

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17 (NRSV)

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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

¹⁵God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'

*It is faith in Jesus Christ that marks us out as God's people.
But are we truly a faithful people? Do we trust God well?
Will we embrace God's surprises even when they seem impossible?*

Abraham laughs at God! Can you really blame him. He is 100 years old. Sarah is ninety. And yet, God has promised that she will bear a son from whom will spring a great nation. How could such a thing be? It's just silly and God is silly to promise it.

Before we jump on Abraham for scoffing at God's promises, we'd best put ourselves in his shoes. First, Abraham has no conception that the unnamed¹ god to whom he has been speaking is the one and only Creator and Lord. So far as Abraham knows, the god who called him is one among many. Second, Abraham has no reason to think that this god is omniscient, omnipotent, or anything like it. The gods worshipped in the ancient near-east were a numerous, varied, and capricious bunch, who made as much trouble as anything else.

But to really understand this story, we have to go back to the beginning . . . way back.

A promise made

In the beginning, God made everything there is. And God pronounced it good. God made humans in God's image and gave them a beautiful place to live and work and walk with God. But desiring to be like gods themselves, the humans tossed it all away, wrecking their relationship with God and taking creation down with them.

But, by grace and grace alone, God set about to put things right, choosing Noah and his family as a fresh start. That didn't work out either. As soon as Noah and kin emerged from the boat, things began to fall apart. Again, the humans tried to make themselves like gods, building a tower to the heavens.

So again . . . and still by grace and grace alone . . . God set about to put things right, to restore all of creation, to make right God's relationship with humanity, to bring justice and mercy to an unjust and merciless world. And this time, God chose a man named Abram² and his wife Sarai to be the ones through whom things would be put right.

¹God would not reveal God's name to Abraham. Moses learns God's name, YHWH, at the burning bush in the Sinai Wilderness (Exodus 3). It is always important to try to avoid importing the full revelation of God that Jesus brings when we turn to the Old Testament. Monotheism would not come to flower among the Israelites until more than a thousand years after Abraham.

²The given names of the couple are Abram and Sarai. After establishing his promises to them, God changes their names to Abraham (meaning "father" or "ancestor") and Sarah (meaning "princess").

God chooses them and makes a profound, cosmos-changing, yet simple set of promises. God will give them a land. They will be the parents of a great nation. All the families of the earth . . . yes, all . . . will be blessed through them (Genesis 12:1-3). God elaborates on this (see esp. Genesis 15), but those are the basics. A family for Abram and Sarai that will have a land of their own and through whom God's work of renewal and restoration will sweep across the planet and all its people.

As a sign of this promise, God instructs Abram that all the males of his family are to be circumcised. It is not that the circumcision is a condition of God's promises being kept. Rather, circumcision is a sign, an outward marker, a baptism of sorts into the family through whom God is working in a special and focused way. There is no deal on the table, just God's promises.

"All the families of the earth"

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of today's passage and all the covenant stories from Genesis. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet.

Abraham is not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. The book of Ruth tells the story of a young Moabite woman who, through her Jewish mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God's people. She is rescued for the sake of all Israel, as she becomes the great-grandmother of King David.

Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, were to be the ones through whom God's project of renewing all of creation moved forward. It was never only about the Israelites. They were part of a much bigger plan.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others. So are we.

Blameless?

In 17:1, God tells Abram, "I am El Shaddai; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant³ between you and me." It would be a mistake to think that God has introduced a condition here, as if God says: *if* you are blameless, *then* I'll put the world right. God *is* going to restore the cosmos, all the families *will* be blessed. God is not only the great promise maker but the great promise keeper.⁴ But will it be through Abraham?⁵ Abraham could back out. God will not violate even his free will.

And what does God expect from Abraham if he is to be the bearer of new creation?⁶ Faithfulness. The Hebrew word translated "blameless" doesn't speak to sinfulness but to faithfulness. God and Abraham are to belong to one another: "I will be their God and they will be my people."

Abraham demonstrates his own commitment to faithful relationship by falling on his face before God. In all that follows, it will always be this mutual faithfulness that lies at the heart of the covenant. It is Abraham's faithfulness that is tested by God when he tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It is Abraham's faithfulness that is lifted up by Paul in Romans 4 when he seeks to show that the story of God and his people has always been a story about faithfulness. It is Jesus' faithfulness that enables God's promises to be kept at last. It is faithfulness that God expects of each of us.

But what happens next reveals Abraham's lack of understanding and perhaps even reveals his fear of the commitment he has made.

³"Covenant" carries a connotation of mutuality which a promise doesn't. This covenant begins to take on the trappings of near-east covenants between rulers and subjects with the odd ritual of 15:7-21.

⁴Bearing this in mind becomes all important when we come to Paul's letters in the New Testament. The book of Romans is Paul's defense of God's righteousness: God made a promise and, yes, God has kept and is keeping that promise – even if it doesn't look like it much of the time. I'm very excited to be teaching a Bible Academy class on Romans this fall. I'll be teaching it twice: Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings. More info and registration for the fall session will soon be ready at the Bible Academy's website: www.thebibleacademy.com.

⁵It is at this point in the story that God changes Abram's name to Abraham.

⁶Note how the language of this section is tied to the "fruitfulness" language of the creation stories at the beginning of Genesis.

Yes, a son

Sadly, right after Abraham falls on his face, demonstrating his commitment to be faithful, he immediately demonstrates that he doesn't really get it. It is reminiscent of the disciples' own blindness to the truth of Jesus' vocation and ministry; e.g. the disciples fought over who is the greatest as Jesus prepares for his own death (Luke 22:24-29). Abraham commits himself to a faithful relationship and then immediately scoffs at the idea that God could actually do what God promised. Ninety-year old women don't have babies! Besides, isn't Ishmael⁷ enough? Abraham asks.

Regardless of how impossible it seems, Sarah is to have a son of her own. Why? Because God has promised it – and, of course, God's promises will be kept.

A bit later, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three men who are, unbeknownst to the couple, actually God in the company of two angels. When Sarah overhears a conversation about her having a baby, she laughs at the very idea. Yet, God tellingly asks, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"

Of course nothing is too wonderful for God. God is involved in this world and in our lives every day. Most of the time, God's work goes little noticed or not at all. But sometimes, God surprises us in a big way, something out of left field, something that we would have thought to be impossible. We might even call it a miracle, which is alright, so long as we remember that God works through very ordinary people and very ordinary means much more often than through "miracles."

READING WITH HEART & MIND, AUGUST 5 - 11

Sunday, Jonah 1 Nineveh was the capital city of Israel's enemies, the Assyrians and was a big place. It is pretty easy to understand why Jonah runs away rather than be the bearer of God's message for the city. Why do the sailors cast lots to find out who has displeased the gods. (This is a great example of the ancient belief that the gods were the first cause of all events, even the roll of some dice). How do you think the sailors knew that Jonah was running away from God?

Monday, Jonah 2 What meaning can you find in Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving for being saved from the storm? Notice that he prays while still in the fish's belly. Do you think that God spoke to the fish because of Jonah's prayer?

Tuesday, Jonah 3 This is really the big miracle in the story: not three days in the fish but the entire city actually repenting. They hear and heed the message that Jonah brings! What do you make of God's changing his mind. This is far from the only instance in the Bible. How would you try to explain this to someone else?

Wednesday, Jonah 4 What is Jonah's reaction to the city's repentance? Why does Jonah want to die? What is God's response? What is the point of the worm and the plant? Do you think that the book of Jonah is to be read as history, recounting events that actually happened, or as an extended parable or as something else? What difference would your answer make to your reading of the story or its message and theology?

Thursday, 2 John It has been suggested that 2 John is a cover letter to accompany 1 John. What message do you take away from this letter? Why do you think that it is in the New Testament? How would you summarize its warnings about false teaching? Why would such attention be paid to deceptive teachers?

Friday, 3 John Here too: why in the New Testament? What are the themes? Notice the attention paid to the doing of good. How we live matters – a lot.

Saturday, Jude Jude was one of Jesus' half-brothers (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Notice again the attention paid to false teachers. How do we go about discerning true teaching of Scripture from false teaching?

⁷When God first tells Abraham and Sarah that they are to have a son, Sarah, knowing she is far past childbearing years, takes matters into her own hands and sends a slave girl, Hagar, to her husband. Abraham is to impregnate Hagar so he can have his heir. Of course, that isn't God's plan and the whole episode with Hagar and the baby, Ishmael, turns out badly. God declares that Sarah is to give birth to a son herself. Not only does Abraham laugh at the idea, but so does Sarah (Genesis 18:12).

