aspects of who God is,

which is reflected in the maleness and femaleness of our humanity as made in the image of God.

God is both strength and tenderness. He is both powerful and mighty, and life-giving and nurturing.

[slide 17] So how did Abram respond to this revelation of God? Look at v.3. What does he say? He says nothing. He just falls facedown to the ground.

Falling facedown is a way of expressing awe and honour to God.

When we want to lift God up, to exalt him, to honour him, falling facedown is one way of doing just that.

To lift God up, to show him reverence and honour, we can lower ourselves, we can humble ourselves, by bowing, by bending the knee, or by falling facedown.

It's just a way using our bodies to engage or connect with God. It's a way of saying to God, "I humble myself before you and acknowledge how great and wonderful you are."

In our lives, we too can use our bodies, our physical posture, as Abram did, to engage or connect with God, whether it's raising our hands, bowing our heads, or bending our knee.

For Abram, falling facedown was the best thing he could do. He's using body language to show that he honours, exalts, and reveres God."

After Abram fell facedown, God said to him, v.4, "As for me, this is my covenant with you;

You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for you shall be the father of many nations."

[slide 18] Abram means, "exalted father," but Abraham means, "father of many nations."

What's interesting about this is that God is naming Abraham according to the promise he gave him.

But Abraham is not yet Abraham in the sense that he's not yet the father of many nations. That's a promise yet to be fulfilled, but he is to have faith in this promise.

So, Abraham's present identity is rooted in his faith in God - that God will indeed make him what his name is already declaring him to be.

And Abraham's name is changed to create a more intimate r'ship with God, so much so, that every time Abraham thinks about his own name,

He's thinking, "I am who I am only because I trust that God will be faithful to his promise.

And if God is not faithful in honouring his promise, I will cease to be me; I will no longer be Abraham, the father of many nations."

[slide 19] This is a beautiful metaphor of our r'ship with God. We are who we are because God is who he is.

We didn't create ourselves. God made us, in his own image. We owe our life and our identity to him.

He knows that we sin, but he stands ready to forgive us, to reconcile us to himself,

and he wants us to partner with him in fulfilling the promise he gave to Abraham, which is to be a blessing to others.

Moving on to v.6, God says to Abraham, "I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations out of you and kings will come from you."

Kings? There are a couple of times in this chapter where the word "kings" is used. What's God talking about?

He's telling us that Abraham, the one who went to war with the 4 kings of the East in c.14, is now himself to become a king: the founder of a royal line.

In fact, in Gen. 23.6 of the Septuagint [LXX], which is a Greek translation of the OT, Abraham is called a βασιλεὺς, or king.

And Matthew, in his gospel, traces the genealogy of Jesus, the king of the Jews, back to Abraham, founder of the royal line.

Hence, God can tell Abraham in v.6, "... and kings will come from you" which culminates with the arrival of the King of the Jews, the King of kings, Jesus.

But there's more to this story. Look at v.15. "God also said to Abraham, [slide 20] "As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah.

This is not as dramatic a name change as Abraham's. Sarai and Sarah both mean "princess."

But look at v.16. "I will bless her and surely give you a son by her." This is the first time this detail for the fulfillment of God's promise is made known to Abraham.

And notice, there's no shaming Abraham for what happened in c.16 with Hagar.

The LORD says, "I will bless her [Sarah] so that she will be the mother of nations and kings of peoples will come from her" including her in the promise God gave to Abraham in v.6.

And how did Abraham respond to this announcement? [slide 21] Look at v.17, "Abraham fell face down" again. But this time for a different reason.

What does the writer say? "Abraham fell facedown and"- and did what? He "laughed."

This time he's not falling facedown in reverent worship before God. This time he falls facedown to the ground laughing.

Why is he laughing? Look at the rest of v.17. Abraham said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man 100 years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90?"

I suppose God could have shamed him or chastised him at this point. But he doesn't. He understands Abraham's humanness.

Then Abraham says to God in v.18, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing." In other words, "God, why are you talking to me this way?"

This is ludicrous, preposterous, ridiculous! I already have a son, Ishmael. Let him be the one you bless. Let's go back to plan 'A' because plan 'B' is ridiculous."

What Abraham doesn't realize is that Isaac, the son to be born to Abraham and Sarah, is God's plan 'A'.

Ishmael will be blessed, as we read in v.20, "... as for Ishmael," says the LORD, "I have heard you."

This is an obvious wordplay. Do you remember what the name Ishmael means? “The God who hears me.”

And God says to Abraham, “I have heard you. I will surely bless him.” But, says God, “I’ve got something even better for you.”

Look at v.19, “... your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac” [your doubts notwithstanding].

Here’s another wordplay, for the name Isaac means what? “He laughs.” Do you think God has a sense of humour?

When Abraham laughed, I suppose God could have said, “How dare you laugh in mockery of the plans of Yahweh. I am the great El Shaddai,

and I say, “You will have a son, and you will call him whatever the Hebrew word is for “you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Every time you speak his name you will be reminded of this moment when you laughed at my plans.”

But this is not what God does. Instead, he brings some humour into the situation.

Abraham laughs in doubt. God uses that to bring some joy into his plan. “We’ll name him Isaac, meaning laughter.”

When Sarah hears the news that she will give birth to a son, in c.18, and knowing that at 90 years of age she is well past her childbearing years, she laughs too.

It will become a laughter of celebration and joy, but right now, Abraham and Sarah can only laugh at just how inconceivable this sounds.

Then God says, in v.19, “I will establish my covenant with him [that is Isaac] as an everlasting covenant...

And as for Ishmael,” says the LORD in v.20, “I have heard you” Abraham. I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers.

He will be the father of twelve rulers, [the list of those 12 rulers is given in Gen. 25] and I will make him into a great nation.”

But there is no covenant established with Ishmael. “My covenant,” says God in v.21, “I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.

When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up [or departed] from him.

On that very day,” v.23, “Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him.”

Circumcision is what God told him to do in vv.9-14. It was a sign of the covenant, or agreement, between God and Abraham.

I wonder how that announcement was received by all the males in his household. “Hey guys, I have some good news and some bad news.

First, the good news. El Shaddai has appeared to me and cut a covenant with me that will bring blessing to all peoples of the earth.

The bad news is the sign of this covenant is circumcision. He then proceeds to cut off the foreskin of every male in his household.

Interestingly, Ishmael, though designated as one who would not be part of this covenant, as would Isaac, still receives the covenant sign of circumcision, as do Abrahams’ male servants.

This show us that no one has a monopoly on divine grace. God’s grace ‘cuts’ across all social and ethnic boundaries.

So, what’s the lesson we learn from this story? [**slide 22**] The lesson we learn is that **doubt does not discredit faith.**

If you’re a person who doubts, understand that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Disbelief is the opposite of faith.

If we want to be a people filled with faith then we will be a people filled with doubt because doubt is a part of faith.

And if we are a people filled with faith, which means we will be a people who doubt,

then we will also be a people filled with questions, because asking questions is often how we work through our doubt.

And asking questions is never viewed as being threatening to God.

Abraham is laughing in v.17 because he's doubting God. "You say Sarah and I will have a son at our age. Haa. Surely you must have another plan. What about Ishmael?"

And God reminds Abraham again, that his covenant will be established with Isaac, the son yet to be born.

So, despite present circumstances, at the end of the day, Abraham trusts and obeys God, circumcising himself, Ishmael, and the rest of the males in his household.

[slide 23] Like Abraham, **we can trust and obey God while having doubts.**

If we are a people of faith, we will be a people who have doubts.

Having doubts we will ask questions. And asking questions is how we deal with our doubt as people of faith.

That's all well and good, but what are we to do with this sign of circumcision? You've probably got some questions about that.

I love how the apostle Paul, in the New Testament, ties circumcision into a conversation about baptism.

[slide 24] In Col. 2.11f, Paul writes, "In him [in Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands, ..."

So, Paul is talking here about a spiritual circumcision. "In him [in Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands by putting off the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ."

Paul is giving us a picture here of 'cutting' away the flesh, or of putting off our old self, our sinful nature, which has been accomplished by the circumcision of Christ.

How were we circumcised by Christ?

Here is where Paul connects it to the symbol of baptism. You were circumcised by Christ, says Paul in v.12 of Col. 2, [slide 25] when you were

“buried with him [Christ] in baptism” and then “raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead.”

Because of what God has done in and through Christ, we have died to our old self, our sinful nature, and been raised to live a new life in him.

That is how we have been circumcised by Christ.

[slide 27] Where are you in your r'ship with Christ? Have you been circumcised by Christ?

That is, have you died to your old self, your sinful nature and been raised to new life in Christ?

Or, having been circumcised by Christ, are you having doubting and asking questions of the faith you're now in?

Let's take a moment of reflection so that we can attune our spiritual ears to hear what God may be saying to us today as we sing, “Dear Lord, I Lift My Heart” 489 / 112 [St. Agnes] P.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, we are listening. Thank you for hearing us and for speaking to us through your word, your Spirit, and through one another.

Thank you for directing us as to what our next steps might be in following you even while having doubts and questions about our faith in you.

You are a God of great love and compassion, of patience and kindness. So, help us to keep in step with your Spirit. I pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

Song 662 / 446 On Christ the solid rock I stand.