

Key idea: In the gap of 13 years, Abram faced questions – God answers them, reassuring Abram that the same applies – mercy, faith, obedience.

FCF: Focus on the obedience, because God has the mercy and faith covered.

Application: Obedience!

1. The promise of God and everyday life...

All Christians live with two realities.

There is the reality of their true identity – a Christian is a sinner saved by God's merciful grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; a Christian is someone who lives facing forward, looking forward to the promise of God that he will return to judge the earth, set things right, and take his people to live with him.

There is the reality of the true and real world that they live in – a world broken by human sin, a world in which we experience the heartache of that brokenness, a world where we grow old and our bodies and minds fail us, a world where the promises of God seem to do nothing else but gather dust.

And Christians live in between those two realities. And that life raises some personal and searching questions. Where is God? How can I be sure that God will do what he promises? How can I deal with life day-to-day as someone waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled?

PRAY...

2. A quick recap...

Over a number of sermons (last year, this year, years to come!), we are working our way through the first book of the Bible – Genesis.

In Genesis 1-3, we see the world as God made it, the world as it broke, and the reason for why the world is as it is. God made the world perfect, with male and female in his image, to rule the world as his rulers, obeying his word. This broke with human sin – the attitude and action that says, ‘God is not. And I am god’. God judges this rebellion – and his judgement is death for humans and the world bears the brunt of this brokenness.

In Genesis 4-11, we see this effect on the world, as humans sin, God judges them, and each time he shows them undeserved mercy.

In Genesis 12-16, we see the plan laid by God to restore the world to his design and plan. This involved God choosing one man – Abram – through whom he will restore the world: God’s people living in God’s place under God’s rule. God made a covenant with Abram – a binding agreement involving promises and obligations. This was described in Genesis 15 – God would give Abram a large family, a land, and blessing – and through him restore the world.

The plan of God is based on grace – God’s undeserved mercy to humans, who deserve his judgement. God’s plan is received by

trusting him – as Abram does in Genesis 15: and this trust in God and his promises restores people to right relationship with God.

As we have looked at Abram this year, he was/is remarkably like us – he heard the promise of God, he trusted God, but time and time again, he took matters into his own hands – and did not trust God. By the end of Genesis 16, Abram's impatience with the plans of God have led him to father a son by a slave girl in his mob – now, he thinks, God will start his large family through this boy!

At this time, Abram is 86, and has been living under the promise of God for 11 years. His wife, Sarai, remains barren. Ishmael is the only child that has come from Abram and what we heard about him in Genesis 16 did not bode well for his role as successor to Abram.

3. A small but very important detail (Genesis 16:16, 17:1) READ Genesis 16:15-17:1a...

We must always pay attention to small details. Whenever we are told Abram's age, we must pause and think, especially when we are told two ages in two consecutive verses.

How many years have passed since Abram's son, Ishmael, was born?

Thirteen years... That event was a terrible error – a moment when Abram and Sarai doubted the promises of God. They took matters into their own hands – and no-one benefitted.

What has happened in those thirteen years? Abram and Sarai have done the normal life thing – they've eaten breakfast, washed clothes, moved sheep, slept, gone to the toilet – life has gone on and on and on. In all that, God has not spoken but his promises remained there – that Abram was right with him because Abram trusted God's words and deeds, that God had made very significant promises to Abram and Sarai.

There are thirteen years of the promises of God we don't know about – and God doesn't seem to think that this is a problem. In fact, I suspect that God allowed Abram to stew in the consequence of his rebellion against God, in the consequence of his doubting God. As Abram and Sarai raised Ishmael, they saw every day the consequence of their doubting of God. Moreover, they lived in the same two realities that we experience now – the reality of the promise of God, and the reality of the brokenness of the world. They are just like us: living their everyday life amidst the two realities.

And I suspect that they would have asked questions, too, of God and his promises, questions like we ask...

4. The reassurance of God (17:1-2) **Look at Genesis 17:1-2... READ.**

After thirteen years, God appeared and spoke to Abram. We do not know what this looked like, or how Abram reacted. But we do know three things.

First, God introduced himself to Abram with a name that he had never used before – ‘God Almighty’. When God introduces himself with a name, and a new name at that, we must pay attention.

This name means, literally, ‘God who is sufficient’. It tends to be used in Genesis at the moments when those who follow God are in need of reassurance or shoring up. And this is one of those situations: ‘Abram, I am sufficient to do the very things that I promised to do’.

Second, after God has revealed his powerful name, he then declares a powerful reassurance – **look at verse 2... READ.**

Did you notice that the wording understands the covenant between God and Abram to already exist? It does! Back in Genesis 15, God has established this covenant, based on his grace (he chose Abram for no other reason than that it was God’s will) and Abram’s trust (Abram threw himself upon the mercy of God, believing God’s promise and acting on it). The relationship between God and Abram already existed in covenant – it was established through grace and trust.

But God reassures Abram that this covenant – not another one, not a new one, not an alternative one – THIS covenant was the one that God himself was going to honour and set into eternity. And he does so by focusing on the one seemingly insurmountable obstacle: a lack of children!

A powerful name, a powerful reassurance – and, third, a powerful command. Sandwiched between the name and the reassurance is

a powerful command from God to Abram – **look at verse 1... READ.**

The covenant is established – by God's grace, and through Abram's response of trusting God. And this covenant must now be displayed – by living in all of life in all obedience to God. The breadth and extent of this covenant is massive – all of Abram's life must now display, in active obedience, that he trusts God because God has been merciful to him.

These two verses are so important. After thirteen years of silence, God speaks. His powerful name, his powerful reassurance and his powerful command are spoken so that the confidence of Abram in God is shored up: here is the reassurance Abram needs. But it also reminded Abram – and reminds us – of the very significant order of God's relating to humans. **It is established in grace, responded to in trust, and displayed in obedience (REPEAT x2).**

In this sense, as Abram lived in those two realities, he could always trust the promises of God – because they depended on God's work and faithfulness and establishment first and foremost.

5. 'As for me... as for you...' (17:3-16)

God unpacks these opening two verses, if you like, in verses 3-16. And the structure is very simple – 'as for me' describes how God promises to act (in verses 3-8), and 'as for you' describes the obedience that will display Abram's trust in God's promises (in verses 9-16).

Again, God gives a powerful reassurance. In fact, in his powerful reassurance of the basic 'people/land/blessing' covenant that he had already established with Abram, God elaborates and expands on those promises:

- The covenant is now put in terms of eternity – this covenant relationship will be everlasting and never-ending. God commits himself to his mob forever!
- The people will now encompass kings and nations, many nations. Abram will not just have a large family, but in his family, many nations and kings will find their origin and identity.
- And, the land is reaffirmed as the very same piece of dirt that Abram is now standing in.

Alongside this powerful reassurance there is an equally powerful command – the 'as for you' part. **Look at verses 9-14... READ.**

Abram's existence will be marked to show that he trusts in the promise of God. This mark will be a sign of obedience, a display of the trust that Abram has in the sufficiency of God to do what he says. It will be physical, permanent, intimate and a reminder.

Now, God did not invent circumcision. It was a common practice amongst the nations in the Middle East at that time. But there are two exclusive differences about this circumcision. Those other nations, first, always practiced circumcision at the age of adulthood or as a sign of marriage – this circumcision was from birth. The reason, second, for this circumcision was different –

there was a theological explanation, a statement of who God is and who this man was in light of that.

And it involved all of Abram's household – whether they understood it or not, whether they were blood relatives or not.

And, to remind Abram of this powerful reassurance and this powerful command, there was a name change – notice the key name changes in this chapter! Abram became 'Abraham' and Sarai became 'Sarah' – the father of many nations would, with his princess, give birth to an heir.

Or would he?

6. A growing faith (17:17-18)

I mean, the promise had been to Abraham that his body would produce an heir. That is what God had said and that is what Abraham had trusted. And so, in Abraham's mind, the birth of Ishmael...

And you can understand his faith being here – after all, look at the obstacles – a 99 year old man and a 90 year old wife?

But, God's promise is for the child to come from Sarah – **look at verse 15... READ.**

That is how God works – his undeserved mercy, which we trust, displayed in obedience. If it was just a matter of Abram sleeping with a slave-girl... That is not how God works: it is his mercy, trusted in and displayed!

At this point, God's response is important...

7. 'Trust me' (17:19-22)

Look at verse 19... READ.

Did you see that God does not blow up at Abraham – there is no stinging rebuke? Instead, there is a gentle reminder and reassurance. In fact, it is a powerful reassurance – there is a name – 'Isaac' which means 'laughter' – I mean, how gracious is God? There is a timeframe – next year. And there is intent – the covenant will pass from Abraham to Isaac.

Again, there are powerful reassurances here, and a name. There is also a powerful grace – Ishmael will be blessed, too. God is not stingy in his kindness and this boy will have great descendants. But it is through Isaac that the covenant will pass.

It is worth pausing here and considering the nature of Abraham's trust in God – his faith. It was there. Romans 4 reminded us that 'against hope, with hope he believed'. Abraham's faith was not missing – it was just developing. He trusted God to produce the living from the effectively dead – he just could not comprehend how this was possible. He sounds a little like us, doesn't he?

8. Powerful obedience (17:23-27)

And then we see the powerful obedience of Abraham. Not only did he respond appropriately to the words of God in verse 3, he now obeys the explicit command of God – **look at verse 23... READ.**

Here we see the extent of the covenant community – it covers Abraham's whole household, even Ishmael who will not inherit the covenant.

Abraham has had thirteen years of humdrum life – thirteen years of living in the tension between the promise of God and the day-to-day brokenness of the world. And God's words to him after those thirteen years – in powerful names, powerful reassurances and powerful commands – is meant to respond to this tension:

- God is faithful. It does not mean that he always speaks, nor that he removes his mob from everyday life. But he is faithful – he speaks and he keeps his word.
- God always relates to people the same way – his mercy comes first, bringing humans back to him; human trust responds to God's mercy; and, human obedience displays that this mercy has restored them to right relationship with God. The order is crucial – mercy, trust and then obedience.
- These two truths – the faithfulness of God, and relationship with God established on his mercy – are the sustenance for Abraham to survive in 'the gaps' – the thirteen years of normal life, the tension of the two realities, the brokenness of everyday life, the normal existence he had in this world.

9. Us?

Are we any different? I suspect we know the reality of such gaps – the periods where living in that tension provokes questions, doubts and queries. That is how we live as God’s mob now... So how do we apply the experience of this man Abraham to us?

Let me say, first, what this passage is not about: we are not being commanded to circumcise our young male babies... But, I do think we are being reminded of several key truths:

- God is faithful. The genealogies of Luke and Matthew – the biographies of Jesus – draw an explicit and real link between Jesus and Abraham. In this sense, here is THE king that God promised back in Genesis 17. And, as Jesus saves people from their sins from every nation, here are the many nations of Genesis 17. Between Abraham and Jesus, there were many ‘gaps’, not least the 400 years between the Old and New Testament. But, God remained faithful – and still does.
- God relates to people now as he did with Abraham. I think that this is the point of Romans 4 – God relates to us in the same way that he did to Abraham – he is the same God, who relates in the same way. His mercy is extended to us, first and undeserved – Jesus came when we hated God. Jesus died for humans – when we hated God. Jesus rose for humans – when we hated God. That is God’s mercy. In this sense, against hope but by hope (just like Abraham), God produces the living from the dead. And we receive all the benefits of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection by trusting what God has said and done in Jesus. This is then displayed in our obedience to God – our whole lives are

walked in front of him. Same God, same relating, same grace, trust and obedience.

- Here is the sustenance we need in the 'gaps' – the promises of God rely upon his mercy first, and his deeds foremost. Our part, in one sense, is easy – take him at his word and live accordingly. In this sense, obedience is our responsibility – after God has done the hard work. In this sense, all we need worry about is obeying the clear commands of God. Our faith will grow. Our trust in God will become more deeply rooted. Our lives will change – because he first reached out to us!
- But, there is a warning here – obedience is not how humans are saved and restored to God – obedience is the display that God has already done this for us (REPEAT). Here, then is the warning of circumcision – not all those obedient in circumcision were saved and restored to God – look at Ishmael! Obedience is not the way to be saved, but the display of having been saved. The same is true today – obedience is not how we are saved – it is the display that we have been saved – by God's mercy trusted in.