

## A Change of Name – A Deepening of Relationship

Today we come to a significant shift in Abram's experience of getting to know the God who had arrested his attention way back in Ur of Chaldea. Abram is about to have his fifth encounter with this God – the first one at Ur; the second in Canaan once he had arrived; the third after Lot had separated from him; the fourth when God made a covenant with him because Abram had complained about not yet having a son; and this is now his fifth encounter with God. This is also the beginning of the third stage of his faith journey with God.

Let's also keep in mind that Abram only has these intermittent appearances of God to him to go on – he has no other context to work out of.

### The Context

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.' <sup>3</sup> Abram fell face down...*

Gen 17:1-3a

Abram is now 99 years old, 13 years after Ishmael was born, and well over 13 years since God had appeared again to him. Abram's initial response is reverent worship...

### God's Side of the Promise

We know this is a deepening of the relationship because of the expectations going with it:

*...and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> **As for me**, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you, and I will be their God.'*

Gen 17:3b-8

The name change from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of many) represents a change in the nature of the relationship between God and Abraham, and a change in the scope of the relationship between God and Abraham that is being established – God will also become the God of his offspring in the same personal way that he is becoming with Abraham.

### God's Expectations of Abraham

<sup>9</sup> Then God said to Abraham, **'As for you**, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'

Gen 17:9-14

There are expectations now that Abraham is being called to act on in order to maintain the covenant. This involved walking with God faithfully and wholeheartedly (v.1) and the rite of circumcision, which was to be the physical mark of the covenant between them – their personal and constant reminder of their covenant with God. However, as the prophets later reminded them, unless the mark translated into their heart-convictions, it was powerless.

The New Testament writers picked up on the prophet's theme, applying it to water baptism and the circumcision of the heart – an outworking of the personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus our sacrificial Saviour.

### **Col 2:9-12**

<sup>9</sup> For in Christ...you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, <sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

The Abrahamic rite of circumcision was always only a physical sign for Israel as a signpost pointing to Christ the Messiah, who would make it an internal reality through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, based on Jesus' completed sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection.

### **Sarai's place in this relationship**

<sup>15</sup> God also said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. <sup>16</sup> 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.' Gen 17:15-16

The covenant involved children who were exclusively to come through Sarah's relationship with Abraham.

### **Abraham's response**

*17 Abraham fell face down; 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?'*<sup>18</sup> *And Abraham said to God, 'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'* Gen 17:17-18

Abraham has come to the point where he simply cannot see how what God is saying is physically possible. And he seems settled in himself that he now has his son in Ishmael!!!

### **God's response to Abraham's response**

*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.'*

*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.'*

*21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.'*<sup>22</sup> *When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.* Gen 17:19-22

What were the key issues God was wanting Abraham to understand through this encounter???

Discussion.

- God's perspective is ultimately always eternal
- It seems God deliberately took them to the point where it was naturally impossible
- Nothing is impossible to God when it comes to outworking his eternal purposes

Why was this so important?

- Because the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, was dependent on it!!!

In effect, God was saying, yes I hear you and understand your dilemma, and I will bless Ishmael because he is your son, but my covenant is not through him.

My plan is eternal in scope and even though it is impossible for you, I will bring it to pass in my time and in my way, which is why I have called you into covenantal partnership with me.

**What do these expectations mean practically for us???**

What sorts of things might God address in our lives to deepen our relationship with him, given that his intention is that we are always growing in our faith and love for him and others?

- Our Priorities – how are we using our time? – we all have 24 hours/day

I recall when God specifically challenged me to prioritise time in prayer with him

Also when he challenged me to commit to personally apply his Word to my life

And when I was challenged about intentionally mentoring others

- Our Relationships – who, how, and why, are we relating to others?
- Thought life – what things are dominating our thinking?