

Trials Move the Sails of Faith Genesis 17:1-27

One of the many great things about growing up at Barakel was the tremendous outdoor playground out our backdoor. A family friend had given us snowmobile so we could ride the two track trails around the adjacent National Forest or take it full throttle up and down the length of the lake. Another family friend had given us a motorcycle that we used in the summer to travel the same trails, except we didn't run it on the lake, although one staff kid decidee to roll it down the hill and into the lake.

Shear Lake is about ½ mile long and maybe 200 yards wide. If we wanted to fish, we could grab a boat, our pole and a can of worms. We could slip a canoe into the water and paddle around. For a time we had a couple small sailboats that were fun to take out. When the wind was good we would tack up to the one end of the lake turn the boat and let the sail out and race to the other end. To really go you need a good wind. Sometimes we started out with a good wind but it would die out in the middle of the lake and we would just sit there.

That's where we find Abram between **chapters 16** and **17**. The winds of trial that had moved him now seemed to have stopped and he's just sitting there coasting. In **chapter 16** he and Sarah had committed a pretty major blunder when she had offered her handmaid, Hagar to be his wife in order to bear a child because she was still barren. They were impatient and maybe a bit confused about what God meant in regard to becoming a great nation through Abram. At the end of **chapter 16** Hagar had a son. It had been 10 years of waiting and nothing had happened before they took matters into their own hands. I want to stress again what I said last week that is of importance for us to remember today that we should **"Always trust God no matter how long the silence."**

It was David who said in **Psalm 27:14** **"Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart: wait, I say on the Lord."**

Impatience with God's perfect plan can get us into some serious trouble that can cause tremendous

problems. We must learn to never run ahead of God.

At the end of **chapter 16** Hagar had returned to Sarah in obedience to the Lord's command and submitted to her. The opening verse of **chapter 17** helps us see the connection to the previous chapter. In **16:16** we read that Abram was 86 when Ishmael was born and in **17:1** we learned that he is now 99 years old. Simple math tells us that 13 years has passed. Nothing is recorded for us in the pages of Scripture to detail their lives during those years. We assume they had remained in Hebron living among the people of the land, content in their surroundings. Knowing that it's been 13 years since Ishmael was born you might be wondering if they have learned to trust and wait on God in the silence.

For all we know life seems to be going smoothly. That can be a dangerous place to be because it can lull us into a state of complacency. We don't want trials, we'd rather have peace and calm. During this time Abram is teaching his son Ishmael the family trade, he's growing up into a young man. We can also assume given what God said about him to Hagar there in the desert that there may have been a bit of a wild streak to his temperament. He may have tested the boundaries of adolescence due to his untamed nature. We aren't told whether the rift between Sarah and Hagar ever got mended or if there was still some tension in the home. That Hagar is still there 13 years later implies that at least she was obedient to the Lord and perhaps after listening to her encounter with God after running away, Sarah may have changed her tune as well. How could she argue with God?

If last week we learned to always trust God no matter how long the silence, this week I would propose that **without trials it is difficult to mature in our faith**. Referring again to the words of Jesus' half-brother, James, he wrote **"Consider it pure joy, my brother, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete (whole), not lacking anything."**

The Message “Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.”

I take that to mean that whether we like it or not, without trials, the muscles of maturity won't grow.

A couple I have come to know at the gym like to go hiking. The wife diligently works the stair climber because one trail has a 500 step staircase to climb and she wants to do it without stopping to rest. Trials build the muscles of faith to help us mature.

Charles Spurgeon once said “None of us can ever come to the highest maturity without the summer heat of trials.”

A goldsmith knows that to get the impurities out of the gold, it has to remain on the heat.

Don't ever get lulled into a false sense of security or complacency when everything in your life seems to be running smoothly. There are times when the heat of trials seems to be so overwhelming to us that we cry out to God for deliverance when He wants us to be in it just a bit longer for its full effect.

I think the term “smooth sailing” is misleading. If you are sailing, you don't necessarily want the waters to be calm, you need a bit of wind to move you along. According to James, the maturity of our faith for spiritual growth requires trials. When you consider examples in Scripture like Joseph, David, Daniel, and Paul their greatest times of growth were during the hard times. The times David fell were the times when things seemed to be going smoothly in the kingdom for him.

I think that's where Abram was at. Everything was going great in his life. We'll see in this chapter that he was banking on Ishmael to be the promised heir. God had other plans and **chapter 17** is another test of faith, another opportunity to trust God and an affirmation of God's promise through the covenant

He had made with Abram, this now being the third time.

We begin in **verse 1** by noting the conversation about the covenant.

I. THE CONVERSATION ABOUT THE COVENANT IS CLEAR – v. 1

Let's take a quick test.

How old is Abram here? He's 99 years old.

How long had it been since God last spoke to him that we know of? It's been 13 years.

Maybe the silence brought Abram to believe that everything was great in his little paradise. He could live out the remainder of his days in peace knowing that he now had an heir to pass on God's promise

That's when God shows up. We call it a theophany, the appearance of God to man. We don't know how God appeared to Abram, just that it was in some visible form. We don't know if it was a burning bush like with Moses or the presence a pillar of cloud by day or pillar of fire by night as with the Israelites in the wilderness or if it was a still small voice like when God appeared to Elijah. All we know is that God appeared and spoke to Abram.

It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, that what God has to say is profound. Let me point out that in the first three verses three different names for God are used. Remember that names aren't just for identification so we know what to call someone, a name spoke of character and even of destiny as we'll see in a moment with Abram and Sarah. So in these opening verses we see three truths about God.

In **verse 1** there is the name “**LORD**” or in the Hebrew, **Jehovah**. Some Bibles always have this capitalized indicating the Hebrew name Jehovah. This name refers to His immediacy and presence, that He is always with us. It speaks to His nearness and accessibility to all who call on Him for deliverance, forgiveness, and guidance.

Psalm 31:1-3 – God guides for His name

Psalm 34:18 – God is near the brokenhearted

In **verse 3** we find the most commonly used name for “**God**” in the Old Testament – **Elohim**. It's used

first in **Genesis 1:1** where God created the heavens and the earth. That name speaks of Him being a mighty and strong Creator whose power is displayed in those opening verses of **Genesis 1** all He had to do was speak and everything came into existence from nothing as He commanded.

And finally, back in **verse 1** God introduces Himself to Abram by a new name. It is the name **El-Shaddai** or “**God Almighty**”. Scholars aren’t entirely clear on the exact meaning and suggest that it refers either to His ability to abundantly supply or that it speaks to His majestic strength. Whichever the case, we have a God who reveals Himself as the ultimate power over everything through His omnipotence and sovereignty. In short, He is completely capable of doing anything to meet our needs. In revealing Himself as Almighty God He is stating His ability to do the impossible. Keep in mind that Abram is 99 and Sarah is 89. It is physically impossible for them to have children.

Romans 4:18-21

By revealing Himself to Abram as the Almighty God in this new name He is telling Abram that He has the power to do what He said. This name is used 31 times in the book of Job and only 17 other times in the rest of Scripture.

In **chapter 14** God is seen as a shield for Abram.

In **chapter 15** God is seen as Abram’s great reward.

In **chapter 17** God is seen as Abram’s great provider.

Have you come to know Him as the Almighty God?

God then tells Abram how he is to respond. He commands Abram to walk **before** Him and be blameless. We learned earlier that Enoch and Noah walked **with** God. Here Abram was to walk before God, to recognize that God was always with him and always had His eye on him. God was telling Abram to be single-hearted in his obedience to God, not to waver, to be without blame, to be sincere and wholly devoted in his faith. Let me just say that being blameless doesn’t mean sinlessness.

David spoke of such devotedness when he penned for us the intent of his heart in these words “**One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek**

after (Psalm 27:4).

James tells us not to be double minded.

Jesus said we cannot serve two masters.

In other words, if Abram was to receive the blessings of this unconditional covenant he was to faithfully and obediently serve God. God revealed Himself by a new name that demonstrated to Abram His ability to do what He promised. Abram was to walk before Him blamelessly.

How God reveals Himself in **verse 1** helps us understand the rest of the chapter. That’s when He confirms the covenant with Abram.

II. A CONFIRMATION OF THE COVENANT THAT IS CONSISTENT – v. 2

Sometimes we need a gentle reminder from God. God’s original call came to Abram at about the age of 40. He was in Haran for about 35 years. At the age of 75 God spoke to him again with the same call. Then he was 86 and now 99.

Let me remind you that God’s word never changes. Each time God spoke to Abram He added something new, but it was always a confirmation of what He had said earlier.

12:1-3, 7b

15:5-7

And now here once again a confirmation of the covenant that promised an heir.

Abram thought it might be his servant Eliezer. God said it wouldn’t be through him.

Abram thought it might be his son Ishmael through Hagar. But God said it wouldn’t be through him.

Now we have an advantage over Abram in that when we need to be reminded of God’s promises to us all we have to do is pick up our Bible and read them in black and white. Abram had to remember what God said. Over time it can become a bit fuzzy. Ishmael is about to become a man and Abram was perhaps a bit content to think that his son would be the heir. God is going to reinforce His covenant with Abram about who that heir would be. Sometimes we think we have God figured out and know His plans, but we need to remember that His

ways aren't our ways. Kent Hughes suggests that the Almighty God was not going to scale down the promise to match Abram's puny thoughts. Abram attempted at times to limit the power of God in his life to do what He promised by shortchanging and shortcutting the plans of God to do the impossible.

In **Matthew 1:26-35** we read about the angel's visit to Mary announcing that she had been chosen to be the mother of the long awaited Messiah. Notice their exchange.

Matthew 1:26-35

He is not the God of the possible or even the God of the probable.

He is the God of the impossible.

I have a copy of the chorus *Nothing Is Impossible* hanging on the windowsill of my study. Sometimes I'll see it and hum it to myself. I need that reminder. **Nothing is impossible when you put your trust in God.**

Nothing is impossible when you're trusting in His Word.

Hearken to the voice of God to thee.

"Is there anything too hard for Me?"

Then put your trust in God alone and rest upon His Word.

For everything, O everything, yes everything is possible with God.

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I know what the song means, but I couldn't help but think about the opening line. Does it mean that God's ability to do the impossible only rests on my ability to trust Him? Is God's power contingent on my faith? But that's why the rest of the chorus is important. In the middle of the chorus there is a rhetorical question asked by God. "**Is there anything too hard for Me?**"

And then when we answer in the affirmative in the end of the song by singing that everything is possible with God the whole chorus makes sense. God's power doesn't rest in my faith, but how much faith do I have to believe that God can do the impossible. That's what the angel told Mary.

Everything is possible with God. So the message to Abram as well as to us is found again in the middle of that chorus: "**Hearken to the voice of God to thee.**" Or simply listen up to what God said and believe Him because He can do it.

I want to suggest that you memorize a verse or at least open up your Bible to the first blank page and write this reference down for easy access. Learn it, lean on remember it because it will get you through times you are apt to waver in your faith. It will help remind you that nothing is impossible with God.

Ephesians 3:20 "Now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us." (NIV) "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."

When your faith is a bit shaky, go to that verse and remember that everything is possible with God. Don't limit what He has already said He will do.

So, let me ask you a question for consideration: **How often do we reduce God to the knowable and possible instead of seeing Him as the God of the impossible?**

The Almighty God is speaking to Abram and confirming, we might even say guaranteeing, that He will fulfill His covenant with Abram. **What, then, is Abram's response?**

III. THE COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT IS CONSECRATION – v. 3a

Abram responds in the only way that is fitting when encountering the living, Almighty God. He fell facedown in reverence for God. He prostrated himself before the Almighty. It is the same response of the 24 elders in **Revelation 4:9-11** when they fell down and worship God and proclaim how worthy He is to receive glory, honor, and power.

Throughout the centuries since time began there have been billions who have never given God a second thought let alone considered giving Him the reverence He is due. Instead of living in devotion to Him they live in defiance of Him. Instead of adoring His name, they abuse His name.

They choose to ignore Him speaking to them.
When God spoke, Abram fell down in reverence
and worship.

**When God speaks to us through His Word revealing
Himself and confirming His promises is our
response to worship Him? How about this chorus?**

We worship and adore You,
Bowing down before You,
Songs of praises singing,
Hallelujahs ringing.
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah! Amen!

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I sometimes will invite you to stand in honor of God's Word when it is read. We were visiting my Dad's church a couple years ago and noticed that every time the pastor read a passage a man sitting in the back would stand in reverence for God's Word. We may not stand or kneel or bow or lay prostrate before God physically, but there should always be a definite awe of Him, for who He is, and for when He speaks to us through His Word. When Abram fell and bowed facedown it He was making a commitment to the God of this covenant who was speaking. By the way, nine times in **verses 2-21** God refers to it as "My covenant." He is the author and initiator. We discussed in **chapter 15** that the covenant depended solely on God. Abram could add nothing to it. All he had to do, in fact, all he could do was believe God, have faith in God. That's how God's grace works. Abram falls down before God.

Are you showing God the proper reverence He deserves?

Beginning with **verse 1** and on down through **verse 16**, God speaks, all Abram could do was listen and act in reverence. It reminds of the old commercial "When E.F. Hutton speaks, everyone listens."

Folks, when God speaks, stop talking, stop interrupting and listen to Him. There isn't anyone who can say anything that has greater value than what God has to say to us.

Notice that God reminded Abram of where he had been, now He was going to tell Him where he was going. Not in the sense of a change in location so much as in his destiny.

IV. THE CHANGE BECAUSE OF THE COVENANT IS CATEGORICAL – v. 5, 15

In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet there is an early scene in which Juliet is opining about a name. She is musing about it out loud from her balcony but in the hearing of her love, Romeo, whom she didn't know could hear her. His family, the Montague's were rivals with her family, the Capulet's. She didn't think that a name should matter much especially where love was concerned.

But as we have said a name is important and God is now going to change both their names. Abram would be called Abraham. The first name means exalted father and the second means father of many nations. Think for a moment about the chuckles, the blank stares, or the side jokes he must have received from his servants when he went back and told them to start calling him Abraham. The old guy is finally off his rocker. Here's a 99-year-old guy thinking he's going to become a large number of nations. **Verse 6** also says that not only would he be he father of many nations, but that kings would be in his lineage. It's one thing to say your descendants will populate nations and quite another to say that there would be royalty as well.

God also gave Sarah a new name. From Sarai to Sarah. Both meant princess, but the later name stressed that she would be the mother of nations and kings. Both she and Abraham were to become God's servants in His unfolding plan of redemption.

Something that is emphatic throughout these verses is the emphasis on God's fulfillment of His covenant. Beginning in **verse 2** there are over 21 times God either explicitly or implicitly uses the term "I will". It speaks to the eternal nature of the covenant.

V. THE CONTINUATION OF THE COVENANT IS COMPLETE – vs. 2-22

I will confirm my covenant
I will greatly increase your numbers
I have made you a father of many nations
I will make you very fruitful

I will make nations of you
 I will establish my covenant to be everlasting
 I will give the land as an everlasting possession
 I will be their God
 I will establish my covenant with Isaac

In these verses God is saying that He would fulfill this covenant in its entirety, that it would come through a son born to Abram and Sarah and God told them what to name the child. This covenant would be forever. This is not a new covenant, it's the same covenant with more detail added.

Throughout Scripture we read that God is faithful.
Lamentations 3:23 – “Great is His faithfulness”
I Corinthians 1:9 – “God is faithful”
I Corinthians 10:13 – “God is faithful”
I Thessalonians 5:24 – “Faithful is He that called you”
II Thessalonians 3:3 – “The Lord is faithful”
I John 1:9 – “He (God) is faithful”

Numbers 23:19 “God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent. Hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?”
Hebrews 6:18 – “It is impossible for God to lie.”

Abraham had only to believe what God said especially when you stop to think that most that the only part of the covenant He would see would be the promise of a son.

Hebrews 11:11 “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered Him (God) faithful who had made the promise.”

Now the command around the covenant is considerable.

VI. THE COMMAND AROUND THE COVENANT IS CONSIDERABLE – vs. 9-14

Remember that this is an unconditional and everlasting covenant. So the covenant isn't conditioned on Abraham keeping it but God did give him a command.

The covenant they were to keep required that every male be circumcision. Their refusal meant they were to be expelled from the land because they had broken the covenant requirement. That's why when Moses was returning to Egypt to free the Israelites God was ready to take his life because he had not circumcised his two boys. Circumcision was the seal of the covenant. It would be a reminder that they were God's covenant people and even though other nations practiced circumcision, this had religious significance to them as well, symbolizing cutting away the heart's sinfulness.

Deuteronomy 10:16 “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”

Deuteronomy 30:6 “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”

If a couple chose not to have their son circumcised it was a sign of unbelief.

Kent Hughes notes that **“Circumcision symbolized the spiritual commitment of one's life to God.”** A wedding ring symbolizes our commitment and love to our spouse. Circumcision was to be the symbol of their commitment and love for God.

What is Abraham's response to all this?

VII. THE COMPLIANCE TO THE COVENANT IS CRYSTAL – vs.23-27

I want to mention two things from **verses 17-18** that I want to make certain you understand. The first is found in **verse 17** where we read that after God mentioned Sarah would have a child that Abraham laughed at the thought of an old man and woman well past the years of having children would be blessed in such a way. This is not a lack of faith on his part. If it had been, God would have rebuked him as He will do with Sarah. It was a laugh of joy and amazement. It's the difference between Mary's response to the angel about becoming pregnant when she was a virgin and questioning the angel about how it would be accomplished and the question by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist

when he was visited by the angel in the Temple.

The second thing to mention is Abraham's concern for what would happen to his son Ishmael. For 13 years he was assuming Ishmael was the promised heir. So Abraham wanted to ensure that Ishmael would also receive a blessing. God assured him that Ishmael would receive a blessing and become the father of 12 princes.

They were to name the covenant child Isaac. If you wonder whether God has a sense of humor it is in that name. In this chapter Abram laughed out of joy and amazement. In the next chapter Sarah laughed out of disbelief. Isaac's name means laughter. We can only imagine that every time Abraham called his son's name, he would recall when he laughed with joy over God's news on the day the covenant was confirmed to him.

Now let me close with this thought because we see in the closing verses that not only did Abraham believe God, he was obedient to God. He went out and circumcised all the males of his household. What is of significance is that all the males went along with it indicating that they too believed in the blessing of the covenant given to Abraham and wanted to fall under its protection.

For 13 years Abraham had perhaps been lulled into a false sense of security thinking that God's promise would be fulfilled through Ishmael. There he was sailing along on calm seas, when in reality the sails of his faith needed to be moved along by a little turbulence. God stepped in and reminded him of the promise and how it would unfold in the near future. Without trials it is impossible to mature in our faith. Abraham is learning to wait for God in the silence. He still has a ways to go as we will see. Until he gets to the point of complete commitment to God, he has some more tests that will help further shape his faith. Through his example we come to see how patient God is in helping us grow spiritually.

Abraham is still learning that God's plans are always perfect and that He reveals them to us at the right time. He will only reveal what we need to

know when we need to know it. All He asks of us to trust Him and in the meantime wait patiently on Him.

Here is something to noodle this week as we close:
The Almighty God has spoken to us in His Word, will we trust the God by whom all things are possible even if it means waiting in the silence?