

# Unfathomable Fruitfulness!

Genesis 17:3b-8

Halifax: 19 July 2015

## **Introduction:**

We have had a long break in our Genesis sermon series, so let me remind you that we had just begun Genesis chapter 17 before we broke off.

- This is the very heart of the Abrahamic portion of Genesis, and in many ways it is the very heart of the God's covenant of grace!
- It is here that the LORD brings His covenant promise to a kind of climax, promising that He is going to fill the world with people who belong to Him.

You will remember that at creation, God said to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.

- This was a command, but also a blessing—in other words, He was pronouncing fruitfulness upon them—declaring that they would be fruitful and fill the earth with offspring.
  - And at the time, Adam and Eve were without sin—so the result would be that the earth would be filled with a godly seed—with image bearers of God.
  - That is what God wanted of them and that is what God would do with them.

But the filling of the earth with godly people did not proceed in a straight line—it ran into extreme difficulties.

- Adam and Eve transgressed God's covenant and plunged themselves and all of their descendants into an estate or condition of sin and misery.
  - Now when they multiplied, they would multiply sinners instead of saints.
  - Their fruitfulness would be the multiplication of wickedness instead of godliness.

But in Genesis 3:15, as part of God's response to what they had done, we saw the first promise of redemptive grace—the promise that God would still bring forth a godly seed.

- You will remember that He promised that He would put enmity between Satan and the woman's seed...
  - As it was at the time, the seed of Adam and Eve were destined to be united to Satan in his rebellion, but God will turn the woman's seed against Satan!
  - In other words, God was going to bring forth a godly people out of the fallen descendants that would come from Adam and Eve!
  - And He goes on to indicate that there will be one born of woman who will lead the way in the complete overthrow of Satan through His own suffering...
    - That His heel would be crushed, but that He would crush the serpent's head.
    - This One that would be born of woman and that would overthrow Satan is, of course, the one who has now been revealed—our dear Lord Jesus Christ!

With these wonderful promises in mind, the LORD renewed His command and blessing to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply.

But the fruitfulness did not come immediately—nor did Jesus the redeemer.

- Adam and Eve brought forth Cain and Abel, and Cain was of the wicked one and destroyed Abel who was of the promised line, but was not the promised one...
- And then Seth was born, and there was a line of godly persons that repented and forsook the Devil to serve God,
  - but by and large the world became filled with great wickedness such that God destroyed it, washing away the whole population as filth that had corrupted the whole earth,
    - but sparing Noah and his family...

And once again God came to them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply—fill the earth.”

- He showed again that it was still His intention to fill the earth with godly people.
  - But even though the world had been renewed so that only godly Noah and his family were left,
    - as they multiplied, ungodliness again became prevalent—even dominate...
    - This ungodliness came to climax in the pride that was seen at Babel where men sought to bless themselves by their own works rather than by looking to God to obtain blessing—obtaining blessing from God by grace...

We saw how God came to them and frustrated their efforts, humbling them by confusing their language and by scattering them so that their self-efforts to be fruitful were frustrated.

- And then in Genesis 12, we saw how God came to Abram, who was from a typical idol worshipping family,
  - and graciously called him, promising to bless him and to make him great—really to give him by grace what the men at Babel sought to obtain by works.
  - In other words, God promised to Abram true fruitfulness—the bringing forth of a godly seed—of a people blessed by God and shaped by God to be His own!
  - And God promised that this blessing would reach to all the nations!
  - And He promised that Abram would have a son through whom this blessing would come—it was the promise of the Son who would subdue Satan and establish pure godliness in the earth.
- And we have seen that this promise was made to Abram, but that Abram and his wife Sarai were barren—they had no son.
  - And yet God kept renewing the promise and He kept repeating it and making it more clear that the child through whom the promised son would come would be born of Abram’s body and of Sarai’s, even though they were past the age to have children.
    - This emphasised in a very tangible way that the bringing forth of a godly seed to fill the earth was not a work of man, but only of God’s grace and power!
    - The LORD, as we have seen, kept refining the promise and expanding it as the years rolled on...

And now in Genesis 17, the LORD brings His promise to its fullest expression!

- He sums up in this chapter the fruitfulness that He is going to bring forth in the earth through the seed of Abram!
  - It is the promise of a huge number of people that will belong to God forever and inherit the earth!
  - It is a promise that is unfathomable, given the sin of man and the present situation of Abram and Sarai!

We have already looked at the opening of this chapter...

- where we are told that the LORD appeared to Abram when he was 99 years old and said, “Walk before me and be blameless!”
  - This too is a command as well as a blessing.
  - Abram is called to be a godly man, but he cannot do this apart from God’s grace.
    - And so it is with all of us—we are called to turn from our sins to live for God, but we cannot do this apart from the grace of God...
      - which grace begins when we hear the call and turn from our sin to follow Jesus for eternal life; continues as He enables us to grow in holiness and in the fear of God; and is completed when we get to heaven.
  - All along, God has shown that this is His work—we are to look to Him for salvation, not to our own fleshly efforts.
    - God says that He will multiply Abram exceedingly—it is the promise to multiply godly people—
    - The promise is not to multiply ungodly people—there are plenty of them—but to multiply people who walk before God and are blameless.
    - This is something that is totally beyond Abram’s ability and that can only be done by the grace of God.

And in the part that we are focusing on today, we see where God promises to bring forth this multitude of godly people!

- If you look at Genesis 17, you can see that God speaks of His part and of Abram’s part in the covenant that He is establishing...
  - In verse 2, He promises to establish His covenant with Abram, and then in verse 4-8 He says, “as for Me,” after which He tells of His own part,
    - and then in verse 9 He says “as for you” in which He tells Abram of his part.
  - This is common in covenants—that the one establishing the covenant says,
    - As for me—this is what I will do...
    - As for you—this is what you are to do...
- Today, we will look at what God promises to do—in short at how He promises fruitfulness to Abram—unfathomable fruitfulness—a world filled with godly people who live forever in communion with God!
  - This is the promise of the church that is a promise to us as much as to Abram if we are among those who believe.

Please give me your careful attention as I read this portion of scripture to you.

- I will begin with verse 1 and read through verse 8.
- Genesis 17:1-8—This is the precious word of God.

**Gen 17:1-8:** When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: <sup>4</sup> “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a

father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> 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 your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

May the LORD bless to us the hearing of His holy word.

Again, having already looked at the call of God in verse 1 for Abram to “walk before me and be blameless,” and at the promise in verse 2 that God will establish His covenant with him and multiply him,

- we come today in verse 4-8 to look at what God promises to do in that covenant.

And in short, it is to make Abram truly fruitful...in this we will look at three unfathomable promises...

- First, the promise of an unfathomable relationship (sinners in communion with God),
- Second, the promise of an unfathomable number (a great multitude from Abram),
- Third, the promise of an unfathomable inheritance (an everlasting possession).

Let’s look at each of these in order...

### **I. An unfathomable relationship—God will be your God!**

- You can see the incredible promise in verse 7 where the Lord says:
  - **Gen 17:7:** “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 your descendants after you.”

A. To have God as your God is *everything*!

1. Of course He is everyone’s God in the sense that He is our Creator.
    - There is not a person on earth that does not have God as his Creator.
    - There is not a person on earth who has a morsel of bread or a fingernail or a breath of air that did not come from his Maker,
      - and for this, thanksgiving and total dedication to God is due.
- But when God promises to be our God in His covenant, it is much more than a declaration that He is our Creator.

2. This is a promise of relationship to us as our God in the sense of being all that a god ought to be to His own people.
  - a. It can be compared to a marriage relationship where a husband promises to be a husband to a woman and a woman promises to be a wife to a man.
    - The groom promises:
      - I take thee to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.
    - The bride promises:
      - I take thee to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.
  - b. And what ought God to be to His people?
    - 1) Well, He ought to bless His people—to provide for them and to take care of them, to preserve them and to maintain their happiness.
    - 2) He ought to use His divine power to bring good to His own people, doing for them as only God Himself can do.
  - c. This is emphasised throughout the scripture...
    - 1) For instance, Jesus concludes that when God says to His people in the time of Moses that He is *the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*,
      - that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though departed from this world, cannot be dead for the simple reason that God is their God...
        - and that He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.
        - If He is their God, they must have eternal life.
    - 2) And in the same way, in Hebrews 11, we read earlier that believers in the Old Testament knew that the land and other blessings that God gave them in this world were by no means the final blessing He had prepared for them!
      - If what they had in this life was all He had to give them, He would be ashamed to be called their God!
      - They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims upon the earth because they knew that God had a whole lot more to give them.
        - Heb 11:16 says: **But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.**
      - Do you see what this is saying?
        - If all God has for His people is whatever He gives them in this fallen world, He would be ashamed to be called their God—He did not do nearly enough for them!
        - When God claims to be a god to a people, it means that He is going to put forth His divine power and wisdom to bless them!
          - It means everything to have Him as your God!

- You cannot be anything but blessed for all eternity if He is truly your God.

B. And that He should be the God of anyone in the fallen human race is unfathomable!

- You would expect Him to be the God of ordinary people who served their maker, but...
1. How could He be our God when we are such sinners?
    - The whole human race is fallen—we rebelled against Him in the garden despite all of the ways He had blessed us.
      - It is a horrendous thing!
    - We fell under His wrath and curse and were cast out of His presence, as those that were unfit to live in communion with Him anymore.
    - In Noah's day, God looked at man and what did He see?
      - Gen 6:5 says: **Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.**
  2. How could God be the God of such a people when He is holy?
    - He will not dwell with the wicked.
      - When He appeared to Israel at Mount Sinai, He appeared with fire and earthquake, and He declared that anyone who approached the mountain would be pierced through—because they were unfit to come before Him.
      - The ceremonies and ordinances of temple worship that He gave to Israel constantly testified that they were unclean and must be purified.
        - They had all kinds of washings and ceremonies and even then they could not come into the holy place where God's footstool was.
        - That footstool was behind a veil, and only the high priest could enter that place once a year to offer a sacrifice of atonement for their sin.
    - 3. God cannot be the God of sinners unless they are purified!
      - And that brings us to one of the most excellent benefits that is contained in (or implied by) this promise to be a God to us!
        - If God is going to be our God, it means that He is going to purify us—to cleanse us from our sin.
        - In order to be our God, God must purify us!
        - He must atone for our sins, and He must completely transform us so that sin is completely eradicated from us.
      - I showed you last time that that is what is behind the command to Abram to “walk before me and be blameless.”
        - This is something that God must do—and that He does do!
          - And now (since the coming of Jesus) we know how He does it—because Jesus Christ has been revealed from heaven!
          - He, the Son of God, came from heaven and became human flesh, born of a woman,

- and He lived the life that we ought to have lived—a life in perfect obedience to God...
  - And then for us He also gave Himself on the cross to atone for our sins—to cover them—to pay the full penalty of them so that we could be pardoned...
  - And then besides that, He pours out His Holy Spirit on us, and the Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that we repent and turn to Him for salvation,
    - and the Spirit works in us and transforms us so that we become the servants of God,
      - and when we die, He completes the work in us and makes us perfect.
  - And then, you see (when all that has been done), we can dwell with God, and we can fully enjoy Him as our God and we can be His people...
    - By promising to be our God, God promises to do all of this saving work for us—all that is required to make us His people.
      - He is all that God can be to us and the outcome is that we get to enjoy Him forever and ever!
      - We get to walk with Him, beholding His glory and beauty, confident in His care, full of hope in His promises, pleasing Him forever with our whole heart and soul!
- C. Brothers and sisters, having God as our God is *everything*—it is absolutely *everything*!
1. Declaring Himself to be our God is the very essence of all of His covenant promises!
    - If you want to roll all His promises together in one statement, it is that God is our God!
    - That is the promise He makes to Abram and to his descendants.
      - It meant that He would provide an atonement and that He would provide new life and that He would bring them all to glory.
  2. From Genesis to Revelation, the very heart of the covenant promise is **“I will be your God.”**
    - In Revelation 21, the climax of the blessing is stated in this way in v. 7:
      - **“He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”**
    - To have God as your God is to have everything.
  3. But let me warn you, God is not your God unless you are joined to Jesus Christ by faith.
    - No son of Adam can be anything but cursed apart from faith in Jesus Christ.
      - Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to God the Father but through Him.

- There is no forgiveness, no atonement, and no eternal life apart from Him and He says to you,
  - In John 3:36, it says, **“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”**
  - If you would have God as your God, you must trust in Jesus and His saving work.

TRANS> So you see that this unfathomable relationship of having God as your God is a reality in Jesus Christ...

- but there is more to this unfathomable promise...
- You might expect that there would only be a few sinners that God would take to be His people—but not so...
  - In spelling out His covenant promise, God speaks of...

## **II. An unfathomable number—a great multitude from Abraham**

A. The large number is emphasised here!

1. In verse 4, the LORD declares that Abram will be the father of *many nations*—of a multitude of nations.
  - This is remarkable given that Abram is 99 years old and still does not have the son through whom the promise is to come!
  - He is not even the father to any son, except Ishmael the son of Sarai’s maid; and yet God declares that he will be the father of many nations!
2. And look, this promise is further expanded upon in verse 6 where the LORD says, **“I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.”**
  - a. Being *exceedingly fruitful* means that he will have lots of lots of covenant children.
    - This is not just a promise of lots of people, but a promise of godly people.
    - God is not interested in masses of ungodly people—He is promising to bring forth masses of godly people who will walk before Him and be blameless!
  - b. And by saying that He will make nations and kings come from Abram, it speaks not only of Israel which we know came directly from him,
    - but also of other nations...
      - and certainly not nations like the Ishmaelites, and the Edomites (the children of Esau) that came from Abram,
        - but the families of the earth that God promised to bless through Abram when He first called him in Genesis 12—the seventy families that were to become various nations listed in Genesis 10.
    - We know that this is what is in view because we know how this promise was fulfilled...
      - that the Gentiles who had been cut off from God are now brought near by the blood of Christ.



- As Jesus said in Mark 8:11: **And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.**
- He commanded His followers to go into all the world and preach the gospel, calling them to make disciples of all nations...
  - We are seeing the fulfillment of this to this day.
- And Galatians makes it clear that when they come to Christ, they become the seed of Abraham...
  - Paul says to the Galatians in Gal 3:29: **And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**

TRANS> And so you see that there is to be a huge number

B. That Abraham should be the father of a multitude is a marvellous thing!

1. When the promise was given, it certainly did not look like this would be the case!
  - He had one son by the maidservant of his wife and that was it.
  - And even more challenging to the promise was the fact that God had called Adam and Noah to be fruitful and multiply,
    - and we see that they brought forth very little godly seed.
    - How was it to be any different for this man Abram?
  - And as the aspect of the promise of the gathering in of the nations to be God's people was unfolded by the prophets,
    - this too seemed more and more increasingly unbelievable as Israel declined in importance from the time of Solomon and was a vassal to the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and in the time of Jesus to the Romans...
    - If we did not know the outcome, it seems almost like wishful thinking to be pitied when Jesus speaks of the nations coming to God to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom...
      - Yet, all of this was confidently asserted when Jesus was rejected and cut off even by His own people who were but a petty and often annoying vassal to the Romans.
2. But you can see in verse 5 that God gives Abram a new name to confirm the promise.
  - Verse 5 says: **"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations."**
  - a. *Abraham* is a modification of his name *Abram*—sort of a play on his name.
    - *Abram* means "exalted father" and very likely means that Abram's father was exalted—a man of importance and status.
    - By inserting a couple of letters in the name, God changes it to *Abraham* which means "the father of a multitude."
  - 1) Remember that for us, that would be just like actually naming someone father-of-a-multitude.

- It was not a name that was in use, but simply the words “father of a multitude” formed into a name.
  - So every time someone called Abraham by name, he would be reminded of the promise that he was to be the father of a multitude.
- 2) You can imagine what it would be like for this 99 year old man with one son by his wife’s maidservant to inform everyone that his name was now *father of a multitude*.
- Surely it got some sneers from some and some pity from others who could not see how the promise of many nations was to be fulfilled.
    - And I have already spoken of the amazing declaration that Jesus made at the very time when He was rejected by His own people and had only a slender following...that the nations would come to God!
- b. But the name Abraham stands forever as a monument of God’s promise to this man, given long before he was the father of a multitude at all!
- How this ought to encourage us to believe whatever God has promised, even if it seems to us as if it could never happen!
    - If the LORD says that *the knowledge of the LORD will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea,*
      - we should not doubt that it will be so!
    - We cannot judge by looking at how things are getting on with the gospel in our region or even in the world,
      - but we can know the future by what God has promised—no matter how unfathomable it may be.
      - The earth will be filled with godly people.

TRANS> And I tell you, it is even amazing that our holy God should gather even one sinner to be their God! He might justly condemn us all!

- But how great is that grace that not only gathers one or two, but a whole multitude that will fill the earth from **every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev 5:9)**!

- And now I want you to see further that to this great multitude there is promised here:

**III. An unfathomable inheritance—the land as an everlasting possession.**

- This promise is given in verse 8: **Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.**

A. The promise entails three remarkable things:

1. First, that Abraham’s descendants (who do not yet exist) will be given the land of Canaan to possess...
  - This is remarkable because right now Abraham himself does not even possess it,

- and because right now, the Canaanites fill the land and have quite a firm hold on it.
- That is the first remarkable thing the promise declares...
- 2. Secondly, the promise declares that this land will be given to Abraham and to his descendants as an everlasting possession.
  - Some want to suggest that *everlasting* perhaps does not mean everlasting here,
    - but such grammatical manipulation does not solve the problem of God declaring that this land will be given to Abraham *himself* as an *everlasting possession* when he did not receive it at all.
    - Some say that by giving it to his children, it is as much as giving it to him, but it actually says that it will be given to Abraham as an everlasting possession.
- 3. And thirdly, there is the remarkable promise that God will be their God in this land.
  - This is, of course, a repetition of the promise that we have already considered in verse 7 where God says that He will be our God forever.
    - And we have already seen what a remarkable thing it is for God to be the God of sinners—of any son or daughter of Adam...
      - and we have seen all that God did in Christ that He might truly and fully be their God.
  - And this is a reiteration that He will be God to the people to whom He bequeaths this land—to Abraham and his descendants, but it also points to a personal presence in that land.
    - The idea is that God will dwell in the midst of them as their God in that place—in that land—
      - as is fully described in Leviticus 26:12 where the Lord says: **“I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.”**

TRANS> And so if we do away with the strained interpretations,

- we have the promise that God will forever be the God of Abraham himself and of his descendants in the land of Canaan.

#### B. How can this be?

1. This can be because the full inheritance will come after death!
  - The fact is that Abraham did not get the land of Canaan as long as he lived on this earth, and neither did many of his descendants.
    - They did not get it for over 400 years, and even then, they often did not possess it and at times had it taken away from them.
  - But God’s promises are not bound to this present world.
    - They reach into eternity!
    - And just as God promises to give us new bodies which are these same bodies resurrected just like Jesus’ body was...
      - only with new properties so that we will not know sickness or death...

- so there is a promise that He will give us a new heavens and a new earth which is this present earth and heaven renewed without the curse upon them.
  - Abraham will indeed possess the land of Canaan and so will his descendants who are among the elect...
    - and they will possess it forever with God in the midst of them.
    - This is the promise of heaven!
      - It is part of the fullness of God's blessing to His people!
2. And what about the other nations that Abraham will be the father of?
- In the same manner, they too will inherit the earth.
    - Jesus makes the promise perfectly clear that *the meek will inherit the earth.*
    - He refers to those who fear God—who are meek toward God—who come to Jesus to be ruled by Him and to be saved by Him and blessed by Him.
      - They will possess the earth as an everlasting possession!
  - In this present age, they often do not possess the earth—
    - They are often paying rent to governors and landlords,
    - And even when they do own something here, they do not at all possess it in the way that they will possess it in eternity...
      - in the way that God promised it in the Garden of Eden...
        - that they would have dominion over the earth and subdue it!
      - There are presently bee stings and droughts and storms and crop failures and wars and all sorts of other issues...
        - but when we inherit the earth as an everlasting possession, we will possess it without the curse and we will enjoy the fruitfulness and the beauty of it in unimaginable ways.
3. I remind you once again of what we read in Hebrews 11 where it says in verse 12-16:
- **Heb 11:12-16: Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.**
  - When we read of a heavenly city, we must think that means a city floating in the clouds.
    - Our God promises us that our bodies will be raised up and that we will inherit the earth.

- Heaven is not somewhere in the clouds—heaven is where God is,
  - and the promise is that God will be with us forever when He raises us up and gives us the city that He has prepared for us which is called the new heavens and the new earth.

**Conclusion:** So you see what marvellous things God promises to Abraham, to his descendants, and to the all the nations in Genesis 17!

- That He will be our God, that He will gather a great multitude to be His people, and that He will give us an everlasting inheritance in the earth!
  - Nothing is lacking for those who have God as their God through Jesus Christ!
- So I urge every one of you to come to Jesus with confidence to obtain all of God's promises!
  - In 2 Corinthians 1:20, the scripture tells us that **all the promises of God in Jesus Christ are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God!**
    - Through Jesus Christ, the earth will indeed at last be filled with a godly seed that will dwell forever with God as their God.
    - This is not the achievement of men, but comes by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.
      - We are to receive this blessing not by works, but by faith in Jesus Christ.
      - All the promises of God are yes and amen in Him!
        - That is our sure and certain hope who have turned from our sins to follow Him in trusting faith.