

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

Living in the Presence of El Shaddai (Genesis 17:1-22)

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This morning we come to one of the most important chapters in the Bible. What makes it so important? For one thing, it sets the stage for the rest of biblical history. In this chapter, God gives to Abram and his descendants the rite of circumcision. This rite is called "the covenant of circumcision," in Acts 7:8, and that's because the Jews from this point forward were bound as a matter of covenantal duty to practice this particular rite because of the promise that God had made to them to be their God. The introduction of the rite of circumcision marked a turning point in biblical history, since from this moment on, the children of Abraham would be distinguished from all the families of the earth by a visible sign in their flesh. That sign would be like a cattle brand, marking out the Jews as a people chosen by God to inherit distinctive blessings that they would receive in distinction from all the other families of the earth.

A second reason why this chapter is so important is because of what it teaches us about the character of God. God reveals Himself in this chapter by a new name, the name El Shaddai; and it was by this name that God would be known by all the patriarchs leading up to the time of Moses. To Moses, God would reveal Himself by another name, the name, "Yahweh," which means "I am." Yahweh is the name of God that emphasizes His eternal nature as the everlasting, unchanging God. But to the patriarchs of Israel-- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob-- God revealed Himself by the name El Shaddai, which is best translated "God Almighty." El Shaddai emphasizes God's almighty power. So this seventeenth chapter of Genesis is a chapter full of revelation about the character of God.

The chapter opens thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, whom Abram fathered by the handmaid of his wife Sarai. Abraham was now ninety-nine years old. We know very little about what happened in the years following Ishmael's birth. They were apparently tranquil years in which Abram had the joy of watching his only son grow from infancy all the way to early adolescence. During these years, Abram developed an intense love for Ishmael and cherished the hope that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled through him. But in cherishing this hope, Abram lost sight of the fact that God does things according to His own plan, not ours. He fulfills His promises in His own time and manner-- not on our own time schedule, and certainly not according to all of our well laid schemes. When Ishmael became a teenager, God

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saw that the time had come to impress on Abram in a powerful way the truth of His sovereign freedom.

The fact that God appeared to Abram only now, when he was ninety-nine years old, in order to overrule all of his hopes and dreams concerning Ishmael, may strike us as odd-- perhaps even a little cruel. Why did God wait until now in order to make known His divine plan and Sarai's role in that plan? Couldn't He have revealed all this to Abraham at an earlier date?

The answer is, though God could have revealed all of this to Abraham from the very beginning, it is not God's way, as a general rule, to reveal to His servants ahead of time the whole future course of their lives. Rather, He makes His plan for our lives known to us little by little, so that we will walk in dependence on Him, prayerfully seeking His guidance throughout the whole of our lives with a humble, receptive attitude. God had already revealed to Abraham a number of things about the future before this moment, but there were still a number of things that He had not revealed, and that left Abraham with unanswered questions. Why did God leave Abraham partially in the dark? He wanted him to learn an important truth-- namely, that God can be trusted even when the future is unclear and our questions go unanswered. Even then, God is totally reliable, and our duty is to go on trusting Him and obeying His know will and waiting on Him for further guidance, without rushing ahead of Him and acting impulsively on our own.

Unfortunately, that is just what Abraham and Sarah had done with respect to the birth of Ishmael. They knew that the Lord was planning to bless Abraham with a son; He had revealed that clearly. But since the two of them were getting older, and Sarah was past childbearing years, there seemed to be only one way for the two of them to have a child together, and that was for Abraham to father a child by a surrogate mother-- Sarah's maidservant Hagar. So Sarah and Abram acted impulsively. They did not seek God's guidance in this matter; they did not wait on His timing. They did what seemed right in their own eyes in order to obtain a goal they desired. They came up with a plan based on their own human wisdom in order to achieve a good goal, then they expected God to bless their plan. In essence, they tried to force God's hand by presenting God with a child born of their own human scheming, then saying to God, "Lord, here is the child you promised us. Now bless him according to your word!"

There is only one thing they didn't count on. God had his own plans and His own timetable, and He was not about to fit in with man's schemes born out of limited human wisdom. It was Abraham and Sarah who had to fit in with God's plans-- not the reverse.

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So God appeared to Abram when he was nearly a hundred years old to make His plan clear to Abram at last. He let Abraham know that the child of the promise would be a miracle child who could only come into this world by the grace and power and wisdom of God. Abraham needed to learn that. He needed to be cured of his sinful self-reliance and the crazy idea that somehow God needed man's help for the promise to be fulfilled. He needed to rely on God's work rather than working to obtain by fleshly means such an extraordinary gift of grace.

In the time remaining, I want to consider three aspects of this encounter between God and Abram: first, God's appearance to Abraham; then, God's command to Abraham; and third, God's promises to Abraham.

I. God's Appearance to Abraham-- We read in verse 1, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless." There are several features about this appearance I would like to point out.

a. It was perfectly timed-- The first is that it was a perfectly timed appearance. God had deliberately waited until this moment in the life of Abram and Sarai, when every hope of their conceiving a child by natural means had been utterly swept away, before making this appearance and announcing the fact that Sarai would conceive a child. Why did He wait? So that Abram and Sarai would never be able to take an ounce of credit for the birth of this child whom God was giving them. All the glory for birth would go to God alone, and they themselves would have to depend completely on God in order to conceive this child. This is the way God performs every great work of grace in our lives; He brings people to the end of themselves, so that their faith and hope are made to rest in God alone. Martin Luther said, "It is God's way to empty a man first before filling him with blessing." That is why God waited so long before revealing His plan concerning Isaac. He was stripping Abram and Sarai of all confidence in the flesh, so that they would look to God alone to do for them what they could not do for themselves. Thus, they would give God all glory for the birth of this child, and would never boast of any achievement on their part in conceiving Isaac.

b. It was a visible appearance-- The second thing we can say about this appearance is that it was a visible appearance. This is inferred from the statement in verse 22 that when He finished talking with Abraham, "God went up from Abraham." The fact that God went up suggests that He appeared to Abraham in visible form, just as He had appeared earlier to Hagar in the wilderness. Throughout the Old Testament, God appeared on various occasions to His servants in visible form as "the Angel of the Lord."

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c. It was an audible appearance-- Then, thirdly, this appearance of the Lord was not only visible, but audible, as well. The Lord spoke words to Abraham-- clear, precise, detailed words which foretold the future and gave very specific instructions to Abram as to what he was to do.

Let me point out something very important here about divine revelation. The fact that God appeared to Abraham visibly and spoke to Abram directly in words backed up with infallible divine authority show that God's self-revelation to Abram was totally supernatural in character. God revealed Himself to Abraham by speaking to Him very specific words of prophecy and instruction. God's words here are clear, unambiguous in their meaning, and absolutely authoritative. And they are God's words, not man's words. Brethren, let us never be deceived by those who say that God cannot reveal Himself by words or speech that expresses infallibly His truth and will. The fact is, The Bible is just that-- an infallible record of God's words by which He has expressed infallibly His truth and will. It is not a record of man's thoughts about God, but a revelation of God's thoughts to man.

d. It was awe-inspiring-- One other thing we can say about God's appearance to Abraham is that it was awe-inspiring. We know that, because as soon as God appeared to Abram and spoke to Him, we read that Abram fell on his face. This is how human beings often respond when they find themselves in the presence of deity; they feel so overwhelmed, they spontaneously bow down or fall to their faces as an expression of reverence. What overwhelmed Abram especially were the words God spoke to him, for those words reminded Abraham of who God is-- the Almighty God. He is the God of infinite power, who depends on no one and nothing outside Himself for His continued existence. Because His power is unlimited, He needs no help from men to carry through or accomplish His own divine purposes. All by Himself, He is able to transform seemingly hopeless situations. To those who are needy, helpless, and without strength, God is able to strengthen them and to raise them up to accomplish great deeds that bring Him glory.

II. God's Command to Abraham-- Immediately after revealing His name to Abram, God lets Abram know that this revelation imposes on him a solemn responsibility, and that is to walk in a manner worthy of the name of God. If God truly is the Almighty God; if all power belongs to Him and flows from Him to His creatures; if He is all-sufficient and all-powerful, and able to do all His holy will in heaven and on earth -- then how ought this to affect our own walk here on earth? God tells us at the end of verse 1: "Walk before me and be blameless" He says to Abram. Earlier in Genesis, we read of Enoch and Noah walking with God; but this is the first time we read of someone being commanded to walk before God, What does it mean to walk before God?

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There is a Latin phrase that sheds light on this expression-- the phrase "coram deo." *Coram deo* means literally "before the face of God." A person who walks "coram deo" lives his whole life in the conscious awareness that he is always, always in the presence of God, always under His watchful eye, always under His authority, and therefore, in all things, he makes it his aim to glorify God.

We have all had the experience, no doubt, of driving down the road, then looking in the rear view mirror and being startled to see a police car driving immediately behind us. Its lights are not flashing, so it is not attempting to pull us over; nevertheless, the fact that it is directly behind us makes us keenly aware of the need to be very careful in our driving-- not to break the speed limit, not to switch lanes suddenly without using the indicator light, etc. We are keenly aware of the fact that the policeman behind us sees everything that we are doing, and that makes us very careful and very deliberate in all our actions.

Now, the man who walks "coram deo," before the face of God, walks with that same keen awareness of being always in God's view. But here is the difference; the believer does not see God as some celestial traffic cop who is eagerly looking to give him a ticket at the slightest infraction he may commit. No, the believer views God as a loving Father whose desire is to bless His children to pour out on them the riches of His grace. Consequently, the believer realizes that the eye of God that is upon Him is not the eye of a cold, unfeeling tyrant, but the eye of a loving Father whom he loves and desires to please. That awareness makes him eager and willing to walk in a manner that bring honor to God.

If we walk before God in this manner, then our lives will be "blameless"-- which the second word God uses to describe how Abram should walk. "Walk before me and be blameless" God says to him. The Hebrew word for "blameless" literally means complete or whole. The idea of wholeness is emphasizing is the concept of integrity. A whole life is an integrated life in which all of our powers are serving the same end. God is not suggesting that we can be sinlessly perfect in this world, although we should strive to avoid sin as much as possible. But the basic idea here is that in serving God, our whole being-- body, mind, and soul-- must be surrendered to Him. Our lives must exhibit integrity.

Why is the society in which are living marked by increasing fragmentation and cultural disintegration? Why are so many people living confused lives, not knowing who they are, why they are here, or where they are going? Why are so many families in our society torn apart by disharmony and conflict? Why do so many professing Christians live self-contradictory lives-- confessing one thing on Sunday, but then living

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as if those things were not true Monday through Saturday? The answer to all these question is the same-- and that is, because so few people in our society at the present time truly know what it means to live *coram deo*. Many who claim to believe in God treat Him as if he were an absentee landlord-- the Great Architect of the universe who built this world in which we are living, then went away and left it to run on their own. Even many professing Christians have a view of God that is more Deistic than biblical. They believe that God made the world, but they see Him as distant and far removed from the world in its daily operations. They forget the fact that He is El Shaddai-- the Almighty God-- who upholds the world moment by moment by His infinite power. His sovereign hand directs all the actions of all His creatures and guides the course of history to its appointed end. It is in the presence of this all-powerful God that we live and move and have our being. It is under His watchful eye that we walk, so our walk must be characterized by integrity and uprightness at all time, in every circumstance, until that day when we stand before Him to be judged according to our works.

How different our nation would be if multitudes of people all at the same time began to walk *coram deo*, mindful of God's watchful eye upon them. How different our own lives would be if we were more consistent in our walk before God, never saying or doing anything but that which sprang from a profound sense of being in the presence of God.

III. God's Promises to Abraham-- So God gave to Abraham this command; then, in addition, He also gave him a sweeping panoramic vision of the future. He thrilled his heart by reminding him of all the promises He had made, at the same time, adding a few new promises to the mix,

First, God reiterated His promise to multiply Abram's seed and to give to Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. But then, God added new promises that were not revealed before. These included the promise that Sarai would bear a child, that the son she bore would be the heir of the covenant. Also, God told Abram that he would be so fruitful, various nations and various kings would come forth from him. This was new information not given earlier to Abram.

Next week, we will look in detail at these promises; then we will consider the tokens God gave to Abraham as visible seals of His promises, to assure him and his descendants of their validity.

CONCLUSION

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In closing, however, I want to draw your attention to how completely God's words to Abram must have changed his vision of the future. Abram had built up in his own mind over many years a vision of how the future would turn out. He fully expected his beloved son Ishmael to be the heir of God's promise. Through Ishmael God would fulfill all the promises He had made. Now, however, Abram learned that his vision of the future was mistaken. God would bless Ishmael, to be sure, but Ishmael would not be his heir. He would not be the one through whom God's promises would be fulfilled. His descendants would not inherit Canaan, nor become a blessing to all the families of the earth. Those honors would fall on the line of Abram's second son, Isaac, who would be born to Abram through Sarai his own wife, not through Hagar. . Such an announcement must have stirred up mixed feelings in Abram's heart. On the one hand, he was thrilled to learn that Sarai would finally conceive a child. She had always wanted to be a mother, and now she would be. He was also thrilled to hear how God would fulfill His promise in a miraculous manner far beyond anything he could have imagined. At the same time, however, Abram must have felt a measure of sorrow and regret with respect to Ishmael. He had to accept the fact that all his hopes and dreams for his firstborn son were ill-founded. I think we can say Abram grieved for Ishmael; you can a poignant tone of grief in verse 18, when Abram realizes that God is going to bypass his firstborn son: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"

That was the heart cry of a loving father who dearly cherished the child he had begotten. He loved his firstborn son with all his heart, and that's why it was heartbreaking for Abram to realize that Ishmael would not be his heir.

But in this Abram learned an important lesson that we must also take to heart-- and that is, that we cannot expect God to prosper plans born out of our own human will and wisdom. This is the mistake we sometimes make when we want something very badly; we act impulsively and make our plans, without waiting on God or seeking His will, then we expect God to bless our plans. Instead of saying to God, "Thy will be done," we say instead, "Lord, won't you please bless my will? Ishmael was the fruit of Abram's and Sarai's fleshly decision to act according to their own wisdom. As a result, Ishmael could never, ever be the child of the promise. He might be blessed by God, but he could never take Isaac's place. Nothing could change that; no amount of tears or sighs on Abram's part could ever alter God's choice. What this means is that in all our planning for the future, we need to learn to subordinate our own will to the will of God. We need to learn the secret of submitting gladly to God's overruling providence, for His plan is always preferable to our own. Instead of impulsively coming up with our own plans and seeking to impose our own will on God, we need to learn the secret of

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waiting on God and trusting Him to work out His plans in His own time, and His own manner.

May God give us all grace to take such an attitude; to respond to God's overruling providence always properly by saying in our hearts, "Whate'er my God ordains is right; his holy will abideth; I will be still whate'er he doth, and follow where he guideth. He is my God; though dark my road, he holds me that shall not fall; wherefore to him I leave it all." Amen.