

Text: Genesis 17: 1-8

Theme: Total Grace and Human Responsibility

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Morning Prayer Service on 01/11/2015 at 10.30am

"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." There are times when God seems inactive and quiet. For Abraham, 13 years had passed. He'd slept with a woman called Hagar who wasn't his wife and he'd produced a child that way. But it was a disastrous move. The child born to Abraham is not the child that will carry forward God's promises. And in fact, that child, Ishmael, would be the source of much pain to Abraham and his descendants for centuries to come. If you are Abraham, then you might be tempted to think that you'd blown it. That the promises were in tatters, and that God was looking for a new way to bless the whole world and bring about the promised rescuer for mankind. **Genesis 17 is the answer to those fears. Has Abraham blown it? Yes. Has God torn up this promises? No. Because the great truth is that the promises of God are not dependant on human performance. They are dependent on God and his unchanging character. What God promises, he fulfils. That is total Grace.**

There's always a gap between promise and fulfilment, and 'minding that gap' isn't easy. What could God say now to encourage Abraham?

In Genesis 17:1-27, we will see a mixture of Total Grace and human responsibility. And we will learn how God works to accomplish obedience in Abram's life and ours. We will see that...

- 1. God is committed to keep His promises (verses :1-8, 15-19).**
- 2. Total grace is dependent on God alone not our good works, but**
- 3. Our relationship with God is shown by a fruitful life of obedience**

1) GOD IS A COVENANT KEEPING GOD – He is committed to keep His promises

So, the Lord speaks once again, this time introducing Himself as *El Shaddai*, the first time in the Bible that this term, which means 'God Almighty', is used. Abraham needs to know that God is real and all-powerful. He is able to perform the impossible, which would include a pregnancy for a woman in her late eighties! Abram is already familiar with the name of God as a shield – who protected Abram when he went into battle in Genesis 14 against a formidable enemy and won.

When life is hard and prayer seems to elicit little response, or when we live in the gap, let's affirm the might and power of God once again. That truth eludes me at times, especially when friends succumb to disease or other tragedies go unchecked. God is. And He is the Powerful One. God Almighty.

In this encounter, there is a definite challenge to Abram to move to a new level of trust and faith. At a time when Abram may have thought that his best years are behind him, God asks him to move up. This call to move higher reached Abram at a point of weakness and inability. **It is *amazing* to consider that when we think it is all over, God may be thinking about beginnings in a bid to ensure His covenant with us is intact.**

Look at what God did to bungling Abram.

Verses 2-8

God refers to specific terms of the covenant to show that He has not forgotten.

He made seven promises as shown by "I will statements"

1. I will confirm my covenant with you and (v.2)
2. I will greatly increase your numbers (v.2)
3. I will make you very fruitful (v.6)
4. I will make nations of you and kings will come from you (v.6)
5. I will establish my covenant with you and your descendants (v. 7)
6. I will give you (and your descendants) the land of Canaan (v. 8)
7. I will be their God (v. 8)

What an encouragement this must have been to Abram. In spite of his rendezvous with Hagar (16:3-4), God was going to honour His covenant with him. Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful (**2 Tim 2:13**). Regardless of what you have done, God wants to extend His grace to you.

Have you sinned against God? Have you failed Him in your marriage vows, in your relationship with your children, in your work performance? Today, He says to you: Return to Me, I want to restore you. I want to bless you.

In 17:4-5, the Lord says, "As for Me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations." **Abram is to be the father of other nations besides Israel.** "Nations" is a key word that is repeated three times in 17:4-6. This serves as a reminder that God's program includes all people: "every tribe, tongue, people, and nation" (**Rev 5:9; 7:9**).

2) TOTAL GRACE

God was not asking Abraham to be good and then he'd bless him. No, God made promises to Abraham in spite of his failures and occasional lapses into doubt. How did God demonstrate this?

A New Name for Abram and Sarai (verses 5, 16 -19)

"No longer will you be called Abram your name will be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations (v. 5). And as for Sarai your wife; her name will be Sarah (v.15). I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her: so she shall be the mother of nations... (v.16)"

For twenty-four years Abram had been living under the shepherding hand of God. Abram was not the same man in character that he was when God first called him. Now God challenged Abram to a closer walk with Him by changing his and Sarai's names. The name Abraham means "father of a multitude." Every time Abraham was addressed, it would remind him of the goodness and greatness of God. This might also have been an embarrassment to him many times over the years. "Oh, your name is Abraham, father of many! Congratulations! How many sons do you have?"

V.17. Abraham fell face down and laughed and said to himself: Will a son be born to a hundred year-old man? Will Sarah bear a son at the age of ninety? And Abraham said to God: Oh that Ishmael might live.

Abraham was tempted to minimise God, and sometimes so are we. To ask the Lord to bless Ishmael was a lot easier than believing that Isaac would be born. It seems that Abraham was not fully accepting that elderly Sarah could fall pregnant, and so settled for asking that Ishmael would be blessed: a compromise arrangement. But **God was committed to doing what He promised He would do even if it seemed naturally impossible. Remember His name,**

God Almighty, the I AM WHO I AM.

We often give up asking for what seems impossible or unlikely, mainly because we get tired of asking or don't want to be disappointed. We don't have to feel ashamed to admit that this happens, because the Bible acknowledges that, when it comes to prayer and asking God to do things, we can get weary and give up. But even though I wish God would do more miracles than He does, I want to keep a 'wide-screen Vision of God and His power. Perhaps what you need is impossible. I wish I could guarantee it. But ask anyway. And keep asking, because God is still God. **And if God has specifically promised a thing, He stands by His Name to fulfil it.**

So, what's the point here? **Well these promises must be of God if they are to happen**, because humanly speaking it's impossible and laughable. But God will not be put off. He even gave a name to the son that would be born by Sarah. His name shall be Isaac- which means laughter. God's promise is of sheer grace, because no-one deserves it and no-one can do it for themselves. Despite human weakness and frailty, despite human sinfulness and rebellion, God's promises will be fulfilled. **And all Abraham and Sarah can do is trust the promises.** And that is what God is like. He is a God of incredible grace.

There is nothing Abraham and Sarah can do in this situation to bring about the fulfilment of the child of promise. They just have to depend on God and God alone.

3) FRUITFUL LIFE OF OBEDIENCE

A New Revelation of God

With this new light of God as El- Shaddai – God Almighty comes a new demand from God, "walk before Me and be blameless." In the King James Version, this word blameless is translated "perfect." God told Abram what was expected of him. We can only do what God expects of us when we know who He is and know it in a real and personal way. If Abraham wanted to know God's power, he had to walk, that is live, close to the Lord and be blameless, that is consistently responding to God in repentance and faith. He must be sincere and honest in his devotion and obedience to the Lord. **Faith always calls for obedience if it is to be counted as real. And when we walk in obedience to God, it shows in a transformed life.**

God states that Abram is to "be blameless." (Verse 1). The word "blameless" means "complete, whole, having integrity." Abram was to conduct himself as if always being in God's presence. What a challenge for Abram and for us. It is easy to be blameless on Sunday morning but it is far more difficult to live a blameless life Monday through Saturday. Who are You When No One's Looking? God wants His disciples to be people of integrity, not duplicity.

(17:9-13). "Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant... Every male among you shall be circumcised... My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant..."

Many people wrestle with the nature of this unconditional covenant. The question that is raised is: If this covenant depends upon God, why are conditions placed upon Abram? The answer is simple: Although God's promises to Abram were unconditional Abram's enjoyment of the blessings was conditional. In other words, within God's unconditional promises, God makes demands.

Circumcision assured a wife of her husband's submission to the Lord. It reminded a husband that he belonged to the Lord. No Israelite man could ever engage in sexual relations without being reminded of the fact that he belonged to God.

The closest Christian parallel we have to circumcision is baptism. Paul relates the two ideas together in Colossians 2:11-12. However, baptism is also a “sign” of the covenant; it does not save us, but is a sign of the covenant that does. Being baptized does not save us, but no Christian should refuse baptism.

In the New Testament, the physical act of circumcision is no longer required for believers. Instead, we are to be circumcised in our hearts, which is the seat of decision-making. This expresses three things:

1. It is an expression of our identification with Christ.
2. It is an expression of spiritual fidelity to the Lord.
3. It is an expression of cutting off or putting to death the sinful nature (Phil 3:3). We are to have no reliance upon ourselves, but rely totally upon Him. That is the circumcised life.

Circumcision didn't save Abram or make him righteous before God (Rom 4:9-12). His righteous standing before God was on the basis of faith. **Circumcision, water baptism, confirmation classes, communion, being born into a Christian home, being a part of a certain denomination, or even saying the sinner's prayer are outward symbols of an inward faith. But apart from a changed heart and life, these religious symbols have nothing to do with salvation.**

Neither circumcision nor baptism was the means of salvation. Salvation in the Old Testament and in the New Testament was "by grace through faith." A whole chapter is written in Romans (chapter 4) to show that salvation came to Abraham years before he was circumcised, so all would understand that act in itself had no saving merit.

Abraham's faith resulted in obedience. Verse 23 says "that same day" Abraham was obedient in carrying out the commands of God. Whatever God said, Abraham listened, believed and obeyed. The lesson is Abraham's challenge all over again. It is a call to a deeper relationship.

Following Christ is no hobby. It must be a life of total commitment. I will close with this short story:

A chicken and a pig were walking down the street one day and noticed some poor children who looked as if they hadn't eaten anything for days. Moved with compassion, the chicken said to the pig, "I have an idea! Let's give those children a nice breakfast of ham and eggs."

The pig contemplated the chicken's suggestion and said, "Well, for you, that would involve a small sacrifice; but for me, it would involve total commitment!"

When Jesus came to save us from sin, he knew that it would cost him his life. He went to the cross anyway to offer to us eternal life. His commitment to us was total. Like the pig in the story, our commitment to Christ must be more than a small sacrifice of our time, energy, and money. It must involve our whole life—all that we are. When we come to Christ, we must be willing to live out the same total commitment that Jesus modelled. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).