

Prayers

Opening prayer

Heavenly Father; we do not always know what You would want us to do. We are weak and need Your assistance, we are tempted and need Your strength, we mistrust the truth and need Your revelation, or we fail in our own strength and need the empowerment of Your Holy Spirit. May we not look to the world for guidance, but to the divine assistance of Your Son Jesus Christ, who alone can set us right in all things. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_ (Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Pray for the Lord's blessing on the mission of the church or in your city or region. Pray that the Lord will work by the power of His Spirit to save the lost

On-going prayers

- **Pray about Aid, and Aid agencies.** *Pray for Aid agencies delivering Aid to far flung regions of the world, by land, sea or air.*
- *Pray for your national leaders, your representatives in government, who are responsible for passing laws to regulate and protect your people*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of work and achievement*

Meditation

There may be moments when faith seems distant;
But You, Lord Jesus, are closer than the air.

We long to know 'why' when life's mysteries loom large;
But You hold the secrets of the world in Your heart.

We search for truth, seeming to be near, yet so far;
But You are the truth that we long to find.

We struggle with our fears, our worries and temptations;
But You remain constant; Your love never fails.

We fight against evil when it strikes, unexpectedly;
But You have the victory over the enemy, forever.

So bridge the gap between our experience of life
And the glorious truth of Your Kingdom.

Hasten the coming of the time we await
When everything in this life is fulfilled in You.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 7: 1-8

¹ When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him and said,

'I am God Almighty; walk with me, and you will be complete. ² I will make my Covenant with you, and will greatly increase the number of your descendants'

³ Then Abram bowed down with his face to the ground; and God said to him,

⁴ 'As for me, my part of the Covenant with you is this: you will indeed be the ancestor of many nations. ⁵ Your name will no longer be Abram, but will be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of many nations. ⁶ I will greatly increase the number of your descendants; and I will make you into nations, and from you will come kings! ⁷ I will keep my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you throughout the generations. It will be an everlasting Covenant in which I will be your God and the God of your descendants. ⁸ And I will give you and your descendants after you the land in which you are now living as a foreigner; all the land of Canaan will be their everlasting possession, and I will be their God.'

Review

Have you noticed that people tend to repeat themselves, and some people do this more than we would like? It is also true that we all do this from time to time, because hardly anyone is excluded from what is a basic human characteristic which reflects excitement or passion, and a desire to stress something very important; and this is what happens within today's passage of scripture. The word 'Covenant' is repeated four times (17:2,4,7), God's promise to greatly increase Abram's descendants is repeated twice (17:2,6), His promise to make Abram into 'many nations' is repeated three times (17:4,5,6), and the promise of land is also repeated (17:8)! It is therefore fairly safe to say that this passage is a highly important passage about God's Covenant promises to Abram! However, we know this already from the story of Abram so far in Genesis (12,2,3; 15:1 etc). God's Covenant is the driving force of the whole story of His relationship with Abraham, and even the tragic story of Hagar in the last chapter is there precisely because it comments on Abram and Sarai's inappropriate attempts to force God's hand to secure the Covenant!

What is said in this passage about the Covenant is of vital importance, but here, it is a theological framework against which is set a number of new things, mentioned for the first time. These new things tell us even more about the Covenant and why it is so important to both God and Abram. In verse 1, God reveals Himself for the first time to Abram as 'El-Shaddai', a name which means 'God Almighty'! Then He makes a promise that if Abram walks with Him faithfully, then He will make him 'complete'. Nothing more is said about what this might mean, but it is likely that this means complete in faith, and therefore complete as a servant of God.

In verses 4 and 5, God repeats the Covenant promise about giving Abram many descendants, and to show His intent, renames Abram as 'Abraham'. The first name Abram means 'exalted father', but the new name means 'father of multitudes' and the change is highly significant. Abraham will no longer be someone who is remembered for his own greatness (as 'exalted'), but as an obedient servant of God who became the father of the multitudes of God's people! More than that, verse 6 reminds us that the promise of God is that Abraham will be the father of not just one nation but of many nations. Only one child of his will be the unique son of the Covenant, but his other children (including Ishmael and those yet to be born), the promise is extended generally so that Abraham will be the father of many 'nations', and his descendants will be 'kings' (17:6)!

In verse 7, we find yet another important development of the Covenant, because for the first time, it is declared as something which will be 'everlasting'. The only Covenant mentioned in the Bible before the time of Abraham is the Covenant God made with Noah (Gen 9:8f.). The nature of this Covenant was different, and the sole theme of it was God's promise not to destroy humanity because of sin, but it was specifically described as an 'everlasting' Covenant (Gen 9:16). God would never go back on His word, whatever His promises. Lastly, in verse 8, God reinforces the eternal nature of His promises by saying that the land of Canaan, previously identified as the future property of Abraham, would be an 'everlasting possession'. The Lord may change the way in which His promises are fulfilled but He does not go back on the essential nature of His promises; they are eternal! The powerful nature of this declaration is confirmed by the manner in which the Lord concludes this announcement; He says with determination 'I will be their God!'

Going Deeper

- Abraham (the new Abram) and the Covenant
- What God offers in the Covenant
- The Covenant, the generations and the land

There is a great deal here for us to study within this passage, especially with its important additions to the Covenant. However, it only forms the introduction to the rest of chapter 17. As we continue in our study in

the next few days, we will find that it is the culmination of the description of God's Covenant with Abraham, and this is confirmed by the institution of the rite of circumcision, not uncommon in ancient times, but practised to this day by Jewish people.

Abraham (the new Abram) and the Covenant

At the age of 99, one would think that Abraham was ready to settle down. He had done what God had asked of him and travelled to Canaan, and after a brief interlude in Egypt (12:10-20), he had stayed in Canaan as directed. He split with his nephew Lot, and demonstrated to everyone his good name and standing (Gen. 14). Then, when his attempts to have a child by surrogacy led him astray, God promised He would fulfil the promise of descendants by other miraculous means. What else could he do but enjoy life and wait? As far as God was concerned, however, it was time to mark the complete revelation He intended to make of Himself to Abraham. Most of chapter 17 is a speech by God declaring the Covenant as the culmination of His relationship with Abraham, and through Abraham to all those who count him either as their physical or spiritual father. The word 'Covenant' appears more times in Gen. 17 than anywhere else in Genesis.

The history of the Covenant is important. Noah was the first recipient of a Covenant (see above), and then God made promises to Abram in Genesis 12 which are basic to what we mean by the Covenant, although the word 'Covenant' is not used. In Genesis 15, Abram has a vision and God accepts Abram's faith (15:6), and in what follows, a mystical Covenant is made between Abram and God which emphasises the previous promises and adds that of land (Gen 15:7-21). Then after his mistake in trying to obtain an heir for the Covenant by himself (ch 16) God remained loyal to his chosen servant Abram, and acted decisively by formalising the Covenant. In our passage, the word used to introduce the Covenant (with one exception see 17:7 below) is the Hebrew word 'natan', which is translated as 'make' or 'establish'. This word is normally translated 'to give', meaning something someone does for someone else. This shows that the Covenant is clearly God's work, done by God's initiative for Abram and his descendants. It is essential that we realise that the Covenant is primarily God's initiative, not ours.

Although chapter 17 climaxes with Abraham's obedient acceptance of the Covenant by the performing of circumcision (17:23), it would be wrong of us to associate God's Covenant exclusively with circumcision. As the New Testament argues, Abram's response to God was firstly by faith (15:6) and whereas God gave the sign of circumcision as a physical sign of His relationship with Abraham, God has now given us a new spiritual sign, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus, celebrated in Baptism (Rom 4:9,11; 6:5ff etc).

What God offers in the Covenant

Up to this point in the Bible, God's promises to Abram of wealth, blessing, descendants and land have been essential to the story, and the promises have been personal. Now, with Abram getting older (he was 99 – see 17:1) and Ishmael, his only descendant to date, reaching the formal age of manhood (around 13 or 14 – we can work this out from 12:4 and 16:3), it was important for God to clarify what would happen next. In our opening verse, He said to Abram 'I am God Almighty; walk with me and you will be complete'. It was a powerful word by which God accepted Abram's underlying faith and it revealed two important things. Firstly, the revelation of God as 'El-Shaddai', an ancient name (according to Exodus 6:2-3), which despite there being some uncertainty about the meaning of the original Hebrew, means 'powerful God'. In other words, God was powerful enough to accomplish what He had said, despite Abram's age. A Latin translation of this name is 'Dei Omnipotens', hence the famous description of God as 'omnipotent'.

After revealing Himself in this way, 'El-Shaddai' commanded Abram to 'walk with Him' (17:1). The last person in the Bible who was said to walk with God was Enoch (5:24), and God gave this command to Abram in order that his faith might be 'complete' (17:1), just as Enoch's had been. This word is normally translated 'blameless', but the idea it conveys is more like wholeness or perfection, and not 'being sinless'. Certainly, after the difficult episode of Hagar's pregnancy and the birth of Ishmael, Abram needed to walk more closely with God. Nevertheless, 'walk with me and be complete' is a powerful Biblical command which a Christian might call a 'rule of faith'.

God then confirmed His Covenant with words from his previous promises (12:2,3 etc), and pointedly called it 'my' Covenant (17:2). There was to be no doubt about who would create and sustain the Covenant, for Abram did not set it up because of his sin; he was only its first recipient! The response of Abram to God's Covenant was to 'bow down'. We are so used to this description of a proper and worshipful response to God in the Old Testament that we do not notice that this is the first occasion in the Bible when a person is recorded as doing this! Up to this point in time, Abram had worshipped God by making altars, presumably for sacrificial worship; now, for the first time, he responded personally and in private and humble obeisance.

Whilst Abram was in this place of vulnerability in worship, God said these words 'as for me, my part of the Covenant with you is this ...' (17:4f.) and repeated the Covenant promises that God would make Abram the father of many nations. This was itself a formal part of the Covenant. If you look further ahead in Genesis 17, you will discover that later on, God says to Abram 'as for you ...' and tells him his part in the Covenant,

which is to obey the instructions for circumcision (17:9ff). There is also a third formal part of the Covenant (17:15ff) in which God says 'as for you, Sarai ...' and tells her that her own part will be to bear a son. All these three together are the heart of the Old Testament Covenant, and they are all about the fulfilment of God's plans through Abraham and his descendants, the first of whom is to be born through Sarai.

The declaration of the Covenant is then followed by a powerful moment in scripture, when God renames Abram in order to reflect this Covenant. The old name 'Abram' means 'exalted father', which was either a reference to Abram's own father Terah, or to God. Whichever is the case, the name points more to the past than to the future. The new name is 'Abraham' which means 'father of a multitude'; a name which points to the future, by faith. Abraham has to accept this new name in faith, of course, because there was no sign as yet of his wife becoming pregnant!

The Covenant, the generations and the land

The last few verses deal with the one outstanding issue to do with the Covenant, which is that of land. The Covenant promises of God in today's text have so far been all about Abraham's descendants, and yet the first time that the word Covenant was mentioned by God (15:18) the promise was about land. God therefore clarifies His promise to the newly renamed Abraham, connecting his descendants with the land. His descendants would receive the land of Canaan as a gift from God and as a permanent homeland. This time, however, God said 'I will keep my Covenant', unlike previously when He said 'I will make' or 'set up' a Covenant, and this enables us to say with confidence that this is a declaration of God's faithfulness. Just as He made a Covenant promise to Noah never to destroy the world again, He now promised His people the land of Canaan in perpetuity.

As before, it is important to remember that whilst this Covenant promise of God is one that God does not forget or go back on, the people of Israel were not able to be so faithful, particularly in the matter of worship. In this passage, Abram responded to God with exclusive worship, bowing down before God in the Bible's first description of personal worship coming from faith. This was not always the case for Abraham's descendants, as is pointed out throughout the Old Testament (see Leviticus 26:27-39 and 26:40-45). For this reason, they eventually forfeited their right to live in the land (as prophesied in 15:12-16).

Discipleship

Application

The final phrase of this passage is: 'I will be their God'. It sounds like a way of bringing to a close what has been said, as indeed it does; however, it is more than that. It is an affirmation by God that He alone will be the God who looks after those who will one day be the descendants of Abraham. He demands exclusive worship, like that offered to him by Abraham. In later years, this is reflected in the beginning of the 10 Commandments, where Moses reports God as saying 'I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:2,3). In ancient times, most gods were thought of as being linked to land rather than to people, but the God who made this Covenant with Abraham was linked to His people first and secondly to the land. This is something that the Israelite people had to learn for themselves when they were forced to leave the 'Promised Land' (2 Kings 24:1ff). It is vital that we remember this, for God, through Christ, is now interested in the redemption of the whole world, not just the 'Promised Land'.

What does this passage say about us and our relationship with God? There is something here about being complete in our walk with God (17:1) which we now know can only come through the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. The insistence of Almighty God that the descendants of Abraham will increase greatly is a challenge to us not to try and put this growth into practice by means of our effort and reasoning alone; to do this would be to do what Abraham had done with Hagar, and try to put God's words into effect by human means. No, our task is to recognise that God is doing His work throughout the world, and our work is to recognise what God is doing and be compliant with His will. This is essential for evangelism which is fundamentally God's activity which we have to be willing to join in, on His terms. In addition to this, God makes firm His promise that His people will have their own land for ever, and even when this world comes to an end and Christ has come in glory, the spiritual 'Promised Land' of God will then be found to be His glorious Kingdom!

Questions for groups

1. What would it take for you to feel that your walk with God was 'complete'? List what you think would be required.

2. As Christians, what do you think can be most gained from understanding the Covenant of God as in Genesis 17?
3. Can a promise really be described as 'everlasting' if it is also conditional? Discuss this in your group in relation to the issue of land in Genesis 17:1-8

Discipleship challenges

- *Think back over your own life and recall the promises God has made to you. Have they been fulfilled? If so, what opportunities have you taken to testify to their fulfilment?*
- *We often expect everything to be handed on a plate to us and to obtain a 'full' blessing now; but God acts through time to bring us His blessing progressively. Spend some time in prayer and fasting to wait on Him for the unfolding of His will for you.*

Final Prayer

When You say a word, may we hear You, Lord. When You touch our hearts, may we feel You, Lord. When You lead the way, may we follow You, Lord. When You inspire us, may we respond to You, Lord. May all our lives be lived in response to Your calling, Lord Jesus. AMEN
