

**The Sign of the Covenant: Faith**  
**Genesis 17: 1-7;15-16**  
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In this text we hear the conversation between God and Abraham. God is revealing to Abraham more detail about the covenant that he is making with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants after them.

**The covenant**

*“I am El Shaddai; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous....As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.... As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

**Elements of the covenant**

What are the parts of the covenant for which God takes responsibility? There are four:

1. God reminds Abraham that God can indeed make this come to pass. God begins this passage by saying, “I am El Shaddai...” This term is used sparingly in the Old Testament and when it is found it is used with promises of descendants. God is essentially saying, “I am in charge of nature and am able to make you fruitful even though you are old.” (from Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2 by Gordon Wenham)
2. God will be the one to make this possible. Abraham and Sarah represent the third epoch in the human story of the Bible. Before this we have Adam and Eve, Noah and Naamah (Noah’s wife according to Jewish tradition, although in the book of Jubilees she is referred to as Emzarra according to wikipedia; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wives\\_aboard\\_the\\_Ark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wives_aboard_the_Ark)). Both Adam and Eve and Noah and Naamah were told to “be fruitful and multiply.” In God’s message to Abraham and Sarah they are told that God will make them fruitful thereby becoming more directly involved in the life of the people. (from Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2 by Gordon Wenham)
3. What will God do? God will make Abraham and Sarah the parents “of a multitude of nations,” (Genesis 17:4) Abraham’s son Ishmael will also be blessed but he will become the father of twelve princes and a great nation. (Genesis 17:20)

4. The ultimate blessing of this covenant is that God will be God to Abraham and Sarah's offspring "throughout their generations." (Genesis 17:7) (from Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2 by Gordon Wenham)

What are Abraham and Sarah responsible for to uphold their part in the covenant?

1. God says to Abraham, "walk before me and be blameless..." Essentially God is saying to Abraham walk with me day by day and be faithful to me. (from Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2 by Gordon Wenham)

Even though Abraham has only been given one task it is not necessarily an easy one. It is important to take a look at what has happened to Abraham since the first time God spoke with him and made this covenant promise.

In Chapter 12 of Genesis Abraham receives the command from God to leave his home country. *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* At this point, Abraham is 75 years old. (Interestingly enough, Abraham's father Terah took Abraham, Lot and Sarah to Canaan but when they got to Haran they settled there instead.)

Abraham and Sarah and all their people make it to Canaan but they go through the land to Shechem because the Canaanites were still in the land. Then there is a severe famine in the land and Abraham and Sarah and all their people with them are forced to go to Egypt where they live as aliens. During this time, Abraham is worried that he will be harmed because his wife Sarah is so beautiful. He tells her to pretend to be his sister. Pharaoh finds out how beautiful Sarai is and takes her as his wife. God sends plagues; pharaoh is angry with Abram and gives him back his wife.

As time goes on, Abram and Lot both do very well for themselves, they do so well in fact that they decide to separate; Lot choosing Sodom and the land near Sodom, Abraham choosing Canaan. Unfortunately Lot found himself in the middle of a battle and was taken into captivity. When Abraham heard this, "he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan... Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his good, and the women and the people."

By Chapter 15 Abraham begins to have doubts. A lot has happened to him since God promised to make him a great nation, a lot has happened but he still does not have a son. God consoles Abraham by again promising that he will have a son but he also tells Abraham that his descendents will be slaves for four hundred years.

Abraham is now 86 years old and he and Sarah believe that maybe God intends for him to have a son through Sarah's servant Hagar. Thirteen years later, we come to Chapter 17 where God again makes his promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will be the parents of a multitude of nations. Abraham believes God's promise and circumcises all the males in his house.

Still there are a few more things that happen before Sarah has a child. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed, Abraham and Sarah travel to Gerar where Abraham again pretends that Sarah is his sister. She is still beautiful at 80+ years old and the king of Gerar takes her for his wife. God punishes the king and his household, the king gets angry with Abraham and gives him back his wife.

Then finally, when Abraham is 100 years old, and Sarah must be close to the same age, they finally have their son Isaac.

What does it take to be faithful to God through so much? To believe that God will fulfill God's promise even though it seems utterly impossible?

**Life application:**

How do Abraham and Sarah or Ibu maintain their faith when there is so much time and so many events between them receiving the promise from God and having the promise fulfilled?

What are the things that we do to keep our faith strong when the waiting is long or when the road is very difficult? Are there spiritual practices like prayer or reading the Bible that keep us focused on God?

Some responses from the congregation:

- It would be an interesting question to ask Jewish survivors of the holocaust, some of whom believed that God abandoned them, while others' faith grew stronger.
- Hearing stories of people who have gone before us or who have lived through difficult times often brings strength.
- Friends who support us by listening, sending cards, meals, helping take care of the lawn or house or just being with us.
- What does it mean when the answer isn't good, when people have been faithful but die anyway from cancer, auto accident, or are murdered?

**Prayer:**

Faithful, constant God,  
give us the determination we need  
to be faithful to your promise  
even when our lives feel unbearably difficult  
and it seems that you will never fulfill your Word.

Amen