

God Almighty is Our God: Genesis 17  
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 Sunday morning, September 9, 2007

What you believe about God is the most important thing in your life. Your view of God will shape you and influence you more profoundly than any other belief you hold. On Wednesday we had the opportunity to set up a booth at the Carnegie-Mellon activities fair, and we were able to meet a lot of students. Some of them were looking for a church or a Christian organization on campus. Others were not looking for a church, but were willing to talk about their religious beliefs. I had some really interesting conversations. A couple students were atheists, one was a Hindu. One young lady said she was a pagan and believed in polytheism. A young man expressed complete apathy about religion in general. He said, "There's god, and there's me, and everything's OK." He said he didn't have time in life to think about religion.

As I reflect on those conversations, I think about how much their lives are shaped and will be shaped by their view of God. Just think about how you would view the world and the purpose of life if you believed that God does not exist and we're simply the accidental result of random chance. Or if you believed that there are millions of different deities. Or if you believed that who God is doesn't really matter. How would those different viewpoints affect your response to trials in life? How would that affect your morality? How would that affect your hope and joy in life?

Who is God? What do you believe about God? Do you know the God of the universe, the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture? He is the only true God, and knowing Him is the only way to experience true life and hope and peace and contentment and joy.

### **God Almighty is Our God**

This morning we'll be looking at Genesis 17, and the first point I want to make is: God Almighty is Our God. In the first 8 verses we see something of who God is and what He can do. I want to read these verses and then talk about how our knowledge of this God should encourage us.

Verse 1 begins by updating us on Abram's age. He is now 99, which means 13 years have passed since the end of chapter 16, where it says he was 86. That means that Ishmael, who was born to Hagar, is now 13 years old. Abram and Sarai are both 13 years older. Sarai, who has always been barren, is now even further beyond child-bearing age, and everyone assumes that Ishmael will be the heir.

This is the state of affairs in Abram's household when the Lord appears to Abram. We read in verse 1 that God begins by identifying Himself as God Almighty, *El Shaddai*. Last week, in chapter 16 we saw that Hagar referred to God as *El Roi*, the God of seeing. Well, here's another name of God: *El Shaddai*, God Almighty. God is about to announce an astonishing promise, and He begins by naming Himself as God Almighty, the All-Sufficient One.

What do you believe about God? Do you believe that He is God Almighty? Do you believe that He is sitting on the throne of the universe, controlling all things, able to keep all of His promises? Is He *El-Shaddai* in your understanding of who He is? Or is He a god who does not control all things, a god who does not know all things, a god who cannot accomplish all his will?

In the Bible, God reveals Himself as God Almighty, and I find great comfort in that. If God is not Almighty, if He's not all-powerful, then where could we find hope? We might try to muster some false hope based on our own abilities, but the deep, unshakable hope that we all long for is only possible when we understand that God is Almighty and powerful, the All-Sufficient One, El-Shaddai.

In verse 3 Abram responds by falling on his face before God. Later in the chapter he falls on his face again, but the attitude is very different. Here, though, Abram prostrates himself before the Lord out of reverence and awe. This is an act of worship. Put yourself in Abram's place for a moment. If the Lord appeared to you and announced, "I am God Almighty." That would be enough to make me fall on my face. God has never appeared to me in that way. But He has revealed Himself to me, and to all of us, in His Word. And I think Abram's action here is a good example of true worship. In the presence of God Almighty, he falls on his face. He bows down humbly before God Almighty, in awe of God's majesty and power and presence.

Do you have times like this on a regular basis? Do you commune with the Living God? Let me encourage you, and encourage myself, to read the Bible with a sense of wonder and awe. Don't read to check off a box. Don't read just to learn some historical data. Read the Bible as God's revelation of Himself, and fall on your face in amazement. Bow down before the Lord in worship as you delight in the beauty of who He is.

May that kind of authentic worship characterize our lives, because when that happens we will know true joy. We won't have to wander aimlessly through life trying to figure out who we are or why we're here or how to find pleasure. Once we see God for who He is, and discover the delight of beholding His glory, then everything else in life will begin to make sense in relation to Him.

God speaks again in verses 4-8, and one of the things He does is change Abram's name. The name Abram meant "exalted father." But God now changes his name to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." There are a couple of interesting things to notice here. First of all, God has the right of naming His people. In this chapter He changes Abram's name to Abraham, He changes Sarai's name to Sarah, and He instructs that their son's name will be Isaac. As the Almighty God, the sovereign ruler of the universe, it is His right to do this.

Imagine if you went to work one day, and your boss said, "Your name will no longer be Mike; it will be Steve. Your name will no longer be Julie; it will be Susan." I don't think any of us would agree to that, because a boss doesn't have the right to change someone's name. But God does. And God exercises that right with Abram and Sarai. He changes their names to Abraham and Sarah as a way of indicating the new plans He has for them. Everything is going to change. The promise is finally going to be fulfilled.

The second thing to notice is the meaning of the name Abraham. It means "father of a multitude." So in the Hebrew language, every time someone said Abraham, they were saying "father of a multitude." Every time Sarah spoke his name, every time his friends called him by name, they called him "father of a multitude." Good morning, father of a multitude. How are you feeling, father of a multitude? It's time for dinner, father of a multitude. Dozens of times a day, Abraham and those around him were reminded of God's amazing and unbelievable plan. I say unbelievable, because at this point Abraham still had only one son, Ishmael. He wasn't exactly father of a multitude. He was father of one son, and that son wasn't even born to his wife, but to his wife's

servant, Hagar. By name, he was father of a multitude. But in physical reality he was only father of one.

Look at what God says in verse 5, “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” He’s not only father of a multitude, but the father of a multitude of nations. What a promise! And it is a sure promise. God states it as though it has already been fulfilled, “I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” When God chooses to do something, and promises to do it, it is as good as done. Nothing can thwart God’s plans, because He is God Almighty.

Various nations descended from Abraham, but the real significance of this promise is in the spiritual offspring of Abraham. Abraham’s spiritual offspring will one day include individuals from every tribe and language and people and nation. Because God is redeeming people for Himself from every ethnic group in the world, and the New Testament tells us that everyone who believes in Christ is a true descendant of Abraham.

Do you know what that means? It means that if you’re trusting in Christ, then you are included in this promise to Abraham’s offspring. And it is an awesome promise, indeed! Let these words soak into your mind and your soul. God says to Abraham in verses 7-8, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you [that’s us!] throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” If you’re a Christian, if you’re trusting in Christ and therefore a true descendant of Abraham, then God is speaking to you in this passage and saying, “I will be your God!”

God Almighty has made an eternal covenant to be our God! “to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (v. 7). “I will be their God” (v. 8). The Almighty, All-Sufficient, omnipotent God is pleased to be God to us. That means that He is committed to using His infinite power for our good. The strength and might of El-Shaddai is flowing toward us in order to bless us. Not because we deserve blessing. Rather, in spite of the fact that we deserve wrath, it pleases Him to channel His grace into our lives.

Ponder the fact that God Almighty is our God. He has established a covenant, an eternal covenant, to be our God. He has promised to give us the land as an everlasting possession. This points to our inheritance of eternal life. We will enjoy the new heavens and new earth for unending ages, basking in the glory of our God.

Brothers and sisters, meditate on these things, and fall on your faces in worship. The Almighty of God of the universe is for us, and therefore who can be against us. May we know the power and the love and grace and mercy and justice and righteousness and holiness and goodness and kindness and patience of our God. And our knowledge of God will profoundly shape who we are, and it will give us rock-solid hope and life-giving joy and peace as we face the days ahead. Know the God of this Book, and you will know true joy!

### **God Marks us as His Own**

That was the first point I wanted to make: God Almighty is Our God. Next, I want us to see how God Marks us as His Own. In Genesis 17 God gives Abraham a sign of the covenant, and the sign of this covenant is circumcision. Do you remember God’s covenant with Noah in Genesis 9? He promised that He would never flood the earth

again to destroy it, and do you remember the sign of that covenant? It was the rainbow. And in the covenant that God made with Moses, He also gave a sign. In that case, it was the Sabbath. So there are signs attached to these different covenants. In God's covenant with Abraham, the sign is circumcision, and in Genesis God has already established His covenant with Abraham back in chapter 15. But now in chapter 17 He instructs Abraham concerning this sign of the covenant that will mark him and his descendants as God's people. The sign of circumcision is a way that God marks His people as His own.

In verse 11 God says, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." Then He gives instructions for how this should be carried out among all the males in his household. And later in the chapter we see that Abraham obeyed immediately. "That very day," it says in verse 23. And then it's repeated in verse 26, "That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house . . ." This removal of foreskin was a permanent mark by which God marked His people.

The question that begs to be answered at this point is: Why this sign? What an odd sign! Why didn't God have them tattoo YHWY on their shoulders or something like that? Why circumcision?

In a moment I want to look at a couple other verses in the Old Testament, and then a verse in the New Testament that show the deeper meaning of circumcision, but before we go there I want us to see from Genesis 17 why God would ordain this particular sign as the sign of His covenant with Abraham. God has already changed Abram's name to Abraham, father of a multitude and promised, "I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." And then in verse 16 God promises, "I will give you a son by Sarah." This is the biggest surprise. Abraham was still assuming that the multitude of nations would come from Ishmael. But now God tells him that Sarah will have a son. Abraham is so surprised that he falls on his face and laughs. To him, this promise was literally unbelievable. Abraham is 100. Sarah is 90. It's laughable!

All of this, including the sign of circumcision, is part of God's plan to highlight His own power and greatness, and to demonstrate Abraham's utter dependence on Him. The sign of circumcision, this mark on the male organ of procreation, is another way that Abraham is constantly reminded of God's grace and God's power to keep His promises. It's not because of Abraham's sexual virility or manliness that Isaac is born. It's because of God's promise. In multiple ways, God made His point perfectly clear, that HE fulfills the promise. His plan. His power. Not our initiative or effort. Not the flesh, but God's grace.

In Deuteronomy God's Word gives some further revelation about circumcision and shows that it is not just about the removal of physical foreskin. In Deuteronomy 10:16 Moses instructs the Israelites, "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn." You see, the outward sign of circumcision is a pointer to an inward, spiritual reality. The flesh must be removed. Our hearts must be circumcised. And in Deuteronomy 30:6 we're told that God will perform that heart circumcision. "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

Before this heart circumcision, all of us are in bondage to the flesh. We love the things of the world, and only the things of the world. We lust after power and money and

sex and comfort, and there's no desire for God. But when God cuts away that flesh, when He removes the foreskin of our hearts, then we are new creatures with new hearts and new desires. Then we can see that God is so much more satisfying than power and money and sex and comfort. In order for any person to have spiritual life, this heart operation must take place. The heart must be circumcised. And this is something only God can do. He has to cut away the flesh that enslaves us, and He has to give us new desires for Him.

Has God circumcised your heart? If He has, it is His way of marking you as His own. And if that circumcision has happened, then it will be unmistakable. Because your desires will be different, which means your choices will be different, your actions will be different, the way you spend your time will be different, how you spend your money will be different. Not that the old desires are completely gone. I wish I could say that's the case. The old desires linger on, but now there are new desires that will slowly gain triumph over the old ones. If God has circumcised your heart, then you are marked eternally as one of His children, one of His elect, one of the redeemed.

I want to close with one verse from the New Testament that highlights another aspect of circumcision by showing the connection between circumcision and the death of Christ. Colossians 2:11 says, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands [this is spiritual circumcision, circumcision of the heart], by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ [and that refers to Christ's death on the cross]." His physical body was put to death. Christ was cut off. Back in Genesis 17 there was a severe warning to those who were not circumcised. Verse 14 says, "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." So you were either cut in circumcision, or you were cut off from the covenant.

Here's the significance in the cross of Christ: we are all covenant breakers. We deserve to be cut off, because we don't keep the covenant. We love the things of the world rather than loving God. But what did Christ do? He was cut off, even though He didn't deserve to be. He was cut away, circumcised, killed. He received the curse of the covenant, so that you and I can receive the blessings of the covenant. This is Good News! This is the Gospel.

Remember from Genesis 17: God Almighty is our God. And God Marks us as His own by circumcising our hearts. And that circumcision is only possible because of the circumcision of Christ, His death on the cross.