

WALK BEFORE ME, AND BE THOU PERFECT

TEXT: GENESIS 17:1-27

INTRODUCTION:

1. We have seen in the life of Abraham a series of steps forward and backward. In Genesis 16 we saw a big step backward.
2. Sarah thought she could hurry up God's program by having Abraham have a child with her handmaid Hagar. Sadly, Abraham went along with this foolish plan, and Ishmael was born.
3. Now in Genesis 17 we see a great step forward in the life of Abraham.
4. Thirteen years have transpired, and Abraham and Sarah were still waiting for their promised son (17:1; cf. 17:1). Nothing is recorded of this long interval and so we can assume that there was no special or new revelation from God during this time.
5. It had been twenty-four years since God first promised Abraham that he would have a seed and that the land would be given to his seed (cf. 12:1-5).
6. Abraham had been waiting a long time.
7. There is a great emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant here in Genesis 17. The word "covenant" is used thirteen times (17:2, 4, 7 twice, 9, 10, 11, 13 twice, 14, 19 twice, 21).
8. And it is here in Genesis 17, that the LORD established circumcision as a token of the covenant (17:10-14).
9. And it is here in this chapter that the LORD gave Abram and Sarai new names -- Abraham and Sarah (17:4, 5, 15, 16).

I. A DIVINE VISITATION (17:1)

1. "The LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God" (17:1). This is the first time in the Bible the LORD identified Himself as "the Almighty God" (*El Shaddai* in Hebrew).
2. We have here a divine visitation -- "the LORD appeared to Abram."
3. We have here a divine revelation -- "I am the Almighty God."
4. We have here a divine declaration -- "Walk before me."
5. We have here a divine command -- "And be thou perfect."
6. This divine command is for us too! Our Lord said in Matthew 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."
7. "Perfect" does not mean "sinless." The Bible does not teach sinless perfection.

8. What the Bible does teach is that we have a perfect Saviour who provides us with a perfect salvation, and this salvation includes deliverance from the power of sin.
9. The Scriptures command perfection; and the Scriptures promise perfection.
10. James 1:4 says, "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing..."
11. Notice, patience prepares for perfection. Abraham was learning patience as he waited for the son God had promised him.
12. Perfection is the Christian ideal and aim. The great Baptist preacher, A.J. Gordon, said: "I would rather aim at perfection and fall short of it, than aim at imperfection and fully attain it."
13. We have too many Christians "aiming at imperfection!"
14. A.J. Gordon wrote a book called *The Ministry of the Spirit*. In this little book, he wrote these words: "If the conception is that of a state of sinless perfection into which the believer has been suddenly lifted and of a deliverance from a sinful nature which has been suddenly eradicated, we must consider this doctrine as dangerously untrue. But we do consider it possible that one may experience a great crisis in his spiritual life, in which there is such a total self-surrender to God and such an infilling of the Holy Spirit, that he is freed from the bondage of sinful appetites and habits, and enabled to have constant victory over self, instead of suffering constant defeat. In saying this, what more do we affirm than is taught in that scripture: 'Walk in the Spirit and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh' (Gal.5:16).
15. "If we regard the doctrine of sinless perfection as a heresy, we regard contentment with sinful imperfection as a greater heresy. And we gravely fear that many Christians make the apostle's words, 'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves,' the unconscious justification for a low standard of Christian living. It were almost better for one to overstate the possibilities of sanctification in his eager grasp after holiness, than to understate them in his complacent satisfaction with a traditional unholiness. Certainly it is not an edifying spectacle to see a Christian worldling throwing stones at a Christian perfectionist" (pp. 120-122).
16. Sadly, there are very few preachers like A.J. Gordon around today!
17. We must distinguish between absolute and relative perfection. Absolute perfection is found only in the Lord Jesus Christ.
18. John Wesley said, "Christian perfection is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone."

19. Samuel Chadwick said, "All perfection is relative except for the perfection of God. Christian perfection does not indicate finality but fitness." That word "fitness" should be noted.
20. By "fitness," Samuel Chadwick is giving a good Biblical definition of "perfect." God is making us fit to do His will.
21. Consider Abraham. God was making Abraham fit to do His will. This helps us to understand Abraham's trials and testings, and why he had to wait so long for Isaac.
22. *Strong's Concordance* says "perfect" means, "to make fit, to complete, to mend (what has been broken or rent), to repair, to arrange, to adjust, to equip, to put in order."
23. "And Abram fell on his face" (17:3, cf. vs. 17). This indicates reverence and absolute submission.
24. In addition to absolute submission, there was absolute silence on the part of Abraham. Abraham listened quietly and spoke not a word while God did all the talking.
25. Abraham finally speaks in verse 18 -- "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" God heard and answered Abraham's prayer (17:20).

II. A TOKEN OF THE COVENANT

1. God repeatedly assured Abraham, "As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee..." (17:4; cf. 15:18).
2. God repeatedly promised Abraham that his seed would be as the dust of the earth, and as the stars up in heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore.
3. Next the LORD told Abraham, "Thou shalt be a father of many nations" (17:4-7).
4. The land of Canaan was promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (17:8; cf. verse 21). According to the Bible, the land does not belong to the descendents of Ishmael (Arabs), but to the Jews.
5. This is very important in light of current events. Back in 1897, Theodor Herzl declared that the purpose of the Zionist movement was "to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law."
6. Many people look at this as the beginning of the modern state of Israel. However, 4,000 years ago, God promised that land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (the Israelites or Jews).
7. It should be remembered that the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional and eternal (cf. 17:19).
8. Circumcision is "a token of the covenant" betwixt God and Abraham (17:11, 22-27).

9. Circumcision symbolizes death to the flesh, and the reproach of the world. You may recall that before the Israelites conquered Jericho, the LORD told Joshua to circumcise the children of Israel that had been born in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt.
10. After they were circumcised, the LORD said to Joshua, "This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you" (Joshua 5:9).

III. THE PROMISE OF ISAAC

1. It is interesting to note how God's promises became more definite and more detailed as time moved on. Here for the first time, the LORD told Abraham, "And I will bless her (Sarah), and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her" (17:16).
2. In this chapter we see a new view of God's power. He is "the Almighty God" (17:1). This is the first time this name is used.
3. And in this chapter we also see a new view of God's purpose. The LORD revealed to Abraham more details regarding His covenant with Abraham, and with Abraham's seed.
4. There are many applications for the Christian today. May we have a better view of God's power -- His power to save souls; His power to answer prayer; His power to direct our steps as we seek His will, etc.
5. And may we have a better view of God's purpose. Let us not miss out on the blessings of God by neglecting Bible study, or by prayerlessness; or by being insensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. May we have a better view of God's purpose!
6. Abraham laughed (17:17). This was not the laugh of unbelief, but the laughter of joy. It was the joyful laugh of a faithful man who considers the news almost too good to be true. *Isaac* means "laughter."
7. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, "God's revelations to His people often seem to be too good to be true, and yet they are true!" (*Genesis*).
8. I had a very interesting Bible study yesterday with two Jewish neighbors in the middle of the snow storm. After my neighbors left, I couldn't help but laugh. I was laughing at the goodness of God!
9. "And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him..." (17:19). Not with Ishmael, but with Isaac.
10. "His seed after him" (17:19b) refers to Jacob and his twelve sons -- the twelve tribes of Israel.
11. Though Ishmael had many advantages, he never knew the LORD. He was a "wild man" (literally "a wild ass of a man" -- 16:12), and a mocker (21:9).

12. Nevertheless, he was Abraham's son, and Abraham loved him, and so Abraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" (17:18).
13. The Lord told Abraham that Sarah his wife (17:19) would bear him a son, and Abraham was to call his name Isaac (17:19).
14. The Lord would establish His covenant with Isaac for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him (17:19b, 21; cf. 26:1-5; 28:12-14).
15. Though the Abrahamic covenant would be realized in Isaac, and not Ishmael, God did not forget Ishmael (17:20). He was Abraham's seed. Ishmael was not responsible for the sin of his father Abraham.
16. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, "God overrules His children's mistakes, and in loving condescension and tender mercy brings blessing out of trouble" (*Genesis*).

CONCLUSION:

1. The LORD appeared to Abraham, and said to him, "I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect" (17:1).
2. I read about a yardstick that was made in London out of platinum. It was designed to be used as the standard for the British government. It took them ten years to make this yardstick, and they said they will be examining it every ten years to make sure it's still perfect.
3. They say that if this yardstick ever varies by even one millionth of an inch, they will reject it and make a brand new one.
4. God has a perfect yardstick, and He will never need to make a new one. God's yardstick never varies or changes.
5. God has a perfect yardstick, and it is not off even by a millionth of an inch or a billionth of an inch.
6. The Bible is the Word of God, and it is perfect.
7. Second Corinthians 13:11 says, "Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect..."
8. If you and I want to be perfect before God then we must study the perfect Word of God. Second Timothy 3:16 and 17 says, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."