

99-01-03a

Deuteronomy chapter 10 is where we find our scripture reading this morning. Moses is speaking to the nation of Israel, the nation he has led out of bondage under the blood of the Passover lamb. They have crossed the Red Sea, they have reached Mount Sinai.

He is rehearsing for them in Deuteronomy their recent past. He reminds them of their deliverance, he reminds them of the delivery of the law to them at Mount Sinai, of their failure, and of the second set of tablets that God gave. And then beginning in verse 12, he gives what is subtitled in the New King James, the essence of the law.

And as we resume our study this morning of the life of Abram, soon to be Abraham, and the giving of God's covenant to Abraham in Genesis chapter 17, it puts us in mind of all of the covenants that God has expressed that are recorded for us in the Old Testament. And all of them point to the person and the plan of God. They reflect God's purpose, they reflect his character, they reflect his desire for mankind.

And so when Moses here gives the essence of the law, the essence of the Sinaitic covenant or the Mosaic covenant, he expresses for us the essence of all of the covenants, including the one that we'll study this morning in Genesis 17. So our reading this morning in Deuteronomy 10 verse 12 says, And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? But to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and his statutes which I command you today for your good. Indeed, heaven and the highest heavens belong to the Lord your God, also the earth with all that is in it.

The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them, and he chose their descendants after them, you, above all peoples, as it is this day. Therefore, circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality, nor takes a bribe.

He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore, love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God, you shall serve him, and to him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in his name.

He is your praise, and he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things which your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as the stars of heaven in multitude. May God add his blessing to the reading of his word.

We'll turn now to Genesis chapter 17, where we resume our study of the life of Abram. You will recall in chapter 16, we had Abram's answer to his problem. He has left Ur of the

Chaldees, he has responded to the call of God, he has entered the land, and then there is a deafening silence.

For eleven years he has lived in the land, and the forward progress of God's plan for him seems to have been halted. God has said that Abram will have descendants, that he will be the father of many nations, that through him all nations of the earth will be blessed, kings will come from him, great expectations, great promises. And then a year went by after the smoking torch and the burning pot, and another year goes by, and another year, and another.

And there is no fruit from the union of Abram and Sarai, they have no children. And a total of eleven years passes in the land, and there is still no sign of offspring. Abram and Sarai get older year by year, Abram is now up in his eighties, Sara is in her seventies, and no offspring.

We noted some of the passages, in fact we have some in our memory verse listing, that talk about waiting on the Lord, waiting for his timing. You think about some of the significant numbers in scripture, of course Abram didn't have any scriptures yet, did he? He didn't have Genesis, or the Torah, or the Law, the Prophets, or the Writings, any of that. And he had only the truth of God that was revealed directly to him, and the truth that had been passed down to him by his forefathers.

And so he didn't know as much about numbers as we do, but if you think about some of the significant numbers in the Bible, what are they? What are some numbers that have meaning? Seven is the number of perfection, twelve occurs a lot, the twelve tribes, the twelve apostles, the six days followed by the seventh day of rest, and so on. Well, we are going to see this morning that unbeknownst to Abram, and probably something that wouldn't have been perceivable by him, I think that he almost made it to the perfect place and the perfect time in God's plan, because he lasted eleven years. And I have the suspicion that if he had made it to the twelfth year, that would originally have been the year of Isaac's birth.

He made it eleven years, but then he cracked, he cracked under the pressure. Sarai got impatient, Abram went along, and they used a humanly devised scheme to try to bring God's plan about, to try to bring about the fulfillment of God's purpose in their lives. They found a way to make it happen, and they did this through the surrogate wife, the surrogate mother, Hagar.

We saw that last time, and we saw that the fruit of this union is not the fulfillment of God's purpose. But even in the midst of failure, God blesses, and God makes covenant promises to Hagar, and makes covenant promises to Ishmael. And when Sarai realizes, after Hagar becomes pregnant even, that there were unforeseen consequences of her meddling in the plan of God, she blames Abram, she persecutes Hagar, Hagar leaves and tries to flee back to Egypt, but God sees her, and God hears her oppression, and he tells

her to return.

Now this is a question, why does God tell Hagar to return? It would seem, from a human point of view, why don't we just let Hagar go back down to Egypt? Let her and Ishmael, the child that she carries, just disappear into the mists of history, and let Abram and Sarai start over. It's a clean slate, it was a mistake, it was outside the will of God and the purpose of God, so let's just kind of let it sweep itself under the rug, that southern rug of Egypt, let Hagar go back where she came from, and start over. God tells Hagar to return to her mistress, to return to the oppressive environment, and to have her son be born in the household of Abram.

And there are a couple of principles that we observe in this. First of all, God has no problem fulfilling his own plan. There is no failure that we can commit, there is no failure that we can engender, that will derail the plan of God.

And we don't have to try to cope with consequences. God will incorporate everything in our lives into his perfect plan. He works all things together for good, even the mistakes.

It's a huge mistake. It violates the sanctity of Abram's marriage. It violates the pattern that God established in the garden of one help meet for one man.

One man, one woman, the two shall become one flesh, that's God's perfect design. And you think, well, it's all over for Abram, he messed up. And there's this permanent effect.

He's got a woman who now has standing in his household because she has born him a child. He's now got a son out of wedlock. Any way you look at it, it's an illegitimate union, it's an illegitimate birth.

It would seem so convenient to just let Hagar go. Abram doesn't stop her. Sarai is glad to see the back of her.

God tells her to return. And it's an important thing for us to remember that we don't have to bear the burden of the consequences of our failures. God will work all things together for good.

He says, Abram, you keep Hagar in the household. And apparently she stayed in the household until her death. And Ishmael stayed in the household until he reached his majority.

Because there are other principles in the plan of God that would be violated were they to depart. And one of the things that is nearest and dearest to God's heart is something that we saw in our scripture reading this morning. And that is care for the widow.

Care for the orphan. Care for the stranger and the oppressed. Because at the very center of God's heart is compassion on those who are caught in the grip of hopeless

circumstances.

It diminishes your opportunities. There is very little expectation for a widow or for an orphan in the ancient world and even up to modern times. Your chances are fewer.

Your hardships are greater. The stranger, the one who gravitates to Israel perhaps because they've heard of the Lord God as Rahab does. They don't have a standing.

They don't own property. They don't have the opportunities that a native-born Israelite has. But God makes provision.

God cares for the widows and the orphans. It's a wonderful study to go through the Bible just with a concordance. Follow the word widow or follow the word orphan through the Old Testament scriptures and see that in every case where that occurs, God is positively disposed.

He blesses. He provides. He cares for.

And He gets His dander up, if you will, when people oppress widows and orphans. The fatherless. The strangers in the land.

Israel receives heavy discipline and heavy rebuke. Anytime they fail to care for these. Well, this is what Hagar and Ishmael are about to become if they depart the household of Abram.

And the household, the dynasty that God is creating in Abram is not exclusive. It is inclusive. And God includes in the blessings to Abram even the races that will spring from this illegitimate union with Egypt.

The Egyptian woman. And God pronounces blessing on them. It's not the same blessing.

It's not the full and rich blessing of God's presence. But it is provision and protection. And an enduring legacy that God bestows even on Ishmael.

And it is in part the reason that he receives the name that he has. What does Ishmael mean? It means God hears. That was the theme of the last chapter, Genesis chapter 16.

Out in the desert place when Hagar reaches the end of her strength and she's thirsty and she's tired. She's fleeing oppression. God hears and God responds.

God never appears to Sarai, does he? God appears to Hagar. And God restores her. And God blesses her.

And God provides security and perpetuity to her offspring. And she herself responds to the presence of God. She in a way is more responsive than Sarai.

Even at the point that God confirms the promise he's given many times before to Sarai.

She's going to laugh, isn't she? Hagar doesn't laugh in the desert. And Hagar obeys.

When God speaks and says return to the place of oppression. You think about it. She's an Egyptian slave.

But when God speaks and says return to the oppression of your mistress. She goes. God speaks to those who have a receptive heart.

And she does. So a couple of great things to remember about the previous chapter. And it tells us in the final verse of that chapter.

Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. Remember this was all Sarai's idea. She said perhaps I can be a mother through Hagar.

She got this idea probably from some of the places they lived up in Haran and Ur. This was sort of a common practice apparently. But verse 16 reminds us that this child was not born to Sarai.

It was born to Hagar and Abram. Then in chapter 17. This is one of the pivotal chapters in the whole Bible.

Chapter 17. We're going to spend just a little bit of time on the beginning of this chapter. And then we're going to see God's five-fold speech.

God is going to speak five times in chapter 17. Five is another one of those resonant numbers in scripture. The chapter begins when Abram was 99 years old.

Remember the previous verse told us he was 86. Now he's 99. So 13 more years are going to pass before God speaks again to Abram.

Well, how long had he been in the land when Ishmael was born? 11 years. When will God speak again? 13 years later. So it is going to be a total of 24 years after Abram's entrance in the land when Isaac is conceived.

And when this promise that God made to him way back in Ur finally begins to take shape in concrete form. Of course, Isaac might object to be called concrete, but he is the material evidence of the fulfillment of God's plan and purpose. But it's 24 years.

It reminds us that Israel had the opportunity to enter the land of Canaan very shortly after they left Egypt, but then they had to wait 40 years and then there was another try. So 12, 24, it's going to delay, in a sense, the fulfillment of God's purpose because of this failure and double the time from 12 to 24. But when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am almighty God.

This is El Shaddai. Walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will multiply you exceedingly.

Then Abram fell on his face and God talked with him saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. For I have made you a father of many nations.

I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make nations of you and kings shall come from you. 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 to your descendants after you. Also, I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger.

All the land of Canaan has an everlasting possession and I will be their God. And God said to Abram, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 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. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 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 your money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. This, of course, anticipates, it recognizes the multitude that has already gathered itself to Abram like his servant that he mentioned in the previous chapter when he said that the servant born in his house would be his heir. This is something that is going to continue.

There are going to be strangers in the house of Abraham. And they can participate in the covenant. The uncircumcised male child, verse 14, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. This is a good place to stop. This is halfway through.

There are two more phases or statements, two more covenant promises that God makes. The broad structure of this chapter is delineated by the phrase, As for X. God says, As for me, in verse 4. He says in verse 9, As for you, Abram. He says in verse 15, As for Sarai, your wife.

And then in verse 20, he says, As for Ishmael. So four sections, four parts of God's communication to Abram. These are clauses or sections, just like you would have in a contract or in a treaty.

God says, This is my part. This is your part. This is Sarah's part.

And this is Ishmael's part. But it is prefaced by the initial statement. And this is the fifth part, the introduction, is in verse 1 and 2. I am almighty God.

Walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will multiply you exceedingly. Now, if you get exposed to much in the way of formal theology, you find that the Abrahamic covenant, as this formulation has been titled or labeled, is classified by theologians as an unconditional covenant, which means that there's no condition to it.

God makes statements here that he is going to perform and fulfill no matter what. It's unconditional. Well, this, and maybe my mind just doesn't reach up into the lofty regions at which this perception was made, because to me, it looks like right at the outset, there's a condition.

God says, look, Abram, I am almighty God. I am El Shaddai. Walk before me and be blameless and I will make my covenant between me and you.

The word there in verse 2, translated make, is *matan*, which means to give. I will give my covenant. I will fulfill my covenant.

Because he's already given the covenant several times before, hasn't he? He gave it in *er*. He gave it back in the last chapter or two. And so this is not something new, but this is a statement of fulfillment.

And it is by far the most detailed statement of renewal of the covenant that we have seen. But we're going to see that this is a pattern of all of the covenants. God is consistent.

And his dealings with mankind, even in the different dispensations, even when delivering different covenants, whether it's the Abrahamic covenant or the Noahic covenant that he gives to Noah after the flood, the Mosaic covenant or the Mosaic law with Israel, the Davidic covenant that he establishes with David, all of these have a similar structure, a similar focus, and they all have a similar condition as we will see. God says, I am El Shaddai. And this is God, and it is the title that reflects His provision, His bounty, His ability to deliver the reward.

Remember after the five kings of the plain, He said, I am your shield and your exceedingly great reward. So, God uses the name here of provision. Why does God use this particular name? Why doesn't He say, I am Yahweh Elohim, or I am Yahweh Adonai, or I am the Lord of hosts, I am the commander of the angelic armies.

Why does He say El Shaddai? Well, we have a sharp contrast here between Abram's attempt, Sarah's attempt to make the plan of God happen in their lives. There's a difference, isn't there? There's a contrast. Abram has made his bold effort with Hagar, and of course it's a disaster.

Now God says, this is how provision is accomplished. This is how the fruit of your life and the fruit of the plan of God in your life is going to take place. I am the God who provides.

I am the God who makes it happen. Then He says, walk before Me and be blameless. It's a very short statement, and people tend to gloss over it so they can get down to the good part about all the different phases of the covenant.

This is God's part, this is Abram's part, this is Sarah's part, Ishmael's part. But this is a very important statement. Walk before Me and be blameless.

Have we seen this anywhere in the earlier portions of Genesis, this idea of walking? Who is it that walked with God? Back in Genesis 5, verses 22 and 24, Enoch walked with God and he enjoyed a very special place and holds a special place in God's plan. Enoch walked with God. It states it twice, in case we missed it the first time.

It comes back and says, he begot Methuselah, and then he walked with God after he begot Methuselah so many years. And then he was not, for God took him. And he departs this life in an unusual manner.

And you recall when we looked at that earlier, why is that? What is the significance of Enoch disappearing without seeing death? He exits life because he walks with God, apparently. These two things are the unique features. I guess the third thing would be he's the father of the longest lived man in human history, Methuselah.

But Enoch walked with God and he was translated, as they say. Never quite figured out how they arrived at using the term translate. That's change from one language to another.

Convert from one form to another. But he, I guess they feel, went from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm, just got translated without seeing death. But of course, one of the fascinating things to us is that when you look at the symbolism of the flood and Noah and his family being delivered through that time of judgment, Enoch departs the world in an unusual manner before that judgment comes.

And this, as has been pointed out by smarter men than me, seems to reflect the pattern of the rapture of the church prior to the judgment that Israel will go through, which would be pictured by Noah and his family being delivered through. And of course, it is uncertain enough in the minds of many that they don't see this as a proof. There are people who think the church is going to go through the tribulation.

Well, this is a picture that suggests to us that we don't, that the rapture and the unusual exit from this life that it represents is going to precede, at some distance, the judgment, which of course is the last three and a half years of the tribulation period. But Enoch walked with God, and that qualified him for a special place in God's plan. He has the opportunity to be that representative.

Who's another person that walked with God that we've already seen? You may not remember, but in the very next chapter of Genesis, Genesis 6, Noah himself walks with

God. And this is a particularly interesting notice. This is Genesis 6 and verse 9 because both of the terms that we find in our passage, Genesis 17, are found in 6, 9. This is the genealogy of Noah.

Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God. When it says that he was perfect in his generations, that word is Tamim.

T-A-M-I-M And we'll be returning to that because that is the word translated blameless over in chapter 17, verse 1. So you have walk and you have blameless. Now you might think, well, but there's an awful lot of walking that goes on in the Bible. This particular use of the word walk in Hebrew is unusual or special.

This is the Hebrew verb Halak. H-A-L-A-K And when it's used in this sense, it is used in the Hithpahel stem. You didn't know you were going to get a little Hebrew grammar this morning.

But Hebrew has different forms of the word that have different meanings. So the Kal stem, Q-A-L Kal is your present tense, your active voice. This is kind of your standard statement of something.

Just a declaration would be the Kal. The Nifal is passive. Instead of I hit the ball, you would say I was hit.

We get the passive voice a lot of times in combination in English. But the passive is the Nifal. The Hithpahel, if you want to spell that, it's H-I-T-H-P-A-E-L Hithpahel The Hithpahel in Hebrew is the reflexive stem.

Reflexive means I hit myself with the ball. Or in the case of Halak, which here is found in the Hithpahel, it means I walk myself. I cause myself to walk.

So it isn't just Enoch walking with God, and you get the idea, well, one foot in front of the other. Or the little poem you see, I've seen it on a plaque hanging on the wall where you look on the beach and there's two sets of tracks and then there's only one set of tracks. The person gets up to heaven and says, Lord, how come you left me when I was in my time of oppression? Because see, there's only one set of tracks.

The Lord speaks and says, no, those were the times that I carried you. You get the idea, well, you're walking with God and then he carries you along. You've probably seen that.

It's a little poem, plaque type of thing. But this is different. This is not just the normal mode of walking.

This is the Hithpahel stem of Halak. And that's significant because it's reflexive. Noah walked himself.

Noah caused himself to walk with God. Enoch caused himself to walk with God. And

guess what? When you get to Genesis 17-1 and God says walk before me, it's Hithpahel.

Cause yourself to walk. You walk yourself before me, God says. So this is a strong statement of responsibility for how we walk.

There's a sort of a passive idea in Christianity. Well, I'm saved. God is with me.

God's at work in me. To will and to do is good purpose. And so just by being a Christian and walking along, I'm walking with God.

This reminds us that we have responsibility for our walk. We walk ourselves before God. We bear the responsibility for how we walk.

And this idea of walking carries on through Scripture. It is used here of Enoch and of Noah, the pre-flood individuals. And you'll notice that it's a statement of fact.

They walked with God. And it says that Noah was blameless. This is a statement of fact.

When it's given to Abram here in chapter 17, it is an injunction. It is a goal. It's stated as a fact for Enoch and for Noah, but it is given as a goal to Abram.

This is his marching order. This is his command. This is the condition that he needs to meet so that God can bless him and so that God can fulfill these promises. To receive the benefits of these covenant promises, one must walk himself before God and one must be tamim, blameless.

And this is in fact the goal for Abram and his descendants. And so we see on through Genesis, over in Genesis 24-40, you have the servant of Abram who's going to look for a wife for Isaac. And he's going to go to a far country and he's going to find Rebekah by the well.

And as he's telling this story, he says in verse 37 of Genesis 24, My master made me swear, saying, You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell, but you shall go to my father's house and to my family and take a wife for my son. And I said to my master, Perhaps the woman will not follow me. But he said to me, The Lord before whom I walk.

This is Abram, Abraham in this case, talking to his servant that he dispatches to find a wife. And he says, The Lord before whom I walk will send his angel with you and prosper your way. And you will take a wife for my son from my family and from my father's house.

So Abram is going to latch on to this. He knows this is his defining principle. This is what he lives for, is to walk before God.

And that's what he makes his goal. You find the same thing over in Genesis 48 and verse

15. Near the end of the book, the Lord willing will reach this advanced place in Genesis.

This is Jacob, Israel, blessing his grandsons. And he stretches his right hand out and lays it on Ephraim's head, who is the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh's head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn. And he blessed Joseph and said, God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads.

Let my name be upon them in the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. So Jacob understood this same principle of walking before God. This is used particularly and in the sense of service to God, obedience to God, of the priests and the Levites.

We won't turn to these passages, but you'll find this in Deuteronomy 10 and verse 8. In Deuteronomy 18.7, you find it over in Judges 20.28 and Ezekiel 44.15. Again, that's Deuteronomy 10.8, Deuteronomy 18.7, Judges 20.28, and Ezekiel 44.15. It talks about the priests and the Levites walking before God, serving God in worship, in instruction, in leading Israel in the spiritual sense. It's very fascinating also when you think about this. What's one of the most common terms in the Old Testament especially for departing from God and going when there is idolatry and rebellion and departure from God, apathy toward God? What's the term that's used? Following after other gods? Going after other gods? If you think about that for a moment, the people of God are challenged to walk before Him.

If they fail that, they wind up running after, walking after other gods. And it reminds us of the perspective that we see here when God reveals Himself to Abram and He says, I am Almighty God. I am El Shaddai.

You don't have to follow after God. Israel is never challenged to follow after God. God is already there.

God has revealed Himself. He says, I'm here. I'm God.

Walk before Me. We don't have to, as the Scripture says, go up to heaven to try to find Him or go down into the depths of Sheol. He is near.

His Word is in our hearts and on our lips. He has already revealed Himself. He doesn't have to be followed after.

He doesn't have to be chased. But when Israel departs from God and departs from the goal of walking before God, they wind up following after other gods. It's interesting because in all of these passages, and I can list them for you, the verb *halak* is used to follow or to walk after other gods.

It's *halak*, but it's not the *hithphael*. It's the *kal*. It's the declarative stem.

They're walking, they're trudging, taking their two steps. But the sense of responsibility for one's walk is lost because here's the idea of running after, walking after, following after some goal, chasing something. And so the principle is put before us.

Are we walking before God or are we chasing after something else? And sometimes, especially in modern Christianity, we find ourselves chasing after what we think is God and what we think is God's plan, what has been presented to us as the purpose of God and the goal of our Christian life. But it always seems to be just beyond reach, just ahead. It's something that we wind up following after.

We're pursuing it. We're chasing it. We're trying to reach that point where we feel like we've really fulfilled the plan and the purpose of God.

And that's not the perspective that God presents to His people. He says, I am God. I'm here.

Walk before me. Don't chase after me or what you think is me. Don't chase after something elusive that doesn't ever seem to be fulfilled.

It's here. This is what Abram does back in chapter 16, isn't it? He's chasing after the fulfillment of God's plan and purpose with the whole Hagar episode. But he says, Walk before me and be blameless now.

We understand the idea of responsibility, the hip file of halak, to walk before God, walk ourselves before Him. How on earth can we be blameless? Because we know we're not perfect. This is a good place to pause and take our break.

And when we come back, we'll examine this idea of tamim. What does it mean to be blameless? How can we be blameless? Let's pause here and take our break.