

LIFE OF ABRAHAM  
“A Life Consecrated To God”  
Genesis 17  
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January 5, 2003

We have been studying the Life of Abraham on Sunday Mornings. You might wonder what relevance a man who lived 4,000 years ago would have for us today. But Abraham is very relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. When God called Abraham in Genesis chapter 12, he said he would make his name great. God kept that promise. His name is still on our lips 4,000 years later. He made the cover of Time Magazine just this past year.

God promised Abram that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. God kept that promise too. It was through Abraham that God gave us a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament begins with these words: *“A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.”* John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* The whole world has been blessed through Abraham.

We have been following Abram as a believer in the true and living God, sojourning in the Promised Land. In Genesis 12 God promised to make him into a great nation. In Genesis 13:16 he said, *“I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.”* In Genesis 15:5 he repeated that promise: *“Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

But ten long years passed. Abraham was now 85 years old and Sarai was 75, and Sarai was still as barren as ever. In chapter 16 we found Abram attempting to help God. He was trying to solve a problem he felt was too hard for God. He and Sarai felt they had the solution to the problem. And Abram took Hagar, Sarai’s handmaid, for a wife. Out of that union, Ishmael was born. The sons of Ishmael have been a thorn in the side of Israel to this very day.

Thirteen more years have passed between chapter 16 and chapter 17. Abram is 99 years old and Sarai is 90. Abraham had taken a wrong turn and for thirteen years there had been silence from heaven. We can imagine that those years were years of unhappiness and unrest in the household of Abram. The presence of Ishmael in the home created endless contempt, bitterness, envy, jealousy and strife.

God used those thirteen years to teach Abram the cost of acting on his own apart from God. Perhaps you have had a similar experience. Most of us have. A time when God allowed you to have your own way and results were distressing. You were permitted to go your own headstrong way so that you would learn the folly of acting apart from God. *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight”* (Proverbs 3:5-6).

One of the most frightening things about life with God is this fact: That if you insist upon having your own way, God will often let you have it, until you are sorry you asked for it. Psalm 106:15: *“He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.”*

After thirteen years of heartache, God appeared to Abram. It is so encouraging that God does not give up on us even when we sin and fail him.

## I. THE NEW REVELATION OF GOD

*“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.”*

After thirteen years of silence, God appears to Abram and says, *“I AM God Almighty.”* In Hebrew the name is *“El-Shaddai,”* which essentially means “the God who is sufficient,” the adequate God, the One who knows what he is doing and how to do it. God is saying in effect, “You have been learning for thirteen years the total inadequacy of your own efforts. Now I want you to learn a new thing about me. I am El Shaddai. You have discovered by sad experience how futile your plans and efforts can be without me. Now learn how capable I am as the Almighty God to bring to pass everything I desire to do.”

This is the first time this name for God occurs in the Bible. It emphasizes God’s infinite power. How great is God? He is Almighty. In the very next chapter he asks Abraham and Sarah the question: *“Is anything too hard for the LORD?”* The answer is, of course not. He is El-Shaddai, Almighty God. Then he promises them a son and fixes the time of his arrival: *“”Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.”* The prophet Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 32:17: *“Ah. Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You.”* There is a song we sing based on this name for God: “El Shaddai, El Shaddai, El El Ya na, Adonai, age to age you’re still the same by the power of your name.”

With this new understanding of God comes a new demand from God. “Walk before me and be blameless.” In the KJV this word “blameless” is translated “perfect.” The root meaning of the word is “wholehearted.” Abraham, if you want to experience my power in your life you have to walk before me, that is you have to walk in fellowship with me, and be “wholehearted” in your devotion to me. He hadn’t been. He had been half-hearted in his devotion and service to the Lord. Now he is being called to total commitment. This truth is often brought out in the New Testament. We constantly try to serve two masters: to please self and Christ. We are quite content to serve Christ, if we can also serve ourselves at the same time. But now God says to Abram, “I won’t permit this any longer.” Walk before me and be wholehearted, be wholly on my side. I want all of your love and devotion.

Application: Jesus Christ says the same thing to each of us today. When you become a Christian you need to understand that his willingness to save you also involves his right to control you. Before you became a Christian you made your decisions on the basis of how YOU felt and what YOU wanted to do. But God comes to you and he says, “stop doing that.” I am El Shaddai, the Almighty God, and I want all of your love and all your devotion. He wants you to

take self off the throne and enthrone Christ alone as LORD and MASTER of your life. That is essentially what he is saying to Abram here.

Along with this new revelation and this new demand, new names are given to Abram and Sarai.

## II. A NEW NAME FOR ABRAM AND SARAI

*“Abram fell facedown, 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....” (vv. 3-5 ff). “God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; 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.’ ”*

The name Abram means “exalted father.” This must have been an embarrassment many times over the years to Abram. Imagine Abram having visitors to his tent one day, which must have happened often, and they asked him his name. He would say, “My name is Abram.” Oh, congratulations! “Exalted father”! Was it a boy or a girl? Abram would have to say, “Actually, I don’t have any children.” Then the visitors would laugh and say, “You mean to tell us that your name is Exalted Father, and you don’t have any children? How in the world can that be? And they would ride off across the desert laughing.

Imagine those same visitors coming by six months later. When he goes out to greet them, they all begin to snicker, “Hello there exalted father.” But he says, my name isn’t exalted father any more. It’s now Abraham, Father of a Multitude! Wow! Must have been twins! Then Abraham said, “No, I still don’t have any children!” They must have been completely puzzled. Here was a man who was a father before he had any children. Abraham was Abraham, father of a multitude, by faith.

As we look back 4,000 years later, we can see that God was true to His word. READ verses 6-7. *“Then God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.”* Genesis 17:15 (NKJV). The name Sarai means “contentious.” This speaks volumes about the home life of Abram and Sarai.

Solomon writes *“It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in house shared with a contentious woman”* (Proverbs 21:9). Sarai was a problem wife. Yet in the New Testament Peter says that this woman is a model for all women to follow. But only after her name was changed to Sarah, which means “princess.”

Application: Sarah is never referred to as Sarai in the New Testament. God does not set her up as a pattern for women until she becomes Sarah and loses her contentious spirit. As Sarah she learned to develop *“a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious”* (1 Peter 3:4). She was not naturally this way. She was an argumentative woman, a nagging wife. But she learned by God’s grace to change. And through the years by God’s grace she lost the need to defend herself on every occasion; and she became Sarah, a princess, honored among women -- with a meek and quiet spirit, that was very precious in the sight of God. The same process takes

place in the life of every believer as we are conformed to the image of Christ by the Spirit of God, through the Word and through the experiences and trials of life.

The third new thing we see in this chapter is the great sign of circumcision.

### III. A NEW COVENANT SIGN

READ Genesis 17:9-13. The actual event is recorded in vv. 22-27. READ.

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. For the Jews this was the mark that they were God's possession and God's instrument for blessing among the nations. It was a mark to indicate that they were to be physically separate from the other nations. It was the mark of God's ownership.

What was physical and literal to Abraham is intended to have spiritual significance to us. In the New Testament we no longer read of circumcision of the flesh but circumcision of the heart. The heart is the symbol of the whole personality—mind, emotions and will. Every believer is to bear in his heart the sign of Christ's Lordship. Our whole personality is to be at his disposal. We are to have a circumcised heart. A heart fully set apart for Him.

Application: Our heart is to be totally Christ's to use as he wills – all our mind, emotions and intellect and will are to be dedicated to God and ready at the command of Jesus Christ to be used for his purposes. We are to have no reliance upon ourselves, but to rely totally on him. *“Walk before me, and be wholehearted”* is God's call to us as it was to Abraham.

### CONCLUSION

Abraham believed God. Paul says of him, “And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. (20) He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, (21) and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.” Romans 4:19-21 (NKJV).

Do we have a faith like that? The God we worship is the God of Abraham. This God is able to bring life out of death, love out of hate, peace out of turmoil, joy out of misery, praise out of cursing and strength out of weakness. He is still El-Shaddai, Almighty God and there is nothing he cannot do. He calls us to do what he called Abraham to do: *“Walk therefore before me, and be wholehearted.”* That will be a life of fruitfulness and blessing, and a life that is pleasing to God. It springs from an understanding that our God is El Shaddai, the God who is all-sufficient.

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