

"When God Says the C Word"

Genesis 17:1-27

24 March 2024

So, I felt like Abram this week. I had some good moments where I trusted God's promises. My soul was at rest. And then I had some moments where I panicked and feared and worried. Up and down, up and down. Just like Abram in Genesis. Up and down.

I had some head-scratching moments this week where I was confused as to what God was up to. Moments where I cried out (screamed out!) to God in deep pain, and really just questioning Him, and trying to understand what He's up to. He's just so mysterious, right? Sometimes Jesus is just downright baffling! Then I had this thought that became our big idea today-

WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD IS UP TO, FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP.

That's what I did. I just said, "*Jesus, I have no idea what you're up to, but I'm gonna fall down and worship you.*"

And I did. I just started thanking Him for who He is. I just worshipped. And, that's exactly what Abram will do in our passage today. So, turn in your Bibles to Genesis 17. That's where we are today.

Okay. A few introductory matters, and then will dive into the text. First, the word *covenant* occurs 13 times in this chapter. Recall that that Hebrew word for covenant (*karat*) means "to cut." You *cut* a covenant someone. We saw that a few weeks ago in Genesis 15. Abram cut up the animals that God walked through. So, in the ancient Near East, you "cut" a covenant. And, trust me, if you haven't read ahead yet, there's gonna be a whole lotta "cutting" going on in this chapter!

Second, we'll also see that God does most of the talking in this chapter. Abram speaks for a few verses, but it's God doing all the talking because He is the one who makes and keeps covenant. He is the one who makes and keeps promises, so He's gonna be on the mic the most.

Third, we have fast-forwarded another 13 years into the future. We ended chapter 16 with Hagar giving birth to Ishmael, but now Ishmael is a teenager. He's in the youth group. We don't know anything about his AWANA years. He's just suddenly in the youth group. And, Abram was 86 years old when we last saw him, but now he's 99 years-old. So, 13 years have gone by. 13 years of more and more waiting and hoping and waiting and hoping...and wrinkles and wrinkles and more wrinkles.

And, then finally, we'll see that Abram's name will be changed to Abraham and Sarai's name will be changed to Sarah...and now I can call them Abraham and Sarah...whew! Calling them Abram and Sarai has been a challenge! It's actually hurt my brain a little. Well. Today I'm free. We're movin' on from these names. Okay. Genesis 17.

What do you do when God says the C word?

LOOK AT VERSE 1...

When Abram was ninety-nine years old Yahweh appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

And, there it is. The C word: *covenant*. What does covenant mean in the Bible? Very simply: *God makes and keeps promises*. I love what Ralph Davis said:

How do you spell assurance? C-O-V-E-N-A-N-T.

And, that's why, once again, we have God reiterating the promises to Abraham. It's like God just can't keep from reassuring Abraham. Abraham needs assurance and bringing up the covenant again is God's way of giving him what he needed. Yahweh just keeps going over it, rubbing it into Abraham's pores, trying to get it into Abraham's bloodstream.

These covenant promises get expanded and stretched out and clarified a little bit, but it's kind of the same promise that Yahweh has made to Abraham all along. Abraham will be the father of many nations. He's going to be very fruitful and have many, many descendants. And, he's going to have the land of Canaan as an inheritance, and that will pass on to his descendants as well.

So, what do we see about our God here? Exactly what we've talked about before- He loves to reassure His people! Yahweh just keeps going over the promise, saying it over and over and over again to Abraham, expanding it a little bit, clarifying it, but he's rubbing Abraham's face in it, trying to get it into his bloodstream.

So, we know 1) God loves to reassure His people, and, 2) as we saw last week, God loves to take His sweet ole time. We're now 13 years into the future and there is still no promised child. So, what we learn about *God* is that He's just so mysterious, and so perplexing, and He doesn't do things the way we do them. And, what we learn about *ourselves* is that we don't like this! We don't like that God is mysterious, and slow, and does things we wouldn't do, and often drags His feet.

Yes, God's ways are mysterious, perplexing, baffling. We just don't understand Him. We just don't think like Him. The real question is, "*How do we learn to enjoy the baffling God while we wait on him?*" Because that's what Abraham and Sarah are having to do. They are waiting and waiting and waiting for the promise, but if Yahweh cannot be enjoyed, if Yahweh cannot be delighted in until He delivers on the promise of a child, then what kind of God is He?

We want to enjoy God while we wait for Him to answer our prayers, right? Our mission statement here at Grace is this:

We exist to ignite a passion in every person to glorify and enjoy God everywhere and in everything.

So, how do we glorify and enjoy God when we find ourselves in a dark, desolate place of waiting? How do we enjoy God in "everything" when that includes waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting? Like, waiting 13 more years for a child to show up?

Listen, if we cannot enjoy God *until we get our prayers answered*, then we are the saddest of all people alive! Biblical Christianity is this: you were made to glorify and enjoy God everywhere He takes you, and in everything you go through. And, you actually can, by His grace, by His Spirit, as you cling to His promises.

This is why Asaph can sing in Psalm 73:

Psalm 73:25-26

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Asaph wanted God. Asaph desired Yahweh, his treasure. He might suffer, his heart might give out, his flesh might give way, but God was his delight. In other words, Asaph is saying, "*I want you, God. I want to enjoy you no matter what I go through.*"

Who knew? Who knew that this mysterious, perplexing, baffling, make-you-scratch-your-head because-you-don't-understand-His-ways God could actually be enjoyed? Well, y'all, He can. And the starting place of glorifying and enjoying God why you wait for Him is to accept Him for who He is: the mysterious, perplexing, baffling, make-you-scratch-your-head because-you-don't-understand-His-ways God.

And, when you learn to accept Him for who He is, that He takes His sweet ole time, and that He's working everything out for your good, and when you believe that, and you get it into your bloodstream, you will find yourself glorifying and enjoying Him in the waiting. You'll find yourself glorifying and enjoying Him in the desolate places. Glorifying and enjoying Him everywhere you go...even when that includes you going to a place that you didn't choose because of someone else's sin. You can even glorify and enjoy Him when bad things happen to you, especially when those bad things are because of the sin and selfishness of another human being.

I think the New Testament way of saying this is found in 2 Corinthians 12:9-

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

That's how you learn to glorify and enjoy God when you wait on him, when it's dark. You embrace your weakness, and you embrace the fact that you can't make it apart from His grace. And, you acknowledge that, and you confess that, and you collapse at His feet, and you say, *"If you don't help me, I'm not gonna make it. If you don't give me strength, I'm not gonna make it. If you don't sustain me, I'm not gonna make it."*

I love how Martin Laird paraphrased 2 Corinthians 12:9-

"Your struggles remain. But what you get is Me."

Even when we have to wait another 13 years like Abraham and Sarah, even when our struggles remain, we have God. And, that's enough. So, freedom, joy, peace, and rest come to disciples when they learn to wait on their God, and trust in Him, and hope in Him. Mark Vroegop says, *"Waiting on God is living on what I know to be true of God when I don't know what's true about my life...Waiting chooses to focus on what I know about the Lord instead of panicking in uncertainty. Reframe your internal question from, 'What's missing?' to 'What's true about God?'"*

That's good. Focus on what you know about God. Don't focus on the uncertainties. Focus on the certainty of who God is. Instead of asking, *"What's missing in my life? Why are things this way?"* ask, *"What is true about Jesus?"* Focus on the answer to that question. In other words-

WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD IS UP TO, FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP.

The best posture to take when you don't understand what God is up to is to fall on your face and worship what you do know about Him.

Why worship? Because He is God Almighty. All powerful. That's what He told Abraham in verse 1: *"I am God Almighty."* The Hebrew is a term you may have heard before because of that Amy Grant song: *El-Shaddai*. It means He is the powerful, strong One. And, in this context, it means that He is able to make a 90-year-old woman get pregnant. El-Shaddai is able to do amazing things like cause a 90-year-old woman to not only get pregnant, but to give birth at that age! Think about that!

So, when Yahweh appears to Abram and tells him, "I am El-Shaddai" there are two responses to that: 1) Abraham should walk before Yahweh and be blameless. This, of course, does not mean that Abraham (or we) are sinless, or that we are "holier than thou" or Mr. Goody-two shoes, etc. It just simply means that the response to grace is that we want to follow Jesus as a disciple. We want to walk in His ways. It's not freedom to sin. It's freedom to live and enjoy God- that's the appropriate response to grace.

And then 2) Abraham falls down in worship. This is all just wonder at the grace of God. Being awestruck that God Almighty would appear to you, and not wipe you out because of His white, hot holiness and glory, but rather invite you into a relationship with him. And, so Abraham falls down on his face and he worships. Worship is always the appropriate response to grace. Being awestruck. Wonder. Awe.

Steven Estes said, *"Jesus Christ knows me, yet still loves me. I cannot get over this."*

When you can say that, and be awestruck that Jesus knows you, and yet still loves you, that's proof that you got the Gospel in your bloodstream. Let me ask you: When's the last time you were just outright floored that God could love someone like you? When you are awestruck by God's love, you will want to walk in His ways.

Okay. So once again, God is reassuring Abram. And now, after saying that His name is God Almighty, El-Shaddai- the name which reinforces that He has the power to do everything that He's promising to Abram- now, Abram gets a new name. His name is now Abraham, which means "father of multitudes." God, in His grace even gives Abraham a new name to remind him that he would be the father of multitudes.

So, every time Sarah called his name, every time one of his kids or grandkids called his name, every time, one of his servants called his name, every time one of his friends called his name, they were saying "Hey, Father of Multitudes!" His name was a reminder of God's promise. That's just the simple grace of God, the *practical* grace of God. The kind of grace that can give you hope when you're down and out. That's how practical our God is, and how dedicated He is, and how committed He is to reassuring us.

So, Yahweh says the C word over and over and over: *covenant*. He is committed to Abraham.

And then, beginning in verse 9, Yahweh unpacks more what Abraham is to do. And, the main thing that Abraham and his male descendants will have to do is to practice circumcision. This will be the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, and his descendants: every male that is born will be circumcised on the eighth day, whether it's

Abraham's grandkids, or whether it's the kids or grandkids of his servants, and the people that help him out on his ranch. And, anyone who is not circumcised will be cut off from the people of God.

So, the organ of procreation is consecrated to God. And, every time Abraham saw that mark on his body, he would be reminded of God's promise. It was actually a very practical covenant sign!

Okay. Back to the story.

LOOK AT VERSE 15...

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

So, Sarai's name will now be changed to Sarah (both names, which mean "princess"). And "Princess" will have a son and nations and kings of peoples shall come from her. And, this is all wonderful news. Abraham has another appropriate response to grace once again: he falls on his face and to worship...but he also laughs! He is worshipping Yahweh because of His goodness, but he's chuckling to himself in unbelief that a 99-year-old man and an 89-year-old woman would have a child. He laughs at God's words! Wow.

Abraham's going to Abraham, isn't he? And, like we saw last week, he wants to help Yahweh out here. He wants to give God a push, and he says, *"Oh, that Ishmael might live before you!"* Abraham is basically saying, *"I've got a 13-year-old boy. He will be the kid of promise, Lord. You don't have to do anything. We already have a kid. Let me help you out here, God."*

Yahweh then replies that Sarah is going to bear Abraham a son, and they will name him what Abraham was just doing when he was worshipping: *laughter*. Isaac's name means "laughter." If you didn't know this about God, he has an obvious sense of humor! Abram laughed, and God said, "Name your kid *Laughter*."

Abraham was learning patience. He had to wait another year before he could hold Isaac in his arms. More waiting. I love what Mark Vroegop said:

"Patience is formed by letting go of what I thought was going to be true about my life."

Abraham had to let go of what he thought was going to be true about his life, that the blessing would come through Ishmael. Abraham has waited almost 24 years at this point. And, he'll have to wait one more year! He's learning that patience can only be formed when he lets go of what he thought was true of his life.

Let me ask you this morning: What do you need to let go of? What plan do you have for your life that may need to let go of and just trust Jesus? What did you think was going to be true of your life that you have to let go of? What do you need to let go of in order to learn patience?

So, the covenant promise of many descendants would come through Isaac, and not Ishmael. But, God would still have a plan for Ishmael and would bless him, and make him fruitful, and multiply him greatly. And then, God was done with the conversation, and He just left and went up from Abraham. And then Abraham responded in obedience, walking before Yahweh, as he had heard at the beginning of chapter 17, and he gave the sign of the covenant- circumcision - to all the males in his household.

And, when Abraham lined all the men up, I'm sure they didn't understand what God was up to! I imagine Abraham saying to them-

WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD IS UP TO, FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP.

When God says the C word, He means it. He is committed to it. He makes and keeps covenant promises. And, at the heart of the C word, at the heart of covenant is this promise: "I will be your God."

Donald Macleod said:

What did God say to Abraham? 'I will be your God.' What does that mean? It means that God is saying to Abraham, 'I will be for you. I will exist for you. I will exercise my God-ness for you. I will be committed to you.' There is no way that can be improved upon! There is no more glorious promise: not in Romans, not in Hebrews, not in Revelation, not in the Gospel of John, not in the Upper Room: nowhere! These words of the Abrahamic covenant have never been excelled and never will.

And, we know this is true because of the cross. Jesus was "circumcised" if you will, "cut off" on the cross for us. Jesus was cut off on the cross so that we could be drawn in. As Paul says in Colossians 2-

Colossians 2:11-15

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

That ought to make you fall down and worship.

Christian, you were buried with Jesus in baptism. You were raised when Jesus was raised. You were dead in your sins and God made you alive with Jesus. He has forgiven you of all your sins. He has canceled the record of debt that stood against you. The verdict that said "Guilty"- *and that was true of you!*- has been nailed to the cross.

That ought to make you fall down and worship.

Instead of cutting off a small piece of flesh in physical circumcision, like Abraham and Crew, in Christ we have had our entire body of flesh removed, not with human hands, by the Spirit of God. Our sin, not in part, but the whole, has been stripped away in Christ, through His circumcision, through His being "cut off" on the cross.

In other words, when Christ died, when He was "circumcised," when He was "cut off" on the cross, we were "circumcised" with Him, we were "cut off" with Him. This is union with Christ language. We were united with Him at the cross. Condemned with Him. Crucified with Him. His death becomes our death. But, we are not just united with Him in His death, but also with Him in His resurrection.

Well, what does the phrase "the uncircumcision of our flesh" mean? It means we were still connected to Adam. We are born into this world connected to Adam. We are sinners because of his sin. We are a part of him. And, we were not "cut off" or "circumcised" from Adam until the Holy Spirit made us alive in Christ, until we experienced regeneration. So, we were connected to Adam, dead in sin, "uncircumcised" and then the Holy Spirit, when we heard the Gospel, made us alive, raised us up from the dead, and "circumcised" us, meaning, He cut us off from Adam and then connected us to Jesus.

There was a spiritual amputation that took place. The Spirit circumcised us from Adam, cut us off, amputated us from Adam, and then He joined us, united us, connected us to Christ.

Christian, God has canceled your sin. Your horrendous sin that has offended a holy God, and the record of debt that stood against you, has now been canceled at the cross. Every sin that you have ever done, written down on a piece of paper, if you will, has been nailed to the cross and you bear it no more. His blood has washed away the permanent marker stain of your sin! You are now justified, forgiven, cleansed, made righteous in God's eyes...*because Jesus was nailed to the cross*. Because Jesus was circumcised, cut off on the cross, for you.

That ought to make you fall down and worship.

And, if you can get that good news into your bloodstream, then you'll say what Steven Estes said, "*Jesus Christ knows me, yet still loves me. I cannot get over this.*"

"When God Says the C Word"

Genesis 17:1-27

Sermon Study Questions

1. Discuss the big idea of the sermon:

WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD IS UP TO, FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP.

How would doing this have helped you this past week?

2. Discuss our mission statement at Grace:

We exist to ignite a passion in every person to glorify and enjoy God everywhere and in everything.

3. Discuss Martin Laird's paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 12:9-

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

"Your struggles remain. But what you get is Me."

4. Discuss this thought from the sermon:

Worship is always the appropriate response to grace. Being awestruck. Wonder. Awe. Steven Estes said, "Jesus Christ knows me, yet still loves me. I cannot get over this." When you can say that, and be awestruck that Jesus knows you, and yet still loves you, that's proof that you got the Gospel in your bloodstream. Let me ask you: When's the last time you were just outright floored that God could love someone like you?

5. Discuss these quotes:

Mark Vroegop

"Waiting on God is living on what I know to be true of God when I don't know what's true about my life...Waiting chooses to focus on what I know about the Lord instead of panicking in uncertainty. Reframe your internal question from, 'What's missing?' to 'What's true about God?'"

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What did God say to Abraham? 'I will be your God.' What does that mean? It means that God is saying to Abraham, 'I will be for you. I will exist for you. I will exercise my God-ness for you. I will be committed to you.' There is no way that can be improved upon! There is no more glorious promise: not in Romans, not in Hebrews, not in Revelation, not in the Gospel of John, not in the Upper Room: nowhere! These words of the Abrahamic covenant have never been excelled and never will.