

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Unforgettable Reminders"

Text: Genesis 17

RGGJR/FBCCS/6-6-21 **UNEDITED**

- In the 4th grade, I accidentally stuck a sharp pencil into the palm of my right hand. Many decades later, I remain a marked man (right there). Back then, without the help of the internet to inform me, I thought I was going to die from "lead poisoning" because I had been stuck by a pencil *lead*. I finally discovered pencil leads are not lead but graphite. I have lived on for many years with the only lasting impact being an artistic black-dot tattoo. It remains an **unforgettable reminder** of the day in 4th grade I thought I was a goner.
- The Hagar story from chapter 16 of *Genesis* can be tough to preach but things don't get much easier with chapter 17. Much of this chapter is given over to the command of God for male circumcision as an "**unforgettable reminder.**"
- I have mentioned a few times now that *Genesis* deals often with stories involving human sexuality and especially human sexual reproduction. Moses is not reticent to talk about sexual subjects because sex is part of God's plan that humans—males and females—will reproduce to fill the earth with God's glorious NAME.
- All along, this filling the earth with God's image by having babies, is pointing to a narrower truth that someday one baby will be born. That child will be THE PERFECT imager of God in human flesh.
- So, as I say, Genesis often talks about human reproduction through narratives that have some sexual content—both righteous and unrighteous in nature.
- If you grew up as an Independent Fundamental Baptist, as I did, we both might conclude it does this to teach us what is sinful, wrong or "dirty" sexually. But there is a bigger point being made. That is this. Since THE Messiah will come through human reproduction, one would expect the forces opposed to God's redemptive plan would attempt to corrupt human reproduction. AND, they certainly do!

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- So then, we would be naïve not to recognize that the assaults today on the biblical pattern of male husband and female wife as a family reproducing children are more than chance attacks that just randomly happen to be about sex and gender. The corruption of sexual truths and gender truths from Scripture are clearly a direct attack on God's sovereignty and plan as the Creator.
- These attacks are not simply about having the right to decide my own gender or the right to have a sexual relationship outside of one man and one woman in marriage. They are a statement of human claims to have **autonomy** from God's rule and God's plan.
- These rebellious ways sexually are not random chance increases in sin. They are carefully aimed by the Powers of Darkness at God's way. They attack the purity of the reproductive means of his plan in an attempt to sully his glorious Name. We will see these attacks repeatedly in this book of "*the beginnings.*"
- So, keep in mind what we saw in chapter 16 last week. Sarai and Abram took the reproductive aspect of producing the promised seed into their own hands using Sarai's maid, Hagar to make things happen their way. I think that gives us at least a hint of why God chose one of the **unforgettable reminder signs** of the covenant we will read about in chapter 17.
- Also, please keep in mind, my simple but repeated statement about Genesis that the book shows us, "*one way or another God will carry out HIS plan—one way or another God will keep every promise he has made and do that perfectly and righteously.*"
- God will do this with the agency of a specific human if that human responds in faith that lifts up the Name of the LORD. God will bless specific humans—that is, God will empower some humans—to carry out his plan **if** they are trusting him and acting righteously.

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- **Remember, we are not talking heaven and hell here.** We are not building a theology of eternal destiny with these truths. We are instead talking about the persons God will use for carrying out **HIS** plan.
- We are talking about how human beings can experience being a part of that plan—how human beings can experience the blessings promised in that plan through faith and obedience in righteousness.
- Before I get into the chapter, some of you may want to know that I see the repetition of the covenant promises here in *Genesis* 17 not as a second covenant made with Abram but as a **reminder** of the covenant that God made unilaterally in *Genesis* 15 when he walked between the parts of the animals while Abram slept.
- I think those promises remain unconditional. God, "*one way or another will carry out HIS plan. God will keep every promise he has made perfectly and righteously.*"
- Some, in the promised lineage, like their Father Abram, will believe God and will trust God and be blessed or empowered to participate personally in that plan.
- As we have been shown concerning Abram and Sarai, these human participants won't have perfect faith all of the time. They won't live in perfect righteousness all of the time. However, God will make the calculations on who participates and who does not. Sometimes, as we will see in chapters 17, he will even draw a distinct bright line for who is eligible to participate and who is not.
- Let's work our way through this chapter focused, once again, on the promises of God, the human response to those promises **and** importantly for this chapter two **unforgettable reminders--signs** from God reminding humans of the **source** of these promises.
- Please look at *Genesis* 17 beginning at verse 1. **READ Genesis 17:1-8**

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- As I said, I think this is the same covenant **signed** unilaterally by God as the fiery torch and oven, with the sleeping Abram in *Genesis 15*.
- *So what is the point of this repetition?* Time has passed and humans don't always do well with waiting. Waiting can confuse us. We can forget what was actually said and we can begin to doubt.
- It has now been around 13 years since the human urge to "just do it!" and make God's plan happen debacle with Hagar. There still is no baby born to Sarai. I suspect Abram and Sarai may be concluding that, in spite of all the issues it caused, their human just-do-it plan has worked and Ishmael will indeed be the promised seed and line.
- But now, God will clarify and God wonderfully and graciously will assure Abram as he repeats the promises and provides **unforgettable reminder signs** of the covenant he has made.
- This time God provides the name "El-Shaddai." If for no other reason than Amy Grant, you may know this name of God. Even if Amy was certain of her exegetical theological work and knew for sure exactly what this name means, many who study it are still not.
- The Hebrew word for "*covenant*" shows up 13 times in this chapter where God calls himself "El-Shaddai." Other contexts where the word is used are also most often connected with God's covenant. So, I conclude this name emphasizes something about **God's relationship to his promises**.
- In more recent times, some uses of words like those in this name found in other texts suggest the idea of *mountains* or even of *breasts* with the emphasis being on the power to supply for needs.
- So, today, in this context with the truth it teaches about God being the **supplier** of what is needed to fulfill his covenants, I think *El-Shaddai* is a name of God that emphasizes **God** does this—**God** provides what is necessary for his plan—**God himself is the resource**

behind the blessings of the one who trusts Him and participates in his promises and fulfills his plans.

- But, for Abram to be the human who experiences this provision to be a part of fulfilling the promises the test says that, Abram must **"walk before God—El-Shaddai—the almighty provider—and must be blameless."**
- Once again, those of us who grew up as Independent Fundamental Baptists might easily jump to the conclusion that God is requiring Abram to be a "good boy"—to be moral and not do sinful things. That moral behavior emphasis is, at best, only a secondary *result* of what God is requiring here.
- To **"walk before God"** is to place yourself in his *vision* and *control* to **direct your walk**. My sweet granddaughter Nora loves to act as if she can walk. In reality, she has to *"walk before someone."* That is someone bigger, stronger and wiser than her must walk behind her holding her up and directing where she goes.
- To participate in the blessings of the plan, Abram must walk **before El-Shaddai** who will be holding him up and directing him.
- **"Blameless,"** could also read **"complete"** or **"whole."** The point would be that Abram must walk before God who is holding him up and directing him like my Nora **all the time—completely—all the time**. Nora cannot yet walk well on her own even for a short time!
- The Nora illustration works to teach one other lesson. Someday, Lord willing, Nora will be able to take steps on her own—to walk without those hands behind her holding her up and guiding her. However Abram never will!
- The whole of Abram's life, if he wishes to participate, will never grow him up NOT to need El-Shaddai for the promises. Sometimes, I think we believers live as if we have grown enough in knowledge,

experience and righteousness that we can do it ourselves **FOR** God.
We cannot! Not Ever!

- I think this is the same idea that Jesus ½ brother James was writing about in James 1. When we walk through life, and the promises need fulfilling, God will give us wisdom about that but with a condition. That condition is that we are "**whole-minded**" and not doubting—not "**double-minded**" as James calls it. This double-mindedness is not that we have questions or that our faith never waivers even a little bit.
- This double-minded doubt is us doubting that we absolutely need God to be holding our hands and moving us forward wisely for every step of life in fulfilling his plan. We are **double-minded doubters** when we begin to believe we can tackle life ourselves and still remain as agents and participants in the blessings of God's plan. We absolutely cannot!
- After last week's sermon on the feeling we have sometimes that, **to do something is better than to do nothing**, this may help clarify. We should never just do something on our own. I suggest if you feel the need to "**do something**," quiet your heart and consider the truth here and in *James*. To do this "**something**" have I truly considered if I am actually letting go of God's hands to walk by myself instead of walking wholly before him? Asking that question and thinking about your "**mindedness**" is the one thing "**to do**" when the urge comes to **do something instead of nothing**.
- God will "**confirm his covenant**" in Abram's experience if Abram will walk before him completely. *One way or another God will carry out his promises* but for Abram specifically to participate in the blessings he must hold God's hands no matter what. That "no matter what" will become quite a test for Abram later in chapter 22.

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- Look at Abram's response to this in verse 3. He knows the truth of who he is and of what God has said and he falls on his face in submission to God and His truth.
- So, God continues and now "**many offspring**" becomes "**many nations**" and "**many sons**" becomes "**many kings.**" Now, these details of the promise will be **everlasting**—not just for some generations but **everlasting** in human history.
- Now, God will be their God **everlastingly**. God—El Shaddai—ties himself to Abrams lineage for the duration of whole plan.
- This everlasting connection will be true even when the generations to come will not trust the covenant God as their God.
- God is still the God of the Children of Abram today even if they don't realize he is and thus don't experience the blessing of that everlasting covenant. The Apostle Paul counts on this unchanging reality for some of his argument when he writes the *Letter to the Romans*.
- Now, **the Promised Land** is now **everlastingly** promised by God's covenant. Centuries later, even if Abram's offspring do not realize it and believe it—even if the Sons of Ishmael claim it is not true—even if most of the world rejects the truth—the Promised Land is everlastingly the Covenanted Land God gives the sons of Abram in which to live. The Apostle John counts on this unchanging reality for some of what he sees in the *Book of the Revelation*.
- As an **unforgettable sign**—an **unforgettable reminder**—of these promises—of the fact that God has this everlasting relationship with the offspring of Abram, God changes Abram's name to "**Abraham.**" Whew! Now, I can finally stop apologizing for accidentally calling him **Abraham** when he is still **Abram**!

- The name "Abram" likely pointed out something like "*exalted father.*" Abram was probably given this name because his father, Terah was a respected man. The family lineage was considered "an exalted" one.
- The new name "**Abraham**" is given by God to remind of all the promises of the covenant. Saying "**Abraham,**" in the Hebrew pronunciation, sounded somewhat like the Hebrew words for saying "**father of a multitude.**" This sound change would be one **unforgettable reminder** of the promises of God—of the covenant of God tying himself, in perpetuity to this lineage—and a reminder of how to participate in the blessings of the covenant every time it was spoken.
- There is a 2nd **unforgettable reminder** to come that is also meant to accomplish this. Look at verses 9 and following.
- **READ Genesis 17:9-14**
- If **Abraham** and his descendants want to fully walk before God and participate in the blessings of the covenant, there is something they must do. It involves some surgery that might make about half of us cringe at the thought of it taking place at the age of 99 or any age we would be old enough to be able to figure out what might be happening.
- According to John Walton, male circumcision was not unique to Abraham's family. It was a common practice in that place at that time as a "*rite of puberty or marriage.*"
- So this sign of circumcision, this **reminder**, as **unforgettable** as it might have been just for the physical pain, was meant to be **unforgettable** for another reason. It was a sign—a reminder—from God that he had made an everlasting covenant with Abraham's offspring. It was also a sign—a reminder—to Abraham's offspring

that walking their life before God in faith and righteousness was the way a person of this line could participate in the blessings of the covenant—that is, a human could be empowered by God to take part in the eternal redemptive plan coming to fruition.

- Single-minded faith in God, *El Shaddai*, along with obedience that was sometimes going to be very painful and often even sacrificial, was how Abraham and his offspring would participate down through all the ages of human history.
- Sadly, down through those ages, most of Abraham's offspring did *not have faith, disobeyed and often refused painful sacrifice* so they did not participate in the blessings of the Covenant.
- The last verse I just read, **verse 14**, makes that point with respect to disobeying the command of circumcision as an ***unforgettable reminder***. If they were "not cut," they were to be "cut-off" from participation in the blessings of the promises covenanted by God.
- You'll also have noticed that the lessons of this sign were to be so complete—so universally understood—that *even male slaves* living among Abraham's offspring were to be circumcised.
- What was the universal lesson being remembered from the human side of things? *God has made unbreakable promises to us about a land a seed and a role of blessing. Has formalized those in a covenant HE will certainly keep. Therefore, we must remember never to let go of the hands of El Shaddai. He makes the promises come to pass not us!*
- *We must shun the path of human autonomy that nearly all other humans around us tread. We need our God who keeps his promises. We need him all the time and in every way.*
- Sarai and Ishmael, Abraham's wife and son are not left out of this matter of ***unforgettable reminders***. Look at verses 15 and following.

• **READ Genesis 17:15-22**

- Sarai, up to this point still childless, will be blessed, that is, be empowered by *El Shaddai*, personally to produce offspring who will fulfill the reproductive, seed promises of the LORD. The double-minded, "Hagar-ish" human schemes will not be necessary. The family can walk before the LORD **wholly** and trust he will do what he has promised.
- **Sarai's** "new name" is "**Sarah**" which means "*princess*" which indicates kings—royalty--will come from her own children.
- Remember, when Abram first encountered the Lord in this long revelation, *he fell down on his face in absolute submission*. Now, in verses 17, hearing this promise to *Sarah*, he falls down again. This time his fall is mixed with something else—**LAUGHTER!**
- Readers and interpreters argue about the meaning of this laughing. I suspect it is **NOT** disrespect, but rather a sign of **human mixed emotions**. As the newly coined, "Abraham," this man respects God and his words just as much. He trusts that God will indeed carry out his plan. *However*, he cannot help but chuckle a bit with amusement or joy when he pictures the way God will carry out his plan.
- God tells him a **yet-to-be born** but **certain-to-be born** son, **Isaac**, will be the name of the son who will be the covenant seed-bearer not **Ishmael** as Abram had possibly concluded. Of course, the name **Isaac** means "**laughter**." Abraham and Sarah both will be reminded of their response over and over again after Isaac—Laughter—is born.
- The **son who is born by faith** in God—*El Shaddai*—rather than born of **human just do something effort** will be how God fulfills his promise. God, not human ingenuity and accomplishment, will get the glory as it should be which makes LIFE to be just as it should be.

- **Ishmael** will also not be deserted by Abraham's God. He too will receive blessings. But, as a monument to Abram and Sarai's streak of human autonomy rather than faith in God, Ishmael will **not** further the fulfillment of the redemptive promise.
- This is a good place to point out once again that we are not discussing the assignment of eternal destiny in heaven or hell. We are also not even talking about only one people—the Israelites—ever receiving blessings from God. We are talking about who will be the humans to fulfill the redemptive plan of God. This plan is, of course, leading to the ONE human who will be God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Notice Abraham's faith and obedience at the cost of painful sacrifice. Let's finish the chapter from verse 23 on. **READ Genesis 17:23-27**
- The emphasis made on "**that very day**" tells me, here, Abraham is a good example of single-minded faith. He does hold on to the hands of God and walk in front of him and he does it immediately. He does it exactly how God told him to do it.
- So, now, **FIRST** when the name of **Abraham** is spoken, there is an **unforgettable reminder** in the air that God has made covenant promises and he will keep them. The person who wants to participate in fulfilling these promises must walk forward with God—El Shaddai. He alone will be the almighty provider able to fulfill the promises. **Pragmatically**, human **DOING** may build a tower or even result in a potential heir but it will not be blessed by God to fulfill his promises.
- So, now, **SECOND** when the men of Abraham's line engage in fulfilling of the promises through sexual reproduction there will be another **unforgettable reminder** that God has made covenant promises. To actually participate in them they cannot forget that

contrary to all the human manly powers they are feeling in that moment, it is God El Shaddai—the almighty provider who will produce the offspring to fulfill HIS promises.

- So, now, even the younger men who are not yet married and having families, will have an ***unforgettable reminder***, of the promises and God's powerful provision in which they need to trust, during the natural course of each day.
- And, so now, even those not born of Abraham—even ***slaves*** living among the family—will also be ***unforgettably reminded*** that these people they serve are blessed not because of their own wisdom, power and value but because of the God they sometimes refer to as their El Shaddai—the almighty provider of the promises.
- And of course, I have toyed with you a bit through this whole sermon by titling it, "***Unforgettable Reminders***," and then by repeating the idea that these ***reminders*** are ***unforgettable*** over and over again.
- ***Why?*** Because we humans do forget! Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will still sometimes forget. Moses will sometimes forget. The Israelites to whom he is writing as they are poised to go to war to forward the fulfillment of the promises concerning the Promised Land often forget.
- AND, of course, you and I will also sometimes forget that it is *El-Shaddai* that keeps HIS promises perfectly and not us.
- When we do forget that an become pragmatic in our doing something rather than nothing, may God mercifully remind us. James, Peter and others in their NT letters tell us this reminding is the reason for the ***trials*** we face as believers.
- They are gifts from God of reminders to hold onto the hands of the Almighty Provider of the promises and walk in front of Him single-minded in faith not relying on our own wisdom and power.

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- **God** will absolutely do all he has promised. By faith and obedient sacrifice, **we** will participate in the blessings of those promises—that is we will receive the empowerment to be part of their fulfillment.
- **REMEMBERING...We cannot do it! He will do it!**
- **We cannot do it! He will let us share in the doing but only by trusting him!**