

# Waiting for God

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Date: 25 February 2007

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[ 0 : 00 ] I invite you to turn to Genesis 17. We are continuing our sermon series on the book of Genesis, and we're nearing the end of it.

In this chapter, when you read it, you can't help but think about renewal. Renewal of a vision of a God, of who God is. Renewal of faith. Renewal of life.

And I think this is very appropriate for Lent, because if you were here on Ash Wednesday, you would have heard that Lent is about a renewal of repentance and a renewal of faith.

And we prayed today, David prayed, the collect for Lent that asks God to create in us new and contrite hearts. There's a deep sense of renewal that goes through the season of Lent.

And renewal is something that goes actually to the heart of what the human condition is, the desires that humans have. The world looks for and it prizes books and magazines and counselors that share how to revitalize relationships and revitalize marriages.

[ 1 : 10 ] The world takes pleasure in hearing about companies and businesses that fall on hard times, but then experience a renewal in the company so that it becomes successful again.

And we even rejoice when the local team that failed to make the playoffs last year are in first place this year. A sense of renewal. Renewal. Renewal. Renewal. Renewal. Renewal. There is something in us as humans that recognizes the importance of renewal.

And that's because each of us are created by God to be made new. And the great and true and certain promise of the Bible is that those who trust in Jesus will become a new creation.

And even more than that, the whole world will be made new when Jesus comes again in glory. Now, this is what is happening in Abraham's life in chapter 17.

Two weeks ago, I was talking about Abraham's renovating work, the work that God was doing to change his life. And we saw a remarkable change take place in him.

[ 2 : 21 ] From being a cowardly, deceitful, untrusting person in God, God remakes him into somebody who is openly glorifying God, who is trusting in God completely, and is one who is fiercely loyal to his family and to God.

Now, wonderfully, we see that this work is not complete. And I say wonderfully because we are in Abraham's situation, as I mentioned a couple weeks ago. We are people who are slowly being remade into God's image.

And what we see in Abraham's life is he takes a massive step back from that renovating work in chapter 16. As Abraham is being taught to trust the promises of God, in the background there is the fact that there is still no son.

And Sarah is still infertile. And both Sarah and Abraham are getting very old. In chapter 16, things are not going well at all.

You can sense an uncertainty and an anxiety building and building. And for 11 years, Abraham and Sarah have been waiting. What is God doing?

[ 3 : 36 ] What is he waiting for? Look at us. And so they did what probably all of us do as we learn to trust God and we experience hard times.

They take matters into their own hands. And they did it because they believed that their ways were better than God's ways. That's called original sin.

It happens every time we think we know better than God. And we are all infected by that at times in our lives. And I hope all of us can recognize it. We remind each other of it every time we say the general confession.

Sunday by Sunday. And in chapter 16, you see that sin show up in the form of resentment. Sarah is resentful that God has made them wait so long.

She believes it's too late. And God cannot come through. And so, because it's too late, she says, God has kept me from having children, is the way she put it.

[ 4 : 35 ] She comes up with a brilliant plan. She says to Abram, go, sleep with my maidservant. Perhaps I can build a family through her. Well, that's a wonderful source of advice.

She is the original desperate housewife. In fact, that show has nothing on this family. They are acting out of desperation.

Not in faith or trust. Abram goes and he says, great idea, Sarah. And he actually goes through with a plan. And if you read chapter 16, which is a great soap opera reading afterwards if you want to, you'll see things go from bad to worse in their family.

And as a result, there's incredible strife. And so at age 86, Abraham has great hostility in his family, but he becomes a father.

And he rationalizes that perhaps with Ishmael's birth, this is what God meant in his promise to bless and to make him a great nation with many descendants.

[ 5 : 40 ] And his sense here is that, you know, God's word isn't to be taken too literally. And the situation that he has manufactured is close enough to God's promise.

And I think there's a great warning for us in chapter 16. Because when we fail to trust in God, it's often because we think God's way won't work or it's not relevant. And we get desperate when we don't see desired results on time.

And we take things into our own hands. This is human nature. And unfortunately, like Abraham, we become satisfied with a very distant second best.

You know, just as Abraham is satisfied with misery in his family to accomplish his end, we also settle for far less than God has for us when we reject God's way and do it our way.

So what does God do about that terrible situation Abraham has created? You know, does he reject Abraham? Does he choose somebody else to work his eternal salvation through?

[ 6 : 49 ] Well, what we see in chapter 17 is something unexpected. Or we should expect it by now. God meets Abraham's unfaithfulness with powerful, extreme faithfulness.

And here we see the character of God. This is what the New Testament talks about in 2 Timothy 2.13. He says, if we are faithless, God will remain faithful because he cannot disown himself.

God in himself, in his character, is faithful to us. And so instead of rejecting Abraham, God actually renews the covenant with Abraham. And not only that, but he expands it.

He makes it deeper and longer. Chapter 17 comes at a crucial time in Abraham's life. He's 99 years old. If you look at chapter 17, verse 1.

And what that means is that Ishmael is 13, which is the age of manhood. And Abraham's probably convinced himself, this is the guy. This is the blessing carrier, the person of the promise.

[ 7 : 54 ] And God appears to Abraham and says, verse 1, I am God Almighty. And what that word means is that he is God who is sufficient. He is the one who makes the barren fertile and who fulfills his promises that look impossible.

God is telling Abraham, trust me. And we've heard that before. And then he says, walk before me and be blameless. Which means he's calling Abraham to orient his life around God's word, around his promises, every single day.

Orient his life around the fact that God is present in his life. It's a word for us as well. And he goes on to renew the covenant and expand it.

Look at verses 5 and 6 there. Not only is Abraham promised a great nation, but he says, your name's not going to be Abram, which means exalted father. But your name shall be Abraham, which means father of a multitude of nations.

And not only that, but he says that kings, in verse 6, will come forth from you. That's quite a promise that's expanded. And then in verse 7, not only does he say that he is going to be Abraham's God in verse 7.

[ 9 : 13 ] He says, I will be their God. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

You see, there's this promise that that relationship that God has with Abraham, that will be the relationship between God and his descendants forever. And then in verse 8, it says, not only is he going to go into a land, but at the beginning of verse 8, I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession.

So it's the permanence that this is going to be your family's possession. And through it all, that covenant is everlasting. We hear that repeated over and over again.

It's something that is going to extend until the end of history. So far from cutting Abraham from the covenant, God actually confirms the relationship.

And he deepens the blessing that is promised to Abraham. And I think for us there's an important word here. Because it tells us that God meets our personal disasters with his power and his grace.

[10:37] And he directs us to his words so that we can know his purpose and his blessings. So that we can be renewed. The new covenant that we have in Jesus, that's sealed in his blood, is everlasting.

And as we heard last week, God himself guarantees that covenant. Remember, Neil was talking about that if God breaks the covenant, he will never break it.

And he dies if we break it. In other words, he's confirming both sides of the covenant. Which is why he sent Jesus to the cross for us. And that's why Jesus says, I give them, in other words, his people, I give them eternal life.

And they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. You see, God's grace to us is permanent. It is eternal.

It is based on what Jesus has done for us. This is the one who we are called to trust. The one who is guaranteed that he will always be our God. We will always be his people.

[11:44] And that call to trust is not a passive trust where we carry on in life as though the covenant does not exist for us. We are meant to actively live for the promise by obeying God's word.

And that's why, right after God says, this is my part of the covenant, in verse 9 he says, As for you, Abraham, you shall keep my covenant.

And then at the end, in verse 10, he says, Every male among you shall be circumcised. You see, there is actively responding to God's covenant in trust.

And I noticed that Dave did not bring the subject of circumcision up at the children's talk. I was wondering what he was going to do with that. I think he was a bit circumspect there. But we need to understand what that is.

Circumcision is a mark of being set apart. And it is done on the organ of procreation to say that from generation following, these people are consecrated to God.

[12:54] It's a sign that they and their children will have a relationship that will go down from generation to generation to generation. And it's also a reminder on their bodies of the mission to walk before God and be blameless before him.

And wonderfully, already in verse 12, you see that all people are being brought into this covenant. No one is disqualified. He says in verse 12, Every male, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner, foreigner should be circumcised.

You see, it's a physical mark of a spiritual reality of belonging to God and living for him. And it was something that would have strengthened faith.

It's a visible sign of an invisible reality. And of course, you can't help but think about baptism when you think about circumcision.

Because that is the sign of strengthening faith for us as Christians. In Colossians 2, and I'll just read it for you. In him, in Jesus also, you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ.

[14:09] And you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. So you who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our sins.

You see, for us, baptism is the sign of the new covenant. And instead of physical circumcision, Jesus circumcises our hearts. He consecrates us to God.

We die with Christ, and we live with him. We rise with him. And he writes his laws on our hearts. So baptism is an outward physical sign of this inward spiritual grace that God makes us his own forever, alive to him and forgiven.

I thought it was wonderful two weeks ago that we had, on that Sunday, three generations of people being baptized here at St. John's. And I thought it was fantastic because the infant baptism reminds us that God initiates the covenant.

His promises come first. While we are helpless and do nothing to earn his love, God offers every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ. And the youth and adult baptisms reminded us that there is a change that happens when you actively trust the promises of Jesus Christ.

[15:38] Because in their baptisms, we saw not only the promises of God in Jesus, but we saw people publicly saying, I want to belong to Jesus. I want to follow him as Lord.

You saw people actively putting their trust in that covenant. And so you see, like circumcision, baptism is a sign of God's faithfulness to us in every generation.

And our faith is renewed when we see that. It's something tangible that speaks to what God has done for us in Jesus. And that's what's happening here to Abraham as well.

He has wandered from the covenant. He's in bad shape. But God's word and his physical sign of God's promises renew his faith and calls Abraham to obey God again.

And wonderfully, not only does that word come to Abraham, but in verse 15, notice that it comes to Sarah as well. I think this is great because as for Sarah, your wife, this is for her.

[16:43] 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, and I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations.

Kings of people will come from her. This is the woman who came up with this completely faithless scheme. And God says, I'm going to bless her. Now, of course, this is a physical impossibility.

And Abraham reacts the way that each of us react when we hear this initially. This is impossible. Abraham falls on his face, and he laughs when he hears it. You know, humanly speaking, this is impossible.

And in fact, Abraham tries to give God a way out. Look at verse 18. He says there, Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight.

May Ishmael be the one who you work your promises through. You know, he's almost a man. He's right here. Let's go with Ishmael. Well, God is very patient with Abraham again.

[17:44] He said, yes, I'm going to bless Ishmael in verse 20. But he says, no, in verse 19, it is going to be the unborn Isaac with whom I'm going to establish the everlasting covenant with.

Not only that, but in verse 21, God says, it's going to happen in one year. And then we hear that God went away from Abraham. God's word is finished at that point.

And the response of Abraham is remarkable. It is the response of someone whose faith is renewed by hearing God's word. Look at verse 26. Right at the end there, it says, you see this renewal.

That very day, immediately, there's a sense of immediate action. Abraham and Ishmael and all his men were circumcised. And it couldn't have been something they were looking forward to.

But it's something that they went ahead and obeyed God very quickly. There's been a powerful change you see in Abraham in these two chapters. He has been brought to the end of his rope in the human point of view.

[18:48] And it has looked as though God has failed him and that he has failed God as well. He's taken things into his own hands. It's a situation that you may have experienced in your life from time to time.

In fact, because we are sinful people, you will have experienced this. You might be going through it right now. We need to remember that God does not reject Abraham.

He renews his faith. And it's important for us to see that he renews Abraham's faith by speaking to him and by giving him the sign of circumcision as a physical reminder that he does and his descendants do belong to God.

Abraham finds it laughable that this covenant applies to Sarah and him. But we know in chapter 21, marvelously, that Isaac, whose name means laughter, is going to bring great joy to Sarah when he is born.

Sarah will say, God has brought me laughter. And she will say, everyone who hears about this will laugh with me, will actually rejoice with me, not in derision.

[19:55] And so what we see is that Abraham and Sarah become alive to God again. They find themselves deeply blessed by God's faithfulness. The whole point of making them wait and bringing them to the end of their rope was to see that it is by God's grace alone that the covenant continues.

What is impossible in human understanding is completely possible with God. That's why God says, is anything too hard for the Lord?

And that's something we should close this sermon with and have it ringing in our minds. Is anything too impossible for God, too difficult for God? This is what every generation, including ours, needs to

hear.

God is full of grace and power. He does what is humanly impossible. When our faith wanders and we take control away from God, God brings us back into the place of blessing, to the place of obedience by His Word, as with Abraham.

God speaks to us in the Bible to confirm again the everlasting covenant we have in Jesus Christ. He is the King from the line of Abraham. He is the guarantee of the relationship with God that we have and He is worthy of our trust.

[ 21 : 13 ] Like Abraham, as we obey His Word, our trust in God is renewed and it grows and we find ourselves renewed and in the place of blessing.

Today, God's Word calls us to believe things about God that are laughable to the world, but they are the very things that bring us joy. May God renew us as we hear Him in His Word and obey Him. Amen.