

## *The Way God Works*

### *17:1-27*

Based on the Biblical account there is no evidence that the Lord has spoken to Abram or anyone else for thirteen years. Abram was 86 at the end of chapter sixteen and at the beginning of chapter seventeen he is ninety-nine years old (16:16; 17:1a). Thirteen years have passed since Abram and Sarai's lapse of faith and fall in the flesh with Hagar. It's been over thirteen years since Abram questioned God about His promise to provide him an heir (Genesis 15:1-4). It's been over thirteen years since Abram put his trust in the Lord and the Lord accounted it to him as righteousness (15:5-6). And it's been over thirteen years since God spoke to Abram (Genesis 15). God has spoken to Hagar more than to Abram during this time (16:7-13). Thirteen years is a long time to go without hearing from the Lord.

We don't know why God has been silent for this period of time. Maybe he wanted Abram and Sarai to think about their lapse in faith and fall in the flesh with Hagar. The strife this act caused surely must have impressed upon them the futility and pain caused by impatiently acting in the flesh apart from trusting God.

But I think there is a better reason for God's silence. The silence of God has a purpose. The silence of God is part of how He works. Genesis 17 will give us great insight into how God works.

#### **Why God Waits**

##### **Genesis 17:1-3a**

**When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.<sup>2</sup> And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”<sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face, . . .**

Have you ever felt as though God was silent? Have you ever felt as though God wasn't working, maybe as though He had forgotten about you? Have you ever been pushed to the limit of your faith, patience and strength by God's required waiting? If so, you may be right where God wants you to be. Why does God wait? What is the purpose of His waiting, of His pausing in the process of His working?

***God makes us wait because He is working in us.*** We might be tempted to think that God wasn't working while He was making Abram wait. That would be a big misconception. God with Abram, as with us, is doing some of His greatest work when we are waiting. While Abram was made to wait by God, God was working *in* Him so He could work *through* him.

***God makes us wait to build our faith.*** We have said that Abram is the *father of faith*. It is Abram (Abraham) who is referred to as the model of faith in the Bible. In fact the apostle Paul's reference to Abraham in his inspired letter to the Romans gives us great insight into the work of

God being done in Abram to bring him to the point of being Abraham. In Romans it states of Abraham:

**Romans 4:18-22**

<sup>18</sup> who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “*So shall your descendants be.*”<sup>19</sup> And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb.<sup>20</sup> He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,<sup>21</sup> and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.<sup>22</sup> And therefore “*it was accounted to him for righteousness.*”

What do these verses tell us God was doing in Abram? They tell us God was working in him to strengthen his faith so he would “not being weak in faith.” God was bringing Abram to the point where he would get his eyes off of the material, “he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb.” God was bringing Abram to a place in his walk with God where he would, “not waver at the promise of God through unbelief,” where he would trust God and be “strengthened in faith.”

***God makes us wait so that we will fully trust in Him.*** When the promise of God came, God wanted to make sure that Abram wouldn’t be trusting in or attributing to his own prowess or strength what God had done. God wanted Abram and everyone else to only always be, “giving glory to God.” This could only happen if Abram, because of the exhaustion of his own resources became, “fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.” This state is what God wants so that it can be, “accounted to him for righteousness.”

***God makes us wait so we know we are powerless in our own strength.*** God waits until we are powerless and have exhausted our own efforts to attain His promises. God wants to build our faith. The strength of our faith is more important to the Lord than us getting what we want. Therefore, like with Abram and Sarai, God brings us to the end of ourselves, to the end of our earthly resources, the end of our earthly wisdom, yes, to the point of hopelessness. God brought Abram and Sarai to the point where attaining the promise of God seemed *impossible*.

***God makes us wait to prepare us for His work through us.*** *In our strength we are limited and cannot accomplish what God wants to do through us; but when we rely on His strength we can do all that He calls us to do; in fact, in God’s strength and power there is nothing He calls us to do that we cannot do (e.g. Zechariah 4:6).* This is a necessary lesson for all who desire to see God fully work in and through them.

***God makes us wait so we will learn He is Almighty God.*** God works in us to bring us to a place in our spirit where we will *fall on our face before Him* (17:3a). God works in us so that we see the futility of our works in our flesh and the glory of His works in His might. That revelation is driven home to Abram by the way “**the LORD**” presents Himself to Abram (17:1b). Remember, “LORD” (YHWH) is the most fundamental name God uses for Himself. This name communicates the idea of God as eternally existent and totally completely capable of fulfilling all His will. The idea is, “I Am all that I need to be always and forever.” The LORD presents

Himself to Abram by saying, **“I am Almighty God;”** (17:1c). The Hebrew name from which “Almighty God” is translated is El Shaddai (Strong’s # 7706 - **שַׁדַּי** - *Shadday* /shad·dah·ee/), which means, “Almighty, most powerful.”

***God makes us wait so we will learn to trust Him.*** Almighty God told Abram to, “walk before Me” (17:1d). God wants us to learn to live, to *walk in His presence*. God wants us to be aware that He is with us (e.g. Joshua 1). God wants us to learn that even when He is silent, *He is there*. He helps us understand this by being silent and then showing us what He has been doing during the silence. When He brings us through the silence He then turns us around and shows us what He has been doing.

***God makes us wait so we will be blameless before Him.*** God Almighty also instructed Abram to “be blameless” (17:e). The word “blameless” is a translation of the Hebrew term TAWMEEM (Strong’s # 8549 - **תָּמִים** - *tamiym* /taw·meem) which occurs 91 times in the Bible and is translated, “without blemish” 44 times, “perfect” 18 times, “upright” eight times, “without spot” six times, “uprightly” four times, “whole” four times, “sincerely” twice, “complete” once, “full” once, and translated miscellaneous three times”<sup>1</sup> The Biblical context in which God inserts this word conveys the idea that Abram is being called by him *to no longer forget God is working and depend on his flesh, but to always trust in God and be conscious of God’s presence and power; no matter what (e.g. even if what you see – such as a deteriorating body – seems to contradict what God says).*

Our part in the work of God is to be fully surrendered to God, trusting Him while He performs this work in us as we wait on Him (e.g. Romans 8:29; Philippians 2:13). What is God’s part? That is what we will see now.

## **The Work of God**

### **Genesis 17:3-8**

**<sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: <sup>4</sup> “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”**

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<sup>1</sup>Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.) (H8549). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

When we look at these verses we see the work of God. God says, “**As for Me,**” as He begins to speak to Abram (17:4a). God clearly delineates His part in His sovereign plan. What is the work of God?

***God’s work is to reveal His will to us.*** Just as God “talked with him,” that is Abram, He communicates and reveals His plan and will to us (17:3b). God communicated directly with Abram and revealed His plan to him. Whether this was audible or in the mind and heart of Abram we do not know. Today if we feel God is communicating with us we need to understand God will never contradict what He has already revealed; He will not contradict Himself. Therefore, we need to scrutinize all supposed communication from God through the lens of His scripture (Matthew 5:17-19; Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-3; 4:12).

***God’s work is to establish covenant with His people.*** God clearly states and reiterates His covenant with Abram (17:4b). God had done this with Noah (Genesis 6:18; 9:11-17). And God did this with Abram and his descendants (15:18; 17:2, 4-8). Jesus introduced a New Covenant through His blood, a covenant of salvation from sin and eternal life through faith in Him (Matthew 26:18; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). The idea of covenant is that of *relationship* (Strong’s # 1285 - בְּרִית - *bâriyth* /ber-eeth). God reveals the terms of and establishes covenant with us.

***God’s work is to transform us from self-centered self-reliance to God-centeredness trust in God.*** This is seen in the change of Abram’s name to Abraham (17:5). Abram means, “exalted father.” Abraham means “father of a multitude.” Abram was changed by God from being someone “exalted,” because of his own relative strength to someone who would be exalted because of what God would do through him as a, “father of a multitude.” Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus said that those who follow Him must put away self-reliance and the flesh life, pick up their mission cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23-26). God works to change us from self-centeredness and self-reliance to total dependence upon Him, to abiding in Him (e.g. Galatians 2:20; John 15; 17:3; 1 John 3:24).

***God’s work is to make us fruitful.*** God told Abraham “I will make you exceedingly fruitful;” (17:6). The only way we can be fruitful is by God’s hand at work in and through us (John 15:16). And God is always able to do more than we can either ask or think (Ephesians 3:20; Philippians 2:13). In our own strength we can do nothing fruitful before God (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 7:18). We can do all God asks us to do through the power He provides (Acts 1:8; Philippians 4:13).

***God’s work is to encourage us according to His revealed plan.*** God revealed to Abraham the details of His plan and in the process He was encouraging him. God did not stop talking to Abram forever. After the thirteen-year wait, when God determined Abraham was ready, God again spoke to Abraham. God encouraged Abraham by telling him he would make nations of him, that kings would bow before him, that God was giving Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan and that this covenant was everlasting (17:6-8).

### **The Sign of God’s Work**

**Genesis 17:9-14**

<sup>9</sup> And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; <sup>11</sup> and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. <sup>13</sup> He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

Here God institutes circumcision as the sign of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants. This sign was mandatory and without it a person would be cut off from God’s covenant people (17:14; Exodus 4:24ff.). This sign was meant to distinguish and separate Gods’ covenant people from those who did not have a relationship with Him. Circumcision was a sign of belonging to God and as such, was of utmost importance. Circumcision was meant to be a sign that a person had given their heart to the Lord and was governed by Him.

In addition to being a symbol of belonging to God, circumcision of the flesh of the male genitals was very symbolic. The genitals of a person are the means by which offspring are produced. The genitals are connected with fertility and fruitfulness, of reproducing other human beings. The miracle of birth was the product of God blessing the seed of man. God’s blessing was closely associated with the production of offspring. By removing the foreskin of the male genitals a symbolic statement was being made that one was *fully exposed to God, fully surrendered to and dependant upon God in the most private and precious areas of life.*

The circumcision of the flesh of the foreskin was never meant to be a mere outward sign of belonging to God. Circumcision was always supposed to indicate an inner reality that one’s heart belonged to God (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). Over time however, circumcision was reduced to an outward ritual divorced from the inward work it was meant to symbolize. This was inevitable given attempts of humanity to live by the law of God in their own strength. It took the Gospel of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to establish in its fullness all that circumcision was originally meant to be. The New Testament states:

#### **Romans 2:28-29**

<sup>28</sup> For he is not a Jew who *is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;* <sup>29</sup> but *he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*

While circumcision is the sign of God for those who are the descendants of Abraham, for Christians the outward sign of God’s inward work in them is baptism (Matthew 28:18-20). But baptism can also, and indeed has also at times become a dead ritual divorced from a true inward work. If the heart is not actually in line with the ritual of circumcision or baptism, the ritual of either is useless.

Circumcision is a ritual. The purpose of rituals is to teach and testify to a work of God. The act of the ritual is not as important as that which the ritual is teaching and testifying to. Circumcision is a ritual that points to a work of God in a person. Circumcision, the cutting off of a male's foreskin, is a symbol of cutting off the *flesh*, that is, symbolizing a person's dependence on God not themselves. When people put their faith in performing ritual acts rather than the God whose acts are being referred to, the ritual acts become legalism (Galatians 5:2-6). Legalism is the effort by people to attain a righteous standing before God on the basis of keeping rituals and laws *in their own strength, (the flesh)*. Rituals were meant by God to be an outward expression of an inward work in a person. Therefore, circumcision is described in the Bible as pertaining to a specific condition of a person's heart. It is in the heart where God works to cut off dependence on our flesh or self-reliance (Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25-26; Acts 7:51; Romans 2:28-29; Colossians 2:11). When you speak of God's work in the heart, you are speaking of a person's *relationship with God, not necessarily whether or not they have performed a ritual*.

### **The Promise of God Completing His Work**

#### **Genesis 17:15-19**

<sup>15</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. <sup>16</sup> And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.*”

<sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall *a child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child?*” <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!”

<sup>19</sup> Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and with his descendants after him.*”

Not only would Abraham have a work of God done in him but so would Sarai (17:15). “Sarai” means “princess.” Her name was to be changed to “Sarah,” which means, “noblewoman.” Sarah would become a woman of honor because God would replace the dishonor she felt because of her barrenness with the honor connected with her child of promise in the present as well as nations and kings in the future (17:16). All Abraham could do at this news was fall on his face and laugh (17:17). God just blew him away with this news. It was like a ten-ton weight was lifted from his shoulders as God confirmed that He would indeed fulfill all that He had promised. Abraham was thinking that this was just too good to be true; but with God the things He does are too good to be true from a purely earthly perspective, but to be expected from a faith perspective.

Abraham had a place in his heart for Ishmael (17:18). He was concerned that Ishmael would serve before God in His covenant plans. But God gave a forbidding “No,” to this request (17:19). God's work of covenant would be completed through “Isaac” (i.e. “laughter”). It's interesting that Ishmael, who came from a work of the flesh, brought division, regret and sorrow. But Isaac, who came through faith in God, is associated with laughter and joy. That is true in life too. That which is done in our own strength results in drudgery, heavy burdens and joylessness. That which is done in the Spirit leads to joy no matter the difficulties encountered.

Why did God discount and forbid Ishmael's involvement in His covenant plans? Because Ishmael was a product of a fleshly work and *no work of the flesh is acceptable to the plans of God*. There is an important lesson for us to learn here.

That done in the flesh will always contradict and wars against that done by the Holy Spirit of God. Just as Ishmael and Isaac's descendants were at perennial war with each other, so too people who function in their flesh are always at war with those who seek to walk in the Spirit. These two ways of functioning are diametrically opposed to each other and cannot coexist. This is specifically stated in God's word with reference to Ishmael and Isaac (see Galatians 4:22-31). That is the truth of scripture (see Galatians 3, 4 and 5). The fulfillment of God's work is accomplished only in the Spirit not the flesh.

### **Obedience – The Faithful Fruit of God's Work**

#### **Genesis 17:20-27**

**<sup>20</sup> And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” <sup>22</sup> Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.**

**<sup>23</sup> So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. <sup>24</sup> Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>25</sup> And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup> That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; <sup>27</sup> and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.**

God heard Abraham's fatherly request and inasmuch as He could, God promised to bless Ishmael and make him a great nation (17:20). But the covenant of God would be with the child of promise Isaac (17:21). Once God was finished talking to Abraham He left him (17:22). As soon as God had left Abraham, he put his faith into action and circumcised “every male among the men” (17:23). Abraham *acted* in faith on what God had revealed to him. Abraham was ninety years old when he was circumcised showing us that *you're never too old to obey God* (17:24). Abraham fulfilled all that God instructed him to do by circumcising all the men of his house (17:25-27).

Jesus said that our love for Him was inextricably linked to obeying His word (John 14:15, 21; 15:10). All disobedience is sinful and a product of doing things in the flesh. You cannot live for your flesh and please God. This does not mean we will never falter or never sin again. It is likely that we will sin in life (1 John 2:1-6). But our aim will be to walk in the Spirit so we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). That is the lesson we must learn. That is the lesson God sought to teach Abraham. Man's extremities are God's opportunities. God is patient and willing to wait until we fall on our faces before Him. That's when the real work of God begins. Are you waiting? Are you willing? Let the work of God begin.