

Abraham and the Life of Faith

“Who He Says I Am”

*"No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations."
Genesis 17:5*

Sunday, June 21
Father's Day
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This being Father's Day, let me share with you how I became a father. The story actually begins way back in Central Peel Secondary School, where Laurie and I began our courtship. Most days after school ended at about 3:15 pm, I would meet Laurie at her locker and then I would walk her home (which happened to be in the opposite direction from where I lived). Note, I walked her home. We didn't take a bus – though we could have. We didn't drive – I had no car. We didn't jog – although, well, that would never happen. But something amazing happened on those walks.

As we walked along, taking our time, we shared stories from our day; stories from each other's lives and families; and stories about the stories we were creating. We shared jokes; laughs, and thoughts about those things that were important to us. The more we talked the more a relationship developed; the more we knew about each other, and, eventually, a love began to grow. One day on a sidewalk somewhere between CPSS and Wilton Drive, along Kennedy Road in Brampton, Ontario, I met my wife, and the mother of my four boys. That's not to say the journey from there to here has been smooth sailing, but the journey has indeed brought us to this day. This episode in our lives came to mind because of something God said to Abram near the beginning of this chapter: *"I am God Almighty, walk before me..."*

Now, God is not telling Abram to walk ahead of Him, what is meant here is 'walk in my presence'. So right way two things of note: first, he's told to walk. The actual Hebrew word means to "walk back and forth; to walk about; to live out one's life." Life, is not a sprint, it is a marathon. I have no idea how many hours I spent walking back and forth between Wilton Drive and Archdekin Drive on the other side of Brampton, but they were hours well spent. There was lots of time for conversation, for getting to know each other and also for the second thing of note: presence. Abram was to walk with God; not to run ahead as he had done in sleeping with Hagar; not to lag behind, as he had originally done on the journey from Ur to Canaan. He was to walk alongside the Almighty.

In doing so, Abram would get to know God; to share stories with God about his hopes, his dreams, about the things that were important to him. And for Abram, God appearing to him here in Genesis 17 must have been a huge relief, especially in light of the way Abram had messed things up leading to the birth of Ishmael. Here is something else important to us. At the end of Genesis 16 we read: *"Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael."* Don't miss his age—86. Genesis 17 then opens, *"When Abram was ninety-nine years old..."* Catch that? He is now ninety-nine.

So, between these two chapters there is a period of silence lasting thirteen years! Thirteen years of wondering, of walking under the night sky and remembering the promise. Thirteen years of walking on eggshells around the camp as Sarah and Hagar competed for his attention. Thirteen years of being a father to Ishmael, who would have

been a constant reminder of his failure to trust God. Perhaps Thirteen years of wondering where God had gone. We'll come back to this silent period later, but for now I want us to reflect on one of the major themes of the chapter, that of identity. There are four new names introduced in this chapter, and a people receive a mark that identifies them as belonging the covenantal community. Of the four new names, one is a new name for God, two are new names for people, and one is the name for a son who is yet to be born, the child of the promise, whose name is not Ishmael.

Let's start with the new name for God – *"I am God Almighty..."* In Hebrew the name is *El Shaddai*. In Genesis the name has strong associations with fertility and life. It identifies God as "the sovereign king of the world who grants, blesses, and judges."¹ In the Latin Vulgate, Jerome translates the name as "all powerful", while others say the name may mean "He who is sufficient."² For Abram, the name identified God as the one who was able to do what He had promised to do – "greatly increase your numbers" and make him the "father of many nations." Very simply, if He couldn't then He was not Almighty. However, the history of Israel, and the record of the Bible demonstrates that He truly is Almighty.

As the Almighty explained to Isaiah:

To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Isaiah 40:25-26

Because He is Almighty He could speak all that is into existence from nothing; He could breathe life into lifeless clay; open the floodgates of heaven to float an ark; bring His people out of Egypt with great signs and wonders; He could stop the sun in the sky, give victory to the weak; unseat powerful kings; heal the sick; raise the dead; and change the name of Abram to Abraham. Because He is Almighty, what is there that He cannot do for you? Because He is Almighty, which of His promises to us is beyond his ability? Jesus affirmed: "Nothing is impossible with God."^a

And what of this new name for Abram? Abraham. The name means: father of many. The only problem is, he is not the father of many. He is only the father of one. Can you imagine for a second how awkward it would be for Abraham to tell his servants and his business partners that from now on call me the 'father of many'? I wonder if they giggled behind Abraham's back? Perhaps sniggering, "There goes the father of many...if many is one." Yet the promise was made by the Almighty. As Paul notes of Abraham in

^a Luke 1:37

Romans 4:17, *"He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."*

Phil Moore³ points out we tend to talk three tenses: past, present and future. We say "I have eaten." (past tense); "I am eating." (present tense); or, "I will eat." (future tense). However, the Ancient Hebrews thought of things in two aspects: the perfect aspect, which describes an action that is completed; and the imperfect, describing an action that was incomplete. In this chapter God speaks in the former—the perfect, meaning He is not saying what He is going to do for Abraham, but describing Abraham as already being what He promised he would be. As far as God is concerned, Abraham is already the father of many.

God speaks of us in a similar fashion, so much so that Paul writes in Ephesians: "God raises us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus..."^b Paul is not speaking in terms of God doing something for us in the future, on the contrary, because He is Almighty, and therefore can do what He promises to do, we are described as already with Christ in glory. The promise is that sure. We might say "it's as good as done." It is guaranteed.

There is this wonderful sketch on Seinfeld over the reservation of a midsize car. When Jerry arrives to pick up his midsize, he is told that a midsize is not available. "But I made a reservation," he points out, "Do you have my reservation?" "Yes," says the girl, "But we ran out of cars."

Jerry protests, "But the reservation keeps the car here. That's why you have the reservation."

"I know why we have reservations," replied the clerk.

"I don't think you do," Jerry responds, "If you did, I'd have a car. See, you know how to take the reservation, you just don't know how to hold the reservation. And that's really the most important part of the reservation, the holding." The important thing is done, we have an assured reservation that is guaranteed.

Thankfully, in Christ:

"you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."^c

^b Ephesians 2:6

^c Ephesians 1:11-14

Abraham is the father of many nations, however, the first nation Abraham is the father of is the people of the covenant—the nation of Israel. They are identified as being the covenantal people by way of circumcision. Scholars debate over the symbolism involved here, everything from the circumcision representing the casting off of old ways, or representing that biblical faith is more than cerebral, it is also an act.⁴ The danger though is that the symbol often becomes more important than that which is being symbolized.

Paul argues effectively that *“Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”*^d There are also examples in the Hebrews Scriptures where it is pointed out that in and of itself physical circumcision had no value. Moses writes, *“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer,”*^e and in Jeremiah 4:4 God says, *“...circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem...”*, and

We need to be careful of attaching too much value, or the wrong kind of value, to rites and ceremonies even in our day. Yes, the Lord’s supper can be a means of grace, but in and of itself, it cannot save. Baptism can be a wonderful means of grace, but again, in and of itself it has no salvific value. Simon the sorcerer believed and was baptized, yet Peter rebuked him, *“You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.”*^f

You are not a Christian—a follower of Jesus—merely because you take communion; or observe confession; or are dunked, sprinkled, sprayed, enrolled or put on a uniform. You are a Christian when you humble yourself before the Lord, repent of your sins and believe on Jesus for salvation, and receiving the Holy Spirit into your heart to begin the work of transforming you into His likeness. Then, and only then, are you a Christian. Then and only then do you receive a new identity.

The next person in this chapter to receive a new name is Sarai, who becomes Sarah. Sarai is understood as some to mean ‘contentious’, while Sarah means ‘princess’⁵, though others claim both names mean “princess” or “queen” with the force of the name change indicating that a new beginning has taken place, though there is a suggestion the name change moves her from being ‘princess’ to ‘my princess.’⁶ The old is to be forgotten, and the new has come. We might even say that in being renamed, Sarah has become a new creation. Of significance too, is that it is here for the first time Sarah is identified as the mother of promised son, and promised nations. As with Abraham, this was not spoken of as a future event, but as a completed action. It was definite.

^d 1 Corinthians 7:19

^e Deuteronomy 10:16

^f Acts 8:21

Are you aware that right now, you have a new name? We have the name given us by our parents, but often we call ourselves by other names at different times, sometimes because of low self-esteem, other times because of pride. We may even be given names by other people—people who do not know that Jesus has a name for us. They name us based on physical traits; on personality traits, or racial traits. They may be sarcastic or hurtful names. However, John tells us that if we remain true to the name of Jesus, then to him who overcomes, Jesus “will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it.”⁹ Note, the name has already been written.

That name—and only that name—is who I truly am. I am not, and you are not, who people call you, who people think you are, or attempt to make you. I am who the Almighty says I am. My identity, my true identity does not come from my father or mother; it does not come from what I do for a living, or from who other people press me to be. The world does not get to give me my name. I am who He ways I am. We’ll look at the naming of Isaac in a few weeks, but right now I want to return to God’s first words to Abraham after a silence of thirteen ears.

Abraham, and Sarah, have been on this journey with God for almost twenty-five years. They have had their ups and downs, especially Abraham. Moments when his faith seemed to soar, and then other moments when he crashed and burned. However, during these twenty-five years, Abraham has been growing. Even during those thirteen years of silence he was becoming more than who he had been. God, who knows our hearts, now comes to him and gives him and Sarah new names because they are now ready to bear these names. In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer writes:

The meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God’s estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God has declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is in the sight of God of more importance than angels. In himself, nothing; in God, everything. That is his motto. He knows well that the world will never see him as God sees him and he has stopped caring.⁷

We need to have that attitude, of not caring so much who or how the world calls us, and focus more on being who God wants us to be. Those silent years were used by God to bring Abram to the place of being ready to assume the mantle of Abraham, and though those thirteen years must have been uncomfortable, if not painful, they had a purpose. God was doing a good work on Abram—growing him into an Abraham. Which brings us to today.

⁹ Revelation 2:17

This is not how I wanted to communicate this chapter to you today. And I know many of you long and have longed to gather together. This period of separation and isolating has been long and difficult—more so, for those who live alone. A few weeks ago, the province relaxed some of its regulations regarding worship services, and I must admit, I was gung-ho to get going again, but the waiting continued. Did you ever think that when our March 15th meeting was cancelled in the midst of Lent, arguably the most holy time of the year, that we would still not be able to meet near the end of June? I'll be honest, these have not been easy weeks. But as I read this text this week, noting the gap of thirteen years between Godly encounters, I began to see today's waiting in a new light.

Listen, sometimes God speaks loudest in the silence. Here is something of which you are hopefully aware, if the Almighty had wanted us to return to meeting together two, or four, or eight weeks ago, nothing could have prevented that from taking place. So here is the big takeaway from this online meeting. What is God preparing us for through these weeks and months of being apart? What lesson are we to learn? What growth is He waiting to see in us, to make us ready to return to meeting together?

If He is Almighty, then truly He can work all things for the good of those who love Him—even fifteen weeks of our buildings being silent. We will be returning to our meetings very soon—and I pray that when we do so we will worship in a new way, a way that is not just going through the motions, but is in fact, worship that is pleasing to God. Perhaps that is what it might be—that our worship had become like circumcision—just something that we do. Perhaps not being able to come together for fifteen weeks has reinforced just how desperately we need to come together, and perhaps God wants to prepare us for some new blessing, for our new identity.

Perhaps these fifteen weeks have forced us to recognize that running helter-skelter from here to there and back again; filling our lives with rush and hurry and busyness was in actually getting us nowhere. Perhaps He just wants us to slow down and walk in His presence, so we can get to know Him better. And in getting to know Him better, we will recognize Him as the Almighty, and come to believe with full assurance that He is All-Sufficient. All sufficient to complete the good work He has begun in each of us,^h for as the Bible promises, "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for [us]."ⁱ

In the meantime, as we wait:

What to me are all the joys of earth?
What to me is every sight I see,

^h Philippians 1:6

ⁱ Psalm 138:8

Save the sight of thee, O Friend of mine?
Jesus, thou art everything to me.

I invite you to claim these words as we sing along with the massed Canadian and Chicago Staff Bands, and may God continue to do a work in our hearts this coming week.

Endnotes

¹ <https://netbible.org/bible/Genesis+17>

² Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 402.

³ Phil Moore, *Straight to the Heart of Genesis* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2010), 105.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 155.

⁵ Henry Blackaby, *Created to be God's Friend: How God Shapes Those He Loves* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 125.

⁶ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/whats-in-a-name-5-times-god-changed-a-person-s-name.html>

⁷ Tozer, A. W.. *The Pursuit of God* (AmazonClassics Edition) (pp. 75-76). Amazon Classics. Kindle Edition.