

The God Who Sets Apart

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. What do you do when someone blesses you with a gift that you clearly don't deserve?

How will you respond when you receive something that you're not entitled to? How will you respond when you receive something that you're not entitled to?

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How will you respond when you're not entitled to? Well, for one, there hasn't been too much new information about the land, other than the fact that it extends from the river of Egypt to the river of Euphrates.

No one knows precisely which territory God was talking about. For years, Abram has stayed in Canaan.

[1 : 5 2] He has worked the soil. He has befriended the locals. He has adjusted to the culture. However, until Abram buys or owns a land, he will always remain a sojourner, a pilgrim in this territory.

Now when it comes to descendants, the idea went from Abram being a great nation, to Abram producing offspring as many as the dust of the earth and stars of the sky.

To Abram fathering a child by the name of Ishmael. Now this last point about Ishmael is particularly agonizing.

Over the last 13 years, Ishmael has grown from a baby to a child. And from a child to a teenager. A phenomenon that's particularly troublesome, not just for Abram, but even more so for his wife Sarai.

13 years in which Sarai cannot bear any children. 13 years in which the hope for Abram's heir has been laid on Ishmael.

[3 : 2 0] Every morning, Sarai looks at the child playing in the fields with jealousy. Every evening, Abram and Sarai go to bed wondering if God has forgotten about them.

Finally, on the point of relationship. The only thing that's been said is God would curse those who curse Abram.

Not so different from a spectator who is for the most part removed from Abram's life. And this is the context which we enter into the world of Genesis 17.

At present, Abram is now 99 years old. Way past the age of fathering a child.

On this day, Abram woke up and went about his daily routine. Watering the crops. Feeding the animals.

[4 : 3 5] Cleaning the house. And on his journey home, Yahweh suddenly appears to Abram in a vision. The Lord starts by introducing himself.

I am El Shaddai. I am God Almighty. Now previously, Melchizedek identified Yahweh as El Aliyon, God Most High.

Focusing on God's absolute place of honor. Whereas Hagar referred to Yahweh as God who sees me.

Emphasizing on his compassion and mercy. Now, Yahweh introduces himself as God Almighty.

A title that will be repeated throughout Genesis. Every single time. In conjunction with the promise of a descendant.

[5 : 40] In other words, the name God Almighty is Yahweh's way of saying, I can do that which is impossible. I can make the childless one fertile.

And I can fulfill my promise to Abram. Right after introducing his name, God says, Walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. Now since the ancient days, whether it's an agreement between a sheep owner or with a herdsman, or a trade contract between two parties, both sides have to agree to the terms.

For Abram, even though Yahweh introduced a covenant to him 24 years ago, the truth is, Abram himself has yet to give consent.

Now the idea that Abram has to agree with what God is doing might sound absurd at first. especially in this case, he's the one receiving all the blessings.

[7 : 04] But if we look at it from God's perspective, the fact that God, the gift giver, willingly binds himself to a covenant demonstrates that he is willing to put his whole reputation on the line to fulfill his promise to Abram.

The Lord's awesome appearing, combined by his powerful initiative to bless, brought Abram to his knees.

Recognizing that he is an inferior, finite being standing before a superior, infinite God, Abram immediately falls on his face as a gesture of worship.

Yahweh starts by addressing the promise of descendants. Verse 4, 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.

[8 : 22] God is a man. Not just one nation, where its population is beyond counting, but extends to multiple nations. And for the first time, yet far from the last, God issues a name change.

Especially in the book of Genesis, a person's name is tied to his character and his destiny. Who this person is, and what direction his life is headed towards.

While Abraham literally means his father is exalted, referring to Abram's status as a noble, Abraham corresponds to father of nations.

So by changing Abram's name, Yahweh makes himself the guarantor that he will see things through to the point where Abraham becomes the forefather of the nations in this world.

The extent to which Yahweh will bless him is made even clearer in verse 6. I will make you very fruitful.

[9 : 44] I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. Now this is a promise that calls back the first chapters of Genesis.

In chapter 1, verse 28, Adam and Eve were commanded to be fruitful and multiply. And notice here, Yahweh is the one who will make Abram fruitful to the point where not just ordinary people, but kings will come from his line.

Now at this point, Abram's probably thinking, well, that's a lot for me to handle. But wait, there's more. Apparently, God's covenant will not just be between him and Abraham, but also his descendants forever.

Verse 7, 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.

out of all people on earth, God has chosen to be in a unique and permanent relationship with Abram and his offspring.

[11 : 08] To Abraham and his descendants shall God give as eternal possession the land in which Abraham is staying right now, Canaan.

Now all of these blessings that God has laid out will stay true under one condition. I will be their God. Now that Yahweh has laid out his role in the covenant, it's time for Abraham's part.

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 covenants 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.

[12 : 44] Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.

God's commands are specific, but also clear-cut. Every male eight days old or above, including his own children or purchased slaves must be circumcised.

Not just this generation, but the next and the one after perpetually. According to Yahweh, the uncircumcised man is like a rebellious man, for he has broken God's covenants, and the consequence is that he will be cut off from his people.

Now, the term cut off might sound like just, it's not that big of a deal, it might just mean being kicked out from the family, or being excommunicated from the community.

But the term cut off is used multiple times in Leviticus to mean being cut off by the hand of God. In other words, to be uncircumcised is to be disobedient to the point where you are deserving of divine judgment and death.

[14 : 32] In a surprising turn, Yahweh moves on to address Sarai for the first time.

Now thus far, God has promised Abraham that he will bless him and give him children, yet it isn't exactly clear how he's going to go about achieving it.

Is it Ishmael? Is it someone else? Well, this time around, God specifically states that the descendants and kings he mentioned earlier will come from the womb of Sarai.

Verse 15, As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai. Her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her.

I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her. Now for what it's worth, Sarah, Sarah is just another way of saying Sarai, much like a dialect.

[15 : 52] and the name change is strangely unexplained, especially in Genesis where it is, where the name change is always followed up by an explanation.

Perhaps what's more important here is that unlike the first speech, where Yahweh's promise is uninterrupted, here, God's direction, God's purpose for Sarah is interrupted by Abraham's doubts.

We get to go into the mind of Abraham and see what he was feeling at the moment.

Abraham, like what any man would do in his situation, questions if it's even possible for a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-nine-year-old woman to reproduce.

Before he even says a word, Abraham falls and laughs, thinking to himself, Lord, have you even looked at us?

[17 : 12] Have you even considered the circumstances? Hello? There is a fundamental biological problem that we have to overcome here.

But viewing things only through a practical lens, Abraham even suggests that Ishmael be the recipient of God's care and protection.

God, of course, being the all-knowing God, sees Abraham's doubts and who he rebukes him firmly.

The Net Bible's translation of verse 19 more appropriately captures the Lord's firmness. No. Your wife, Sarah, will bear you a son and you will call him Isaac.

Isaac. Ironically, the name Isaac means he laughs. By laughing in disbelief, Abraham actually confirms God's promise without himself realizing it.

[18 : 34] Now, Yahweh further identifies Isaac as the child of the covenant.

I will establish my covenant with him, verse 19, as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

As for Ishmael, God will listen to Abraham's request. He will make Ishmael fruitful such that his children will be twelve tribal leaders and they will form a great nation.

But all in all, in the grand scheme of things, the promise of the Abrahamic covenant will come through Isaac.

Whom God says here specifically, your wife, Sarah, will bear to you by this time next year.

[19 : 43] On this dramatic note, full of suspense, God exits the scene. Now, on his way home, Abraham was filled with excitement.

For 25 years, the hope of a descendant has been dangled before Abraham. Yet nothing ever seemed to happen. But in one year, Abraham will finally see his wife, Sarah, bear a child.

In one year, Abraham will receive his rightful heir at last. Looking forward enthusiastically with the fulfillment of God's promise, Abraham gets home.

He reiterates all the promises, all the words of Yahweh to his family members and commands that on that evening, that's how urgent it is, every single male will be circumcised.

Abraham at the age of 99 and Ishmael at the age of 13.

[21 : 07] Abraham for many of us, the Abrahamic covenant is an important story in the Old Testament, but for the most part, seems irrelevant to us.

After all, not only did this narrative take place thousands of years ago, but the idea of circumcision is foreign, not only to Malaysians, but to most of East Asia.

The question then becomes, how are we to think of the Abrahamic covenant? What is the relationship that circumcision and what is the place that it has in the Christian life?

Perhaps it's helpful for us at this point to take a step back and look at the role of circumcision in ancient Near Eastern societies. Now, back then, the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Arabs, all practiced circumcision, although many who did so could not give an adequate explanation other than tradition.

That's what our ancestors did, they would say. Now, philosophers speculate that possible reasons could be for health, could be for preparation for marriage, even for removing lusts and teaching control over one's thoughts.

[22 : 59] reasons. For Israel, however, circumcision failed two purposes. First, circumcision marked an individual as belonging to God's covenant community.

To remove the foreskin of the penis is to be included into God's chosen group. Now, of course, circumcision was far from just a physical sign.

The second and perhaps more important purpose of circumcision is to be a reminder for every Israelite man to walk blamelessly before God like Noah and like Abraham did.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear in Romans 2 to 4 that a circumcised man who is otherwise disobedient to God is no better, is considered actually as an unrighteous man deserving of death.

Real circumcision is a spiritual issue of the heart. The God is eternally committed to our well-being.

[24 : 41] God is eternally committed to our well-being. After 24 years of waiting, God rewards Abraham with an heir, with a seed, with a child of his own.

God binds himself to an everlasting covenant. He guarantees that no matter what happens in the future, he will stay true to his people.

God established this covenant even though he foresaw that in the future, in the days to come, Israel would choose slavery in Egypt over life in the promised land, would prostitute themselves over Baal and the pagan gods rather than trust God's deliverance from a famine, and would call for a serious help rather than depend on God's protection.

God foresaw all the betrayal, the adultery, and the pain that Israel would inflict him, but at this moment, thousands and thousands of years ago, God established a commitment to remain faithful to his chosen group.

marriage, which one of us, knowing that our fiancé would betray us in our marriage not just once but countless times, would choose to tie the knot, which one of us, with the knowledge that the person we wake up to the next day would have spent the night before on someone else's bed, would choose to stay in the relationship.

[26 : 43] But I suspect that the idea that God is eternally committed to our well-being is one of those Sunday school truths that we have heard countless times before, that we might even say we believe, but we don't live it out in practice.

there's often a disconnect between the intellectual and the practical, between our minds and our hearts and our bodies.

Certainly in the year of our Lord 2021, as we continue to maneuver our lives in these unprecedented times, doing our best diligence, doing our due diligence, as law abiding citizens, we get the question, is God truly committed to us?

We look at the untamable carnage of the coronavirus, the unpredictable implications of Malaysia's political turbulence, the uncountable obstructions to personal plans, goals, and ambitions.

We ask, has God forsaken us? Indeed, has God forsaken us? It's a question that's asked multiple times throughout biblical history.

[28 : 34] history, during Israel's time in Egypt, during Israel's wandering in the wilderness, during Israel's conquest of Canaan, during their exile in Babylon.

Has God forsaken us? yet time and time again, the prophets point towards the Abrahamic covenant as the foundation of God's faithfulness towards his people.

Over and over again, God's people looked at the fact that he established an everlasting covenant with Abraham as hope to persevere through the most difficult times.

This hope would carry thousands and thousands of years onwards until it culminated on the cross, where the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came down and performed the greatest act of commitment, of love, to give himself up so that you and I captives of the world and slaves to sin will be set free.

Facing God's covenant love, what then should our response be? Number two, we are wholly set apart for God's service.

[30 : 23] God's God's God's God's service. In the Abrahamic covenant, God chose a people for himself.

God set apart Abraham and his descendants. Circumcision gave them a physical reminder that they belong to God's chosen people.

people. The Jews are set apart in the sense that they are to be different from their pagan neighbors, from the unbelieving nations around them.

They are to obey Yahweh's command and to worship Yahweh alone. In the same way, when we put our faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit is given to us as a permanent seal in our hearts.

God claims us as his own such that nothing can separate us from his love. Yet in return, the Holy Spirit also empowers us for his service.

[31 : 36] He empowers us for God's service such so that we may love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But if we're honest, we haven't exactly lived up to our calling.

Particularly in this pandemic season, Christians in Malaysia have not really stood up from the public, nor have we set ourselves apart for God's service.

A conversation where we are supposed to carry the torch of hope to non-believers. We extinguish the fire and sink into despair.

In discussions where we should be brought to our knees interceding for our nation, we have chosen instead to follow along and tear down our leaders.

Living in a world where the news station and social media constantly bombards us with negativity about our circumstances. We have raised our hands in passivity.

[32 : 53] We have allowed the currents of culture to swirl us into whirlpools of defeat, stuck in the depths of despair.

What's worse? We have traded passion for lukewarmness, witness for silence. Frankly, one could ask, is Jesus still on the throne?

friends, we can do better than this.

I don't mean by sharing hashtags of lindong diri, lindong samoa on our social media. I don't mean forsaking all your responsibilities to just fast and pray.

I don't even mean regurgitating Bible verses and spamming them to your non-believing friends. I am not advocating for a delusional hopefulness that disregards our circumstances.

[34 : 07] No, our faith is much more seasoned than that. Quite the opposite. Spiritual hyperactivity is not the solution.

like the prophets. Our efforts must be grounded in God's covenantal faithfulness that was ultimately displayed on the cross.

Each day we must be convinced of God's sacrificial commitment for our well-being such that in response to his covenantal love, we may dedicate every ounce of our strength to him to serve Jesus and him alone.

Brothers and sisters, do you still have conviction? Does your flame still burn?

To whom does your allegiance lie? to whom shall you give it all towards?

[35 : 29] Let me leave you with the words of the English writer John Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress. This hill, though high, I covet to ascend.

The difficulty will not me offend. for I perceive the way to life lies here. Come, pluck up hearts, let's neither faint nor fear.

For better, though difficult, the right way to go, than wrong, though easy, where the end is woe. let's pray.

Let's pray. Lord, we are people of divided hearts.

we confess that we allow our hearts to wander freely. We confess that we have not lived up as agents of your service.

[36 : 37] We confess that there are many things in this world that rob us, that distract us from commitment to you. We confess that we have often sunk into despair.

air. We confess that we have forgotten that you are committed to us. We confess that the cross is often an afterthought before all the procedures and actions that we have to take.

I pray, Lord, though the path is difficult, ground us in you. Ground us in your covenantal faithful love.

Circumcise our hearts. Rid it of the things of the idols. Make us clean and dedicate us for your service.

In Jesus' name, amen.