



## Lesson 8 | Compelled by Grace

### Genesis 17:1-27

Imagine someone riding their bike on a high, narrow road with two very steep valleys on either side. If they veer off to the left, they will fall and crash and likely get seriously hurt. If they go too far to the right, then they will face the same fate. Our imaginary bike rider will need to keep focused on the path ahead and be careful to avoid going too far off the path in one direction or the other. When we come to theology, we face a similar situation when it comes to God's grace and our obedience. Our obedience does not earn us salvation, because our home in heaven is ours by the grace of God and by His grace alone. Yet once we have become a part of God's family, there are obligations that we must keep. True faith will eventually lead to true obedience. You cannot claim to believe God and continually go on rejecting His Word and living for yourself.

***Why do we have such a hard time holding these two ideas at the same time?***

***What happens if we drop one or the other (God's grace or the necessity of our obedience)?***

As we come to Genesis 17, we see that God is again discussing His covenant with Abram, but this time with certain stipulations put on Abram. This challenging passage raises some interesting questions. First, is this a new covenant, or is God just reaffirming the covenant from Genesis 15? And if it is the same one, is it now dependent on Abram's obedience? Why does God ask for the sign of circumcision? Finally, what part does this play in the overall story of Abraham's life? Why did God give a large gap between the first discussion of this covenant in Genesis 15 and the rest of the instructions here in chapter 17? While we will seek to address these questions, we don't want to miss the forest for the trees. The main point we want to see in this lesson is that God follows up His gracious and unconditional covenant with requirements. The covenant did not depend on Abraham's obedience, but it did require it. In a similar way, our salvation does not depend on good works (Ephesians 2:8-9), but it does require them (Ephesians 2:10). God gives grace, but that grace should compel us to then live differently as a result.

## God Confirms His Covenant with Abraham (1-8)

Thirteen years have passed since Ishmael was born (cf Genesis 17:25). The plan to have Hagar produce an heir for Abram took place ten years after they were in the land (cf Genesis 16:3), so they've been in Canaan for close to twenty five years (compare Genesis 17:1 with 12:4). God's covenant ceremony with Abram

likely took place before the episode with Hagar, so it's been at least thirteen years since God has talked to Abram about the covenant. Yet here, seemingly out of nowhere, God shows up once again so that He can instruct Abram about the requirements of the covenant and to promise him great reward.

### God Demands Abraham's Obedience

God's covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 was unconditional, that seems pretty clear. God walked through the divided animals alone, and in doing so took full responsibility to make sure that what He had said was going to happen would happen. But now God shows up to Abram and tells him that he must walk before God and be perfect. This has led to some people arguing that there are two covenants God makes with Abram, one in Genesis 15 and one in Genesis 17. The problem is that later generations will talk about the covenant with Abraham, not the covenants with Abraham (cf Nehemiah 9:6-8). Nowhere else in Scripture do we see the language of covenants, only of the covenant. So was that covenant unconditional, or were there things that Abraham had to do?

The answer is yes. God made an unconditional covenant with Abram, but He expected obedience of Abram. The obedience expected of Abram was intended to be a response to God's grace, not the basis for the covenant. In other words, God had done everything that needed to be done, but now He expected Abram to live up to that. God is coming, not to make a new covenant,<sup>1</sup> but to affirm His previous covenant and to require behavior of Abraham that lines up with that covenant.

***Why does it matter that God initiated the covenant first?***

***Why would God not make His covenant conditional on Abram's obedience?***

Later on, God will require the sign of circumcision, but at this point the expectations are more broad. "Walk before me and be perfect" God says to Abram. "Walking before God" means living with integrity and honesty in a way that represents God well, that follows closely the laws He gives (1 Kings 9:4; Isaiah 38:3, cf Ephesians 4:1). "Being perfect" doesn't mean that someone is without sin, as Noah is described as "perfect" (cf Genesis 6:9). Rather, it means being wholly committed to God, not holding anything back.<sup>2</sup>

***What is the connection between "walking before God" and being "perfect"?***

### God Promises Great Blessing

God reiterates and intensifies His promises of great blessings in terms of (1) offspring (2) a relationship with God and (3) the land of Canaan. Already God has told Abram that he will make a great nation from

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "I will make my covenant with thee" in 17:2 could also be translated as "I will confirm/reaffirm my covenant with thee." The Hebrew word that is used here (*nathan*) is not the normal word for making a new covenant (*karath*) or establishing an already made covenant (*qum*), but could be used for either. Given the context and the fact that God has already "made" this covenant in Genesis 15, it makes more sense to understand this as God affirming or establishing the covenant He has already made.

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word (*tamim*) is often used of sacrifices that were perfect, i.e., without blemish. It is occasionally used of God's activity (Deuteronomy 32:4). The word is occasionally used of people, such as Noah, Abram, David (2 Samuel 22:24), and Job (Job 12:4, KJV "upright").

him and that He will give Abram the nations as a blessing. But whereas Abram was previously told that he would be the father of a great nation (Genesis 12:2), he is told now he will be the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:4-6). In fact, Abram's name is here changed from "Abram" ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude [of nations]"). God's promises do not seem any closer to being fulfilled, yet God is doubling down and enlarging the promises, rather than shrinking away from what He had said earlier. God also tells Abraham that he will give to him and his offspring the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and that He will have a special relationship with Abraham and his offspring by being their God and claiming them as His people. By the end of the speech, it is truly staggering to think about all that the Creator God of the universe has promised to do for Abraham and his children after him.

***What incredible promises has God made to us that would seem to be so crazy that it takes great faith to really believe them?***

## God Requires the Sign of Circumcision (9-14)

God had begun talking to Abraham about this covenant by requiring that Abraham walk rightly and be perfect, but spent most of the opening section talking about what God Himself would do (Genesis 17:4, "As for me"). Now God gives Abraham (Genesis 17:9 "And thou") the sign of circumcision that he must implement in fidelity to the covenant. This whole issue of circumcision is confusing for many people today, so we will cover briefly why God asked for this sign in the first place and what it meant.

### The Purpose for Circumcision

God tells Abraham that circumcision was to serve as a sign of the covenant that was given. This was the way God wanted Abraham and his descendants to show that they were indeed part of the people who were in covenant with Him. Perhaps surprisingly to us, even those who were purchased slaves of foreigners were made to undergo the rite. Yet this would have served to unify the entire household. There was a sense in which everyone, then, would be a member of this covenant family, not just natural-born Hebrews.

There are two potential dangers with this sign. First there is the danger that the sign itself would be ignored. Moses, for example, ignored this rite at some level and almost got someone killed by God (Exodus 4:24-26). Although this is a confusing passage, however one interprets it, Moses is not taking circumcision seriously and someone almost dies. God is serious about the matter of obedience. Yet at the same time, obedience to this command does not mean that one's heart is right before God. As the Old and New Testament will make clear, many people have been circumcised in their bodies but their hearts are not right with God.

***How can we today have a similar problem of either ignoring some of God's laws, or thinking that we must be acceptable to God because we do certain things?***

### The Meaning of Circumcision

In the text of Genesis 17, God never tells Abraham why it is that He chose the particular image of circumcision. The act itself strikes us as very personal, somewhat graphic, and perhaps even awkward to talk about. Yet God knew all of this and chose it anyway. Later biblical revelation will give at least two

reasons for this: (1) it set God's people apart from the rest of the nations and (2) it was meant to be an external picture of an internal change of heart. God wanted His people to be different from the nations around them, and that included what they ate, what did and didn't do, and it included their circumcision. This plan was so successful that by the New Testament, "the circumcision" has become a way of talking about Jewish people generally (Romans 2:25-29). But the picture also demonstrated a physical change that pointed to a deeper, spiritual change that needed to happen. Even in the Old Testament, God will talk about "circumcision of the heart" (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). We, like Israel, can also begin to focus so much on what we see on the outside that we lose sight of what God is really looking at – our hearts.

***How can we make sure that we are paying attention to our hearts and not just what others can see on the outside?***

## God Clarifies His Covenant Regarding Sarah (15-22)

God had shown special attention to the Hagar, the Egyptian slave, in Genesis 16. Now He gives special attention to Sarai, renamed Sarah, and to the role she will play in His grand plan of redemption.

### God's Promise

God had previously promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Now He adds new information and gets even more precise – Sarai, now Sarah, will be the one to have that child. This is especially significant because up until this point, God has not promised to do anything explicitly miraculous. He's promised to make Abraham the father of a great nation, but that won't take a miracle per se. He's promised to give his seed the land of Canaan, but again that's not a miracle. Here, however, God tells Abraham that He will do something which is physically impossible.

***Why do you think God has waited this long to tell Abraham that Sarah will be the one to have the child?***

***What can we learn about God's character from this delay?***

### Abraham's Doubt

Abraham had a response that might surprise you if you are used to thinking of Abraham as the ultimate example of faith – he laughs. Furthermore, Scripture makes it clear that this wasn't a laughter of joy or excitement, it was a laughter of unbelief. Abraham simply can't imagine this happening – it is physically impossible. And so he gives God a counteroffer – "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" Abraham just can't bring himself to believe that Sarah could have a child, so he focuses instead on Ishmael.

***Why do you think this response did not anger God?***

***How could the New Testament describe Abraham as someone who did not "stagger at the promise of God through unbelief" (Romans 4:20)?***

## God's Assurance

God does not back down. He makes it incredibly clear that He is talking about Sarah having a child, and that while He will bless Ishmael, within a year a 91-year-old Sarah will have a child. God is undeterred by Abraham's response, and He firmly and confidently tells Abraham what will happen and then leaves Abraham.

***What does this teach us about the character of God?***

## Abraham Obeys Immediately (23-27)

As is typical for Abraham, once receiving the instructions from God on what Abraham needs to do in order to show his fidelity to the covenant, Abraham leaps into immediate actions. Twice the passage tells us that Abraham not only did all of this, but he did it "in the selfsame day" (17:23, 26). Not only that, but the author is very careful to make sure that we realize Abraham did everything that God asked Him to do – including circumcising those who were born in his house and those servants he had purchased from other nations. Abraham obeyed immediately and completely as soon as God had stopped speaking with Him.

***Why do we sometimes put off obeying God until later?***

***Why do we sometimes only obey God part of the way?***