

THE COVENANT RENEWED

Genesis 17

We have reached another of the important crises in the history of Abraham and are to behold again the matchless grace of God in His dealings with the father of all them that believe. God always has some fresh surprise of knowledge, grace and blessing with which to delight His children. We see this again and again in the life of Abraham and not least of all in the story recorded in chapter seventeen.

Thirteen years had elapsed since Abraham in impatient unbelief had "hearkened to the voice of Sarah." Abraham had to live those thirteen years in the presence of his attempt to help God out, and all of that time he knew that his way was not in accordance with God's plan. Nothing is recorded about those years, and we may assume that there was no special or new revelation of God's will during the time. Perhaps God just let him meditate during those years. Anyway, this interval is passed over in silence; it is a blank, a period of spiritual barrenness.

After these thirteen years God appeared to His servant again. God has more than one way of communicating with us. The normal channel is through the Bible, but He also speaks directly to us through the Holy Spirit and sometimes through the providential disposal of our circumstances. This fresh appearance of God brought with it a new message. He said, "I am the Almighty God."

Why did Abraham have to wait all this while before the Lord appeared to him again? Why must so many years drag their weary course before God reveals Himself once more and makes the promise to give him Isaac? God was about to act in grace, but ere grace can be displayed the creature has first to come to the end of himself; before divine power is put forth man must learn his own impotency. Not till Abraham's body was "dead" would God fulfil His Word and give him a son. God's opportunity does not come until man's extremity is reached. This is a lesson we sorely need to take to heart, for it is of great practical importance. The Lord has a reason for all His delays. God not only does that which is right and best, but He always acts at the right time and best time. Not until our own powers are "dead" will God act in grace.

To apply this principle to your own life, let me ask, Are you anxiously exercised over God's delay about something? He has some wise purpose for it. He had with Abraham, and He has with you. God has more than one reason for His delays. Often it is to test the faith of His children, to develop their patience or to bring them to the end of themselves.

Abraham needed to be reminded of God's Almightyness. It was for want of considering this that he had resorted to sinful devices. Another lesson which we need to learn is never to employ unlawful means in seeking to promote the work of our Lord. How sorely the Lord's servants need to heed this truth! Like Abraham, they are longing for seed, spiritual seed, but it does not appear, so they too often resort to unworthy methods to produce seed of themselves, arguing that the end justifies the means. The effectual cure for all impatient anxiety is to reckon on the One Who is all-gracious, all-powerful and all-sufficient.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared unto him and said, "I am the Almighty God." The revelation which God here made of Himself was well suited to the occasion. This was the first time that He revealed Himself as "the Almighty." None except the omnipotent One could meet Abraham's need at that time. Ninety-nine years of age and his body dead, Sarah barren and long past the age of child-bearing--how could they hope to have a son? But, with God all things are possible. Why? He is El Shaddai, the All-Sufficient One.

Shad means a woman's breast. El Shaddai means God the breasted one, the God Who is enough, the all-sufficient One. Who has not tried to care for a restless, fretful child? Finally,

the mother of the child would say, "Give me that child." Immediately after she took it and hugged it to her breast, it got quiet. It got quiet because it was where it was. The mother's breast rests the child, nourishes the child, strengthens the child and satisfies the child. So, the God Who is all-sufficient wants to pour Himself into my life, rest me, nourish me, strengthen me and satisfy me. He can satisfy me here as well as He can satisfy me in heaven. The Christian must thus learn to live above the circumstances of this life. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament. Christ said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." He rests us by revelation, redemption and reconciliation. We can find satisfaction in Him Who has met every need of man. El Shaddai is the God Who can do whatever is necessary.

After God had broken the long silence between Himself and His servant and revealed Himself as the One Who possessed limitless power and infinite resources, He uttered a twofold command, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect." God thus called upon His servant to live and move in the divine presence and to be sincere, genuine, true-hearted and upright. To walk before is suggestive of a child running ahead and playing in the presence of his father, conscious of his perfect security because his father is just behind. Spiritual life in this world consists of walking before God. The idea of walking arises from the conception of life as a journey brought about by the passage of time. In the Hebrew language it expresses conduct or behavior. To walk before God, therefore, is to carry out every action, speak every word and think every thought with the realization that one is in the presence of God. "Walk before me, and be thou perfect." Thus God covers the life of the believer in this world and in the world to come. Perfection is the standard which God set before us. We are constantly to strive toward it. In the world to come the believer will be perfect.

To Abraham, God said, "I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly." This meant that God would bring Abraham into a special relationship with Himself. Multiplying was the result of entering into covenant relationship with God. Fruitfulness follows this relationship. Flowing from our own relationship with God in Christ comes the blessing of others won to Him. As time goes on and those whom we have led to Christ bring others, the numbers of those to whom we shall have been a channel of blessing grows larger and larger.

The personal result was soon seen. "Abraham fell on his face." This is the attitude of adoration and worship. It implies also the sense of unworthiness to look upon God. This attitude of reverence and of readiness shows that Abraham realized the solemnity of the occasion. Now that God condescends to reveal Himself again to Abraham, the patriarch is overwhelmed at such grace in the light of his taking matters into his own hands instead of leaving them with God and resorting to fleshly expediences instead of patiently waiting for God to act. Thus, we may regard Abraham's falling on his face as a case of wonderment at the divine favor shown him notwithstanding his lack of faith and his impatience.

"God talked with him." What a high privilege Abraham had of listening to God! Once again God showed His trust in His servant. He would not hide from him what He was about to do. How beautiful is the picture of this holy familiarity between the mighty God and His servant! God likes to talk with all His children. To us He speaks through His Word and through the Holy Spirit.

It is not surprising that God gave to Abraham an especially strong assurance. "As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee." In those words God was reminding Abraham that He had never been unmindful of His solemn promises to him. He simply reminded His servant of an already existing covenant. Then He proceeded to tell him some of the forthcoming results of this existing fact. Not even the silence of thirteen years could alter God's purposes or change His mind concerning Abraham.

In this new revelation in verses four to eight God dealt with three things--Abraham, the land and his descendants. The original promise of God was expanded, and in order to correspond with the expansion the name of His servant was changed from Abram, which meant "exalted father," to Abraham, which meant "father of a multitude." This was to indicate that God's covenant was not made with Abram the Chaldean chieftain but with Abraham the believer. Moreover, the change of name implied an entrance into a new relationship with God.

This change of name had two effects. First, Abraham ceased to be exalted. This happens when God saves a person. Self is abased, and Christ takes the place of self on the throne of the believer's life. Second, Abraham became the source of blessing to a great multitude. This also happens when a sinner is saved. Before his salvation he is barren spiritually, but thereafter he becomes a means of blessing to many.

Abraham is now told his part in the matter. It is very striking and suggestive to notice that all he was required to do was to obey God's Word in the one respect mentioned in these verses. This is another illustration of the fact that God's covenant of grace is one-sided. God is the Giver; man is the receiver and never the equal. The conditions to be fulfilled are stated in verses ten to fourteen.

The name of Abraham's wife was changed also. This is another indication of God's purpose and a special assurance of blessing. The change of name given to her at the same time as to her husband shows that she too was brought into covenant relationship with God. The covenant blessings were not restricted to Abraham and his male descendants, but Sarah was included. The change of name represents a change of status, and it is typical of the change of nature received in regeneration. For the first time Sarah was announced as the mother of the promised seed. Up to this occasion everything had been couched in general terms as to "seed" but without special reference to Sarah. God's blessing upon Sarah turned her barrenness into fertility. The consequence of His blessing us must be spiritual fertility or the winning of others to Christ.

Abraham received the new revelation of God with reverence. He fell on his face. This attitude of worship is the proper one for a creature before his Creator or a redeemed being before his Redeemer. It is reasonable to conclude that this laugh of Abraham's arose from triumphant faith and exultant joy. It was evidently the laugh of a faith which, while taking God at His word, considered the news almost too good to be true. God's revelations to His people often seem to be too good to be true, and, yet, they are true.

But, there is one shadow over the scene. Abraham was thinking of his growing son. His prayer was that Ishmael might live before God. In view of the coming birth of a son to Sarah, Abraham did not want Ishmael excluded. The words "live before Thee" may mean spend his life in the conscious presence of God and be a worshipper of Him, or they may mean "be alive in the eyes of God" rather than dead and unnoticed. In other words, Abraham was anxious for Ishmael to be real to God and thus be the object of His constant care. How natural was this appeal on behalf of Ishmael! The boy had won his way into his father's heart, and it would have been surprising from the natural and human standpoint if Abraham had not desired Ishmael to be his heir. Yet, notwithstanding the naturalness of the appeal, there lay at the root of it a desire to have "some substitute for God's promises." It is as though anything else would do as well. God knows better than His servant, and we have His answer at once.

Not even the intense appeal could stand before God's purposes. God assured Abraham that Sarah was indeed to be the mother of the seed, that the son's name would be Isaac (meaning laughter) and that the covenant which was to be everlasting was to be realized through Isaac and not through Ishmael. Isaac was to be the ancestor of Christ. His descendants and not Ishmael's were to be in special relationship with God. He was to be the heir of the blessings and promises. However, Ishmael was not to be forgotten. He was Abraham's seed and was to be blessed and made a great nation.

As God's time for communion had come to an end, He left His servant to ponder what had been said and to respond to the revelation. How prompt was his obedience? It was done as God had commanded on the selfsame day. How striking in their simplicity are these words indicating the immediateness of Abraham's trustful obedience! This is ever the pathway of blessing. "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it," and the sooner the better. How complete was his obedience? Not only as to himself and Ishmael but also to all his house, Abraham fulfilled the divine requirement and bestowed the sign of the covenant. They were all included in the divine blessings, for God knew that Abraham would influence aright his entire household.

In this fresh revelation Abraham learned much about God, and we need to learn the same lessons today. The more we know of God, the stronger and richer and better will be our lives. Abraham received a new view of God's character. God revealed Himself to him as a God of might and power and, as such, able to fulfil all his hopes. He received a wider view of God's purposes. He obtained a clearer view of God's will. God's will for us, as it was for Abraham, is loyal obedience to Him. Abraham also received a fuller view of God's grace. It was grace that prompted, planned and provided these blessings for him. It was grace that condescended to Abraham's weaknesses, faults and limitations. It was grace that persisted with him and provided everything for him.