

Text: Gen 17.1-27

Thirteen years ago last Thursday, my oldest grandchild was born. Thirteen years ago tomorrow, Susan and I moved from our house in Colwood to our house in Sooke — Debbi was in Edmonton, helping take care of the new baby who had shocked the world by coming early.

A lot has happened in 13 years.

- Stephen Harper was our prime minister then, but now... let's not talk about it!
- In our family, Susan lived at home, Cullen and Kaleigh were off at school, but that all soon changed
- Susan went back to school, then became a teacher, moving from South Carolina to California to Indiana to (now) North Carolina
- Cullen came home, then moved out, then Sydney showed up (and Norman and Mahershalalhashbaz to be)
- Kaleigh came home and she's still home
- And instead of one grandchild we have now seven, with one more coming — many blessings

What has happened in your life in 13 years?

We've been talking about Abram. Our last story involved the birth of Ishmael ("God hears").

We turn the page from chapter 16 to 17 and thirteen years go by.

What happened in those thirteen years? We don't know.

Ishmael was born ... Abram named him ... saw him grow, develop, begin to walk and talk, learning how to be a man and now he is thirteen! (Thirteen is auspicious for us because now you are talking "teenager" although there is not much difference between twelve one day and thirteen the next.)

Things I wonder about the turn of the page between Genesis 16 and 17.

- How did Sarai and Hagar get along?
- How did Sarai get along with baby Ishmael?
- What did Abram think as he watched Ishmael grow? How did they relate to one another? — we have some indication that Abram loved Ishmael as only a father can love a son.
- Did God talk to Abram during these 13 years? We have no record of it.

No doubt many things happened during those years, but Chapter 17 opens with God speaking to Abram and Abram is 99 years old (Sarai 89).

One of my commentaries says,

“The chapter is more of a theological treatise than the typical Abraham story”¹

The chapter marks a permanent change in the lives of Abram and Sarai, and a momentous day in Hebrew history.

Read Gen 17.1-27

K. A. Mathews discerned a chiasmic structure to the chapter:

- v. 1a Introduction: **Abram** “ninety-nine”
- vv. 1b–22 Covenant revealed
 - vv. 1b–8 Covenant promises announced
 - vv. 9–14 Sign of circumcision prescribed
 - vv. 15–22 Covenant promises explained
- v. 23 Circumcision inaugurated
- vv. 24–27 Conclusion: **Abraham** “ninety-nine”²

You can see this is a little artificial since the second level points aren’t exactly parallel textual points (22 verses vs. 1 verse).

Here is another way of looking at it (my chiasm):

- 1-8: Introduction: Expanded Covenant (Abram to Abraham)
- 9-14: Sign of the Covenant revealed
- 15-22: Joy of the Covenant revealed: Isaac
- 23-27: Sign of the Covenant adopted

Proposition: God permanently altered Abram’s life: name, body, and future for the blessing of many nations in days to come.

¹ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, vol. 1B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 199.

² Mathews, 1B:199 emphasis added.

I. The movement from Abram to Abraham

A. The meaning of the name

1. Abram = “exalted father”
2. Abraham = “father of nations”

The name change is a feature of this repetition of the covenant.

“The patriarch’s name change was crucial. The name Abram (17:5), meaning ‘exalted father,’ harked back to Terah (11:27) and implied that Abram came from royal lineage. But in Hebrew the name Abraham (‘abrāhâm) sounds similar to ‘father of a multitude’ (‘ab hămôn) of nations (17:4–5). His new name implied a look ahead to his descendants.”³

B. The repetition of “multiplication”

1. I will multiply you exceedingly (2)
2. You will be the father of a multitude of nations (4)
3. I will make you the father of a multitude of nations (5)
4. I will make you exceedingly fruitful (6a)
5. I will make nations of you (6b)
6. Kings will come forth from you (6c)

The Ishmaelites, Midianites, Zimranites, Jokshanites, Medanites, Ishbakites and Shuahites (see Gen 25.2ff.) are the physical representation of that.

But also:

Rm 4.16 ¶ For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

³ Allen P. Ross, “Genesis,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 58.

C. The blessing of the covenant descendants (7-8)

1. This is an everlasting covenant
2. This extends to the descendants
3. This involves the land
4. And it involves their relationship with God

The essence of the covenant is not forgotten, but the breadth of the covenant is exponentially expanded.

II. Covenant fruitfulness centered on Isaac

15-17: Sarah the mother of nations

18: Request for Ishmael

19: Revelation of Isaac

20: Provision for Ishmael

21-22: Sarah will bear Isaac

A. From Sarai to Sarah

1. Sarai = “my princess” (seemingly a diminutive: Debbi is a diminutive of Deborah)
2. Sarah = “princess, mother of kings” (16)

There is an elevation and expansion of Sarah’s role in this revelation

B. The focus of the covenant is Isaac (“laughter”) (19)

1. Notice that Abraham also laughed (17)
2. Explicit revelation, 100 yr old Ab and 90 yr old Sarah would have a son, and the covenant centers in him
3. The Lord doesn’t forget Ishmael (blesses him) but focuses on Isaac

The joy of God’s eternal covenant is that the working of it depends on him, not on man — God would bless Ishmael, but he would solve Abraham’s inheritance problem miraculously through Sarah.

III. The significance of the sign

A. The way Abrahamic circumcision becomes unique

1. The Egyptians and some Semitic groups employed circumcision “predominantly as a puberty rite or marriage rite”⁴
2. For Abraham’s people, it became a permanent life-long sign (from the eighth day)
 - a. The eighth day corresponded with the seven days of uncleanness for a new mother
 - b. It also corresponded with the Day of Atonement (eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles)
 - c. Included all males (with females covered by relationship to father of husband)

B. The meaning

1. The nature of the sign reminded every Israelite of the promise concerning the seed of Abraham and the multitudes of nations
2. The sign involved a removal of flesh, just as God called for a circumcised heart (symbolized separation from sin)
3. Marked the sons of Abraham as clean in the sight of God

C. Differences under the New Covenant

1. We are not under the Law: no requirement
2. We have circumcised hearts by the work of the Spirit in regeneration
3. We have no parallel in baptism

D. The response of Abraham

1. That same day (26)
2. Abraham took action (some think he performed all the surgeries!) (23)
3. All the men in the house received the sign
4. Again, the age of Abraham and Ishmael are given (24-25)

⁴ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 1B:198.

Conclusion:

Proposition: God permanently altered Abram's life: name, body, and future for the blessing of many nations in days to come.

The great blessing for the world isn't physical, it's spiritual. Any man who turns to Abraham's great son, Jesus Christ, can have his heart circumcised, sins forgiven, and eternal life.