

October 18, 2015
Rick Myatt

WEARING THE SIGN Genesis 17

There was an article in the newspaper last week about this business that pays people to put advertising on their car. They contract with businesses to find people to put those big signs on their cars advertising whatever their business happens to be. My first thought was that I don't think I'd like to do that. Then I realized that without even thinking about it I do something like that. I have a shirt that just says "O'Neill" on it. Someone meeting me for the first time might ask, "I see your last name is O'Neill." Um, no. "Oh, did you, like steal it from Mr. O'Neill or something?" No, I didn't steal it from a person named O'Neill. I got it from the O'Neill surf clothing company. I have several shirts that say "Honolua" in big letters on the front. I got them all from the Honolua Surf Company. So do you get paid to advertise for these companies? That's smart of you, getting paid to wear clothes that advertise those companies. Um, actually, I don't get paid to do it. In fact, I pay to wear those clothes. I bought them. So, Rick, let me get this straight. You pay good money to walk around in clothes that advertise for those companies? Yes. Wow, you know how to drive a hard bargain, don't you?

It's a little strange that I do that, I admit. No one twists my arm to get me to do it. Obviously that is another example of the effect of our culture on us. In our culture it is kind of a thing to wear clothing that prominently features company logos or names so we do it without thinking. It's not that I believe so deeply in O'Neill or Honolua or Nike that I want to promote them and try to encourage others to buy their clothes. I guess those companies are fine and I like some of their clothes, otherwise I wouldn't have bought them. But they are not some cause I believe deeply in. In part they are capitalizing on the desire to identify with the surf culture or the athletic culture, depending on the company. Actually I'm not really a part of either of those cultures in any meaningful way. So in effect I have to admit these shirts are hypocrisy, or at best just false advertising.

If you were to wear clothes that advertised something, what would that message be? What sign would you want on your clothes? I am going to talk about a sign this morning, an important and famous one. It is a bit like the sign on your shirt. It says something about who you are and what you believe in. It is a God given sign. But one thing will be crucial as we look at Genesis 17 today, and that is that we remember the point of this sign.

GOD GAVE A COMMAND

In Genesis 17 Abram was 99 years old. It had been 13 years since the unfortunate incidents of chapter 16. As far as we know Abram has not heard anything from God in the intervening years. He and Sarai have just been waiting. This had to have been extremely disappointing for the two of them. They've been given multiple promises by God that they are going to have a child, but nothing has happened and God is nowhere to be found. Proverbs 13:12 says, "hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life." By this time Abram and Sarai are truly sick at heart, for their hope has been deferred for decades. In fact hope really had disappeared completely. I suspect Abram and Sarai were bewildered, but they had concluded that having a child was no longer possible for them. They've pretty much given up. This incident has a parallel in our lives in that most of us know what it means to have a hope that is deferred for so long we finally give up. We know how sick at heart that can make us.

Imagine that when I was young God had appeared to me and promised me that I would become a major league baseball player. Further imagine that my life has gone exactly the way it has to this point and the entire time I've been waiting for that big break. How would you suppose I'm feeling about now? I would be hugely disappointed. The promise has not been kept and now it is obvious it never will be. A couple of weeks ago I woke up one morning feeling like I had pulled my calf muscle up near the knee. I was fine when I went to bed. There was no injury, which meant I apparently pulled a muscle sleeping! I feel utterly confident in saying playing a professional sport of any kind is out of the question for me and has been for many years. Actually it was all my life because I lack athletic ability, but now age has severely complicated the matter. So I have that disappointment. But I also have the disappointment of knowing that God can't really be trusted. He promised and did not deliver. That's what I would be feeling if God had given me such a promise, which, of course, he hasn't.

After years of apparent absence and silence, now that all possibility of that promise being fulfilled is gone, God suddenly shows up again. He's very polite because the first thing he does is introduce himself. He says, "We've met before but you may not remember me. Just in case you've forgotten I am God Almighty." The Hebrew words used there were El Shaddai. The literal meaning of the Hebrew name is debated by scholars. Some think it was derived from a Hebrew word that meant "to destroy" or "to overpower." Thus God is the one who can overpower any obstacle or enemy. Another suggestion is that it means "from the mountain," so God is the God from the mountain, suggestion he is from up above.

There is a third possibility and I think this is the correct one, though many excellent scholars disagree. The word “El” is short for Elohim and means “God.” The name Shaddai is a combination of two words. The “Sh” part of it means “who is.” The other part, the Hebrew word “dai,” means “sufficient” or “enough.” In Exodus 36:5 after the people of Israel had been told to bring offerings to pay for building the tabernacle the workers who were building said to Moses, “The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done.” The word translated “enough” is “dai.” So the name literally means, “The God Who Is Enough.” In 5 of the 6 times this term appears in Genesis it is associated with a promise of posterity and blessing. This suggests that this name of God was used because it communicates that God is sufficient to provide the blessing that was promised.

It would be normal for Abram to think, “Well, I guess that God guy just overpromised and wasn’t able to deliver. His heart was in the right place, but apparently he just couldn’t pull it off.” God immediately corrects that thinking. He is the God who is enough. Enough for what? Enough to fulfill his promise, even when it seems impossible. If the promise hasn’t yet been fulfilled it isn’t because God didn’t have the wherewithal to do it. It is because God has his own plan and timing. Even now, when it is literally impossible for Abram and Sarai to have a child God is sufficient.

God is El Shaddai. He is sufficient to provide. He is sufficient to keep his promise that I will play in the major leagues even now when it is physically impossible. Unfortunately he never promised any such thing. But if he did promise it he could do it even today.

Once God was confident that Abram knew who he was, he gave him a command. I think God had told him something like this earlier, but since it has been a while he is reviewing for him what he wants him to do. First he says “walk before me.” This was an expression that was used back in that day to picture a servant’s role before his master. He stood before him to serve.

A way I like to think of it is to envision a stage actor. He plies his craft before the audience. His desire is to do his best to offer up to them something that is pleasing to them. He acts before them. So the idea here might be that we live our whole life out with God as the audience, seeking to do that which will please him. We can live our lives with any number of audiences in mind. The most common is ourselves. I do whatever will please me. In fact our culture today practically has made it a sacred saying that you have to be yourself and do what will make you happy. But

in truth all of us have a tendency to live before other people. We make so many of our choices on the basis of what will win approval from them. There is a universe of different people you could choose as your audience. It could be parents, or a group of friends, or some admired person.

God is to be our audience. Our lives are to be a command performance before him. We are to seek to please him in everything we do in everything we are.

There was one other command that God gave to Abram. He told him to live blameless before him. How are you supposed to live without any blame? To be without blame means to never do anything wrong. Who's going to be able to do that? I'm not. For now let's keep this in mind and we will come back to this command in a few minutes.

Abram fell face down before God. That didn't mean that he tripped. It was a way of worshiping and submitting to the commands of the covenant that God had just given him.

GOD CONFIRMED HIS COVENANT

Next God proceeded to once again reiterate the promises of his covenant with Abram. First he changed Abram's name to Abraham. He went from being "exalted father" to "father of many." God is again promising to Abraham that he will in fact give him children and that from his children will come many descendants. Nations and kings will come from Abraham's descendants. And his family will possess the land of Canaan. Once again we see the promise that the land that Abraham was living on would someday be the homeland of his descendants.

God also changed Sarai's name to Sarah. That name change was not significant in terms of its meaning. Both names meant princess. The point was that both of them were different people because of their relationship with God. Entering into a covenant with him changed who they were.

GOD GAVE A NEW SIGN

God next gave a sign of this covenant relationship. At the end of verse 10 God said to him, "Every male among you shall be circumcised." I suspect that Abraham said, "Uh, circumcised? Really?" I can't imagine that he was thrilled by that news. He was 99 years old and God wants him to go through an elective surgery. But it was a minor procedure. Excuse me but from where I stand in that particular region there is no minor. Remember they didn't have sharp scalpels and

anesthetics. Verse 12 says every male of his descendants is to be circumcised on the 8th day. That's good because they won't remember it. But old Abraham would never forget receiving this sign. Let's just say that receiving that sign was not going to be a walk in the park. It reminds me of the old Far Side cartoon that showed two deer standing in a forest. One of them had a bullseye on him. The other said to him, "Bummer of a birthmark, Hal." I wonder if someone said after hearing about this, "bummer of a covenant sign, Abe."

Have you ever wondered why circumcision was the sign of the covenant? It's not exactly the most visible sign, at least it better not be. I have encountered several different explanations for why God chose that to be the sign. Some of them are more plausible than others but they all share one thing in common. There is no evidence for any of them. We don't know why God chose that sign because he didn't tell us. If someone tries to explain to you what the significance of that sign is, take whatever they say with not just a grain of salt, but a whole shaker of salt.

The fact that God gave no explanation for the sign tells us that the nature of the sign itself is not important. If it was crucial for us to understand why he chose that sign then God would have explained it. God could have said that the sign would be that everyone who is a part of the covenant should always shave their hair and be completely bald, or maybe have the word Yahweh tattooed on their forehead. The point is not so much the sign itself as the faith, the loyalty and the commitment to have the sign. The significance is the obedience of having the sign.

There is a very important theological point to observe here. In Romans 4:9-11 Paul wrote "We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." When did the covenant God had with Abraham go into effect? It was in place all the way back in Genesis 12. We also saw in Genesis 15 that God did that ceremony of ratifying the covenant. It was in effect then. All that happened before Abraham was ever circumcised. Both of those instances made clear that God's promises were not conditional and dependent upon actions by Abraham.

It is crucial that we remember that the covenant did not happen because Abraham was circumcised. He got circumcised because he was already a part of the covenant with God.

Laurie and I are very much alike in many ways. But we do have our differences. She absolutely loves desserts, where I am generally not a big fan of most of them. At a nice restaurant they always ask, “would you like to look at the dessert menu?” Laurie immediately says yes, often after she has just said, “I am so full.” I’ll say, “Wait, I thought you were full. Why do you want to look at the dessert menu?” She says, “My dinner stomach is full, but my dessert stomach is empty.” I see. Thus endeth the lesson in anatomy. But I will look at the dessert menu and see exactly zero items that appeal to me at all, whereas she has difficulty choosing which is best. Another difference is she loves chocolate, I don’t. She is addicted to coffee but I can’t stand it. Yet another difference is that she is a sucker for anything shiny. She loves jewelry. Walk by a jewelry store and I guarantee her eyes will be drawn right to the bling. I, on the other hand, could care less about jewelry. I suspect that’s why I never was close to being a professional athlete. Have you noticed all the jewelry those guys wear? That’s right, the problem wasn’t my lack of ability, it was that I don’t like jewelry. No doubt. I only own and wear one piece of jewelry. It’s my wedding ring. So here’s the question: am I married because I wear a wedding ring? No, I wear a wedding ring because I’m married. It is a symbol of our relationship, not the cause of it. I am married whether I wear the ring or not. Occasionally I will take my ring off. I did that when I played hockey or softball. I do it these days when I go for a swim in the ocean. I have known several guys who have lost their wedding rings in the ocean. I have noticed that generally that is not very well received by their wives. So I am careful not to put myself in a situation where that could happen. When I take that ring off am I no longer married? Of course not. The ring is only the sign of the relationship. So it is with circumcision. It was merely the sign of the relationship or the covenant with God it was not the cause of it.

GOD GAVE REASSURANCE

Abraham’s response to God’s promise was laughter. “Sarah and I are going to have a child? Yeah, right. That’s a good one, Lord. A real knee slapper.” This was too much to believe. How was he supposed to father a child when he was going on 100 years old? Was Sarah going to be able to have a child when she was 90? Now there’s a great idea. Can you imagine raising a toddler when you’re in your 90’s? Or even worse, your 100’s? Is there a “do not call” list for that duty?

Abraham found that promise to be literally incredible, as in not to be believed. Since it was impossible for them to have a child he had another suggestion for God. How about Ishmael? Can’t he be the promised child? Abraham is still trying to help God solve this obviously insurmountable problem. But God still insisted the same thing that he had said 13 years earlier back in chapter 16. God would

give Abraham and Sarah a son. The promised child would not be the product of some idiotic human scheme. He would be a child born to Abraham and Sarah through God's divine power.

It is to Abraham's credit that he truly loved his son Ishmael. He still wanted Ishmael to be blessed by God. So in this passage God promises that he will bless Ishmael as well. He will be fruitful and his numbers will greatly increase. God would make him into a great nation. So Abraham did not need to worry about Ishmael. However, Ishmael was not the child of God's promise and covenant. God would give Abraham and Sarah that son just as he had promised. And God would give him a totally appropriate name. His name would be Isaac, which means laughter. Obviously God gave him that name because that was Abraham's response to God's promise.

ABRAHAM RESPONDED

Abraham may have found these promises awfully hard to swallow, but he believed. Verse 24 says Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised and his son Ishmael was 13. Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on the same day. And every male in Abraham's household was circumcised. No doubt they were all thrilled to death about that whole covenant thing.

APPLICATION

15 years ago Disney made a movie titled *The Kid* that apparently hardly anyone saw, but we love it. It's kind of an unusual story. In it Bruce Willis plays a successful and wealthy image consultant who is turning 40. One night an eight year old boy shows up at his house. After a while both Russ, the image consultant, and Rusty, the boy, come to the unavoidable realization that Rusty, in fact, is eight year old Russ. At one point Rusty runs around the house yelling, "Chester, Chester here boy." Russ says, "Stop that yelling." Rusty asks, "Where's Chester?" Russ responds "Who is Chester?" The boy says, "My dog. I'm going to get a dog when I grow up. He's going to be the world's greatest dog." Russ says, "Sorry kid, no dog." The boy says, "Why not?" Russ says, "Because I travel all the time I can't take care of a dog." Excited, Rusty says, "I knew it! I grow up to be a pilot and flight jets!" "No, I'm not a pilot," answers Russ. "Then what do you do?" the boy asks. He answers, "I'm an image consultant." They had a discussion about what that means with young Rusty concluding it meant Russ teaches people to lie. Then the boy says, "Hey he shouldn't there be a lady around here?" "You mean a wife?" says Russ. "No, I'm not married." The boy, obviously discouraged, flops down on the couch and says, "You're almost 40, you have no dog, you don't fly jets, and you're not married. I grow up to be a loser."

In the movie that scene is a turning point for Russ. He begins to take a new look at his life. But the scene gets us in touch with the reality that the dreams of our childhood often bear little or no resemblance to the reality of our adult lives. Most of us end up in places we never really imagined. Often they are very good places, but they can still leave us with some level of disappointment. The unfortunate reality is that life is full of disappointment. Most of us have had some things that we deeply cared about and prayed fervently about, to no avail. Honestly, we've been a little disappointed in the fact that God never answered the way we wished he would. We find ourselves in a position that has some similarity to Abraham who longed so deeply for a son. A son that God had promised to give him, but that son had never arrived. For now more than 20 years he had waited in hope, but nothing had happened. He was disappointed. How are we to deal with this? This is a question that we must answer, and if we do not it will eventually erode our faith. We will conclude that God is not to be trusted.

BELIEVE IN EL SHADDAI

The message of this incident is that God is El Shaddai, the one who is sufficient. This is much like the message we have seen all along. We are to believe that what God supplies is enough. That's what his name means. Was that true for Abraham and Sarah? Spoiler alert. Abraham and Sarah did indeed have a son. But then you already knew that. It was a long, long wait. We will get the same message again when we look at that incident. God was indeed sufficient, and did supply what was promised.

Philippians 4:19 says, "My God will supply all you need." Do you believe it? That is the fundamental question of life. Will he in fact supply? Or perhaps, we should say the fundamental question really is since we know he will supply, are we willing to trust and wait until he does?

This incident challenges us to be patient, to be confident in our God, to believe that he in fact will keep his promise to supply what we need. And it means we need to be content with what he gives us. This is what it means to live by faith. For a quarter of a century El Shaddai gave Abraham and Sarah many blessings, but not the one thing they wanted most. Year after year passed and God expected them to wait and trust. He would fulfill his promise, but it only happened after a long wait that surely felt inexplicable to them.

Do we think God bears a striking resemblance to a genie who will give us whatever we wish? Do we insist that he operate according to our timetable? He did

not do so with Abraham and Sarah. The message here is that we must learn to believe in the God who supplies, but he supplies what he knows in his divine wisdom is best, even if it is not what we want, and he does it in his own timeframe. In the end faith is trusting when we cannot see, and that means continuing to trust in his goodness and his ability to provide even when it is not evident in our circumstances today.

WEAR THE SIGN

God had already made and ratified the covenant with Abraham. The covenant was in place no matter what Abraham did. In the meantime there was something God wanted him to do. He wanted him to commit to being circumcised. That was like wearing the company logo on your shirt. It proclaimed what Abraham stood for and who he was. He was a member of a covenant with God. Abraham did it when there was as yet no son on the horizon. He acted in faith and did what God asked him to do.

We are now part of a new covenant relationship with God. It is a covenant established through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in this covenant relationship the same way Abraham was in his covenant relationship with God. He believed God. He trusted God's promise. We do the same. We trust God and become part of his new covenant people.

Just as God wanted Abraham to wear a sign of the fact that he was in a covenant relationship with God, so God wants us to wear a sign. Only this sign is different. In Romans 2:29 Paul wrote, "Circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the spirit, not by the written code." In other words as a sign of our covenant with God he wants us to be circumcised. But it is our hearts he wants to be circumcised. In other words, he wants our hearts changed.

What will that mean? It means much the same thing as the command that God gave Abraham. He wants us to live before him and be blameless. Well that's a problem for me, because I don't do blameless. Recently near the end of one of those really hot days we've been having Laurie was very tired and very hot. I asked her if she wanted to go for a swim to cool off and she said, "No, what I want is to have a root beer float." Unfortunately we didn't have any root beer in the house. But this was a problem I could fix. I told her I would go to the store and get some root beer for her. She insisted that I did not need to do that but I was determined. I wanted to love and serve my wife in a tangible way. Since I was going to go to the store I asked her if there was anything else that I needed to pick up there. She mentioned three other things. I wrote them all down to make sure I

didn't forget anything. I went to the store and had a little trouble finding one of the items. I was determined that I would solve the problem so I went on a hunt through the store and finally located the elusive item. I did my shopping and headed home knowing that Laurie would be very pleased. I had even thought of a couple of extra items that we needed that I had purchased. When I got home I began putting the grocery items away feeling very proud of myself. I told Laurie about my success in hunting down the hard to find item and about the extra items that I had thought of while at the store. After I got everything put away she said, "But, where's the root beer?" Root beer? Uh oh. I forgot the root beer. I went to the store to do a kind and loving act for my wife so that she could have a root beer float and I forgot the root beer. I wrote it down and still forgot the main point of the trip. I don't do blameless.

As dumb as I am about things like that, I am equally dumb about doing the things that God wants me to do, if not worse. It's not just that I choose not to do blameless, it's that I *can't* do it. I've tried, just like you have, and my best efforts have always fallen desperately short. That's why Jesus came here, because there was no other way for me. I am hopeless without his grace and his work on my behalf. How then am I supposed to be blameless?

Fortunately there is some hope for me even in this command to live blameless. To be truly blameless is to be perfect and that's something none of us can do. But that's not exactly what the Hebrew word used in Genesis 17:1 meant. In Job 9:21 Job said, "Although I am blameless, I have no concern for myself." He claimed to be blameless. Yet in 14:17 he said to God, "My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin." Wait, what sin? I thought he was blameless. He thought it possible to be blameless while still having sin in his life. The word translated blameless is used in Joshua 10:13 to refer to an entire day. In Ezekiel 15:5 it referred to a whole or healthy vine. In Psalm 38:3 it spoke of health in the bones. In other words, this word can mean to be whole or healthy. So what God is saying to Abraham and to us is that he wants us to have souls that are whole and healthy. In other words it is not to be a heart full of hidden disease.

Here is a way that I like to think about this. A number of years ago we had a very busy day at the end of which we had some friends coming to our house. We had time to straighten up most of the house, but we had some clothes and other things in our bedroom that we did not have time to put away. So I gathered them up and just tossed them into the closet. I just made sure that as we showed them around the house we didn't open my closet door and reveal the mess in there. Living blameless before God means living in such a way that we have no closets that we

are hiding from God. It means that we are willing to have him open the door to any space in our hearts and lives. If he finds something in a space that he deems unworthy we tell him, “you can have it Lord. You do with it whatever you want.”

And, as we saw it means living “before the Lord.” Here’s a quiz for you. What movie do you suppose is our son-in-law Michael’s favorite movie? It’s the old classic *Top Gun*. He’s a fighter pilot, what else would it be? I love that movie too. You may not remember this, but at one point during the final battle they talked about launching the Alert 5 aircraft. That is an aircraft that is placed on the flight deck of a carrier with pilots on board, ready to be launched within 5 minutes. That plane and its pilot’s job is to be ready to take off at a moment’s notice. They have no other task but to wait for the call of the Air Boss. You and I are to be on Alert 5 status with God. Our job is to live continually waiting for his call and command. We have no other job and we must never, ever be distracted from our task. That is the sign of being in a covenant relationship with God.

This helps us with disappointment because it changes our focus. The point of my life is not to get the thing that I’m disappointed in not receiving. The point of my life, the thing that gives it meaning and fullness, the thing that provides real motivation and joy, is wearing the sign. It is displaying the sign that I am in a covenant with God. But this will only help us if we keep very clearly in our minds the point and function of a sign.

REMEMBER THAT GOD REDEEMS

There is a note here that is easy to miss. Abraham and Sarah had really fouled things up by the Hagar detour. That produced a son named Ishmael who had no part of God’s promise and covenant. Despite that God said he would make something good of that goof. Ishmael would be blessed and would become a great nation.

There is good news here that God can somehow make something even out of our mess-ups. Laurie and I came up with what we thought was a terrific idea for a birthday present for Michael. His birthday took place while we were in Hawaii with all the kids. We remembered there is a shop in the little town of Lahaina where they sell beautiful models of airplanes made out of mahogany. They are just gorgeous pieces of work. We figured we would buy a model of an F-18, since that’s what Michael flew before becoming an instructor and is now training Navy and Marine pilots to fly. So one day we went to that store...and they don’t sell them anymore. I wasn’t going to be foiled that easily. I went on the Internet and found a company that sells them. Even better they would engrave Michael’s name

on the plane under the cockpit just like the real thing. So I called the company and ordered one. I gave them his name, spelling it out along with his call sign. They said they would mail it to their house in Mississippi. We were happy knowing it would get there right after they got home. We just told Michael a present was on the way and he'd get it when he got home. I was dismayed a couple of days later when we got a notification that the plane had been shipped via Fed Ex...to our house instead of Michael's! We were annoyed and frustrated at first. We were going to call and complain, but then decided it might be a good thing to see it and make sure it looked good before giving it to Michael. So it was waiting for us when we got home. And it looked super, except for one small problem. They misspelled Michael's name. It was engraved on the plane incorrectly. They engraved "Capt. Michael Towsend" Instead of "Capt. Michael Townsend." We were sure we were going to have to fight with the company to get them to fix the problem. I don't know how you do that when something is engraved in wood. Laurie called and explained the problem. The guy was totally apologetic. He said, "Shoot, I do that every time I take an order over the phone. If it's not written down I get it wrong." He promised to engrave another one and to send it to the correct address. He was very nice about it. It's there now, sitting on the piano in Michael and Carissa's living room. What were we to do with the misspelled one? He said, "It's yours." So now it's in my office. I think it's so cool. I love it, misspelling and all. It sits there as a reminder to me that a mistake, an unacceptable thing can be used for a great purpose and bring joy to people. That is what God did with Ishmael, and it is what he does with us.

In Genesis 50:20 when Joseph's brothers apologized to him for their cruel and inexcusable act of selling him, their own brother, to human traffickers, he said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." God was able to redeem even terrible, sinful attitudes and actions. This is huge for me, because it means even if I am disappointed with how things have turned out, with the way things are going in my life, God can redeem it. I can trust that even though I may not understand the why or the endgame, I can know that God can and will redeem all things in my life. Even when I am disappointed I can be confident that God will redeem it and make it good in his own timing.