

I Working with the High School and Middle School ministries over the last couple of years has given me the chance to reflect on my own middle school experience. One incident automatically comes to mind when I was in 6th grade, and it was progress report season. At the time, I had been struggling in school, and there was a policy that if you got below a certain grade point average or received a D or an F in a class, you were required to have a parent sign it so that they can stay in the loop.

I thought it would be noble of me to save my mom the heartache and sign for her. That way, she wouldn't have to know how I was doing at the moment, and by the time report cards came out, I would have fixed everything. Well, within the first five minutes of me turning in my progress report, my teacher approached me and asked if I had signed it. I was afraid, and y'all, I promise you I lost every feeling in my body. She looked at me and said, "You made a big mistake, and you shouldn't have done that." She and my mom met after school, and when we got in the car, I was quiet the entire ride home. The whole time I was anticipating what my mom's reaction was going to be.

I think that it's innate for all of us to wonder how people will react when we've made a mess of a situation. It can be our bosses, spouses, kids, friends, and parents. But I also believe there are moments where we wonder how God responds to us in our mess. Because if we are honest, mistakes are a part of all of our lives. And when we don't live up to the expectations of others, or what we try to project to our friends, and we make a mess out of something, we surely ask ourselves, "What is God's response to this?" We feel secure when we experience God's love and intimacy, but it's in those daunting, challenging, messy times of our life where we can assume things about God that aren't necessarily true.

According to Dane Ortlund, author of *Gentle and Lowly*, this is the very reason why we need a Bible.

Our natural intuition can only give us a God like us. The God revealed in Scripture deconstructs our intuitive predilections and startles us with one whose infinitude of perfections is matched by his infinitude of gentleness. Indeed, his perfections include his perfect gentleness. It is who he is. It is his very heart.

And so today, my brothers and sisters, as we turn to the scriptures and continue looking at the life of Abram, we are going to

reinforce a proper view of God and see how the Word shows us a God who responds to our failures in grace.

We are in Genesis 17, but first, let's see what a mess there is and what God is responding to. Up to this point, Abram is a sojourner believing in the one true God that from him will "come a great nation" and that through him "all the people on earth will be blessed through him." In chapter 15, God made a radical promise by binding himself into a covenant with Abram. It was a promise on steroids. And in this covenant, God essentially said, "If I don't do everything I said I'm going to do, may a curse fall on me."

We all have those moments where we experience the radical greatness of God's promises, but it's in the mundane rhythm of everyday life we become discouraged. We see Abram and Sarai have a lapse of faith and decide to take matters into their own hands in chapter 16. Instead of waiting in faith, they try to expedite the process. Instead of helping the problem, it made things worse. Sarai and Hagar were at each other's throats, and the Bible describes Ishmael as a 'wild donkey of a man,' so raising him was very challenging. Which now brings us to chapter 17, how will God respond to the mess they've made? What we'll see is God responds to our failures in grace. Grace is not a New Testament idea. There isn't a peaceful New Testament God and a wrathful Old Testament God. What we'll see is that throughout the biblical narrative, God deals with his people in grace. So look with me at verses 1 and 2.

The Grace of God's Appearance

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty" (v. 1a). The very first thing we see is that after 13 years, God shows up and breaks the silence. Now 13 years is a long time. To put it in perspective, 13 years ago for us was 2008 when we had a major recession. Obama had won his first presidential election. Android and Google Chrome were first released, and most importantly, God showed up supernaturally when the Giants beat the Patriots. That was surely a blessing. My point is that 13 years is a long time.

When God appears, he says, "I am God Almighty." That word in Hebrew is actually three words in one. *El*, which is (God), *Sha*, which is (that), *Di*, which is (sufficient/enough). So the direct translation is "The God That is Enough." Now, why would the first thing God says to Abram be an announcement that he's enough? Remember, at this time, it has been almost 30 years

since God first promised Abram he would have a son. Thirteen years since he last heard from God.

Since then, there has been chaos in his home. He had a lapse of faith, and don't forget; he is now 99 years old. I mean, he's not getting any younger. What once seemed impossible seems very impossible at this point. So if there is anything Abram needs to hear right now, it is God saying "I am enough for any circumstance." And I think it serves as a reminder for us today that no matter how far we have strayed or how messy our circumstance has become, God is enough. God is not limited to what limits us. God doesn't get caught off guard by what catches us off guard. He is not startled or surprised by what he sees. He is enough.

"...walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers" (vv. 1b-2). Now when we hear "walk before me and be blameless," our minds automatically assume this means moral perfection or absolution from sin. Thankfully that's not what it means. In Hebrew, the word used for blameless means wholeheartedness. It does denote a deeper meaning of being wholehearted, resolute, and committed to walking with the Lord. It means having every area of our lives under the Lordship of Christ—how we view our money, how we do relationships, how we spend our leisure time.

My coaches used to say, "Wherever your head goes, your body will follow." It was an athlete axiom that meant if you wanted to go in a certain direction, wherever your head is pointed, the body would soon follow. In other words, you can't be in two places at the same time because if your head is going in one direction and your body in the other, you will be contorted. And the same is true with us as followers of Jesus. We begin to look contorted and misaligned when our hearts are in one place, and our body is in another. When we are so focused on work, but we neglect our family at home. When we are buying nonsense, but our bills aren't getting paid. When I'm gaining much knowledge, but treat the people around me badly. This is a call for us to be wholehearted. And the only way we can be wholehearted and solely devoted to God is to believe that he is enough.

I love these two verses because they really capture God's heart. There's a commercial for the Marines that used to play a while back. It starts out with a village that is in complete disarray. A place I would not want to move towards, but then you see foot soldiers pursuing, planes flying, and land vehicles moving toward the city. And the commentator says,

There are a few who move toward the sound of chaos, ready to respond. When the time comes, they are the first to move toward the sound of tyranny, injustice, and despair.

What we see is that in the appearance of God's grace, he does not stand transcendent of our despair, doubts, and worries but moves towards us and pursues us with mercy and everlasting

love. And if that wasn't enough, God gives more grace to Abram by reciting his covenant to him.

The Grace of His Covenant

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "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. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." vv. 3-8

God opens up his covenant promises which gives Abram a new identity. He now goes from Abram (exalted Father) to Abraham (the father of a nation). It's bad enough to be named an exalted father and have no kids, but now he is called the father of a nation! That's like calling someone bald, curly, or someone who's 4'5" tall one. They just don't go together. But God changes Abraham's identity because, in God's eyes, the promise has already been accomplished. And notice what flows from this new identity—the promise of fruitfulness, kings, and nations, everlasting assurance, a covenant that will be forever, and a great inheritance, the land of Canaan. These are the same promises God gave to Abraham in chapters 12 and 15, but now with more detail.

These specific promises were fulfilled in this Abrahamic covenant, but for us in Jesus Christ, under the New Covenant, all the promises of God are yes and amen. In Jesus, you and I have a completely new identity. We have the promise of fruitfulness, the assurance that our salvation is secure, and an inheritance that awaits us in heaven that will never fade or spoil. What Abraham, you, and I need to be reminded of is that we can't break God's promises by leaning on them.

I know I make a bunch of promises that I don't always keep. If you put your hope in my words, you will be greatly disappointed. Just ask my wife. One thing I'm learning being a newlywed is getting my time right when I tell my wife I'll be home. She'll ask, "When will you be home?" And I say, "Oh, in about 30 minutes. And here I come an hour later. I promise I'm are working on it, but I know my word isn't always sure. Thankfully God is not like us. Numbers 23:19 states, "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he not speak and then act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" So let us lean on the promises of God and dare to believe.

That reminds me of that old hymn "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, just to take Him at His Word; Just to rest upon His promise, just

to know, "Thus saith the Lord." What an assurance to have. Even in our mess, his promises aren't nullified by us but are fulfilled because of his faithfulness. Now promises are great, but there can still be an uneasiness because we don't see promises. It's nice to know my wife is married to me, but it's even nicer to look at her finger and see her wedding ring. Signs help keep our eyes on the promise. And this is what God does for Abraham.

The Grace of God's Sign

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 with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." vv. 9-14

Now I know what you're thinking. What is he going to do with that? Circumcision had a few functions. In the Old Testament, it was a sign that set people apart. Remember, this was God's brand or badge on his people. This sign made them distinct from their neighbors, and it also connected generations (the firstborn, the older males, and foreigners.) But lastly, circumcision points to something greater. The purpose of a sign is that it signifies something. So this sign of circumcision has a more significant meaning than just an outward badge. Let's read a little further down the road. In the book of Deuteronomy, we see Moses speaking to the people of Israel about how they would be set apart as a distinct people in light of the covenant of God.

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. Deuteronomy 10:12-16.

Notice that Moses expands the definition of circumcision to not simply a physical marking but something internal. It is the circumcising of the heart, which is our greatest need. In the Old Testament, it was an outward sign of an inward reality. Circumcision in itself is a cutting of the flesh, and we know when the Bible talks about the flesh, it is that sinful nature of ours that is in hostility and rebellion to God. This is why Paul rails against the Jews in Romans in regards to circumcision because they put their hope in the sign and not in what it signified.

For us, what good is it to have the sign of the Lord's Supper or baptism without having what the sign signifies? And I believe it's good for us to have an evaluation. Has God begun the cutting away process in my life through his spirit? Does the call to deny yourself and pick up your cross and follow me strike a chord in our hearts?

The topics of holiness and being set apart for God are topics we can subtly avoid because we can cheapen the grace of God to signs and rituals without having any evidence of our hearts being touched. That cheap grace that says I have a license to do whatever I want and checks boxes enables sin and brokenness and has no cutting power. Yet, the cutting away is one of the most gracious things God can do for us.

The grace of God does the painful work of transforming you and produces a beautiful result. It is a loving grace that stays with you, surrounds you, and allows you to take risks to be vulnerable. This grace loves you too much to give up on you. The signs we participate in (baptism, communion) become an act of grace to us because it signifies what God is doing for us and in us.

So in light of all of this wonderful revelation God has given to Abraham, how does he respond to such kindness? We see his response is two-fold. He laughs, and then he goes.

Abraham's Response to Grace

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. Abraham was

ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen; Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him. vv. 17-27

Abraham, at this moment, is speaking to himself. In his heart, he is contemplating everything God has said and what God has promised. Because given his current situation and where he is at in life, how can God be this good? "Will a son be born to a man who's 100? Will Sarah bear a child at 90?"

What is it in your life that you have trouble letting God's grace minister too? Do you struggle with a secure identity in Christ? Do you ask if it's really possible to live free of character defects? Do you ask if you are truly forgiven of all mistakes? "Will God really supply all of my needs?" We contemplate as Abraham contemplates because it sounds almost too good to be true. The grace of God makes us laugh because it is miraculous, abnormal to us, and at times incomprehensible. This is why Abraham voiced his concern for Ishmael because he couldn't wrap his head around the fact he will have a son from Sarah.

In verses 19-22, God addresses his and our doubts with grace and makes it abundantly clear that the promise will not be through Ishmael, although he will be blessed. Abraham will have a son named Isaac from Sarah. And the reason he's named Isaac is because it means "he laughs." And what God is saying, "Every time you look at him, you're going to be reminded of all those moments you laughed and doubted. You will know around this time next year that you can trust me, that you can put your hope in me, and that I am the God who is enough.

Abraham laughs, but he then responds in obedience. He goes and circumcises his entire household. And this is what we must learn. When we trust God and move in obedience, it brings forth transformation. Our response to God's grace ought to be, as Derek W.H. Thomas, a pastor, said, "A life of grateful holiness." Our obedience is not to be made right with God, but because he has made us right with him, we can live a life of unburdensome obedience.

John Newton, in his song, *Amazing Grace*, summarizes what we've learned today quite nicely. "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home."

Remember the story of my mom? Well, we eventually got home. The car ride seemed like an eternity. I created a lot of false assumptions in my head, thinking of how she was going to respond. I was thinking, "She's going to take me out of sports, or she'll only give me vegetables till I'm 18, or that she was going to scream at me. I thought of everything! She sat me down, and she knew I knew what I did was wrong. My face showed it. But she affirmed her love for me and modeled Jesus' heart at that moment by gentle instruction. And it was that moment of kindness and grace that made me not want to do that again. In fact, it strengthened our relationship, and we got closer.

It is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. So, remember the next time you blow it, and you probably will, remember the truth and not what your guilt tells you about God. God responds to the failures of his people in grace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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