

9010U

SOUTH AFRICA BIBLE SCHOOL - 1997

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Speaker: Bro. Roger Lewis

Study #4: Embracing the covenant blessing together

Reading: Genesis 17:1-22

Well, thank you brother chairman, and my dear brethren and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, and my dear young people.

I don't know how many people have bibles open, obviously as one gets further back in the hall, you know, the principles of darkness increase, and, so, I'll leave it for you to work out the symbology of who's sitting where! We do hope that during the course of the study that all will be enlightened in due course with the advent of some powerful changes. (Note: a play on words re: the fact the electric power had failed, so no lights in the hall.)

In Genesis chapter 17 then, is where we're going to start our record this evening, as our brother Clouse had read for us: in those first 22 verses, we have the next stage of the story of Abram and Sarai. By the way, someone said to me, 'you know you oughtn't to have stories you know'; you see, the word 'story' doesn't mean 'make belief' does it? A story is a story but you can have a true story; this is a true story, there's no make belief here, this is the real story of their lives, but just as there are chapters in a story so there are chapters in the lives of these people and, so, we're going to go through, therefore, the next part of the story which is the next chapter, which also happens to be the next chapter of Genesis.

Now, you see, where we left them on the occasion of our study this morning, was that Abram and Sarai had learnt in the words of a New Testament quotation, 'the children of the flesh, these are not the children of the promise', that's what they learned, wasn't it? The children of the flesh, these are not the children of the promise, and they had to learn that now through bitter experience. You see, Genesis 17 verse 1 says, 'When Abram was ninety years old and nine, Yahweh appeared to Abram'. So, we're told in chapter 16 and verse 16, at the end of that chapter, that 'Abram was fourscore and six years old when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram'; so, he was 86 when Ishmael was born, but 99 in Genesis 17 verse 1. So, you see, Abram and Sarai now had to wait for a further 13 years for the fulfilment of the promise: remember one of the lessons we had learnt in chapter 16 was that they hadn't learnt to wait on God. God says, 'I'll teach you to wait on Me, alright!', they had to wait another 13 years before God moved to fulfil that

promise!

You see, I think two things happened in those 13 years: first of all, Romans 4 tells us (and by the way, Romans 4 is commentary on Genesis 17), Romans 4 tells us that by this chapter both Abram and Sarai had dead bodies; in other words, they could not produce children, neither of them. Their bodies were as good as dead, says the record in Romans 4. You see, during those 13 years, therefore, all earthly hope, all natural hope of ever being able to raise the promised seed by natural means had now been extinguished. Both of them had dead bodies, says Romans 4, and therefore, in those 13 years they had now learnt to wait absolutely on God, there was no other way, but to wait on Him. Of course, the other thing they had to do during those 13 years, is that they had to endure the consequences of their own sin in Genesis 16, hadn't they? As now, a little child ran around the household, and Hagar, of course, being the woman she was, would still not lose opportunity to make the point that that was 'her boy', but she would encourage him to run to Abram, wouldn't she? She'd say to Sarai, 'do you see how his father loves him?' The lad would run to his father, to Abram, and there was further distress and further trial, you see, in that house. How easy it would have been for a 'Peninnah-Hannah' situation to develop between these two women during these 13 difficult years.

But now, they're over! and finally, says the record in Genesis 17 verse 1, 'Yahweh appeared to Abram and said unto him, 'I am Almighty God, walk before Me, and be thou perfect'. I am Almighty God, and of course, that's the title 'El Shaddai', isn't it? I am El Shaddai; so, although it was Yahweh that appeared, He called Himself, He entitles Himself El Shaddai on this occasion. Now, what does El Shaddai mean? Well, it has to do with, of course, the principles of power and might, but that power and might is channelled in a rather special way; I'm just going to read another couple of references for you in the use of El Shaddai:

— in Genesis 28 verse 3 we read these words, 'And El Shaddai bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people'. So, El Shaddai in Genesis 28 has relationship to the building of a family and the multiplication of offspring;

— In Genesis 49 we read, in the 25th verse in the blessings of Jacob upon his son, 'Even by the El of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Shaddai, who shall bless thee with blessing, blessings of the breasts, and blessings of the womb'. So, El Shaddai is really used here in the sense of 'He who has the power to nurse a family', that's who El Shaddai is!;

— and, of course, there's an interesting reference in the New Testament, which we won't turn to but you might like to take a note of, in 2 Corinthians 6 verses 17 and 18, the apostle Paul, on one occasion, exhorts the brethren that they might leave the world and come out to God, and he says, 'Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and I

will be a father unto you and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty (El Shaddai).

So, you see, the term 'El Shaddai', we believe, that's used here in Genesis 17, has relationship to God in the context of Him being a nursing Father to a young family. Later on, of course, in the history of the nation, He would be known as 'Yahweh' the covenant God of the fully developed seed; but, not yet. First, the seed has to be begun and it would be begun by the operation of God acting as a nursing Father, that that first special unique miraculous son, the promised seed, might be brought forth — 'I am El Shaddai, says Almighty God, in Genesis 17 verse 1, as He appears to Abram.

Then He says in that first verse, 'Walk before Me, and be thou perfect'. Now, you see, when God says to Abram to be perfect, He doesn't mean perfect in the sense of 'sinless', He means to be 'upright or sincere' (8549), but you see, that phrase 'walk before Me and be thou perfect', you see, I think it would have taken Abram's mind to an earlier occasion. What episode would that remind Abram of? walk before Me and be thou perfect? You see, that phrase came from another man, from an earlier age. Who was the man who walked before God and was perfect and upright in his generation? and the answer is, Noah; and, what did God do with Noah? God made a new beginning through Noah and his sons; and, now, God was going to do the same through Abram and Sarai. A new beginning was going to be made and, therefore, He takes Abram's mind back, as it were, as He asks him to walk before God in that state of perfect sincerity as did Noah of old.

Then, in the 2nd verse of Genesis 17, God says, 'I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly'. I will make My covenant, He says: now, it's interesting that in Genesis 17 verse 2, when God says that He'll make a covenant, it's not the normal word for 'making a covenant'; the normal word is 'beriyth' (1285) in the Hebrew which means, of course, 'to cut a covenant', but that's not the word used here in Genesis 17; the word used here is 'nathan' (5414) which means really to 'institute or grant or to implement the covenant'; you see, the covenant was made in Genesis 15. The covenant was cut in Genesis 15, but what God is saying now in Genesis 17 is, 'now Abram, the time has come for us to make a covenant, we've already cut the covenant, but now the time has come for that covenant to be established between us', says God. What He says in the second verse is a marvellous thing, you see, what He says is this, He says, 'I'll make My covenant between Me and thee' (and when the lights do finally come on, since we've had an earnest for that possibility of that already); when the lights finally come on, you'll find that that's a key phrase used in Genesis 17, between Me and thee. It's used in verse 4, it's found again in verse 7, 'I will establish My covenant between Me and thee; it's found in verse 10, 'this is My covenant between Me and you'; again, in verse 11, it says at the end of the verse, 'this shall be a covenant betwixt Me and you'. You see, I think what God was saying was this, between Me and thee; He wasn't just simply saying, well this is going to be a covenant between Abraham and God, I think what God was saying was, 'Abraham, this covenant, the fulfilment of this promise is going to be between Me and you; I'm going to be involved in its fulfilment',

says God. 'You and me together, Abraham, we're going to fulfil this promise and this son that you've longed for is about to be brought forth, and I'm going to be personally involved in ensuring it'. In other words, God was going to intervene in their lives, Abraham was going to be the father of the lad, but in another sense, God was going to operate upon them and the very fatherhood of God would be involved in the production of this seed.

It reminds of Ephesians 3, doesn't it? and verses 14 and 15 when it says there, in the words of the apostle Paul, he calls upon God, he says, 'Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named', remember that phrase? in whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, God is the Father of us all; and as promised to Abraham on this occasion, God would be personally involved in the fulfilment of this promise! Wow! what a promise that was! In fact, verse 3 tells us that as a result of this promise it says, 'Abram fell on his face'. He fell on his face and God talked with him. You see, I don't think he just fell on his face because of reverence, although that, no doubt, was the case, not just because of humility, but you see, I think Abram felt a deep sense of unworthiness. He felt absolutely amazed that, despite all of their mistakes and all of their weaknesses, that God was still prepared to fulfil that promise with them. Abram felt terribly humbled by that! he fell on his face, as God talked with him.

As God talked with him, He said these words in the 4th verse, 'As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations'; actually, the word 'nations' that's used in the 4th verse of Genesis 17, is the word 'gowy' (1471), is the word normally used of the Gentiles. So, this promise, you see, to Abram, that he was to be a father of many nations was going to reach out ultimately, starting with just this one boy; but, it was going to reach out to embrace both the Jew and the Gentile. Now, why was that promise so extensive that both Jew and Gentile eventually would be caught in its embrace? Well, I think for the very reason that God has mentioned, is that, you see, God Himself was to be involved in Abraham's fatherhood. As the Creator of all things, the principles of God's salvation are absolutely universal, they extend to all and, so, through this one son would eventually come to Abraham fatherhood of many nations, who would be caught within the embrace and within the wonder of these promises.

So, verse 5 says, 'Neither shall thy name anymore be called Abram, but thy name should be called Abraham, for a father of many nations have I made thee.' Now, some of you may know this but it's interesting, you see, because we ask ourselves the question: And how was this to be? how was the promise to be fulfilled? how was Abram with his dead body and Sarai with her dead body: how were they going to be empowered and enabled to bring forth this child? The answer lies in the 5th verse because, you see, it says 'thy name shall no longer be Abram but Abraham'; now, some of you might know that the word 'Abram' in the Hebrew has 4 consonants. But now, to his name was now going to be added a fifth consonant or letter; and his name is going to go from Abram to Abraham and it's the 'h' that's going to be added, it's an extra consonant, but as far as Abraham was concerned it was a fifth letter that was to be added to his name. You see, the number '5' in the bible represents, well it represents

'divine grace', it stands for the principle of 'grace', but I think we can extend it further; you see, it specifically, I think, represents grace in this sense: the grace of God in imparting strength to those in human weakness, that they might be made strong by Him. Those that are strengthened out of their weakness are those especially who are the recipients of divine grace; and, you see, I think the lesson of this chapter was that God's grace was going to intervene in their lives, in order that this child might be brought forth. It was all going to be the operation of grace.

So, you say, 'well that's fine, but that's only one letter really! Actually, the number 5 is quite significant in this story, perhaps more significant that we realize. You see, firstly, Abram's name was going to be expanded from 4 consonants to 5, but the letter that was added to his name was the letter 'h' in the Hebrew, which just happens to be the 5th letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Not only is it the 5th letter in the Hebrew alphabet, but it is, of course, the dominant consonant in the name of God Himself. Yahweh, YHWH, and that 'h' you see, represents the intervention of God's grace into the life of Abraham that he might be empowered to bring forth this seed. It just so happens that the letter 'h' that was added to his name, has a numerical value of, why, 5! Of course, this was going to be a fulfilment of a covenant that had been made already in Genesis 15, and you might like to make a note that in Genesis 15 and verse 9, it outlines the sacrifices that were used to make up that covenant that they had made between them; do you know how many animals there were in the covenant? why, 5 animals. Of course, the whole promise concerned the seed, didn't it? the promised seed to come, do you know how many times the word 'seed' is mentioned in this chapter? why 5 times. And Genesis 17 is a manifestation of God to Abraham, there was a whole series you see, of manifestations by which God communicated with his friend, Abraham. There were actually 8 of them, there were 8 divine manifestations in the record to Abraham; you'll never guess which one this is, would you? why this is the fifth time that God has been manifested to Abraham. GRACE was going to operate in the life of the patriarch in order that that child might be brought forth.

Do you reckon that's right? Come and have a look at Romans 4. Now, remember that Romans 4 is a commentary on Genesis 17, and the crucial thing that would make all the difference, in order that this child might be brought forth, was the operation of divine grace, that out of their own weakness they might be made strong by His intervention in their lives. Look what Romans 4 says and reading from verse 13 by way of connection, here's the inspired apostolic comment upon Genesis 17: 'For the promise that he should be the heir of the world was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the Law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect. Because the Law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression. Therefore,' he says, verse 16, 'therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end that promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the Law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, As it is written, I HAVE MADE THEE A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS'; and, the apostle Paul quotes from Genesis 17, that it might be by grace, says the apostle; yes, that's the lesson I'm sure, of Genesis 17. You see, the principle

was this: you can have all the faith in the world, but without God's grace you cannot be saved! and without the grace of divine strength intervening in Abraham's life and in Sarah's life, this child could never be born. So, that was the promise that God made to them — was that He would personally intervene in that way.

So, coming back to the record in Genesis 17 then, God says in the 6th verse, 'I will make thee exceeding fruitful and I will make nations of thee and kings; kings shall come out of thee'. So they would too!, because from Abraham would spring the royal Davidic line; from Abraham eventually would come Messiah the prince, and reaching out into the 'goyian' of the age to come, there would, of course, be the aristocracy who will rule with Christ in the kingdom age, and they're all going to be counted as Abraham's seed as well. Yes, kings were to come out of Abraham, all beginning with this first child that would be born.

Verse 7 says, 'I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God'. So, this promise which, by the way, was really to natural Israel, involved two things: it was a covenant of possession (I will give thee the land); and, it was a covenant of fellowship (I will be their God) and both those things were promised to the nation of Israel in a natural sense. They would enjoy a special relationship with God that only Israel would ever have! and, we notice that the promise was, in verse 8, for an everlasting possession. The everlasting possession of verse 8 is matched with the everlasting covenant of verse 7 — only an everlasting covenant, you see, can promise an everlasting possession.

Now, verses 9 to 14, we're going to, actually in the interest of time, we're going to move over those, but we're going to extract, I think, just one vital principle from them before we move on to the 15th verse. Now, you'll probably know that verses 9 to 14 in Genesis 17 is all about circumcision, it's about the principle and the ritual of circumcision. I just really want to make a couple of comments that I think are pertinent to this story in terms of the meaning of those verses. We say, of course, that circumcision represents the cutting off of the flesh, the repudiating of carnal thinking in our lives. That circumcision is the equivalent in the Old Testament of baptism in the New, whereby we seek to put to death the old way of the flesh and the old thinking of the flesh. All of these things are true but I'll tell you what I think circumcision really stood for in Genesis 17, it's really very simple; you see, this chapter is all about the promise of a son, a son to be born to a man and a woman who are past being able to have a child; and God says 'I'm going to intervene, Abram in your life. I'm going to give you My strength in your weakness, I'm going to bestow My grace upon you, I'm going to be El Shaddai, a nursing father; it's going to be between you and Me, I'm going to be involved in this Abram'. In order to teach Abram that this child was not to be born by the principles of natural procreation, he is circumcised in the very context of a promise being made to him, that he was going to father a child. When a man's been circumcised, well, that's the one time he can't really father a child.

Now, I tell you what, that's how exactly the New Testament takes it up, you see, come and have a look at Acts 7, whatever else circumcision may mean, I think the lesson to Abraham was, he was being brought to Sarai's level. Her body was incapable of producing a child, and I believe, so was Abraham's symbolically in the episode of chapter 17 when he undergoes the principle of circumcision. Now, have a look at Acts 7, you see, this is the famous speech of Stephen, isn't it? now, look what he says about circumcision in verse 7, he says, 'The nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve Me in this place. (now listen to these words) And He gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac', do you see how those ideas are brought together? He gave him the covenant of circumcision and so begat Isaac, but a circumcised man can't beget a son, you see, this was going to be the operation of divine intervention, the intervention of God. This child, in a sense if you like, was not to be the product of his flesh, God was going to share in the birth of that child, and as if to remind Abram of that fact, He circumcises him, and so he begat Isaac'.

Romans 4 again, have a look at Romans 4 and see how this chapter brings together the principle of circumcision and fatherhood, so that clearly the fatherhood that is being spoken of is something beyond the ordinary resting, in fact, on the power of the operation of God. Now, you see, Romans 4 says this in verses 11 and 12, 'And Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised:' (he received the sign of circumcision) 'that he might be the father', do you see that? he received the sign of circumcision that he might be a father. What a wonderful juxtaposition of ideas, it's a paradox, you see, he who was incapable of producing children was to have children through the operation of God upon him.

So, coming back to Genesis 17, I think that's what circumcision stood for, in this particular story, and this couple are both now brought to a common level, of complete inability as it were, to have this child that the operation of God's grace upon them might be seen!

Now, come to verse 15 because now in the 15th verse we come to the involvement of Sarai in the story. Now, do you see what verse 15 says, 'And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her; yea, I will bless her, and shall be a mother of nations, kings of people shall be of her'. Remarkable, you see, so now Sarah is brought into the promise in just the same way as Abraham has; and, what's the change as far as Sarai is concerned? Why her name is to be changed! and how is her name to be changed? why, the letter 'h' is to be added to her name as well; the same operation of divine grace that was to work upon Abraham, was to work upon his wife as well; so, the 5th letter is added again. Remarkable! so, God in this verse now concentrates Abraham's attention on the fact that his wife was as equally involved in this promise together with him. You see, I think this was the one thing that Abraham never really understood, that Sarah was in this together with him!

Now, let me show you that in terms of how that exactly unfolds, it's really quite lovely! Now, look at this, 'behold my covenant is with thee'; now, here's the promise made to Abram, first of all, 'neither shall thy name anymore be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham', and the divine 'h' of grace is added to the patriarch. 'Thou shalt be a father of many nations' and not only a father of many nations, but 'I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee', so that eventually says the record, 'kings shall come out of thee'. These are the terms by which Abraham is exhorted and encouraged in verses 5 and 6 of this story in Genesis 17.

Now, in verses 15 and 16, God focuses the attention of Abraham upon the fact that his wife is intimately involved in the fulfilment of this promise, in fact, she is equally involved in the outworking of this promise. Now, just look at this, it's lovely! first of all, God says, 'As for thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be!' So, her name is changed in just the same way that her husband's name was changed. Then it says, just as it said of Abram that he would be a father of many nations, in verse 16 it says of Sarah, 'and she shall be a mother of nations'; and just as it's said of Abraham, 'I'll make thee exceeding fruitful, of Sarah it says, 'I will bless her' (and of course, the blessing that was to come upon her was the blessing of receiving strength to conceive seed, in order that she might be fruitful). Then of Abraham it was said, 'I will make nations of thee', and it says in verse 17 to Sarah, 'I will give thee a son also of her' and through that son, of course, would come those nations. Finally, it was said to Abraham, 'kings shall come out of thee' and Genesis 17 verse 16 says, 'kings of people shall be of her'. Now, just look at that, you see, they were in it together, weren't they? they were absolutely bound together in the fulfilment of this promise to come of the wonderful child that was to be born. I think, this just hit Abraham! I think he was absolutely flabbergasted, he never really understood this before! that his wife and he were absolutely in this story together. In fact, what the record goes on to say in verse 16, it says, 'I will bless thee and I will give thee a son of her', but Rotherham translates the phrase in verse 16, 'yea, moreover, he says, I will give from her to thee, a son!'. Just listen to those words carefully, 'I will give from her to thee, a son'; you see, it's almost as if God says that Abraham's got nothing to do with it! I will give from her to thee, it's almost like a virgin birth, you see; the operation of God was going to be upon Sarah in just the same way that He was going to operate upon the life and upon the body of Abraham.

Verse 17 tells us, 'That Abraham fell on his face!', isn't that remarkable? he's only just got up; he fell on his face in verse 3, he must have got up at some stage and there he goes and falls on his face again, says verse 17. Why did he fall on his face this time? Well, you see, I think he fell on his face in the 17th verse because he had just understood the principle of Sarah's complete involvement in this promise. He had never ever really grasped that before, and you see, as soon as Abraham would have understood that, he would have recognized the folly and the foolishness of what they'd done with Hagar. How could they ever build the house of Abraham by means of another woman, when this was his wife and this was the woman that had to bear that promised

seed, she's in it with you, says God. So, Abraham fell on his face in sheer wonder of the understanding of that principle of their mutual involvement in that promise. Do you know how we know that? because that's what verse 17 says, 'Abraham fell upon his face and he laughed and said in his heart (now listen to what he said) 'shall a child be born unto him that is 100 years old, and shall Sarah that is 90 years old bear?' and he brings the two of them together, you see, in the fulfilment of the promise. Are we really both going to have this child, he says? Yes, the miracle of sonship was to involve a divine visitation upon both of these older people, really; a 100 years old and 90 years old, as the record says.

Then verse 18 says, 'Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before Thee'. Now, that's an interesting thing actually, 'O that Ishmael might live', it's almost a strange thing, isn't it? for Abraham to say in the middle of this promise that he's just been given about the birth of his own son. 'O that Ishmael might live before Thee'; now, I don't think for a moment that Abraham was pleading for Ishmael instead of Isaac, he was filled with joy at the thought that Isaac was going to be born. He wasn't asking for Ishmael to take Isaac's place, but I think what Abraham was saying was this, that he knew that if Isaac was to be born and he was to be the promised seed, then Ishmael would immediately be relegated to servant status, so he prays to God that God might find some place in His purpose for Ishmael. God answers that, God says later on that He will do that; it's an interesting principle of Abraham, you see, Abraham had care for other people. No sooner is he promised Isaac than he's concerned about Ishmael, 'Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee'. In a later chapter he prays for Lot, he had a care for other people but, you see, the one thing that Abraham had to develop, the one care he had to develop, was a care for Sarah his wife. It's a funny thing with husbands, you know, they can often show this spirit of care to everyone else other than their wives! They spend time with the children, they'll teach Sunday School, they'll sit on the gospel proclamation committee, they'll be an arranging brother, they'll attend all sorts of important meetings in the ecclesia; and, the one thing they won't do, and the one person that they won't spend time with, is their wife! Funny thing, you know, aren't men strange creatures, it's just the way they are, and you see, Abraham was going to need to spend time with Sarah, because I think what happens in this story is that Abraham, in fact, he really thinks ahead, his faith just leaps ahead. I think Abraham's convinced that the child is really going to come, he's absolutely convinced (I'm going to show you why I think that in a minute). But, you see what the record says, he says, 'Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee'; God says, verse 19, 'Sarah thy wife shall bear a son', you think about your wife, says God! You show care for her, she's the one that needs your help right now, your development right now, your encouragement right now, SARAH thy wife; she's involved Abraham but she needs your help as a husband.

Actually, the verse goes on to say, verse 19, God said, 'Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed, and thou shalt call his name Isaac (3327 - Yitschaq). Actually, that's interesting! thou shalt call his name, you see, in the case of Ishmael, the mother had the naming of the child, didn't she? but in the birth of Isaac, the father had the naming of the child. What was the child to be named? it was to be named 'Yitschaq', which, of

course, means 'laughter', and I believe that this child was named on the basis of the laughter of faith which Abraham gave in the 17th verse, where it says 'he fell upon his face and laughed and laughed'; I don't think it was a laugh of unbelief, b&s, I believe it was the laugh of absolute faith. I'll tell you why, I've got 3 reasons why I think that's the case:

1. The first thing is that Romans 4, which is a commentary on the thinking and the feeling of Abraham in Genesis 17, says, that in this episode 'he believed in hope, he staggered not, he was strong in faith, he gave glory to God, he was fully persuaded'. This is not the laughter of an uncertain man says Romans 4, this was a man who had absolute conviction that what God had promised He would indeed fulfil.

2. The second thing is that it says, 'Abraham fell on his face', and, you see, I think that was the action of instinctive prostration in wonder and thanksgiving. He didn't fall on his face because he was uncertain. He didn't fall on his face because he was doubtful, he fell on his face because he was joyful with certainty.

3. We know, of course, that he used the new name of 'Sarah' immediately, thus indicating his deepened appreciation that they were to embrace the covenant blessing together. His use of that name and his understanding of that principle of their mutual involvement was an understanding of faith that it would indeed all happen. You know, in John 8 verse 56 it says, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; he saw it and was glad', do you remember that passage in the New Testament? so, therefore, we believe, is probably the place where John 8 verse 56 is alluding to, 'your father Abraham rejoiced', that's the laughter of faith! So, this son of promise was to be named 'Isaac' - laughter, in commemoration of Abraham's glad acceptance of the divine promise. Yes, I think Abraham was absolutely convinced that it was going to happen, and his son was named in commemoration of that principle.

Now, the question is, What convinced Abraham? Why was Abraham so sure? by the way, Sarah wasn't! I don't think she was sure at all; Abraham was, but I don't think Sarah was! and I think this is one of those things where a man is different to a woman, a man sees things differently. What Abraham saw was, he saw right to the end, he saw the son, and he was absolutely convinced that that son now could come, and would come, as a result of the divine interposition in their lives. But, Sarah saw all the problems and difficulties on the way; but that's the way a woman thinks, isn't it? Men have a much better objective sense of seeing an end; but, a woman is built in a way that she sees every valley, every mountain and every truck on the way; and, a man, sometimes, seems to skip over the mountains, but a woman's got to go down every valley and up every hill, she does, she's built that way, she's different! and Sarah's not ready yet for the faith that's needed on this occasion.

I'll show you an interesting parallel, have a look at this! In Colossians 1, I think we have an allusion to Genesis 17. Colossians 1 says, 'Walk worthy of the Lord, Genesis 17 said, 'walk before Me'. Colossians says, 'being fruitful in every good work', and Genesis

says, 'I'll make thee exceeding fruitful'. Colossians says 'and increasing in the knowledge of God' Genesis 17 says, 'I will multiply thee exceedingly', and that word 'multiply' is translated 'increase' (4129) in Isaiah 51. Colossians says 'being strengthened with all might', Genesis 17 says, 'I'll be an El unto thee and to thy seed'. Colossians says, 'unto all patience and longsuffering' and isn't that the very lesson that Abraham and Sarah had learnt in this episode? when he was 90 years old and 9, and they'd learnt to wait another 13 years on the Father. 'Let it be with all joyfulness' says Colossians, and Genesis says, 'Abraham laughed in his heart' as a result of this promise that had been made. Colossians says, 'giving thanks unto the Father', and Genesis says, Abraham fell on his face to do just that! 'that we might be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in life', says Colossians and Genesis says, 'I will give unto you the Land' and in Psalm 105 it calls the Land, the lot of their inheritance. What was the key to all of this in Genesis? It was promised by El Shaddai, and Colossians says, 'God has made us meet for all of that!' Now, do you see that word 'meet' there in Colossians 1, is only found twice in the New Testament? It's found once in Colossians 1 verse 12 and once in 2 Corinthians 3 verse 5, where it's translated 'sufficient'; God has made us sufficient for whatever is necessary. But, it just so happens that that word 'sufficient' is the word that the Septuagint version uses to translate the phrase 'El Shaddai' in the Old Testament. God is sufficient for everything! Abraham believed that! In the words of a wonderful passage in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9 where these words are to be found, 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness', and, you see, I think that this was the point. That El, the all sufficient One, is the One that Abraham now absolutely believes in, he was convinced that that powerful God, El Shaddai, would perform everything that He said and had promised to him. He believed in the 'all sufficient power' of that God, I don't think Sarah did, not yet! She wasn't ready, not yet! and Abraham's faith, I think, leapt ahead on this occasion, and so it was left for him now to try and encourage his wife.

In verse 21 of Genesis 17 goes on to say, it says, 'My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year'. 'My covenant will I establish with Isaac': you know, b&s, that covenant is first made in Genesis 15, isn't it? the covenant is cut between Abraham and God; you know the word 'covenant' is used once in Genesis 15, do you see how many times the word 'covenant' is found in Genesis 17? Remember it's already been used once, and it's never used again after Genesis 17, so, whatever you add to the one time it's been used in Genesis 15 when the covenant is first cut, is the final number you'll get to; so, what do you think the number might be in this chapter? 13! excellent! So, you see, the word 'covenant' concerning this couple is found

14 times in the record, do you know what that is? 7×2 , isn't 7 the number of the covenant?

This is 7×2 : Abraham and Sarah were in this thing together, weren't they? they were joined together in embracing the hope of this covenant. But, you see, what the verse says is that 'Sarah shall bear thee a son at this set time next year'. That's 12 months away, by the way! So, the child is not going to be born yet, not quite yet, there's further development needed, you see, and the development was needed in Sarah. I think

Abraham here, was given time in order that he might now help his wife, develop his wife, to that final point of faith that was needed before the child could be conceived. Abraham had to learn, b&s, the principle of sacrifice.

Now, we won't turn up 1 Peter 3, but you'll notice that this is where the words come from, and I believe that in 1 Peter 3, that Peter has in mind again the example of Abraham. So, he says, 'Likewise ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace (oh, that's interesting, 'heirs together of the grace') of life; that your prayers be not hindered'. Is that not really the fulfilment of Genesis 17? It's interesting, by the way, the husband was to dwell with his wife, dwell with them, says Peter; now, I said here that Abraham shared his tent with Sarah. Now, you might think that's funny, but you see, that's exactly what happened, because in the next chapter, you see, what happens is this: Abraham is sitting at the tent door and some strangers arrive, so, he goes rushing out to meet the strangers. Then he comes rushing back into the tent and says to his wife, 'I want you to get some food ready'; then he takes the food and while he's outside, she comes and stands in the tent door. They lived in the tent together, they dwelt together in the tent! Now, that's interesting because later on, you see, it says in the divine record, that when Isaac got married, it says he brought Rebekah his wife into his mother's tent! So, Sarah had her own tent, but in Genesis 18, hard on the heels of this episode in Genesis 17, they are dwelling together in the same tent, exactly as Peter says. They were to dwell according to knowledge and I think that's the point now, you see, Abraham has to develop a sacrificial spirit towards helping his wife, that her knowledge and her faith might increase to the same point that his has already reached. Giving honour unto the wife, isn't this the chapter where he immediately calls her by her new name, recognizing that she's the weaker vessel? he had to have sympathy for her situation in this particular regard; and of being heirs together, and if ever there was a lesson that Abraham had learnt in Genesis 17 was that, that his wife was fully involved with him in the fulfilment of this promise and that they would be heirs together of the grace of God, and isn't that what happens in this chapter? The promise of grace being added to both of them, and what was that grace to be seen in? it was to be seen in the grace of life, and ultimately, of course, that's eternal life, but for Abraham and Sarah in this chapter, their bodies were to be physically quickened with life again, in order that that child might be brought forth. That your prayers be not hindered, says Peter, and we're going to find later on in the story that, I believe, it was the prayers of Abraham that finally brought faith to his wife Sarah.

So, you see, we've said wives need to learn submission, but here's the other side of the ledger now, you see, husbands have got to learn sacrifice! You know, when Paul expounds marriage in Ephesians, he says, 'Husbands you've got to love your wives even as Christ loved the ecclesia and gave Himself for it'. I think the problem that a lot of husbands have is, they say, 'wow' you know, that's pretty big'; all that Christ did was give His life for the ecclesia, and it's such a big thing that husbands don't quite know how to actually take up this spirit of sacrifice. How do you sacrifice? Well, I think, Peter makes it easy, really, you see, Peter breaks the idea down, he says, 'do you what to

know what sacrifice is? he says, I'll tell you what it is; you've got to dwell with them according to knowledge, you've got to give honour to your wife, you've got to appreciate that she's the weaker vessel, and you've got to dwell together as heirs of the grace of life. That's sacrifice! you learn those things, says Peter to the husband, and you've learnt the principles of sacrifice; so, what are they?

By the way, one of the interesting things in this record, is that from the moment that Genesis 17 stops, in every single incident that now follows on, you'll find that Abraham shows care for his wife. I think he learnt it out of this chapter, you see, he shows care for his wife in every single episode from now on.

So, what is it? Well, firstly, says Peter, dwell with them according to knowledge; so, husbands have got to spend time with their partners in scriptural matters. It's not necessarily doing the readings with the children, it's talking about the truth. It's talking about the principles of the truth, it's talking about the principles of the truth in all circumstances of daily life. Actually, wives need to communicate, don't they? I read something somewhere about the fact that a woman actually needs to get out more words per day than a man. Sometimes, when a husband comes home, that there's a sense that one could be convinced of the truth of that! shall we say! So, dwelling with them according to knowledge means spending time to communicate, the one with the other, in order that the wife's faith and her own knowledge and conviction might be increased.

I know when we first got married, it was only a short while ago, really, and you want to start your married life off so well, don't you? everything's got to be perfect, but you have to have a good wife to start, by the way, everything's got to be perfect. 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath' and two other things before the sun went down that we wanted to do: #1, you close the evening with prayer together (isn't that dwelling according to knowledge? husband and wife concluding the day with prayer); and, #2, the other thing we liked to do was read a book at nighttime. We read just a few pages in bed before we went to sleep, and they were some of the happiest books and happiest hours of time we ever spent reading those books. There was a sense of sharing and intimacy and a wife needs that, she needs her husband to dwell with her according to knowledge; and, she also needs him to give honour unto the wife. She needs his esteem, she needs his courtesy, she needs his thoughtfulness, she needs his care! A man has to learn to give honour to his wife, in the way he actually thinks and acts towards her; that he esteems her as precious, even in a romantic sense I don't think that that's silly. I don't think it matters how long you've been married, I think a woman always likes to be told by her husband that she's the most beautiful creature in the world; they always like that! There's a sense of honour, you see, that a man ought to have for his wife, and it's a terribly nourishing thing!

And, says Peter, you've also got to appreciate that she's the weaker vessel! So, what does that mean? less brains? NO, because Genesis tells us that a man and woman stand as equal before God in the matters of salvation. There are some highly intelligent

women, and some highly unintelligent men, so the woman is not the weaker vessel in the sense of any mental incapacity. What I think that it's saying is that the makeup of a woman is different, she's a prey to emotions when a man doesn't care, her physical makeup is more delicate, she's a creature of tenderness, she's a creature of gentleness, she's more vulnerable! Those very things which go to the makeup of a woman are her strengths as well as her weaknesses, because it's part of the maternal spirit that's planted within womankind, but it makes her gentle and her husband has got to appreciate that and, therefore, deal gently with her as the weaker vessel.

He's got to dwell with her as heirs together of the grace of life; to realize that marriage is truly a combination of the two complimenting one another, drawing on the skills and abilities of each other. Husbands have to learn to sacrifice for their wives, and see, b&s, isn't this true? that if a man learns to sacrifice for his wife, then he may reasonably expect the spirit of submission in return. But, the moment a man demands submission as of rights, then he's missed the whole point of apostolic exhortation, because Paul doesn't say that sacrifice is a right that a wife can demand, and Paul doesn't say that submission is a right that a husband can demand! Paul says that sacrifice is a duty that the husband should perform! and Paul says that submission is a virtue that a wife ought to show! I think the onus always rests on the husband first to show leadership and, therefore, a husband ought to learn the principle of sacrifice first, if he seeks that spirit of loving cooperation and submission from his wife. It's not the big things in life, you know, that count for sacrifice, it's the little things! You know, one of the main things to find out is how to sacrifice for her by asking her what she wants; sometimes it's a terribly little thing, some annoying thing around the house that she's actually wanted fixed for about 3 years now, and she'd be thrilled if you fixed that! She'd count that a sacrifice! if you would just do that little thing.

Brothers! brothers that are married: sacrifice isn't not communicating with your wife on spiritual things but buying her an occasional posy of flowers, that's not sacrifice! Sacrifice isn't never having prayers together, but having the occasional fling at a restaurant! Sacrifice isn't dwelling together with her and not spending time with her in scriptural things, but suddenly going on an expensive holiday! They never make up for those other things, do they? That's not sacrifice, sacrifice is these things: dwell with her according to knowledge, give honour unto the wife, respect her tenderness and gentleness, and appreciate that you're heirs together with regard to the hope of the grace of life to come. Abraham now was going to have to take up those principles and to encourage his wife that she might now reach the climax of faith together with him, that they might now expect and anticipate the birth of this beloved son.

Embracing the covenant blessing together! El Shaddai is all sufficient to nourish us unto fruitfulness. Whilst faith is essential, salvation only comes by the operation of divine grace. Fruitfulness in spiritual things comes by cutting off the flesh. Men and women are equal fellow heirs of the salvation offered in Christ, coordinated in the plan of redemption through the Son. Abraham learnt to develop the spirit of sacrifice and Sarah was to learn that God would bless her. Faith is a belief in a power greater than our own,

that is able to perform that which is humanly impossible! And so He will, b&s, He'll perform in our own lives as well, that which is humanly impossible if we will but have faith in Him, and rest in the confidence of His promises.

And ye His saints rejoice
His praises to declare
Whose mercy calls you from the dust
There blessedness to share.

For soon He will reveal Himself
In His dear Son
To seal the covenants of truth
And perfect all in One.