

Cut Away 4-3-07

Genesis 17

Last week, we took a close look at the first verse of this chapter. We saw that it had been 13 years since the last time God had spoken to Abram. Ishmael had been born, and Abram had probably settled into a comfortable routine. His desire for an heir, he thought, had been granted. There must have been a real closeness between the two of them. Abram must have believed everything was finally working out, and then God showed up.

Do you think maybe we develop the same kind of ruts for our lives? We step into a wrong path, and in God's gracious mercy it isn't as bad as it could have been, so we get comfortable. We start to settle into the idea that the compromise is the fulfillment. We even put our hopes and dreams into that compromise. Then God shows up. Our response to God's interruption of our routine is entirely dependent on where our heart is. (Acts 9:3)

When God appeared to Abram, God challenged him with a greater revelation of the power of God, and a challenge to get even more serious with God. "*I am God Almighty!*" he told Abram. It seems that Abram had stopped believing that it was possible for Sarai to have a baby. God gave Abram a wake up call in the revelation of El Shaddai. He was telling Abram, "I can do anything! Walk before me and be blameless." I think that is a great one-sentence call to recommitment. I hope that each of us heard that call last week. (Jeremiah 32:27)

God told Abram, in [verse 2](#), that He would confirm the covenant with him. Abram must of shook his head and been thinking, "Huh? But God, you already gave me a son." The covenant also included the promise of the land, but the context of the exchange shows that God is talking about the heir he promised Abram.

Abram fell on his face before God. It is a position of utter humility. Any revelation of God should cause man to fall on their face, but this revelation began with the revelation that God is all-powerful and that Abram is required to be blameless, all the more reason to be on your face. Then God went right into the confirmation of a covenant Abram thought had already been fulfilled. When you realize your direction has not been God's direction but that of your own making, you better be on your face. Have you ever been there? I certainly have. One minute you think you are in the center of God's will, and the next you realize you are out of God's will and being a poor testimony for the cause of Christ. It's like dying.

There are three portions in God's revelation, God's part, Abram's part, and Sarai's. [Verse 4](#) begins God's side (the "as for me" portion) of the confirming of the covenant. God changed Abram's name from "exalted father" to "father of many nations", Abraham. God sure knows how to keep His end of agreements. Abraham is the father of the Arabs, Jews, and people groups descended from his third wife Keturah, not to mention the world wide spiritual fulfillment in churches scattered around the whole world. (Romans 4:11-12) When, in [verse 6](#), God promised to

Commented [notes1]: 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.
Acts 9:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 27 "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"
Jer 32:27 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 2 I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."
Gen 17:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations."
Gen 17:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 12 And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.
Romans 4:11-12 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.
Gen 17:6 (NIV)

make him very fruitful, He sure meant it! He went on to promise to be the God of his descendents and renewed the promise to give the land of Canaan to them, that is, to the promised line of Isaac.

In [verse 9](#), we have Abraham's side of the covenant, the "as for you" portion. God hasn't asked anything of Him to this point, other than to leave the land of his birth and go to the land He showed him. ([Genesis 12:1](#)) Abram is about to hear what is required of him. He was to be circumcised and to circumcise every male in his camp, whether related or merely a servant. It wasn't that this act would somehow please God. God's requirement is to be blameless. [Verse 11](#) tells us why God required them to be circumcised, for a sign. This would be an outward sign that this group of people had entered into a special covenant with God. Those in this covenant relationship expected the promised seed that would come. They expected the Promised Land. They believed in an all-powerful God that is capable of bringing things that He has promised to pass.

Commented [notes7]: 9 Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. Gen 17:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. Gen 12:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. Gen 17:11 (NIV)

In [verse 13](#), God made an unusual statement about circumcision. He said it was to be an everlasting sign. We all know that our bodies will one-day decay. How can it be everlasting? Perhaps God meant that generation after generation would keep the ritual sign. But why do we need the sign after the seed is born and the people inherit the land? We'll come back to this in a moment.

Commented [notes10]: 13 Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Gen 17:13 (NIV)

Then God gave the "as for Sarai" portion, and gave her a new name, Sarah. Some believe that the original name meant "strife, contention, quarrelsome". Sarah means "princess". God was saying, "Don't call her "contentious" any more. Now you are to call her "princess". Husbands, do you think the Lord might be trying to tell us something? (Think about that one.) ([1Peter 3:7](#)) Some etymologists believe that God was adding something of Himself to their names. God is referred to as Jah ([Psalm 68:4](#)). See the (ah) inserted into the names Abr(ah)am and Sar(ah).

Commented [notes11]: 7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. 1 Peter 3:7 (NIV)

But all this, other than the name changes, is not new. [Verse 16](#), however, will change everything. *"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."* Notice "by her", a 90 year old childless lady! That is when it was helpful to recall the first verse, that God is Almighty! It must have taken Abraham by surprise. Somewhere during this revelation, Abraham had gotten back on his feet. When he heard this, the next verse says, *Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"*

Commented [notes12]: 4 Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, and rejoice before him. Psalms 68:4 (KJV)

Later, the LORD will rebuke Sarah for laughing when she hears what God is going to do. ([Genesis 18:12-13](#)) This makes me believe the laughter from Abraham is more of humor at the thought of God giving a child to people their age. He wasn't laughing at God's ability, but the thought of it actually coming to pass.

Commented [notes13]: 12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?" 13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'" Gen 18:12-13 (NIV)

Suddenly it must have dawned on Abraham what God was saying. His use of Hagar was not what God had in mind. His excitement about Ishmael inheriting everything was misplaced, but he loved him. Finally we have Abraham's first words in the

chapter. "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" It was a cry of, "Oh my gosh, what have I done. Please don't hold it against Ishmael. Please bless him."

¹⁹ Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. God gave Abraham the same answer He often gives us, "Yes, but..." In other words, I will do what you are praying, but I have other plans than what you are thinking. Name my plan, "laughter". You see, ultimately, God has the last laugh. We mess things up by going our own way and doing things our way, then God comes along, when we have made His will seemingly impossible, and He has the last laugh. (Psalm 2:4) By making it beyond all natural possibility, God gets all the glory. It reminds me of Jesus waiting two days after He heard Lazarus had died before He returned to resurrect him. (John 11:6-7) He picks the most impossible to make the greatest witnesses. (1Corinthians 1:27-29)

In verse 20, God promised that Ishmael would be the father of 12 tribes, but the covenant of the promised seed and the inheritance of the land were with the son named "laughter". Then God told Abraham the birth would take place about a year from that time. And God went up from Abraham, His presence lifted. He was done communicating what Abraham needed to hear.

In the rest of the chapter, Abraham immediately did the "as for you" portion of God's communication. This is an indication of his eagerness to do the revealed will of God. We need that same eagerness to not delay when we know God's leading. He circumcised himself and his 13-year-old son, Ishmael and all the servants in his household that very day. He didn't hesitate one bit. Now the world was divided into two camps, those circumcised people who had entered into a covenant with God, and those who had not.

But what does all this mean to us? Thankfully, we have the New Testament to explain to us today, the application for our lives. God was calling out a group of people through whom He would bring the Promised Seed. He set those people in the Promised Land. He did bring about every one of His promises to Abraham. So aren't they done and over with? Remember earlier, I pointed out that there is something eternal about this covenant renewal. There is a deeper layer to be uncovered. As with much of the Old Testament, this is a picture of deep spiritual realities that are important to us today. (Hebrews 10:1)

Moses, the author, told us of the spiritual significance in his fifth book, Deuteronomy. He told them that the Lord had chosen them, just as we read in our chapter for today. But in that book, instead of reiterating physical circumcision, he said, ¹⁶ *Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.* Deuteronomy 10:16 (NIV) When God speaks, we should turn toward Him and listen with all our heart. When God directs, yield, instead of being hardhearted and going our own way. Circumcision, then, was a picture of having a heart that attuned to God instead of one's own desires.

Commented [notes14]: 4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Psalms 2:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 6 Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. 7 Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." John 11:6-7 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.

1 Cor 1:27-29 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. Gen 17:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming--not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Heb 10:1 (NIV)

Towards the end of that same book, Moses also told the people that if they turned away from God, and then were taken away as captives, they could repent. (Deuteronomy 30:1-3) When they realized that God was punishing them and prayed for mercy, Moses wrote, *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.* Deuteronomy 30:6 (NIV) In this picture, circumcision meant the heart for the things of the world was cut away, and only a heart for God would remain. That is to truly live. This brings us to the Apostle Paul's use of the term in the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul gives us a number of spiritual lessons from Genesis 17. First, he relates what Christ has done in us as the true circumcision, that is, when He takes away our old nature and makes us new in Him. ⁹ *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,* ¹⁰ *and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.* ¹¹ *In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,* ¹² *having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.* Colossians 2:9-12 (NIV) Do you see the connection with the quote from Moses? The heart for the world is cut away, and a heart for God remains. Many people claim to be Christians, but their life doesn't show that their desire for the world has been cut away.

In this passage, Paul also relates circumcision to baptism. Both are renouncing the old life. Both are declaring a new allegiance. Both identify those taking place in the ritual as people now in covenant with God. Both are signs that something has already taken place, not a work that merits God's blessing. That is why our baptismal has a portion of this verse. This brings us to another point the Apostle Paul drew from the story.

Abraham was already declared righteous in a previous chapter. (Genesis 15:6) Circumcision was a sign and a seal of that righteousness, not a path to it. ⁹ *Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.* ¹⁰ *Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!* ¹¹ *And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.* Romans 4:9-11 (NIV)

Just as the Jews of that day thought that their circumcision earned them some special place with God, so today, many who are baptized think that it earns some kind of credit with God. Both are a picture to us and the world that something in our hearts has changed. Our allegiances are no longer to self or the world. We are declaring that we have entered into a covenant relationship with God.

We had some wonderful baptisms in the Jordan River. Before each one, the person being baptized spoke of the change that had taken place in their life to all who could

Commented [notes19]: 1 When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Deut 30:1-3 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. Gen 15:6 (NIV)

hear. If your heart has been changed by the Lord, you should follow His example and go through this ritual that declares to the world, we have changed. We have new allegiances. We have entered into a covenant with the Almighty. The old nature has been cut away! Like Abraham, you should be eager to do so. Some of you remember Mac Fish. He made a commitment to Christ one Sunday morning, and I baptized him in the creek that afternoon. Like Abraham, he couldn't wait to obey.

The picture we have seen in Genesis 17 is of a people who are stepping out on a limb and believing something different from the world. They believe the promises of God. They believe the seed will be miraculously born. They believe they will inherit the land. They so believe it that that belief sets them apart from everyone else. They are marked as God believers.

Baptism presents the same picture. In two weeks we will have some baptisms, and I ask you to consider if you need to declare that you believe something different from the world. Have you entered into a covenant relationship with God? Do you believe the seed of Abraham, Christ Jesus, came into the world, just as God promised, and rescued you from the clutches of Satan? Do you believe the Promised Land is yours by faith, not physical Israel, but the eternal New Jerusalem? Then let the world know by being publicly baptized.

I can't help but think that when God made these promises, His eyes were on the eternal realities and not the temporal pictures. Heaven and earth will pass away. (Luke 21:33) The everlasting sign between God and us is our transformed hearts that were changed by what Jesus did in our place. We are looking forward as Abraham did to our eternal home, in the heavenlies, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:10)

Commented [notes21]: 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Luke 21:33 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Heb 11:10 (NIV)

One final quote from the Apostle Paul about our chapter for this week, ²⁸ *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.* ²⁹ *No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.* Romans 2:28-29 (NIV) Has your heart been circumcised by Jesus? Are you sensitive to His voice? Have you publicly declared that you are in a covenant relationship with Jesus, and that your allegiances are to Him and not the world?

This was an amazing thing that God was offering to Abraham. It is an amazing thing that He offers us. The God of the universe, Creator of all things, invites you to be in a special relationship with Him. As for God, He sent His only Son to die in your place, to pay the debt you owed. As for you, He just asks that you allow Him to circumcise your heart, to cut away the old nature that brings so much destruction into your life (Romans 6:4), to make your heart sensitive to Him. What a gracious offer to Abraham and to you and me. Are you willing?

Commented [notes23]: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life"

If you are, *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.* Deuteronomy 30:6 (NIV) Live!