

“God’s Promise is No Laughing Matter”*Genesis 17***Introduction** = [BLANK1]

Do you ever wonder when it’s time to just call it a day and give up? Or when something keeps breaks down, how do you determine when it’s beyond repair? If you are working on a project for school or work and you fall way behind when is it beyond recovery? How far behind is too far for a comeback? Many of us have probably been at a game where a wave of fans exited the stadium before the game was over. Some of us have been part of that wave of fans who concluded that our team was just too far behind for a comeback.

If I had been at this year’s NFC championship game between the Packers and the Seahawks I would have been among the fans, like Taylor Strong, who left before the bitter end. **[VIDEO]**

By giving up, and walking out of the game before it was actually over, Taylor Strong missed the chance to see one of the most dramatic comebacks of all time—a choice that she herself “instantly regretted” but could not undo.

[BLANK] Now the choice of whether to give up hope (or not) in a football game is, in the scope of life, not really a big deal. *But* the choice of whether or not to give up hope (or not) in the dark moments of our lives is huge and it underlines for us the difference that faith makes. Is the situation you are in really hopeless? Is it time to just call it a day? Maybe it is, but *not* if God hasn’t given up on it, no matter how hopeless it may look or feel to us. Which is why God has a habit of choosing hopeless people, and hopeless situations to show just how big of a comeback he is capable of doing in us and through us (Romans 15:4).¹

Biblical Contact – Read Gen 17 [SLIDES] (Watch for “As for me...As for you...As for Sarai”)

When we read in Genesis 17 that “Abram was ninety-nine years old” it is clear that humanly speaking, he and Sarai had definitely reached that stage

¹ “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4)

where they were *too far gone* for a child. Things had already seemed hopeless 13 years ago and their biological clocks had kept on ticking to the point where historically no one had ever seen a comeback kid from an age deficit this big. The story tells us that it was, humanly and historically speaking, impossible. And yet it is precisely at this point, when the whole stadium of public opinion had given up hope and walked out, that the LORD appeared to Abram to renew his promise, to reinforce it through repetition, and even raise it higher (nations, everlasting).

A) God's Promises

- “I will make you into a great nation” (12²)
- “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them...So shall your offspring be.” (15⁵) **[SLIDE]**

- 1) “I will greatly increase your numbers...make you the father of many nations...Abraham...very fruitful...nations...kings will come from you” (v.2,6)
- 2) “The whole land of Canaan...an *everlasting* possession to you and your descendants after you
- 3) “be your God and the God of your descendants...I will be their God.”
- 4) “Sarah...I will surely give you a son by her... mother of nations; kings...will come from her”
- 5) Ishmael...bless him...rulers...a great nation

B) Abraham's Obligations **[SLIDE]**

God had already “cut” a covenant with Abraham **[PICTURE]** and Genesis 15⁶ was clear that the basis of the covenant was not in anything Abram had done, but in his faith, he simply believed in the integrity and ability of God to be true to his promise no matter what the odds. Yet God's comment to Abraham was designed to *involve* Abraham, it required not *only* Abram's step of faith but also Abraham's ongoing faithfulness. As OT professor John Goldingay notes,

“Abraham's integrity was not the basis of the covenant, but it was essential to its working. In this sense, God can only go on affirming the covenant commitment if Abraham does the same. Otherwise (as with a marriage relationship) things will simply not work. It takes two to tango.”²

² John Goldingay, Genesis For Everyone Chs. 17-50, p. 3.

God give Abraham two significant commands. The first was, “walk before me faithfully”. “Walk” suggests a way of living rather than a single walk from point A to point B (e.g. Ur to Canaan & now you can retire—NOT). “Walk” is the same language used for Noah^{6:9} and Enoch^{5:22} who *walked faithfully with God*. Walking “before God” (i.e. before his face) is living totally open to Him in honesty and intimacy. Living so openly with God is both an encouragement and a challenge.

It is an encouragement because it means God will be watching over Abraham **protectively**, as He has been doing through Abram’s ill-advised Egyptian adventure^{ch.12} & Abram’s dramatic rescue mission^{ch.14} to recover Lot (cf. “I am your shield”—15¹). Living openly with God is a challenge because God will also see what kind of person Abraham really is. God needs a “blameless” person (i.e. not perfect but whole, a person of integrity, a person totally & fully committed to God’s way)³, to make His great plan fully operational (like Noah—6⁹; like Joseph; like Jesus). As Mother Teresa put it, “We must become holy, not because we want to feel holy, but because Christ must be able to live his life fully in us.”⁴ God is looking for what one writer has called, “a long obedience in the same direction” (a trajectory of faithful living...e.g. the Assiniboine River **SLIDE** and story...).

*The essential thing ‘in heaven and earth’ is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.*⁵

What makes a life worth living is **participating in the eternal plan and purposes of God**. This requires faith, not a moment of faith but a life of faith. It is this “long obedience in the same direction” that the spirit of our age does so much to discourage—obsessed as it is with short cuts and quick fixes, disposable goods and relationships that are considered disposable when the going gets tough (i.e. “it’s too late for a comeback”). But God says, “Abraham, if the world is going to experience a genuine comeback, if the paradise that was lost is

³ “blameless” suggests not the absence of any faults or failures, but the presence of a positive quality of wholeness (wholly committed, whole-hearted vs. half-hearted, a fundamental moral wholeness or straightness, integrity).

⁴ See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful For God*, p. 65.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche quoted by Eugene Peterson in, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 13.

going to be regained, it will require a personal and inter-generational commitment to a long obedience in the same direction.”

“**As for me**”, God says in verse 4, I’m totally committed to this plan and my part in it (recall the cutting of the covenant ceremony in chapter 15). “**As for you**”, God says to Abram in verse 9, “*you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come.*” The sign, the constant reminder, of the covenant between me and you from generation to generation will be circumcision (v.11). God’s covenant commitment with Noah, to preserve creation, was marked with the sign of a rainbow. Why is the chosen sign for this covenant circumcision?⁶ I think the three best reasons I’ve gleaned are:

- (a) A **permanent** reminder – “Circumcision was God’s brand”⁷ or tattoo^{Gen.4:15}
- (b) A **practical** reminder – There is a logical link between the promise of offspring, and putting a permanent reminder on the organ of procreation. While the mark of the covenant is obviously confined to the male, it would be visible to the female as well when the two become “one flesh” to produce a child.
- (c) A **partnership** reminder – The knife appears in this chapter as it did in Gen. 15, but this time Abraham, not God, must go through the cutting ritual. God had committed himself through a cutting ritual, and so will Abraham and his household.⁸

In chapter 15, the covenant was clearly initiated and implemented by God, but here in chapter 17 “establishing” (confirming, sealing) it involves a human response. What covenant faithfulness looks like in practical terms was spelled out in the command to “*walk before me faithfully and be blameless*”. But Abram’s willingness to enter whole-heartedly into this life of faith is made decisive by following through on his part of the covenant ceremony (until God says **SLIDE** “It is finished”^{Jn.19:30}). Genesis 15 was God’s “I do”. Abraham and his household’s “I do” will happen in his act of obedience. The closing verses²³⁻²⁷ underline the immediacy of Abraham’s response (“On that very day”^{v.23,26}) and its totality (“all...every”).

⁶ The rite of circumcision, which involves the removal of the foreskin on the penis, is practiced in many parts of the world by different tribes. In the ancient Near East, the majority of Israel’s neighbors practised circumcision, as noted in Jeremiah 9:24-25 (“*all who are circumcised only in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places.*”), but not in Mesopotamia. See Wenham, Genesis 16-50, p. 23.

⁷ Derek Kidner, Genesis, p. 129.

⁸ Richard L. Pratt Jr., He Gave Us Stories, p. 223-225. See also von Rad, Genesis, pp. 197-201.

We noted already God's "as for me" in verse 4, and God's "as for you" to Abraham in verse 9. God also has an important "As for Sarai" comment in verses 15-21. She too will be marked by a name that embodies and highlights God's incredible promise, and underlines beyond a shadow of a doubt that she too is at the heart of his comeback plan.

- "I will...surely give you a son *by her*...she will be the mother of nations; kings of people will come from her ("Sarah" = princess...royalty!).

Once again Abraham falls face down before the LORD. He is in an outward posture of worship, but inside he is laughing to himself. Perhaps he forgets for a moment that he is an open book before the LORD. Or maybe he just can't help himself. Of all the plays God has in his playbook, throwing up a "Hail Mary pass"⁹ and expecting *Sarah* to run down the field and catch it...is hilarious! No wonder Abraham suggested going with a play that sounded much more reasonable, like a straight handoff to the best running back on the team...

It's not that God doesn't have plans to include Ishmael in ways that are even greater than Abraham imagined (see v.20), but those plans pale in significance to what God has in mind for Sarah and her miraculous comeback kid that will have them rolling with laughter (Isaac) "by this time next year".

- Comment on the significance of the name by which God identifies himself in verse 1
- Melchizedek knew God as *El-Elyon* ("God most high"—14¹⁹⁻²⁰)
- Hagar knew God as *El-Roi* ("God who sees me"—16¹³)

Here God introduces himself for the first time as *El-Shaddai*. It will be the most used *El* combination in Genesis (28³; 35¹¹; 43¹⁴; 48³) and occur almost exclusively in Genesis (cf. Ex. 6³; Ezk. 10⁵). Though the root meaning is obscure, its usage in Genesis is clear. As OT professor Gordon Wenham notes, *El-Shaddai "is always used in connection with promises of descendants: Shaddai evokes the idea that God is able to make the barren fertile and to fulfill his promises."*^{p.20}

⁹ A **Hail Mary pass** is a very long forward pass in football, made in desperation with only a small chance of success. The term became widespread after a Dec. 28, 1975 NFL playoff game when Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach (a RC) said about his game-winning touchdown pass to wide receiver Drew Pearson, "I closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary."

Mary to Elizabeth (by Stephen Lang)

This God our nation serves and worships is a God of dreams and most peculiar fantasies.

The old conceive, the untouched conceive,

And I think that henceforth we will not fix any tethers on the hands of God.

We will not say, "This cannot be," or murmur,

"Only a babbling fool believes such tales."

This God, this Holy One, startles me, bringing the impossible among us, making

A grand desire take shape as flesh and blood.

Who knows what may occur? If you and I have seen the truth indeed, known in ourselves

The ways of God, just think what deeds may shake

The world--the blind may one day see, the lame may walk, the dead may live again, the sick

At heart may find new hope. Such shall we see.

Conclusion

Do you ever wonder when something is beyond repair? More importantly do you ever feel like the obstacle you're up against is impossible to overcome, that the gap is just too big, that your patience has worn too thin, that it's time to just get up & walk out. Friends, don't make the kind of mistake that will leaving you "instantly regretting your life choice". Don't give up on your marriage or ministry or your friend or child or neighbour you've been praying for when God hasn't given up. Instead, take a step of faith, cast yourself upon the mercy of El-Shaddai. Enter into a covenant relationship with the God who does some of his best work when the chances of a comeback look absolutely impossible.

As those who live on this side of the divide between the Old covenant and the New, how we express this commitment to God looks a bit different on the outside (baptism vs. circumcision—Col. 2¹¹⁻¹²), but it's always been the same on the inside ("circumcise your hearts"—Dt. 30⁶; Rom. 2²⁹). Make a whole-hearted surrender to our Lord and Savior. Today God is giving you the opportunity of a lifetime, the opportunity to put your faith in him, to put your life in his hands.

PRAY – El-Shaddai, give us a word of hope that seems so beyond what we can even ask or imagine that when we hear it, we will find ourselves overcome with laughter, not the laughter of cynicism and unbelief, but the laughter of wonder and awe that causes us to fall before you in worship & surrender

(Psalm 126¹⁻² "When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.")