

Genesis Ch17v1-27

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 17 Last week we were looking at the previous chapter and that messy story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar.

And in the midst of all of that mess, God was revealed as the God who sees. The God who sees everything. Nothing escapes his notice.

And not in some distant and detached kind of way, but in a very near and intimate sense. He sees our suffering. He sees our hearts.

And he sees our fears. And today we're going to hear God reveal himself as God Almighty. In Hebrew it's pronounced El Shaddai. You might have heard that name before.

And not surprisingly, God reveals himself by this name to those people who seem to be doubting God's power to do what he had promised.

[1 : 26] So let's read that story together in Genesis chapter 17. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty.

Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. Abram fell face down and God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you.

You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham. For I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful.

I will make nations of you and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

The whole land of Canaan where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you and I will be their God.

[2 : 44] Then God said to Abram, As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep.

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come, every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner, those who are not your offspring.

Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. God also said to Abram, As for Sarah, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarah. Her name will be Sarah.

I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her. Abram fell face down.

[4 : 02] He laughed and said to himself, Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90? And Abram said to God, If only Ishmael might live under your blessing.

Then God said, Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. I will surely bless him. I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers and I will make him into a great nation.

But my covenant I will establish with Isaac whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.

When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

On that very day, Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household are bought with his money, every male in his household and circumcised them.

[5 : 16] As God told him, Abram was 99 years old when he was circumcised and his son Ishmael was 13. Abram and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day and every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

So Father, we pray now as we think on your word that you would grant us that spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we might know you better.

And we ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. There's something irresistible, isn't there, about laughing at someone else's expense.

I'm sure you've all seen those videos on television of somebody falling off something or walking into something and not being able to stop yourself from laughing at them. Or if you're a little bit younger, maybe you've watched endless YouTube videos of people attempting to do something only for it to go disastrously wrong.

Well, these chapters of Genesis read like a compilation of Abram's dumb ideas. It's like some version of a Dumb and Dumber movie tracking Abram and Sarah's travels throughout the ancient Middle East.

[6 : 45] Or some black and white Laurel and Hardy movie where Sarah turns to Abram only to scratch her head and say, well, that's another fine mess you've gotten me into.

These stories would be laughable if they weren't so serious. God has promised Abram that he would make him into a great nation and that through Abraham blessing would come to all the nations of the earth.

But with every one of Abram's dumb ideas, he seems to put God's promise in danger. You might remember there was that Sarah is my sister fiasco back in chapter 12.

Abram and Sarah travel to Egypt because there's a famine in the land. But as they join the queue at the Egyptian passport patrol, Abram suddenly gets into a panic.

He knows that Sarah is a beautiful woman. He knows that she's going to be noticed by all of the men that they meet. And he has a pretty low view of Egyptians. He thinks that they're going to kill him to take Sarah as their wife.

[7 : 58] So he comes up with a great idea, doesn't he? Let's pretend we're not married. Let's just say that you're my sister. Well, things may not work very well for Sarah, but at least Abram's life will be spared.

Well, she's most certainly noticed by the Egyptians. In fact, the Pharaoh himself hears about this beautiful foreigner. He starts to treat Abraham well for Sarah's sake. And Abram suddenly begins to accumulate wealth, all under the pretense that Sarah is his sister.

Until God intervenes. The Lord sends serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household, and Pharaoh seems to know that this is something to do with Abram and Sarah.

The Sarah is my sister story was a dumb idea from the beginning. As time goes on, Abram seems to be giving up on God's promise.

He assumes in chapter 15 that it's his servant Eliezer who's going to be his heir. Maybe up until now, Abram had relied on the fact that there was always his nephew Lot.

[9 : 09] Maybe it was through him that this blessing would come. After all, they have no children themselves, and well, Lot is family. But at this stage, Abram and Lot have parted ways.

Abram looks around him. He has no children. His nephew has left. It's looking as though his servant Eliezer is all that remains. In chapter 15, Abram speaks to God as the sovereign Lord.

Yet he doesn't live as though this is the sovereign Lord. Like many of us, there's a big gap between what Abram knows and how Abram lives.

We can address God, can't we, as our loving, heavenly Father. And yet doubt that God's actions are for our good.

We can address God as the all-wise God, and yet ignore the teaching of his words. Addressing God as sovereign Lord doesn't mean that Abram lives as though God is the sovereign Lord.

[10 : 22] But the sovereign Lord gently assures Abram, this man will not be your heir, but a son who is of your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

In spite of Abram's doubts, God points him back to his promise. Then last week, we heard the story about their servant's son, Ishmael.

Time has gone on and God appears to be doing nothing, so Sarai takes things into her own hands and arranges Hagar to be her surrogate. Well, it's at this point that the story goes from dumb to dumber.

Abram and Sarai have done all that they can do to see God's promise fulfilled. They've sought to protect Abram's life in Egypt. They've assumed that the promise would come through someone else like Lot or Eliezer.

They've tried to produce a child of their own making. They have done everything that they could but rest in God's promise.

[11 : 36] You see, Abram's dumb ideas are all rooted in his view of God. Not so much what he sees of God but what he fails to see of God.

And there is nothing as important in life as having a right view of God. In his book *Knowing God*, Jim Packer opens with these words, disregard the study of God and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold as it were with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.

This way you can waste your life and lose your soul. Well, Abram certainly looks like someone stumbling and blundering through life blindfolds.

And if Jim Packer is correct, when God appears to Abram here in Genesis 17, Abram's greatest need is to know God better.

It's not family counselling though I think we can all agree that that wouldn't have done them any harm. It's not advice on how to conceive. Like any desperate couple, I'm sure they would have tried anything that anyone suggested to them.

[13 : 09] Abram's greatest need is to know God better. So when God appears to Abram, he begins by revealing something about himself.

Abram's greatest need is to know the God who has made the promise. The first words God speaks to Abram are these, I am God almighty.

I am God almighty. Thirteen years have passed since Ishmael was born. Abram is now ninety-nine years old.

And here's what the New Testament has to say about Abram and Sarah in Hebrews eleven. By faith even Sarah who was past childbearing age was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.

And so from this one man and he as good as dead came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. Now it seems to me that the writer is far kinder to Sarah than he is to Abraham.

[14 : 31] Maybe he's just being polite. Sarah is past childbearing age. She is past grandparenting age.

She is an old woman. The thought of her conceiving was well inconceivable. And Abram were told that he was as good as dead.

No fertility clinic in the world would even look at them. There was absolutely nothing to work with. But isn't that the very point?

This was never something that Abram and Sarah would do. It was always something that God was going to do. for them.

It was something that God Almighty would do for them. This is what Abram and Sarah needed to know. That the God who made the promise is God Almighty.

[15 : 39] In actual fact all through the book of Genesis this name El Shaddai is tied up with this promise to make the descendants of Abram into a great nation.

God Almighty would do this. You see God Almighty is self sufficient.

And not just in the sense that we might use that term today. Self sufficiency has become a very popular lifestyle, hasn't it? Growing your own food, generating your own energy, making your own clothes.

But the truth is that none of those things are actually self sufficient. They're all dependent upon other things. You still can't cut your hair without scissors.

You can't grow food without seeds. You can't make clothes without needles and threads. You can't generate energy without wind and sun. Not even to mention that we wouldn't exist without mothers and fathers.

[16:38] Our best attempts at self-sufficiency are only a pale reflection of God's. In fact, there's no real comparison at all. Because God needs no thing and no one.

He is the only one who is truly self sufficient. Now, such a God stands in complete contrast to the pagan gods of the ancient world.

They were needy. They were high maintenance gods. They were dependent upon humans to give them all they needed. And they could get pretty angry if their worshippers didn't give them what they wanted.

You might remember in Acts 17, the apostle Paul confronts the people of Athens with a God who is altogether different from these high maintenance gods.

here's what he says, the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands as if he needed anything.

[17:53] Rather, he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. God is the God of the Bible is God almighty.

He needs nothing. He needs no one. Rather, he is the giver of everything.

That's what Abram needs to know. This God is El Shaddai, God almighty, the self sufficient one. He doesn't need Abram to do anything.

He doesn't need a servant. He doesn't need a nephew. He doesn't need an illegitimate child. He is God almighty, self sufficient, needing nothing and needing no one.

self sufficient. But he's not only self sufficient, he is all sufficient. Maybe you've worked with someone who is self reliant.

[19:00] They don't need anyone or anything. They're at their happiest when they're working away on their own. They don't need anyone else to contribute. They don't welcome advice.

They don't need help. But their self reliance isn't a good thing at all because they would do so much better with the input of others.

Well God is not like that self reliant co-worker who achieves substandard results because he resents the help of others. Because God almighty is not only self sufficient, he is all sufficient. He has everything he needs within himself to do whatever he pleases. You see even Abram's dumb ideas have not derailed God's promise.

Sarai's scheming is not going to frustrate his purpose. The king of Sodom nor the pharaoh of Egypt will be allowed to hinder his plans.

[20:14] Because the God who has made these promises is none other than God almighty. You and I sometimes make promises that we fully intend to fulfil but something gets in our way.

We make plans but at the last minute through circumstances we can't control will our plans fail to materialise. it wasn't that we didn't want to do it it wasn't that we lacked the ability to do it but something prevented us from doing it.

Well no thing and no one gets in the way of God almighty doing all that he promises.

is this is what Abram needs. He doesn't need to understand how God is going to do what he promised. He only needs to know that the one who has made the promise is El Shaddai the self sufficient one the all sufficient one God almighty.

but knowing more about God caused Abram to a deeper commitment to God.

[21:39] Look at the rest of verse one. I am God almighty walk before me and be blameless.

You see knowing more about God caused Abram to a deeper commitment to God. God almighty will fulfill all of his promises to Abram.

Abram doesn't need to concern himself with that at all. Rather Abram needs to concern himself with walking faithfully with God almighty.

Abram's knowledge about God must change how he lives before God. We could say that it's an if-then kind of thing.

We see those kind of statements in the New Testament. Jesus says, if you love me, keep my commandments. He isn't making his love for his disciples conditional upon their obedience.

[22:50] Instead, he's saying that if they love him, then they will do what he commands. If-then. The way that they live flows from their relationship to Jesus.

The Apostle Paul will use the same kinds of arguments. Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above if-then.

Our relationship with Jesus changes our lives and our affections. Now that's what's happening in the second part of verse 1.

I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Abram's knowledge of God must change how he lives before God.

And the same is true of each one of us. Now a strange thing happens in these chapters doesn't it? God changes the names of Abram and Sarai.

[23 : 54] In verse 5 Abram will be Abraham father of many. And verse 15 Sarai will be Sarah princess because from her will come kings.

It all sounds wonderful doesn't it? But tell me this who has the right to change anyone's name. Who has the right to do that?

Well God Almighty does because God Almighty defines our identity as he did with Abram and Sarai. We live in a time where self is the God of the age. Gender is no longer defined by biology. no one can tell a woman what to do with her body.

Consent is the only sexual boundary. And when we're surrounded by that kind of culture all of the time that bows the knee to the God of self, we can too easily forget that it is God Almighty who defines our identity.

[25 : 09] That our lives are not our own to do with as we please. That we are to walk before God faithfully and be blameless.

You see God Almighty defines our identity because we belong to him. And everything we have belongs to him.

Now I don't know if you've ever shared a house with somebody else. Maybe at college you shared a house with other students. Well it was my experience during college years that there was only one way that you could have any hope of putting something in the fridge and it still being there when you went back later.

You wrote your name on it. You not only wrote your name on it, you wrote your name all over it. You wrote your name all over it in big bold capital letters so nobody could miss it.

this is Martin's and you can be sure that it still would be gone from the fridge when you went to find it. Well in the rest of this story that filled the most of our reading actually it's as though God takes a big black marker and writes his name in big bold letters all over Abraham and everything that Abraham owns.

[26 : 40] It's the sign of circumcision. I'd love to have counted how many times the word circumcision or circumcised was said in that chapter. But that's what God is doing with each cut of the flesh God Almighty is saying this is mine.

He belongs to me. And the fact that Abraham belonged to God changed how Abraham was to live. Didn't the Apostle Paul write to the church in Corinth you are not your own you were bought at a price.

and that price was the death of God's own son. We were covenant breakers deserving to be cut off from God and his people and that was what circumcision signified but Jesus was cut off in our place.

We are not our own we were bought at a price therefore Paul says honour God with your bodies. They are not yours to do with as you please.

[27 : 55] If you belong to Jesus they belong to him and it's he who defines your identity and has a right to say how you live and how you use your bodies.

In fact how you use everything that belongs to you. So as those who have been bought at a price by the death of Jesus as those belonging to him let us live as people who trust God's promises in Jesus.

Let's trust the God who is both self-sufficient and all sufficient. Let's not only address him by this name when we pray El Shaddai God Almighty but let us learn to live as though the God we pray to really is what he says he is God Almighty.

Let's pray together. Father we confess that too often we go through life like Abram and Sarah feeling to rest in the promises of God and doing everything we possibly can to fulfil your promises to us.

Oh Father may we learn that such a path takes us to the end of ourselves and forces us back to you and may we learn to be people who trust you.

[29 : 37] May we grasp that you really are God Almighty that nothing is outside of your control. That not one thing or no one can frustrate your purposes for your people.

And Father may we learn to rest in that knowledge. And Father we pray that we are people that as our knowledge of you increases that so our commitment before you increases that we walk before you faithfully in light of the knowledge of what we know of you.

Father may we grasp that everything we have belongs to you. That we were bought at a price by the death of your son the Lord Jesus. That just as you had the right to rename Abram and Sarah to define who they were so you have the right to define who we are and how we should live and what we should do.

And may we learn not to resist such a thing but to grasp that there is real freedom in knowing who you've made us to be.

May we learn to rest in that knowledge and walk faithfully before you and we ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

[31 : 02] Well the guys are going to return and we're going to say