

THE FUTURES CONTRACT

GENESIS 17:1-27 JANUARY 12, 2022

Some contracts have unusual clauses attached. Soccer contracts are notorious for their strange stipulations. Consider the case of Neil Ruddock. Neil was a tough defender, voted one of the “hardest footballers of all time.”¹ He even represented his country on the English national team in 1994. But, Neil was a big player. So big, in fact, that when he moved to Crystal Palace, the club put a requirement in his contract. If he exceeded 220 pounds his salary would be cut by 10%. Within six months, Neil had been fined 8 times. Needless to say, he wasn’t with the team long.

In our text tonight, God appears again to Abraham. He comes to assure Abraham of the covenant He had made, but also to reveal *more* information about all it contained, including a new responsibility Abraham would have.

Thirteen years have passed since the last verse of chapter 16. Abraham has been in Canaan for 25 years and, it seems, a long time has passed since he’s heard from the Lord. We pick up in verse 1.

Genesis 17:1 - When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him, saying, “I am God Almighty. Live in my presence and be blameless.

God shares a new name here. It’s ‘El Shaddai,’ which we often translate as ‘God Almighty,’ because that’s what Jerome did in the Latin Vulgate. But, scholars aren’t sure what exactly this name means. Derek Kidner writes, “*There is no universal agreement. A better guide is the study of its use...in Genesis it tends to be matched to situations where God’s servants are hardpressed and needing reassurance.*”² El Shaddai is the name Job and Balaam both used.³ Certainly it speaks of God’s might, but there’s more. It describes God as the Sovereign source of life, blessing, and fruitfulness. The name itself is an invitation for a person to come and become acquainted with this God, and see what He will do in your life. And that’s exactly what He invites Abraham to do. He says, “live in My presence” (or your translation may say “walk before Me”).

What does this mean? A believer is to live out their lives in communion with, and mindful devotion to, God - to make decisions based on our trust in God, relying on what He has said. But there was a problem. God said, “As you do this, be *blameless*.” Abraham was *far* from blameless. His second wife, Hagar, was walking proof of his previous failures. How could he live up to this?

The Bible reveals that God not only knows about our imperfections and failures, He’s willing to cleanse us of them - to correct us - so that we *can* be blameless in His sight. One scholar writes, “the Hebrew word signifies wholeness of relationship...rather than no sin.”⁴

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Ruddock

² Derek Kidner *Genesis*

³ NET *Study Bible Notes*

⁴ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

This is what God desires for *all* of His children: That we live out our lives in His presence, in a whole relationship, which deepens and grows and progresses as we allow Him to do what He wants in us.

Genesis 17:2 - ²I will set up my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you greatly."

In order for God to give all He wanted to Abraham, Abraham would need to *participate* in certain ways. God wasn't saying, "I *had* promised you some things, but now I'm not so sure." No, it was done. But as one commentator said, "Revelation...brings responsibility."⁵

From one perspective, it seems like God is very demanding in this chapter, but that's not the case. He's explaining to Abraham more of what He intends to do for him and that those *intentions* have a lot of *implications*. God is asking Abraham to join Him in the work, not so that the Lord can *get* things from Abraham, but so the Lord can *give* all He wants to give.⁶ And what God wants to give is *big*. In the Hebrew there is an emphatic repetition: "I will multiply you exceedingly, exceedingly."⁷

Genesis 17:3-6 - ³Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: ⁴"As for me, here is my covenant with you: You will become the father of many nations. ⁵Your name will no longer be Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. ⁶I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you.

Abraham doesn't know what to say, but he still has worship to give. As he worships, the Lord gives Abraham the name by which we know him. Abram means "exalted father," whereas Abraham means, "father of multitudes." For years, Abraham had treasured God's covenant in his heart, but in reality, he didn't know the half of it! God had so much more planned for this man and this family.

From Abraham there wouldn't just be one nation but many. We know some of them as the Ishmaelites, the Edomites, the Midianites. But there *would* be one special, unique nation called Israel, through which God would do a singular, spectacular work - *the work of redemption!* Of course, the New Testament reveals that Abraham is the father of "all who believe."⁸ And so, what a remarkable thing the Lord did through a regular family life, starting with simple faith.

Genesis 17:7-8 - ⁷I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you. ⁸And to you and your future offspring I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession, and I will be their God."

⁵ Warren Wiersbe *Be Obedient*

⁶ Kidner

⁷ NET *Study Bible Notes*

⁸ Romans 4:11

God says "I will" no fewer than 16 times in this passage. And when He says He will, it means He *really* will. There are some who say that God has cancelled His land promise to the physical descendants of Abraham, that He has transferred them or spiritualized them. But let's take note: His promise of descendants was true and literal. A literal Isaac. *Real* kings like David and Solomon and Jesus, the *real* Messiah who literally came. How dare we say that one portion of God's words are just as they seem while the very next portion has failed! No, God has a particular, ongoing plan for the Jewish people - one that will culminate in a true, literal, 1,000 Kingdom on this earth.

This is all glorious to us, but we have to recognize how foolish it would've been to the world around Abraham. "Who are you?" "I'm the father of a multitude." "Where are your kids?" "I just have this one, but I'm pretty sure I'm gonna have one more soon!" "So, what do you do?" "Well, we're the true owners of all this land...kings, really."

God's message is foolishness in the eyes of the world,⁹ but that doesn't mean it's untrue. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

Genesis 17:9-14 - ⁹God also said to Abraham, "As for you, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations are to keep my covenant. ¹⁰This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised. ¹¹You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²Throughout your generations, every male among you is to be circumcised at eight days old—every male born in your household or purchased from any foreigner and not your offspring. ¹³Whether born in your household or purchased, he must be circumcised. My covenant will be marked in your flesh as a permanent covenant. ¹⁴If any male is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that man will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Was God changing the terms of the agreement? Circumcision was not a way to get in, but a sign of the fact that Abraham believed and had partnered with the Lord. It was a reminder of what Abraham had already agreed to.¹⁰

When a policeman receives a badge, the badge has no power in and of itself. If I took a cop's badge, that doesn't make me a policeman. When you see an officer's badge, it is a symbol of their affiliation, their authority, their legitimacy, their sacrifice, their service, and the vow they've taken.¹¹ Circumcision was a symbol - a reminder - of who God's people were.

The Hebrews weren't the first to circumcise. Other cultures at the time did it, usually for certain classes like priests and at adolescence rather than infancy.¹² But God was using this custom in a special way, to be an intensely personal reminder to individuals of the work He was doing in their

⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:18

¹⁰ NET Study Bible Notes

¹¹ <https://www.co.merced.ca.us/3346/History-of-the-Badge>

¹² See Kidner, Alter

hearts and through their lives - a set apart, spiritual work, which would permeate every aspect of their lives. Though the symbol was *physical* for Abraham, it's the *heart* God really cared about. Even in the Old Testament, it's made clear that the physical rite of circumcision, though commanded, was only to signify the transaction of the heart and the life God had called this people to.

Deuteronomy 30:6 - ⁶The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live.

Jeremiah 4:4 - ⁴Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts,

This idea of heart change carries into the New Testament. Along with the stipulations of the Mosaic Law, physical circumcision is no longer a requirement for God's people. Paul discusses it in Romans 2. His conclusion is: true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. Circumcision is of the heart – by the Spirit as we submit to the Word of God and walk in faith.

Genesis 17:15 - ¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai, for Sarah will be her name.

Both of these names mean "princess."¹³ The last time we saw Sarah, it wasn't great. Both she and Abraham fell into a serious lapse of faith. But, make no mistake, Sarah was an obedient believer. Her name change gives us two important things to think about. First, it is a reminder that we have been adopted into royalty. The King of Heaven and Earth has decided to share His Kingdom with you. Second, her name gives us this thought, which I'll happily borrow from Warren Wiersbe: "The Christian husband should treat his wife like a princess, because that is what she is in the Lord."¹⁴

Genesis 17:16 - ¹⁶I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

This is the first time that God has revealed to them that *Sarah* will bear a child. Why didn't He do so earlier and, thereby, avoid the Ishmael debacle? God is looking for faith. We can't please God without faith. It is the way He wants us to live. Remember: God doesn't want to have a transactional relationship with us, but a personal one - one based on love and trust and closeness.

**Genesis 17:17-18 - ¹⁷Abraham fell facedown. Then he laughed and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Can Sarah, a ninety-year-old woman, give birth?"
¹⁸So Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael were acceptable to you!"**

Before we get the red pen out to subtract some points from Abraham, we should notice this: He worships again, even when he doesn't understand how God could possibly accomplish what He said. And he worships in obedience. He refers to his wife as Sarah *immediately*.¹⁵ He's to be

¹³ CSB Study Bible Notes

¹⁴ Wiersbe

¹⁵ NET Study Bible Notes

commended for these things. But, we see that his faith, *at this point in time*, is limited to what he considers 'possible.' He does the math in his head and he has concluded it can't be done. But he still wants to be in partnership with God, so he floats this idea: Why don't we go with Ishmael? He's the next best thing!

Here's the problem: the Ishmael idea was bad 13 years ago and it's still bad now. Here is how God likes to do His work: Not by might, nor by power, but by His Spirit. We want Him to work in our lives and in our midst, so we need to accept the fact that the ideas aren't going to be ours. The methods aren't going to be worldly. Instead, we're to *discern* what is the will of God and then follow in it.

Genesis 17:19-21 - ¹⁹But God said, "No. Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will confirm my covenant with him as a permanent covenant for his future offspring. ²⁰As for Ishmael, I have heard you. I will certainly bless him; I will make him fruitful and will multiply him greatly. He will father twelve tribal leaders, and I will make him into a great nation. ²¹But I will confirm my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year."

God didn't refuse Ishmael because He hated him. He loved Ishmael. He had a wonderful plan for Ishmael's life. But *this* specific plan for the Messiah would come through Isaac. God has particular plans for your life. We're not meant to be drifters, wandering about while life happens to us. We're invited to learn at the feet of our Lord, Who has adopted us into His household, where we can serve and grow and be sent out according to *His* good pleasure.

Genesis 17:22 - ²²When he finished talking with him, God withdrew from Abraham.

"But wait! I thought I was supposed to live out my life in Your presence!" Though the Lord was gone from Abraham's sight, Abraham was not gone from God's. He was still able to walk before the Lord. What does that mean? It was a heart position. It was the position of disposition. Abraham was left without the visual presence of God but he could continually seek the Lord for his personal life, his family life, his future decisions, and future hope.

In this church age, God feels far when it comes to human senses. But He is not withdrawn. We are *promised* this: Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.¹⁶ He has placed you where you are so that you might seek Him and reach out and *find* Him, for He is not far from any one of us.¹⁷

Genesis 17:23-27 - ²³So Abraham took his son Ishmael and those born in his household or purchased—every male among the members of Abraham's household—and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that very day, just as God had said to him. ²⁴Abraham was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised, ²⁵and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. ²⁶On that very day

¹⁶ James 4:8

¹⁷ Acts 17:24-25

Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. ²⁷ And all the men of his household—whether born in his household or purchased from a foreigner—were circumcised with him.

Abraham is the father of faith. Faithfulness means obedience - doing what God has told you to do. This was a *difficult* obedience. But Abraham did it that very day. What an interesting moment it must have been, when Ishmael came and said, "What does this mean?" "It means we're in covenant with God." "What else did God say?" "He said He has a plan for you, but not the one I want. So we're gonna go with what the Lord has said and trust Him."

What about for us, tonight? These moments in Biblical history are important for us to know, but God intends them to be more than just historical. Most of us know that The Mayflower Compact was a signed agreement and a significant stepping stone in US history, but it has little bearing on our actual day-to-day lives. But God's word is given to profit and train and equip and correct us so that we can be people of God who know the power of God and do the work of God.

We see in this text God reminding believers of how close He is and how great His love is for them and how He has intentions for their lives and more to show them, more to give them, more to do with them. They're things that God's people can't discern on their own - they need it to be revealed. And God *wants* to reveal, but, in order to do so, the believers have to participate in faithful obedience. They have to set aside their own notions and plans and instead receive from the Lord. If we want to be in that position, the Bible says we need to be people who believe and who have circumcised hearts. That, with the Spirit, we cut away the fleshiness and the self-autonomy and the disbelief and worship the Lord, be in His presence, and listen for His voice.

We all want a greater revelation of God's plan for us as individuals and in our families and as a church. We want to be directed. We want to experience His presence in a personal, powerful way. But, often we feel a disconnect. What do we see here? Abraham worshiped and obeyed God even when he didn't understand and he was able to enjoy a powerful friendship with God. What do we obey? The Scripture, where we discover what God has said. How do we worship? We're going to do that together in just a moment. Praising God, thanking Him, for His power and goodness.

There are two pitfalls that we can identify in this scene: We don't want to be an Ishmael or a Lot. You see, Ishmael was circumcised, but he's never an example to us of a person who honored God or believed God or walked with God. In that sense, he's like a person who went through the rituals of belief, without offering his heart to the Lord. And he did not enjoy fellowship with God, despite the fact he was circumcised.

But then there's Lot. He was *uncircumcised*, yet is declared righteous in the New Testament. But, looking at his life, he clearly did not enjoy closeness with God. He lived a life outside the warmth of God's leading and grace because he went his own way and had his own ideas.

In one of those notorious soccer contracts, Giuseppe Reina (a German striker) thought he'd make his own plan. He demanded that, as part of his signing agreement, a particular team would build

him a new house for every year he spent with them. "Sure," the club said, "If that's what you want." And so, pleased with his plan, Giuseppe signed on the dotted line. Imagine the disappointment he felt when he received the house the club built for him...out of legos...*three years in a row!*¹⁸

As Christians, it does no good for us to try to make our own spiritual plans. As a church and as individuals, our first question should always be, "What does God want?" We want Him to new things. We want to see great things. But more than that, we want what God wants. And we know God wants to speak to us, to direct us, to grow in us, and we don't want to miss it. So, let Abraham encourage us tonight. The way to have a faith full of growth and closeness with God, experiencing His presence is by listening and worshiping - being ready to obey, even when it's painful, and refusing to either go our own way or to simply go through the motions. Instead to follow after God's word and leading, knowing that He is always good and keeps on getting better.

¹⁸ <https://whatculture.com/sport/10-insanely-weird-football-contract-clauses?page=9>