

Life of Abraham

December 5, 2011

Genesis 17

From what we have learned in the first five chapters of Genesis, (12-16) which are devoted to the life of Abram, or Abraham, as he was eventually named, what can we say that we have learned about the life of faith from the life of Abram?

First, that it is a life initiated by God, not man. Abram did not seek the Lord to find out what the Lord wanted him to do, we learn from Genesis 12 and the first few verses of Acts 7 that God called Abram, but there is no evidence that Abram was seeking a change in his circumstances. Actually, when and under what circumstances the Lord saved Abram, we don't know. What we do know is that God spoke to Abram, but according to the Bible, there is no evidence that Abram was seeking the will of God.

So the life of faith is a life which God initiates with us, not a life that has its starting-point with us.

Second, it is a life when we learn more about the patience of God. It took Abram much longer to get from Ur to Canaan than it should have. Abram obeyed God in going to Canaan, but he had been told to leave his "kindred" behind, but his father and Lot went with him. So his obedience was not complete. That is the way our obedience often is.

The life of faith is a life of fellowship with God. Much is said in the Biblical account of Abram's life about his altar.

The life of faith is a life of unexpected trials.

The life of faith is a life in which our impatience gets us into other troubles. For example, the famine in Egypt, which led to Abram's fear about his own safety because of the way the Egyptians were attracted to Sarai because of her beauty.

The life of faith is a life where we see many times that God intervenes in our favor. His grace is in our favor. We don't have to hope that the Lord is on our side; He always is!

The life of faith is a life of power and victory.

Other things could be said, but it is good to learn the details of a life of fellowship with God as they are to be seen in the life of Abram because there are experiences he had that have their parallel in our lives.

But now we come to Genesis 17.

17:1 There is a fourteen year break here in the record of Abram's life, and thus the events of this chapter took place some twenty-four years after Abram and Sarai left Haran on the final lap of their journey to the promised land of Canaan, and thirteen years after the close of chapter 16. At this point Abram was being asked by God according to the word of the Lord which King David would express for all of us in Psalm 37:7 where we read, "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him." I think we would with Abram if he had asked the Lord, "Isn't twenty-four years long enough to wait"? Of course, the world would say, "Yes," but the man of faith must say, "No"!

Now the Lord does not speak to us like He often did to OT saints, either audibly, or in a vision, or through some prophet. But nevertheless He does impress us with what He wants us to do. I am reading the life of Hudson Taylor, and one thing that has impressed me in reading about his life, is the fact that he was deeply convicted even before he knew much about China, *that that is where the Lord wanted him to go*. And it was that conviction that caused him to move ahead in preparing to go, and it was that conviction that convinced him to stay when he got to China and ran into all kinds of problems which normally would have caused him to go back to England.

If we are going to walk with the Lord, we are going to have to learn *the patience of faith*.” And that is one of the hardest lessons we have to learn. In fact, it doesn't seem like we ever learn it because every waiting period is a fresh trial, and the longer the trial, the greater the testing is.

But it is clear that the Lord knew what Abram (and perhaps Sarai also) needed. It does not seem that Abram sought the Lord about the long delay. This doesn't mean that Abram would not have sought the Lord, or maybe that he even had sought the Lord. We are just told that “the Lord appeared to Abram,” and spoke to him. What did the Lord say?

The first words out of the Lord's mouth were about Himself: “I am the Lord.” What was the Lord doing? He was seeking to get Abram's mind off of the long time he had waited. He was seeking to get Abram's mind off of himself, and how much older he had gotten. It is hard to think of all that may have been going through Abram's mind. But I would venture a guess that Abram, as godly as he was, and regardless of how much he wanted to please the Lord, had been thinking more about himself and Sarai and their immediate surroundings, and had not been giving enough thought to the Lord.

I remind you again of what I think was David's life verse when he wrote Psalm 16:8, “I have set the Lord always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.” What was it that David was continually thinking about with reference to the Lord. *He was thinking that the Lord was continually with him*. Abram was just as conscious of the presence of the Lord as he was of the presence of Sarai. The Lord was a living reality to Abram. He knew that the Lord was with him all of the time, day and night. And he knew that the Lord was always awake, day and night. And he knew that the Lord had been with him every step of every mile from Ur to Canaan. And he realized that the famine had caused him trouble because for the time being he was more conscious of the famine than he was of the Lord.

And we need to remember that although we don't have the place in the plan of God that Abram had, yet we are just as important to the Lord as Abram was. No all of the promises of the Word apply to us, such as God's promise to give him a son, or to give him the land of Canaan, *but most of the promises of the Word do apply to us!*

The years since Abram left Ur had made a lot of changes in Abram, *but they had not made a single change in the Lord*. And what the Lord was then, He is the same today. That is what “Lord,” Jehovah, means, *the God Who is, not was, but is!* We need to keep thinking of the Lord all of the time. Moses in writing this chapter said that “the Lord appeared to Abram.”

But what in particular did Abram need to be concentrating on with respect to the Lord? It was that He was “the Almighty God.” He was the God Who had created the heaven and the earth. Think of what power that took. There is no power among men today that can even begin to compare to God's work as Creator. And even in Abram's day the Lord had kept the world turning and functioning in all of its vast powers for over two thousand years. So it was not the case that Abram and Sarai did not have a son because God could not give them a son. All things are possible with God, and especially the things that are impossible to us.

Was there anything then, that Abram was supposed to do? Yes, there was? What was it? He was to “walk before” the Lord, and be thou perfect.” Remember that “Enoch walked with God.” And Noah “walked with God. And this is what God wanted Abram to do more than anything else. To take it a step farther, this is what the Lord wants you and me to do, to live as in God’s presence, as we are, and to live in dependence upon Him. It is this that can make long years seem like heaven on earth. The words, “and be thou perfect,” do not mean that we will ever be perfect in this life, but they do mean that we should strive always to grow in our dependence upon the Lord. We will never trust the Lord perfectly, but that is to be our goal. And our communion with God in prayer will become more and more a part of our lives if we are really seeking to walk with the Lord.

There is a lot of food for thought in this first verse of chapter 17, isn’t there? We all need to think about this verse as though God had spoken these words to us. That is the reason that Moses was directed to write out what the Lord said to Abram.

17:2 Here the Lord turned from what he wanted Abram to do, to what He was promising that He would do for Abram. Verse 1 was a command for Abram; verse 2 was God’s promise to Abram. This was actually a renewal of the covenant that God had made with Abram back in Ur over twenty-five years before. The passage of time changes a lot of things, but it does not change the promises of God, nor does it change the purposes of God. So if Abram was to have peace after all of those years, he had to obey the commands of God, and he must believe the promises of God. Abram was in the land, but he still did not have a son, and yet the Lord said to him as though it was like the first time, “and [I] will multiply thee exceedingly.”

What was Abram’s response. See verse 3.

17:3 It seems from Abram’s behavior here that this was a real turning point in Abram’s relationship with God. He did not speak a word, but his action indicated that he intended to do what the Lord told him to do, and that he firmly believed that God in His grace, and faithfulness, would still do what He had promised so long ago that He would do for Abram. It seems that Abram didn’t speak because, at the moment he couldn’t speak. Haven’t you had times like that – when the Lord and His Word were so wonderful to you could, or actually did, fall on your face before the Lord, “lost in wonder, love, and praise,” as one of our hymns says. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if also tears of joy and amazement flowed from Abram’s eyes so overwhelmed was he by God and His Word. It all seemed so unlikely to Abram at that time, that he lay speechless before the Lord as though he were saying he would obey and that he did believe.

“And God talked with him.” It is often the case that the Lord talks with us the most when we are silent before Him. This seems to be the thought of Habakkuk 2:20,

20 But the Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him.

And Psalm 46:10-11:

10 Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

11 The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The words, “and God talked with him,” *i.e.*, with Abram, are to give the fullest authority to what follows. It is like the words that the prophets often used, “Thus saith the Lord,” to show that they were not speaking on their own, but on behalf of God, claiming divine authority for what they were about to write.

Calvin has an excellent comment on this statement:

God declares that He is the speaker, in order that absolute authority may appear in His words.

For since our faith can rest on no other foundation than His eternal veracity, it becomes, above all things, necessary for us to be informed that what is proposed to us, has proceeded from His sacred mouth (Calvin, John, *Genesis*, pp. 415, 416).

17:4 What the Lord said to Abram here amounts to a restatement of the covenant which He gave to Abram back in Ur. Regardless of how Abram considered the promise of God, the covenant, after all of those years, God said, “As for Me,” that is, I stand by my promises which I gave to you, the most important of which is that “thou shalt be a father of many nations.” There may be a passing reference to the way in which Abram would be connected with God’s blessing upon nations like the Ishmaelites, but by far this is a repetition of “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed,” *i.e.*, blessed with salvation. This was God’s way of saying what the Lord said in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” And like Peter said in Acts 4:12, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other Name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

The point is that the God of heaven and earth never has given a promise to anyone else in all of human history like this promise, this covenant, which God gave to Abram. There is only one promise of God for salvation, and that is through Abraham’s seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul told the Philippian jailor, a Gentile, when he ask Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They responded by saying, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”

There never has been, and there never will be, an alternate way of salvation, in spite of what some men are saying today. (Tell about Robert Shuler’s interview with Billy Graham about this very question, and what has happened to Robert Shuler since then.)

17:5 Now the promise of God is always enough, whatever the promise might be. But because of our weakness and inclination to doubt even God, in confirmation of His promise, God changed Abram’s name from Abram to Abraham. According to Keil and Delitzsch, two noted Hebrew, evangelical scholars, Abram means *high father*, but Abraham means *the father of the multitude*. While the name of Abraham has been held in high esteem by many nations, there is no multitude like those who from all of the nations of the earth, have or will trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation!

So this confirmation is not a new covenant, or promise, but a restatement of the same covenant which God originally gave to Abram in Ur. That is why the Lord said to Abram in verse 4, “My covenant is with thee.” Through all of the ups and downs in Abram’s life since God established the original covenant with Abram, nothing had changed with God. God said in so many words, “I have already established my covenant with you and there are no deletions or amendments of any kind in it.

17:6 From here on down through verse 8 God repeated the details of the covenant given first in Genesis 12:1-3.

Here the promise has to do with the many nations that will result from God’s promise. This has to do, as I have mentioned with the Ishmaelites. The same can be said of the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, and so on. So this has to do with the nations which have their national roots in Abraham

17:7 This has to do with the spiritual seed of Abraham, those in OT times, as well as those in NT, those chosen of God for their eternal salvation..

17:8 And finally, the land which God promised to the people of Israel. This is the big problem concerning the Jews and Arabs today. The land has been given to Israel. The conflict over the land will still

become more acute, but the day is coming when the land will be restored to Israel during the millennial period which is yet future. The promise given here is declared by the Lord to be irrevocable. Men may discount all of Israel's claims to the land. However, the covenant of the Lord shall stand. It is amazing how national Israel today lays claim to the land given to them, but so far rejects the Lord Jesus Christ as their Messiah along with the promise of eternal salvation which is a part of the original covenant. Today Israel wants the land, but rejects the Savior. However, the day is coming when the elect of Israel will accept the Savior, and then be given the land.

Up through verse 8 we have the I will's of God. Now beginning with verse 9, and going down through verse 14 we see what the descendants of Abraham were to do as evidence that they were keeping the covenant of the Lord.

17:9 Keeping the covenant did not mean that the covenant of God which He had promised to keep, was also dependent in part upon the circumcision of the male children, but, like baptism in the Church, the body of Christ, it was evidence of their faith in the covenant of God. One major difference between circumcision and baptism is that circumcision was an act which fathers were to carry out with their male children as an expression of their faith when a baby boy was born; baptism is what people, male and female, are to observe after they have believed. But neither one can be essential to salvation. In Genesis 15:6 we are specifically told that Abram "believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him [Abram] for righteousness." This is the basic truth of salvation. And as the Apostle Paul very clearly explained in his letter to the churches of Galatia, the covenant of salvation is annulled if after saying the Abram was justified by faith alone, other conditions are added. Once a covenant is sealed, to add other conditions to it, is to nullify the original covenant altogether. Of course, if circumcision could be added and required, then no girl or woman could be saved.

I have never seen an explanation as to why circumcision was chosen as the way the father expressed his faith in the covenant of salvation when circumcision has nothing to do with women, but apparently it has to do with the authority of the man over the woman which was to be carried on generation after generation.

Verse 9 is simply a statement that there was something that Jewish fathers were to do to their male children as evidence of their own faith in the covenant of God.

17:10 The Lord described circumcision as the way fathers were to express their faith in God's covenant: "Every man child among you shall be circumcised." There is definitely an emphasis here on the family, and upon a father's responsibility to his male children even for generations to come.

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A careful reading of verse 10 seems to indicate that the circumcision of boy babies was to be evidence of God's covenant with all of His seed, that is, of male and female. It could not be an additional requirement for salvation because God's covenant with Abraham had already been established on faith alone. (See Gen. 15:6.)

17:11 Here circumcision is called "a token," - "a token of the covenant" that God had made with Abraham and his seed. This is what the rainbow became to Noah according to Genesis 9:8-17, esp. verse 12 and 13. The rainbow was a sign of God's promise that the world would never be destroyed again by a flood. Circumcision was a sign of a Jew's faith in God's promise of salvation. In the first God gave the sign; in the latter, the sign was given by the people of their belief in God's promise of salvation.

The writer of the book of Hebrews spoke of God confirming His promise with an oath, or a token. See Hebrews 6:11-20:

11 And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end:

12 That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

13 For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself,

14 Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.

15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.

16 For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.

17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:

18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:

19 Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;

20 Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

Thus the promises of God are secured to man, not because God needs to confirm them with His oath, but because of the weakness of man, even of believers. Circumcision was a renunciation of man's dependence in himself, and a token of his intention to believe the promise of God. Sometimes those who were circumcised turned against the Lord, in which case, according to the Apostle Paul, their 'circumcision is made uncircumcision.' (Rom. 2:25).

The same is true of baptism today. It is a token of our salvation if we do it in faith, but if we turn away from the faith, our baptism loses its meaning for ourselves and for others.

From **7:12-14** we learn that circumcision applied to every male child who was born in the house of a believing Jew. If he is not, he is cut off from his people because "he hath broken his covenant.

One writer has suggested that circumcision meant three things:

- 1) An expression of faith in God and His covenant.
- 2) A renunciation of any confidence in the flesh. – a denial that salvation could ever be a work of the flesh, that believers were to be distinct from the world, and that their lives were to be made holy by living in obedience to God.
- 3) Evidence of surrender to God.

Since circumcision was to be performed on the eighth day, it could not have been at the request of a baby. Thus it seems that this, too, shows parental responsibility toward the child, and especially the father's responsibility. Thus the pattern of the lives of children was firmly established before they were capable of making such a decision for themselves.

7:16 The record now turns to Sarai. The meaning of Sarai and Sarah, and the difference between them, is now obscure although there is some basis for believing that Sarah means *princess*. One thing this usually indicates is a change in character. Sometimes it suggests salvation. Our impression of Sarai up to this

point may not be very good when we consider her plan for Hagar, and the treatment of Hagar after she learned that Hagar was pregnant. Anyway, it was God Who changed Sarah's name. The time had obviously come when Sarah would have the promised seed. In Habakkuk 2:3 we read,

3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.

It is easy to get impatient with the Lord, and then run ahead of Him. But the same thing to do is always to wait on Him and to wait for Him. That is never easy for us when we can see no reasonable argument as to why we should wait. Impatience continues to be a problem for most of us throughout our lives. It was a major problem for both Abram and Sarai. But now we are seeing what God does in fulfillment of His plan.

17:16 The Lord was talking to Abraham, not to Sarah. Twice the Lord said, "I will" and "she shall." Actually there is a third "she shall." A couple of times before it had been as though the Lord said, "Not now," and Abram (as he was then) said, "Then I will." Time is usually an important factor in knowing God's will, and it is certainly a factor in seeing what God will do. It is never a mistake to wait until the Lord is ready to carry out His will for us. He is never late even though it seems to us that He never acts as quickly as we want Him to work.

Now when God spoke to Abraham about Sarah having a son, what did he do? He did what he did back in verse 3 of our chapter. He fell on his face. But he didn't wait for the Lord to continue to speak to him. What God said the words we read in verse 16, Abraham laughed. He was really laughing at God. What a terrible thing this is! Can it be that this is the man that we call, a man of faith? Yes, it is. What is it that we sing? "The arm of flesh will fail you; you dare not trust your own."

The question Abraham asked shows what the problem was: he had his eyes set on himself and Sarah, but not on the Lord! He told the Lord in so many words, "You have waited too long. I will be a hundred when a child would be born, and Sarah would be ninety." And he might have added, "How can we be sure that our baby would be a boy even if we could have a child?"

No, Abraham was not interested in having a son because he already had one! And he didn't wait any time at all to tell God what his plan was. It was different from God's plan, and Abraham felt that it made a lot more sense than God's plan, which, as far as he was concerned, God's plan might not work anyway.

17:18 What was Abraham's plan? He said to God, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" Ishmael was just entering into his teen age years. Abraham had learned to love Ishmael, and some time in those thirteen years it had occurred to Abraham that Ishmael might be the promised seed. That would have been a relief to Abraham because he didn't like to wait anyway. But does God have a Plan B? Does He ever have a Plan B? No, He doesn't!

17:19 God continued as though He had not heard what Abraham had said. But He repeated what had always been His plan knowing that what was a problem to Abraham was no problem to God.

God told Abraham, "Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son *indeed*" (italics mine). What Abraham told God may have been true, but the things that are impossible with man are possible with God. See Luke 18:27. And the Lord continued by saying that He had a name all picked out for Sarah's son. It was Isaac which is formed from the Hebrew verb, *to laugh*. Now I don't think that God chose that name because Abraham had laughed when God told him that Sarah would have a son. No, God is not like that. He sometimes has us remember our sins, but it is not to get even with us. No, I think that God chose that name Isaac to let Abraham know that even though he had been very happy with Ishmael, his joy over Isaac would far surpass the joy he had had in

Ishmael. Solomon would write later in Proverbs 10:22, “The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow with it.”

He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He always does the best for those
Who leave the choice with Him.

17:20 But in giving that promise to Abraham of a second son, He did not forget Ishmael. You see, God often blesses one without neglecting the other. In fact, God said to Abraham, And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him.” Before Abraham had brought up Ishmael, God had already blessed him. And here God added some more I will’s.

17:21 However, the Lord intended to stand behind His plan to give Abraham a son, Isaac, through Sarah “at this set time in the next year.” Abraham’s waiting days for a son through Sarah were coming to an end.

17:22 God had finished all that He intended to say to Abraham, and He “went up from Abraham.”

But the closing verses of the chapter indicate that after this time of fellowship with God, Abraham had some unfinished business to take care of – some very important unfinished business.

17:23 Neither Ishmael nor, apparently, any of the male relatives and servants, had been circumcised until that day.

17:24 Neither had Abraham been circumcised, but he was then – at 99!

17:25-26 Ishmael was circumcised at 13. He and his father were circumcised on the same day.

17:27 And apparently all of the circumcisions mentioned in these final verses, was done on the same day.

Here Abraham was acting as a true man of faith. This was a tremendous undertaking for one day.

But Abraham believed that when God has revealed His will, and made clear what we are to do. Then we need to do it. All of Abraham’s family and all of his servants, men, women, and children, could see that obedience to God had the highest priority in his life. He did not want to leave undone anything upon which God had made known His will. This ought all of us to ask ourselves the question: *Are there things in my life which I have left undone which are clearly the will of God?* If so, we need to take steps right away to bring our lives into conformity with the will of God. There is a suggestion here that our sins of omission may be more numerous than our sins of commission.

Concl: In Luke 6:46-49 we have the record of how the Lord brought that message to His disciples to a conclusion by asking this question in verse 46, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” And then He followed that question with the words found in verses 47-49. (Read.)

This sounds very much like what the Apostle James wrote in James 1:19-25. He exhorted us as believers to be “swift to hear,” but then he followed it with “be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only.” Such a believer who is only a hearer and not a doer, deceives himself as to the true state of his relationship with the Lord. But it is the hearer and the doer who is blessed in his deed. It is this that keeps our lives in a constant state of blessing.