

27. God, the Covenant Keeper

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When I started to learn English while I was a junior high student in Seoul, South Korea, I've noticed that you Americans have many rather interesting last names. Often, I found that some last names have something to do with occupations. For example, Stoner, Mason, Carpenter, etc.

I am sure that you are thinking, "What about your weird name?" In Korea, they often use Korean native language characters and Chinese characters, since much of Korean ancient culture was very much influenced by ancient Chinese.

So, what is the meaning of my weird Korean name? I don't know. I've never had enough curiosity to find out what the meaning of my name is.

When I became a naturalized American citizen in 1985, I had an opportunity to change my name in English for free. I should have changed it to something easy for you guys, like "John Smith". Because I've noticed many American people chose not to listen to and pronounce my name correctly, they literally butcher it however they want. You name it, I have heard all different variations of my name.

In the Middle East, especially in Israel, the meaning of the name is extremely important. You could tell the character and the personality of the person by his or her name.

We are going to find out 4 important names that are mentioned in this chapter 17. They are all related to one thing: God's covenant to Abraham.

A. EL SHADDAI – ALMIGHTY GOD

Genesis 17:1-2 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. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

Between chapter 16 and 17, 14 years flew by.

The Hebrew name for 'Almighty God' is "El Shaddai". This is the first time it occurs in Scripture. "Shaddai" is translated as "Almighty" 48 times in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent is used in 2 Corinthians and Revelation. It is translated "Almighty" except in Revelation 19:6 "Omnipotent".

"El" means "God" in Hebrew. So what does "El Shaddai" mean? It is the name of "the all-powerful and all-sufficient God who can do anything and meet any need."

But why would God reveal this name to Abraham at this time, at the end of 14 years of silence? Because God was going to tell His friend Abraham that Sarah would have a son in a year. The Lord wanted Abraham to know that He is the God who is all-sufficient and all-powerful and that nothing is too hard for Him. God says "I will" 12 times in this chapter. He is about to do a miracle.

Enoch and Noah had walked with God, but Abraham was to walk before God, that is, live in the knowledge that the eyes of God were always upon him.

The secret of a perfect walk before God is personal worship of God. Like Abraham, every Christian believer must fall before the Lord and yield everything to Him. If He is "El Shaddai – Almighty God," then who are we to resist His will?

The phrase "My covenant" is used 9 times in this chapter and defines God's relationship with Abraham. God promised once again to multiply Abraham's family, even though he and his wife did not have any children for the last 90 years.

B. ABRAHAM – THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS

Genesis 17:3-8 Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: 4 "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 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. 8 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."

To encourage Abram's faith in the promise of descendants, God changed Abram's name from "Abram" which is "father of many" to "Abraham" "father of many nations".

There was, no doubt, a sense in which Abram – "father of many" – was a hard name to bear for a man who was the father of none, especially in a culture where inquiry about one's personal life was a courteous practice. Now God went a step further and made his name "father of many nations." It is almost absurd for a childless man to have such a name.

There are many wonderful name changes in the Bible, such as when God changed Jacob's name to Israel in Genesis 32:28, and He changed Simon's name to Peter in Mark 3:16. God promises a wonderful new name to every overcomer, like us, in Him in Revelation 2:17.

Keep in mind that Abraham's descendants include not only the Jewish people but also the Arab world through Ishmael and the nations listed in Genesis 25:1-4. All who trust Jesus Christ as Savior are spiritual children of Abraham according to Galatians 3:6-9.

Galatians 3:6-9 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." 7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

God's everlasting covenant also included an everlasting possession: the land of Canaan. This land is a battleground today and always will be until the Lord returns to reign. But as far as God's covenant is concerned, the land belongs to Israel.

The Jews' ownership of the land depends solely on God's gracious covenant with Abraham. God gave them the land. But their possession and enjoyment of the land depended on their faithfulness to obey the Lord. This was the theme of Moses' messages in the Book of Deuteronomy.

C. CIRCUMCISION – THE SIGN OF COVENANT

Genesis 17:9-14 And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

10 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; 11 and 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 child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. 13 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. 14 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."

For the first time, God gave Abraham something to do regarding the covenant. He told them to take upon themselves a sign of the covenant, showing they received the covenant by faith. The sign was circumcision, the cutting away of the male foreskin.

God probably commanded the circumcision of children to take place on the eighth day because this is the day when an infant's immune system is at the optimum level for such a procedure. Many medical reports note that newborn children's blood clotting agent is at its highest levels in infants on precisely the eighth day of life, making the eighth day the safest, earliest day to circumcise an infant.

However, unfortunately, through the centuries, the Jews began to trust more the sign of the covenant than the God of the covenant, believing that circumcision by itself was sufficient and necessary to save anyone. Paul refutes this idea extensively, especially in light of the finished work of Jesus.

Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

The closest Christian parallel we have to circumcision is baptism which is also a "sign" of the covenant. It does not save us. Believers today are in the New Covenant and are the true circumcision of their hearts, which is experienced spiritually through the death of Christ. Again, being baptized does not save us, but no Christian should refuse baptism.

Colossians 2:11-12 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

D. SARAH – THE PRINCESS

Genesis 17:15-17 Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 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." 17 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?"

The third new name was "Sarah," which means "princess."

We must not minimize the place of Sarah in God's great plan of salvation. Like her husband, she had her faults. But also like her husband, she trusted God and accomplished His purposes. She is not only the mother of the Jewish nation but also a good example for Christian wives to follow. The Christian husband should treat his wife like a princess because that is what she is in the Lord.

Motherhood should be highly esteemed, and the birth of a baby should be welcomed with joy. How tragic is it that we turn that womb into a tomb and make the starting point of life into a holocaust through abortion.

I need to talk to the ladies who had an abortion done. If you asked God to forgive you for your sin, He did. Please do not dwell on it. There is nothing you can do for what you have done. But there is something you can do for the future. You can encourage other ladies or young girls who are considering an abortion not to do it.

E. ISAAC – THE HEIR OF GOD'S CHOICE

Genesis 17:18-22 And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" 19 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. 20 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. 21 But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year." 22 Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

The first baby in the Bible who was named before birth was Ishmael, and the second was Isaac which means 'laughter'.

From the human point of view, we can understand why Abraham interceded for Ishmael. After all, Ishmael was his son, and the father loved him dearly.

But from the spiritual point of view, Ishmael could not replace Isaac or even be equal to him in the covenant plan of God. God had already promised to bless Ishmael, and He kept His promise. But the covenant blessings were not a part of Ishmael's heritage. Isaac alone was to be the heir of all things.

There is a practical lesson here for all who seek to live by faith. When God is preparing a bright future for you, don't cling to the things of the past. Ishmael represented the past, Isaac the future. Ishmael symbolized man's fleshly way of accomplishing something to help out God. But Isaac was a miracle baby, born by the power of God. Ishmael brought dissension into the family, but Isaac brought laughter.

F. COMPLETE OBEDIENCE

Genesis 17:23-27 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. 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 same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; 27 and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Abraham's belief in God's covenant was proved by his obedience to the command. What we really believe will show in our actions. Abraham's obedience was complete, prompt, and daring. Because he put all his fighting men out of commission for a few days.

Abraham didn't need to pray about this. God said it and he obeyed. This is a wonderful example of obedience from a great man of faith. This complete obedience of Abraham is the prelude of his obedience with the willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in chapter 22.

G. APPLICATIONS

- 1) The secret of a perfect walk before God is personal worship of God.
- 2) When God is preparing a bright future for you, don't cling to the things of the past.
- 3) When God speaks to us, the best thing is doing as we are told, not thinking it over to come up with our own opinion.