

Change of Direction **Genesis 17**

We're going to get back to Abram this morning and continue to study how he learned to live a life of faith in God. This morning we are going to pick up the story almost 25 years after he moved to the land of Canaan. When we left off last time he had been in Canaan for just over 10 years and was really getting established in the land. The biggest problem he had was that he didn't have a son to pass on his inheritance to, but we saw how he and Sarai came up with a remedy to that and they ended up with a son through Hagar. So all was well for Abram – Ishmael was growing up, they were enjoying peace and prosperity and for all Abram knew he would just keep going the same direction until the end of his life. Life was good. But God's plans were not complete. Something big still needed to happen and God was about to bring up a whole new change of direction in Abram's life.

When things are going well in our lives, we usually don't get excited about major changes. We're happy and content with where things are at and wish they would just stay the same. But then something happens that changes everything; something outside of our control. We don't ask for it, but it happens anyway. And we know that in some way, God is involved. He either brings things up or allows things to happen and we find ourselves in a place we don't really want to be.

This happened to me about two and a half years ago. I was in Montana for Thanksgiving with Amy's family when I got a call from my dad. He went in for a doctor's appointment and they discovered that he had stage 4 colon cancer that had already spread to his liver. That was news I never wanted to hear and for those of you that have walked the same road, it's very heavy news. That diagnosis changes things – for my mom and dad, it changed the way they lived their lives and when they got that news it was the last thing they wanted to hear. Life was good. No one wants to walk down that road, but many of us do.

Some of you are facing a similar change in your life where something about your health changes and you will never be the same. Some of you face changes because of what's happening at work. Sometimes things change because of circumstances with parents or children and you have to step in. Or maybe you've experienced a divorce or the death of a spouse or loved one. Change can happen because of financial hardship or natural disaster. Life is going along so well, why do these things have to happen? It can be hard to understand when life changes direction

and God won't turn things back around, and it can be very difficult to know how to respond.

This morning we're going to look at some major changes that God brought up in the life of Abram and how he responded and my hope is that God will inspire us to have courage and strength to trust him during times of change rather than resist him. We ended last time at the end of Genesis 16 where Ishmael was just born and Abram was 86 years old. 13 years went by and the story continues in Genesis 17.

Read Genesis 17:1-8.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ 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. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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."

Abram had heard most of these promises before, so they weren't new to him, but what was new was that God was going to change his name. He would no longer be "Abram," but "Abraham." This was a very significant change because of the meaning of the names. According to my study Bible, the name "Abram" means "exalted father" and was probably a reference to Abram's father Terah. So his old name emphasized his ancestors and his former life. The name "Abraham" means "father of a multitude" and looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promises to him and his descendants. So from this point on, "Abram" is left behind, and he becomes "Abraham." That signified a major change of direction was about to take place. According to the Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary, "*In Eastern countries a change of name is an advertisement of some new circumstance in the history, rank, or religion of the individual who bears it.*" Things were going to change. It began with a new name and would continue with what God told him next.

Read Genesis 17:9-14.

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² 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, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.”

So this change was a big deal. God was establishing a new covenant with Abraham and the sign of that covenant would be circumcision. God had covenant dealings with Abraham in the past, but this is the first time we see God enter into a covenant with him in all its fullness. According to the Reformation Study Bible, a covenant like this involved a solemn agreement that would bind the two parties to each other in a permanent, defined relationship with specific promises, claims, and obligations on both sides. It would be similar to the covenant God made with Noah after the flood and with the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai.

We see elements of this covenant beginning in verse 1. In verse 1 we see the covenant obligation placed on Abraham that he must walk before God and be blameless. In verse 2 we see God’s claim that he would multiply him greatly. He expands on this in verses 4-6 by telling him he would be a father of a multitude of nations and God would make him exceedingly fruitful, would make him into nations, and kings would come from him. In verse 7 he tells him that this covenant would also be established with his offspring as an everlasting covenant. And in verse 8 he promised that he would give them the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and that he would be their God. So these are the terms of the covenant God was making with Abraham.

Then in verses 9-14 he tells him what the sign of the covenant would be. I’m going to point out that this sign is pretty bizarre as far as signs go. The sign of the new covenant that we are in with God is baptism, which is pretty cool. The sign of God’s covenant with Noah was a rainbow, which is also pretty cool. But when it came to the sign of his covenant with Abraham, he chose circumcision... What’s up with that?!

Why circumcision? Well, I think God had a number of reasons, but the reason that several scholars point to that probably made the most sense to Abraham and his men was that it involved the organ of procreation. My study Bible says: “By this ritual the organ of procreation was consecrated to God.” Given the specific circumstances in which this covenant was given, this begins to make sense. God had just given Abram a new name that meant “father of a multitude.” And the promise of fruitful procreation was deeply embedded in this covenant. So for the sign to be circumcision, as odd as that might seem to us, probably made sense to him. Later on it would be seen by Abraham’s descendants as something that set them apart from all the pagan nations around them and they took great pride in it. And in the NT it would be seen as an OT foreshadow of what Christ would accomplish through his death on the cross by cutting off our sinful flesh.

But the main thing I want us to see this morning is that it was another change for Abraham and this time a pretty drastic one. Every male in his camp had to be circumcised from then on – even if they were 99 like he was. This was a binding regulation of the covenant and any man who was not circumcised would be cut off from the people. So not only was Abraham given a new name that day, but he was also going to have to get circumcised and break some pretty startling news to all the men in his camp. That was a drastic change, but the most difficult change for Abraham would be in what God told him next.

Read Genesis 17:15-21.

And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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?”¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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.²¹ But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

We need to realize that up to this point, Abraham would have assumed that all the covenant promises he heard would be fulfilled through his only son, Ishmael. For 13 years Abraham was raising him as if he was the promised heir through whom

God would carry out his promises. And God had never told him that Sarah would have a baby, so in Abraham's mind Ishmael was it. But on that day, God told him that would not be the case. Not only would nations and kings come from Abraham, but they would also come from Sarai. So God changed her name too. No longer would she be called Sarai, but she would be called Sarah – a name that emphasized her descendants. She was going to have a baby boy.

This news would have been very difficult for Abraham to receive. At first he laughed at the mention of it – how could he at 100 years old and Sarah at 90 years old have a child! That was a humorous thought. At their age they were not looking to have a baby. But then it started to sink in and his attitude sobered. If Sarah had a son, what would that mean for Ishmael? Abram loved his son – a son who was just reaching the age where he was beginning to turn into a young man. For 13 years Abram had all his hopes and future wrapped up in Ishmael: “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” But it was not to be. God would not carry out his covenant promises through the son they obtained by natural means. He would carry out his covenant through a son whom he would give them as a gift. The covenant would carry on because of God's grace and mercy – a significant sign of God's plan of redemption.

So Abraham had a lot to swallow – a new name, a new sign, and now a new son. I imagine Abraham had been happy with the way things were before and all these changes weren't overly welcome, but what was he to do? They were out of his control. God was bringing these things about and he didn't have a choice. The only thing he could do was chose how he would respond. Would he complain? Would he drag his feet? Would he resist the change of direction that God was placing before him? The way he responds is something I think we need to take to heart this morning as we struggle with some of the changes we face.

Read Genesis 17:22-27.

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.²³ 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.²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.²⁶ That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised.²⁷ And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

The phrase that sticks out to me is “that very day.” It shows up two times. Abraham responded that very day. He took immediate action. That demonstrates two things to me: faith in God and submission to his will. He didn’t know how things were going to end up, but he trusted God and that gave him the courage to move forward in obedience.

There are going to be times in our lives where we reach a cross roads. We’re headed in one direction, but God brings about a change or allows things to happen that point us in a different way – a way we really don’t want to go – cancer, divorce, laid off at work, fire or flood... These things are out of our control and the only thing we can do is decide how we’re going to respond.

I want to learn how to respond like Abraham. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*” Faith and submission. This winter we did a series on the attributes of God and in that we saw how God is perfect in all his ways – he is perfect in wisdom; he is perfect in power; and he is perfect in goodness. He sees and knows the big picture and how everything is going to work out for our greatest good and for his glory. And because of that, we can trust in him, submit to his will and move forward with courage when a change in direction comes. That doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy, but it does mean that we have hope – unwavering hope for what is to come.