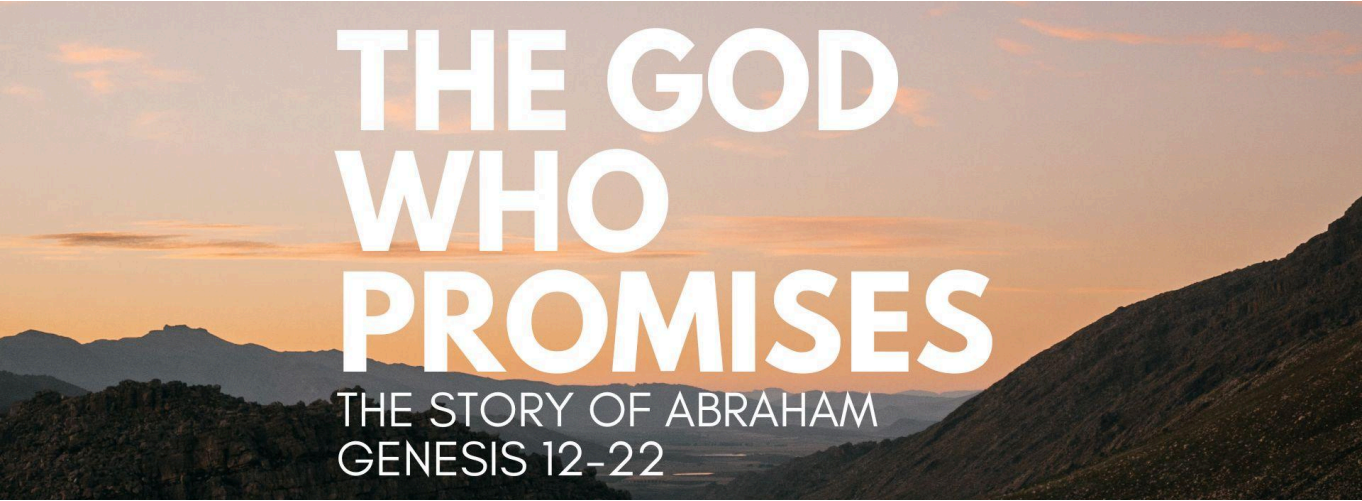




THE GOD WHO PROMISES

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM
GENESIS 12-22

The God who Sees and Hears - Genesis 17

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(Leaders, please use these questions **as a guide for discussion**. Please don't feel like you have to go through every one!)*

Connect: How does knowing that God sees, hears, and cares for you challenge the way you respond to waiting, suffering, disappointment, or uncertainty in your life?

Warm-Up

1. Think about a gift you've received that meant a lot to you. How did you respond to the person who gave it?

Read Genesis 17:1-8

2. What do we learn about God from the title "God Almighty" (El Shaddai) in verse 1?
3. What does God command Abraham to do in verse 1? What do you think it means to "walk before me and be blameless"?
4. How does Abraham respond in verse 3? Why is this an appropriate response?
5. What's the significance of Abraham being given a new name?
6. What promises does God renew and expand in verses 4-8? How do we get caught up in that?
7. What stands out to you about God's repeated use of the phrase "my covenant"?
8. How does remembering who God is and what he has done help us live obediently before him?

Read Genesis 17:9-14

9. What was the purpose of circumcision according to verses 9-14?
10. Why is it important to understand that circumcision was a sign of the covenant rather than the basis of the covenant?
11. Read Deuteronomy 10:16 and Deuteronomy 30:6. What do these verses teach about the kind of obedience God desires?
12. Can you think of examples where someone might display an outward sign of faith without genuine trust in God?
13. Are there any signs or religious activities that you might be tempted to trust in rather than the giver?

Read Genesis 17:15-27

14. Why would God's promise to Abraham and Sarah seem impossible from a human perspective?
15. What does this passage teach us about God's power and faithfulness?
16. How does remembering God's grace in Jesus help us pursue a life of joyful obedience rather than mere religious rule-keeping?
17. What tools or signs or habits can help point us to God's covenant faithfulness to us?

Apply: What's one area in your life that God is calling you to greater obedience right now?

PRAY: *Gracious God, thank you for your faithfulness to Abraham and to us. Thank you that through Jesus we have been welcomed into your family and share in your blessings. Help us to remember your grace and goodness that we may live in greater obedience to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

TITLE: Covenant Obedience

PASSAGE: Genesis 17

LOCATION: St John's Wishart 9AM

BI: Reception of the covenant promises leads to obedience to the call of the covenant

AIM: For people to be reminded of the importance of a changed life having been saved.

STRUCTURE:

- 1-8 Covenant Renewal
 - 9-14 Covenant Sign
 - 15-21 Covenant Family
 - 22-27 Covenant Obedience
-
- It's always nice to receive a gift isn't it?
 - Be it for a birthday or Christmas or anniversary, or "just because" - it's nice to receive a gift.
 - But imagine a Christmas morning in a typical household with young kids...and the parents have got little Max a present that's all nice and wrapped up.
 - They offer it to the kid...but Max doesn't make any moves - he just sits there.
 - Maybe he even says - "that looks really nice!"
 - Maybe they offer it again thinking there's been a misunderstanding - but Max just sits with his hands in his lap.
 - The gift is a free gift, it's on offer! But Max actually has to **make a move** to receive it! He actually has to trust the parents and reach out and grab it!
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- And as we've seen in Genesis so far - God has offered Abraham a free gift of his promises to him.
 - These promises are called a covenant - and he has been promised, many descendants, a land for them to live in, and that through him, the whole world will be blessed.
 - And a couple of weeks ago - we saw that Abraham believed God! And he was considered right with God.
 - But now this week - we see that truly believing in God and his promises will always lead to obedience to God.
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- So to get us back into the story.
 - Last week we saw Sarai wanting to take matters into her own hands by getting Abram to take her slave girl as his other wife and then sleep with her to get the promised son thing happening!
 - Now as we saw, it got messy. Very messy.
 - Now in chapter 17 - we fast forward 13 years.
 - So by now, Ishmael (Hagar and Abraham's Son) is quickly approaching manhood.
 - Abraham is 99 years old; Sarai is now 90 years old
 - The promises of a son for Sarai and Abram made some 23 years ago seemed far fetched back then - but by now, it seems impossible.
 - So you'd be tempted to think that at this point, maybe God's going to do his covenant thing through Ishmael.
 - OR maybe - God's just left this diabolical disobedient doubting debaucherous family behind.
 - Maybe he's just done with them! They are a bit of a mess to be honest!
 - However - no. Not just yet.
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- **Covenant Renewal**
 - Here in chapter 17, God doesn't just renew the covenant but he expands it even further.
 - 17:1-2 "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."
 - God speaks once again into the silence and uncertainty...saying that he is not just God, but God almighty.
 - The Hebrew is El-Shaddai - the best definition is that he is the God of mountains. He is the God of strength...of power.
 - And he calls Abram to obedience.
 - He calls on Abram to walk before him and be blameless.
 - Now - obviously, this can't refer to a sinless perfectionist life. That's impossible this side of the fall. That's impossible for us!

- But it's describing a life that is lived in transparency to God. A life that is lived in openness to God. A life that is lived as if it was lived in God's presence!
 - *A school classroom can be an unruly place depending on the teacher and students.*
 - *You know, the students might act up a bit, do whatever they want.*
 - *But when the Headmaster or Headmistress walks into the room - the attitude changes. The Big-Dog is here!*
 - *Suddenly the students are quiet, obedient! Because they are studying and working before the principal!*
 - *But that's probably more out of fear for the Principal and the punishment that they could inflict!*
- But with Abram - he's been called to live as if in front of God in his presence. And not out of being scared of God, but out of a reverence and awe of who God is - the Lord Almighty!
 - You don't want to sin in front of God!
- This is simply a call to obedience!
- The logic of V2 seems to indicate that in some way, the fulfilment of the covenant depends on Abram's obedience to it!
- Just like in order to receive a gift - you have to actually reach out and receive it...or if you receive a parcel in the mail, you have to open the door and reach down and grab it...
- In order for the promises to come to full fruition - Abram has to live with God as God and Abram as not!
- And Abram's response is totally correct.
- V3 - Then Abram fell on his face. Worshipping him and recognising that God is God and he is not. This is the proper fear of God
- And so God renews and expands his promises:
- V4 "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 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. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you."
- Previously in chapter 12, God promised Abram that he would father a great nation - now that gets expanded to the father of a Multitude of nations! Many nations!
- And his new name is going to reflect that.
 - Abram means exulted father
 - Abraham means father of a multitude!
- And notice the repetition V4 - multitude of nations, V5 multitude of nations, V6, nations - plural.
- He's going to be the father of many - his descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky.
- And then Kings will come from him
- These nations are going to have Kings and royalty.
- V7 - these covenant promises are also for Abraham's descendants - his children, his children's children, his children's children's children! It's an everlasting covenant!
- And Abraham's family are going to have the land and God will be their God.
- And this is all - as long as Abraham lives with God as God.
- As the God who promises to and covenants with him.
- Note that 8 times in this chapter - God repeatedly refers to the covenant as owned by him? He says "My covenant"
- Not 'Our covenant' but 'My covenant'
- Remember, the covenant wasn't something agreed upon between two parties, this was God promising to Abraham!
 - This wasn't a contract up for negotiation!
 - This was God promising to Abraham.
- All Abraham and his descendants needed to do was to opt-in to these promises was by living with God as God. Trusting God. And obeying God.
- Keeping the covenant. Living in obedience to the covenant maker!
- **Covenant Sign**
- And a marker or sign of this dedication to God - was circumcision.
- V9 And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your

offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”

- The practice of circumcision wasn't new or foreign at that time in the ancient near-east.
 - It was sometimes used as a rite of passage for boys coming into manhood.
 - Sometimes used for men about to become husbands.
- But here - it's a blanket sign for every male in Abraham's house, including sons and also foreigners bought with money - and his descendants after him.
- V12 says that every male at eight days old must be circumcised. They get immediately included in this sign!
- And the sign is to represent the people's dedication to God.
- It's a symbol of their inclusion in the covenant promises! And the inclusion of the whole family unit in it as well.
- The significance of this symbol is that just as the foreskin is cut off and discarded (it's not like they keep it and frame it) - if a person cuts themselves off from the covenant and the covenant maker and rejects God - they too will be discarded and cut off!
 - But remember - this is just the symbol...and a sign.
- Circumcision wasn't the way to receive the covenant promises, it's the symbol of being a recipient of the promises. It's the marker!
- What's required is covenant obedience - walking with God.
 - As was told to Abraham at the beginning of this chapter - living a life that's lived in transparency to God, and living before him.
- This is even laid in Deuteronomy in Moses' parting words to the Israelites, right before they were going to enter into the promised land!
- He tells them to Deut 10:14-16
 - “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”
- And then he promises them, that if they turn to the Lord and chose life:
 - Deut 30:6 “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.”
- Because it's no good having a circumcised piece of skin, if your heart still runs after things not of God and you're disobedient
 - *It's like wearing a Maroons jersey in order to fit in in QLD but you're really from New South Wales and really support the blues.*
 - *You're a fraud! The sign of the jersey means nothing! Zip. It's redundant!*
- So in order to be a part of the covenant and the promises, one has to believe in the promises and then obey them.
- And Circumcision was a sign of obedience.

- **Covenant Family**

- But who are these promises going to come through?
- The 99 year old Abraham and the 90 year old Sarai
- V15 “And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”
- Sarai gets a name change to Sarah - meaning ‘princess’ but what's even more amazing than the name change - are the promises.
- The 90 year old Sarah is going to have a baby.
- Just think about this in purely medical terms:
- At 90 years of age for a woman, not only are the child-bearing days ancient history, but menopause is also ancient history, the monthly cycle is long gone!
- There's probably a serious risk of breaking a hip at conception!
 - The osteoporosis of a 90 year old must be out of this world!
- And what would giving birth do to a 90 year-old body?!

- Can you imagine? It's no wonder we're laughing - it's completely ridiculous! It's impossible! But not with God.
- Abraham laughs too not because he doesn't believe that God can do it, but because he believes he can - and the thought of it seems hilarious!
- And so his son through Sarah is going to be called Isaac which means 'he laughs'
- God's covenant, his everlasting covenant is going to go not through Ishmael but through Isaac.
- **Covenant Obedience**
- And Abraham believes God and obeys him.
- V22-27 outlines in some detail the circumcision of all the males of Abraham's household. We won't go into that right now thankfully!
- But the main point is that Abraham was obedient to God and kept his covenant.
- And thankfully he did - because we get to be a part of these eternal promises too right here today. The promises of blessing...of life...of forgiveness...of relationship with God.
- And we can do this through the one who is the great descendant of Abraham and Isaac.
- 2000 years later, Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem. He was in the line of David, born as a descendant of Abraham.
- And at 8 days old, he was circumcised. He was dedicated to the Lord. He was a Jew!
- And he was dedicated to serving God. It wasn't just his skin that was circumcised, but his heart was as well!
- He served God truly and perfectly. He was from the tribe of Judah - the royal tribe, where kings came from!
- He is the King of the Jews - the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!
- And it's through his obedience to God in going to the cross - that you and I can receive the promises of God!
- It's through Jesus, and turning to him and believing in him, that we get to be part of Abraham's family. We get to be part of the nations of Abraham!
- And by God's grace - we too get given signs to help us remember who we are in Him!
 - It's not through circumcision anymore as Paul writes in Galatians that circumcision means nothing now!
- But the sign for Christians is Baptism!
- Our Baptism reminds us that we have died to our old ways, we have cast it off - and we now have new life in Jesus! We are now a new creation!
- And it's by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that our hearts can be sealed and circumcised and dedicated to God.
- Because being a recipient of grace **always** leads to a changed life.
- Just as God commanded Abraham to keep the covenant, we too need to keep the covenant by constantly turning to God!
- If we are baptised and we've even attended church for a while, but turn away from God and reject God - then the sign is useless!
 - *If you've been on a roadtrip - I'm sure you've come across signs which say "This sign is not in use"*
 - Well that's what it's like when someone is baptised and even takes the Lord's Supper weekly but goes home to an unchanged life!
 - The sign isn't in use! And in fact, the promises aren't in use, but are being rejected.
 - That person who cuts themselves off from God's promises, who rejects the gift and rejects the giver - they will be cast off...don't let it be you! Don't reject God's gift of salvation and eternal life and love, but accept it. Believe it! And keep it.
- The way to an obedient life isn't through gritting our teeth and just trying harder...
- But it's through remembering the promises and the promise maker.
- Remember that we have been saved and loved by the same God who made these promises to Abraham and who kept his promises!
- Remember the lengths that God went to to bring us into Abraham's family, through the death of his one and only son...
- Remember the grace of God...Remember your baptism!
- And live and walk before God almighty - as an undeserving recipient of the covenant of God....As a sinner who has been deeply loved and saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus.