

## Genesis 17 – Remembering Gods promises

### **Watch Memory game video**

**How do you remember things?** How do you ensure that you remember those special dates, peoples names or just important facts that you need to remember? Do you associate things? Do you chunk, like in the video? Do you leave yourself reminders, perhaps on the fridge or digitally on your phone, do you turn your watch upside down. Maybe you do it through repetition, for exams you read and reread what you have to memorise.

In today's passage we see Abram once again being reminded of the covenant God has made with him and in this passage we see God gives Abram some ways to help him remember Gods covenant to him. God changes Abrams name and he adds circumcision. But before we look at that more closely, lets look at what Abraham is to be reminded of, the covenant by looking at a timeline of Abram so far.

### **What needs to be remembered?**

In chapter 12 Abram was 75 years old when God first promised to make him into a great nation, that Abram's name would be great and that all people on earth would be blessed through Abram. In chapter 13 God reiterates the promises saying that he will give the land to him and his descendants and that his descendants will be like the dust of the earth. In chapter 15, which we looked at last week God

once again reiterates the promises to Abram this time saying his descendants will be like the stars and God performed a ceremony for Abram to assure him that he will give Abram the land he has promised. Then in chapter 16, which we've skipped, when Abram is 86 years old, decides with Sarai that because Sarai wasn't getting pregnant that Abram should have a baby with Sarah's servant Hagar. They gave birth to a son, Ishmael. Another 13 years pass and Abram must have thought that Ishmael was the heir God promised, that he was the start of many nations, but in our chapter today God, with Abram 99 years old, God once again reiterates and expands on his promise to Abram. God now tells Abram that he will be the father of many nations, kings are to come from him and the covenant will be an everlasting one. He also gives some specifics about Sarah and Isaac. God says that it won't be Ishmael that is heir to God's promise, it will be a son from Sarah and they are to call him Isaac.

From the start of our story to now, 24 years have passed. 24 years since the original promise was made. It's easy to understand why Abram might have had doubts, question God or even take the matter into his own hands isn't it.

Last week we saw that God helped alleviate those doubts by performing a ritual that Abram would have been familiar with, like a very serious pinky swear or contract if you are an adult. Today God adds 2 more new things to help Abram, he changes their names and adds circumcision.

So why does God do this? Why after the previous times when God has spoken to Abram does God change Abrams and Sarais name and add circumcision. Lets start by looking at the names.

### **Names are important**

At first God changing Abram and Sarai's name may not seem that significant, after all their names sound mostly the same just a few letters here and there. But God changing Abrams name was significant. In ancient times names were regarded as part of who you are as a person, your destiny. So Abraham and Sarah were now destined to be Father of nations and mother of Kings. Secondly it would be a constant reminder for both Abraham and Sarah of Gods promise. Every time they hear their name called they would be reminded of Gods promise to bless them with children. Finally God giving them new names shows his authority. Not just anyone can go around changing peoples names. It would be like Marty at Alexanders baptism holding him up and saying "Your parents named you Alexander, but from now on God has named you Phillip." That would be stepping a little beyond Marty's power. But God has the authority to determine destiny and rename people.

There are actually 2 other names that are introduced for the first time here, did you notice them? Yes, there is Isaac, did you notice the other one? Its in verse one, The Lord says "I am God Almighty" This is the first time God has called himself

that. In Hebrew its El-Shaddai. It signifies Gods power and sovereignty. It stresses to Abraham that God can and will fulfil his promises. It is the name that is used regularly throughout Genesis when God is giving promises to Abrahams descendents. God even says to Moses in the beginning of Exodus 'I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God almighty Exodus 6:3.

It was important for Abraham to see God as God almighty. And its important for us to see him that way too. The way we live is determined by what we think of God. If our God is El-Shaddai, the awesome, mighty God of Abrahams story, then our lives will reflect our trust in God's awesome promises to us. What you truly believe about God is the most important thing in your life. Any thoughts of a God less potent than the God of Abram will impact the way you live and affect your faith.

The other thing God does during this expansion of the covenant is add circumcision. I think there are a number of reasons this was added.

The first reason I think is to involve Abram and get his acceptance and commitment. Last week we saw that God made a commitment to Abram, the firepot representing God went through the halved animals showing Gods commitment to his promise to Abram. But God is a relational God he wants Abrams involvement too. With circumcision Abram will

show that he accepts Gods promises and future generations can show their acceptance too.

Circumcision is also a seal, showing that Abram had been set apart, that he was owned by God. And by circumcising his children it showed that Abram wanted them to be set apart too.

Both these first 2 points, the commitment and seal are sort of like the uniform a sports player wears. Take Lebron James, a famous basketball player, a couple of years ago he changed from playing for Miami to playing for Cleveland. As part of that change he now wears a Cleveland jersey rather than a Miami jersey. Lebron putting on the new jersey shows his acceptance of the change to his new team and also sets him apart as now a Cleveland player. Circumcision shows Abrams acceptance of Gods promise and sets Abram apart as Gods.

Circumcision also acted as a sign to Abram pointing to Gods promise. It would help Abraham remember the promises that God made. Gods timing can seem like it takes a while, it had taken 24 years to get this far, circumcision would be a constant reminder to Abraham of the promises that God had made, a promise that would last forever. And its not just a way for Abram to remember, its a way for future generations to remember as well. Given that this covenant is an everlasting covenant, God commanded circumcision through the generations, it was each generations way of committing

their children and themselves to God and showing their acceptance of God's promises.

And the decision to circumcise was meant to be not just a one off decision, it was meant to represent an ongoing commitment to God's promises. We can see that in later books of the Old Testament when the word circumcision is used with a person's heart. Moses wrote, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). Likewise Jeremiah challenged the people, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 4:4). Circumcision was meant to represent a whole of life commitment to God.

Just before I go onto what the equivalents of circumcision might be for us today, I want to briefly talk about what circumcision was not. When we get to the New Testament time, there were some people who not only saw circumcision as the way to show you were part of God's family but some were saying that being circumcised was how you were saved. And that's wrong thinking. That's why in numerous passages Paul in the New Testament points out that Abraham was credited with righteousness before he was circumcised. Circumcision does not *make* people part of the family, it was a sign they *were* part of the family. Paul also emphasised the

decision to accept Gods promise over the physical act of circumcision. He emphasised the circumcision of the heart. Which brings us to what does this look like today?

### **How do we remember?**

Well, I think there are a number of things which reflect aspects of circumcision today. Firstly we have confirmation. Although that may sound un-Anglican to some, confirmation is there to show our acceptance of Gods promises that he made to us. We accept that Jesus died on the cross for us and it shows our acceptance of the decision to live for him. It is us putting on the jersey of Jesus team and saying we want to live for him.

Circumcision was also about remembering. About reminding Abraham and his ancestors of Gods promises. And I think we have a number of ways we remember Gods promises as well. Firstly we have events. Each year when we celebrate Easter and Christmas its a reminder to us of the amazing thing that Jesus has done for us. It's a reminder that he came to earth as a baby and that he died and rose for our forgiveness.

We also have habits that we use to help remind us of Gods promises. We have things like Baptism and the Lord Supper. Baptism is similar to circumcision as we baptise our infants to show that we want them to be part of Gods family. We baptise them to show that we accept Gods promises. We also are reminded of Jesus death and resurrection through the Lord Supper. This is where we are given physical reminders of

what Jesus has done. I really like some of the words we say during Lord Supper, “Take, remember and believe that Christ died for you and be thankful.”

But just like circumcision was sometimes misunderstood in the bible I think we need to be careful not to misunderstand the way we remember things now. As we do Lord Super or Baptism as we go through Christmas again in a little over a month we need to make sure that we are not just going through the motions. The danger of repeating something is that we start to do it on autopilot and the meaning is lost. So next time you participate in Lord Supper, take this challenge to think and reflect on all that Jesus has done for you, that He died and rose for you, reflect on the promise that we still wait for, that Jesus will return in all his glory. And as you get ready for Christmas don't get caught up in the commercial nature of it, or even the family focus of it. It is a reminder for us that Jesus came to earth as a human for you and I.

The other danger is letting the signs stop being signs pointing to Jesus and instead letting them become the focus the way some Jews had done with circumcision. As important as doing Lord Supper and Baptism are for remembering Gods promises we shouldn't overemphasise them either. They are not the way we are saved. God has already done that through Jesus. They are the signs that point to our salvation.

**Why is it important to remember?**

Finally I want to look at why is it important to remember, why do we need to be reminded again and again of Gods promises. In some senses the answer is easy. Because we forget. And the longer the time the more likely it is for us to forget. We may think it was hard for Abraham who had to wait 24 years before Isaac came along, well we have waited almost 2000 years since Jesus died and rose again for him to return. Remembering is important because if we remember Gods promises it will affect how we live. Just like we need to know God is God almighty we also need to remember his promises to us. That he has forgiven us and will come back again. This should affect how we live. We can live with confidence knowing we are saved. We should live with humility because we know it's not because of anything we have done. So in this coming week make sure you spend time dwelling on God's promise. Remebering it. And maybe encourage one another this week by sharing the promises you remember with them.

Amen