

Genesis Ch17v1-14 - Everlasting Faithfulness

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[0 : 00] I need a refill, so just one minute. I need a refill, so I need a refill, so I need a refill, so I need a refill.

There we go, we've all got tickly throats today.

Let's read Genesis 17. We're going to read the first 14 verses today. Let's hear God's word. 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.

[1 : 58] Your name will be called 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 the 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. Then God said to Abraham, 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.

[2 : 58] 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 of your household, not of 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. Well, let's pray. Amen. We come to you, God Almighty, creator of our life and giver of life.

Would you, by your spirit, speak words to us afresh today? Words that lead to a transformation of our hearts, changing our minds and our thinking, reorientating us to love you and worship you.

[4 : 33] Help us in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks.

No. No. So, how do you respond to failure? If someone lets you down or they break a promise to you, how do you respond inside?

What do you feel? Well, we might let the first one go, mightn't we? But the second time, well, that's it. It's over. It's finished.

We're not very patient with each other's failures, are we? Well, how does God deal with our failures? How do you think God responds to our daily, hourly, minute-by-minute failures?

Well, look at verse 1. When Abraham, we're going to use the name Abraham through this, I'm not going to try and say Abraham and Abraham, I'll get mixed up, so we'll just call him Abraham through this chapter.

[5 : 56] When Abraham was 99 years old. Now, that's not a reminder to get the invites out for Abraham's big, big birthday. No, it's a reminder that 13 years have passed since Abraham's big, big failure.

Just look back one verse to the end of chapter 16. Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Remember, God had promised Abraham a son, but since his wife Sarah had borne him no children, he took matters into his own hands and had a son with Hagar who was not his wife.

And the son of that relationship, Ishmael, was now 13 years old. So every passing year, every birthday of Ishmael was only a reminder to Abraham of how he had disobeyed God.

How does God respond to failures like Abraham? Failures like us? Well, he responds in one word.

[7 : 14] Covenant. Covenant. Look at verse 2. He says, Then I will make my covenant between me and you.

Now, we've come across covenant before, back in chapter 15. So this is not a new covenant. It's a continuation of the first one, but with new detail.

Now, a covenant is like a promise or a pledge. It's a formal relationship between two people who agree to a set of promises.

It's a bit like a marriage. A husband and wife make promises. They vow to be loyal and faithful and committed. And when God makes a covenant, it's to be long term.

God doesn't do short term relationships. He's in it for the long haul. Now, to get that long termness into our heads and allow it to sink in, get your yellow highlighter out and mark the word covenant all the way through chapter 17.

[8 : 28] Well, 13 ticks later, you will get the point. God responds to failures with covenant faithfulness.

Better still, read aloud verse 7. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you.

Or verse 13, the end of verse 13. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. And this would go on down through the family, the middle of verse 19.

I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant. God responds to failures like us with everlasting faithfulness.

So let's see what this everlasting covenant is in more detail. First, covenant reminds us of an everlasting relationship with God.

[9 : 40] There's a lot of repetition through chapter 17. We get continual reminders of God's promise to Abraham that he's going to be a great nation. But here in chapter 17, we get to see the purpose of why God is going to make him into a great nation.

Look how God introduced himself to us. Verse 1. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty.

Once more, God takes the initiative and intervenes into Abraham's helpless life. God Almighty, the creator of the universe, the one that spoke everything into existence, the one who owns all things, rules over all things, has power over all things, who sees all things, comes and speaks.

I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and you will greatly increase in numbers.

You see, God doesn't give up on failures. He moves towards failures. God Almighty is concerned for insignificant, weak, nobodies like us.

[11 : 15] Now this intervention by God Almighty is filled with purpose. Look at verse 7. God speaks and he says, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.

And here's the addition to the covenant. To be your God and the God of your descendants after you. It's an I will be your God and you will be my people kind of promise.

You see, the purpose of making Abraham into a great nation is that God is going to be God to this nation. God is making an everlasting promise that is going to reach out into all the world down through this history in the centuries of time and reaching forward into all history.

I will be God to you forever. This is the kind of relationship God calls us into.

You see, we tend to look at our relationships with God through different eyes. we imagine that it's us who moves out towards God.

[12 : 39] It's almost that God is there as an invitation if we like it or whatever. If you're interested in a relationship, well, here I am for you.

When you're ready in your time, just let me know. Well, Abraham isn't given that choice, is he? God intervenes and says, verse 7, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you.

This is what's happening, Abraham. This is how it's going to be. I am going to be your God. Now, I know that begins to grate with our pride because we love to be able to sing, I decided to follow Jesus.

Well, that's not how it works. If you follow Jesus today, it's because God Almighty intervened in your life, not at your invitation, but because God said, I will be your God.

God, now that might cause a bit of upset for you. It might even keep you awake at night. But doesn't that help us see what a gracious and good God we have?

[14 : 02] God Almighty is interested in you. He desires to be your God. When Kirsty and I stood at the front of a church 25 years ago, I made a promise.

I will be husband to you. That means I am for you. I am in this marriage for your good. I will be everything you need and desire.

Now when God comes to us and takes us by the hand and says, I will be God to you, God is saying, I am for you. I am in this for your good.

I will be everything you need every single day. All that you desire, I will be for you. Shamefully, unlike me, God is loyal, committed, steadfast, faithful.

As one writer put it, this is a relationship no time can exhaust, no circumstance can change, no disaster can destroy, no catastrophe can crush, no human failure can alter, and that no death can break.

[15 : 30] In fact, to drive the point home, God gives Abraham a new name. Look at verse 5. No longer will you be called Abram, your name will be Abraham.

Every time Sarah would call him, or his buddies would call him Abraham, there would be an echo within his heart and within his life, God saying to him again, I am God Almighty and I will be your God.

So first, God's covenant is all about an everlasting relationship with God.

But also, come on, covenant is all about an everlasting commitment to God.

You see, God's relationships, just like a marriage, is not just one way traffic, it works both ways. Something God made sure Abraham understood.

[16 : 42] Look at the middle of verse 1. God says, I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless. There's a way for you to live in relationship with me, Abraham, and it's to be faithful and blameless.

Now, how do you show such commitment to God Almighty? Well, God gave Abraham a sign. He gave him a sign.

Look at verse 10. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep. Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Now, this painful action was a sign of a promised action. The cutting off with a knife of the foreskin from the penis was an everlasting mark of commitment.

In two ways it demonstrated commitment. First, it was a reminder to Abraham that God was committed to him. God Almighty will be his God.

[17 : 56] God is for him. But second, it was a reminder to Abraham that he was committed to God. He belongs to God Almighty.

He is for God, devoted to God, loyal to God. My life is now cut off for God.

God is now to God. You see, it was all very practical, wasn't it? Every time Abraham got up in the morning, went to bed at night, every time he went to the loo or put on his pajamas, it would be a reminder, Abraham, you belong to God.

Abraham, you're for God. That's why it says in the end of verse 13, my covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.

It was an everlasting sign that he was committed to the God who was committed to him. So, question, why do we now go and make disciples of all nations, circumcising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit?

[19 : 21] Good question, isn't it? Well, we're going to come back to that in a minute, but let's not lose our focus. You see, a relationship with God is always two ways.

God has promised himself to us, and we promise ourselves to him. It's not an optional extra. Obedience isn't just for the very keen, it's for every follower of Christ.

So, look at verse 2. God says, I will make my covenant between me and you. This is what I'm going to do, I'm going to establish this covenant.

Verse 9, then God said to Abraham, as for you, you must keep my covenant. I'll make it, you've got to keep it.

Verse 23, on that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household, or bought with his money every male in his household, and circumcised them as God told him.

[20 : 37] You see, when God Almighty speaks, God's people always obey. In fact, failure to commit to God would have everlasting consequences.

Verse 14, any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.

God is saying, if you are not cut off for me, you will be cut off from me. You see, we can't mess about with God.

When God speaks, we listen, we do. It's not an invitation to raise objections. Of course, this implies that we are intentionally listening to God's voice.

We want to know what pleases God. We want to know what is good for us. So we read his word, we listen to his voice, we obey. I have a wedding ring and it provides a similar purpose.

[21 : 46] Every time I look at my ring, every time I fiddle with it and turn it around in my finger, it reminds me of promises Kirsty made to me.

But it's much more than just one-way traffic. It reminds me of my commitment to Kirsty. this ring tells me I am no longer my own.

I live for another. Well, if God is my God, I am his. I belong to him. I'm no longer my own.

I now live in the service of God Almighty and there is nothing that God cannot ask of me to which I can turn around and say no. My life doesn't belong to me anymore.

So second, covenant is all about an everlasting commitment to God. Third, an everlasting need for God.

[22 : 56] Covenant means an everlasting need for God. Every year, I'm sure you've seen this on the television, the state holds a citizenship day.

To become an Irish citizen, you must make a promise. And here's how the promise goes. I solemnly declare my fidelity to the Irish nation and my loyalty to the state.

I undertake to faithfully observe the laws of the state and to respect its democratic values. God's promise. For Abraham and his family, circumcision day was like citizenship day.

It was a declaration to say we belong to God. It was a promise to say we're committed to God. I undertake to faithfully observe all the laws of God Almighty.

honesty. However, instead of it being a mark of being devoted to God, it actually became a reminder of their failure to obey all that God had said.

[24 : 06] You see, circumcision marked you out as belonging to God. It was an external sign of your commitment to keep the covenant.

But just because you had the mark, just because you had had that little cup with a knife, didn't mean that you were an obedient person. Circumcision didn't make you keep the promise.

Just the same as those who attend citizenship day. Just because you promised to faithfully observe all the laws of the state and to respect its democratic values, just because you might sign a piece of paper, doesn't mean that you will obey all the laws of the land.

Well, Abraham and his family soon realised that the act of circumcision, painful as it was, was actually a whole lot easier than the act of obedience. And we're no different because we can stand before God and make our promises.

others. I will love the Lord my God with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my strength. Oh, and just one other thing. I will love my neighbour as myself.

[25 : 29] It seems we too fail to obey. We need a change of heart. You see, the physical act of circumcision pointed to the need for a spiritual act of transformation.

External signs were good, but what was actually needed was an internal change of people's hearts. Follow with me as we go forward.

Go to Deuteronomy chapter 10. Deuteronomy chapter 10. The context here is Abraham's small family have now become a great big nation.

They've all made the commitment to be devoted to God, but, as Deuteronomy chapter 9 tells us, they are a nation that have failed terribly.

They've just set up the golden calf and they've pledged allegiance to it. And now this is what God says in response. this, he says, is what must happen.

[26 : 42] Deuteronomy 10, verse 14. To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.

This is God Almighty who we're dealing with. Yet the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them. and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations as it is today.

Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. Stop your stubborn behaviour. Circumcise your hearts.

God's love. You see, the heart represents where our true loves are, what our true desires actually are. So you need to cut off the disordered loves and the unhealthy desires.

You need to change your heart. Well, how's that going to happen? Make more promises to God? Ratchet up the commitment levels?

[27 : 59] Go to rededication services? Please, Lord, would you come into my life again? I mean, I didn't do it quite right the first time, but this time I really mean it, come into my life.

No, we need something much bigger and greater than our own failed attempts. Listen to what God would say to his people.

Go to Deuteronomy chapter 30. Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6. God says, circumcise your hearts.

Well, how's that going to happen? Well, God steps in. Deuteronomy 30 verse 6. The Lord, your God, will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants.

Why? So that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live. You see, you and I can't make ourselves love God more.

[29 : 13] Our hearts are desperately broken and sinful. We can't help but love other things and other people instead of God. So, how is this going to happen?

how are our hearts going to be changed? Well, God does what he said he is going to do. God will promise or has promised to circumcise our hearts and he does that by establishing a new covenant through Christ.

God circumcised our hearts through or by Christ. Christ must be the one who performs internal spiritual surgery on us.

Now, this is all helpfully explained for us if you go to the New Testament to Colossians chapter 2. So, you've got Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians.

Maybe if you've got a page number, someone you can shout it out for us. Colossians chapter 2. 1183.

[30 : 37] So, Christ must be the one who performs internal spiritual surgery on us. And here we see it explained.

Colossians chapter 2 verse 11. In him, in Christ, or because of your faith or your being united to Christ, in him you are also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands.

No outward external act is ever going to change your heart. You can't perform your own heart surgery. So, how are we going to be changed?

Well, read on. Your whole self ruled by the flesh, that is, your whole self ruled by your sinful desires of your heart, was put off or cut off when you were circumcised God by Christ.

You say, well, how does that happen? How does he cut off our sinful desires of our heart? How does he deal with us? Well, look at verse 13.

[31 : 55] When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.

You see, two things are happening here. First, our sinful hearts are dealt with. As Christ went to the cross, he took on himself our disobedience, our failures, so when the knife of judgment fell, Christ was being cut off from God for us.

The only true obedient son who walked faithfully and blamelessly before God was punished for you and for I. And not only were our sins dealt with, but second, we were given a new heart.

Look what it says in verse 13. You were dead in your sins, but now God has made you alive with Christ.

Your heart was so broken, you were dead. There was no spiritual life to you, but now you've been made alive, you've been given a new heart so that you can now live a new life.

[33 : 09] A life filled with the Holy Spirit who gives us God desires and God loves. You see, Christ has been cut off for us so that we can be committed to him.

Now all of this has been demonstrated in the new covenant sign. You see, the old covenant failed, not because of God, he was faithful, but because of our failure.

We needed a new covenant, one that doesn't depend on us, but one that depends solely on God. and we enter that new covenant everlasting relationship by faith, which is demonstrated in baptism.

Again, let's read verse 11. in him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self was ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead.

You see, the act of baptism, the going down into the water and the coming up out of the water is a sign of your faith in Christ.

[34 : 41] When you're getting baptized you're saying Christ died for all of my failures, every one of them, future ones, past ones, and Christ was raised so that I might have a new life to live a new way.

Through our baptism we are expressing our absolute need for God. Now if this is the kind of God who can deal with all of your failure forever, if this is the kind of God who is committed to an everlasting relationship with you, if this is the kind of God who is for you and never gives up on you, who dies for you, who gives his life for you, who is committed to you, how can we not be devoted to him and love him with all our hearts?

You see, baptism is important to us. God commands it.

God Almighty says, my disciples, my followers should be baptized. You see, every time I sin and every time I fail, I can look back at my baptism and it reminds me of God's covenant faithfulness to me, that he has dealt with all of my failure.

It will never be held against me. It will never break my relationship with God ever. But when I look back at my baptism, it reminds me of my covenant commitment to him.

[36 : 30] Johnny, you're no longer your own. You belong to God. You're devoted to God. So how does God deal with failures like Abraham?

How does God deal with failures like you and me? One word, covenant. let's pray.

Let's pray.