**September 2, 2020 | A Study on Chapter 17 of the Book of Genesis**

**The Covenant of Circumcision**

What do an elderly man, a mummy and a walking stick have in common? Give up? Ok, how about Abraham, Lazarus and Aaron’s staff? The answer is that in each instance God brought something that was dead to life. The story of Lazarus is very familiar. Jesus was traveling with His disciples when He received word that His dear friend Lazarus was sick. Rather than returning to Bethany to attend to Lazarus, Jesus waited 2 days while slowly breaking the news to His disciples that Lazarus was dead which reminds me of a joke. A man left his cat with his brother while he went on vacation for a week. When he came back, he called his brother to see when he could pick the cat up. The brother hesitated, then said, "I'm so sorry, but while you were away, the cat died." The man was very upset and yelled, "You know, you could have broken the news to me better than that. When I called today, you could have said he was on the roof and wouldn't come down. Then when I called the next day, you could have said that he had fallen off and the vet was working on patching him up. Then when I called the third day, you could have said he had passed away." The brother thought about it and apologized. "So, how's Mom?" asked the man. "She's on the roof and won't come down." When Jesus arrived at the home of Lazarus He was chastised by Martha and Mary who were convinced that Jesus could have saved their brother if He had returned promptly. The story ends happily with Jesus restoring life to Lazarus after he had been dead 4 days (see John 11:1-44).

Aaron’s staff was a remarkable instrument. We first see God using it to expose the impotence of Pharaoh’s magicians (Ex. 7:8-12). In Numbers we read about how the Israelites rebelled against Moses and Aaron and how God showed that Aaron was his chosen servant to lead the priesthood. Each of the 12 tribes placed a representative staff in the Tent of Testimony and God performed a miracle overnight by sprouting leaves and almonds from Aaron’s staff (17:1-8).

Chapter 17 begins with God once again appearing to Abram to reaffirm His covenant. Now God changes Abram’s name to Abraham meaning father of a multitude which is fitting since God told Abraham he would be the father of many nations. God also instructed Abraham to require circumcision of all males to keep the covenant with God (there is no equivalent rite for females). As we discussed last week, each time God appeared to Abram He was more specific in revealing His plan for Abram and his descendants and He now makes it clear that Sarah would give birth to a son and they would name him Isaac. This encounter with God differs from the previous times God spoke to Abraham as God appeared to him (probably another pre incarnate appearance of Jesus) and he fell prostrate before God. Just as Abraham had a new name, God referred to Himself in a new way, God Almighty (El Shaddai).

Abraham’s first responds with laughter to the news that he and Sarah would have a child at their advanced ages (see also 18:12-15). Some think this is laughter of delight while others think that Abraham did not believe it was possible (note how life expectancy fell sharply after the flood.) His next response is more serious as he asks for a blessing for his son Ishmael. God promises earthly blessings for Ishmael but makes it clear that the heavenly covenant is reserved for Isaac alone. God tells Abraham that Ishmael will be the father of 12 rulers (see 25:13-16).

God brought a dead stick to life and he brought Lazarus back from the dead but you may be thinking that Abraham and Sarah were alive. In the book of Romans, Paul writes that Abraham figured his body and Sarah’s womb were as good as dead so in that sense God brought life forth from that which was dead (4:19). We should consider how God demonstrated His power in each of these situations. He not only showed that Aaron’s staff had life, it produced fruit which was well beyond the proof needed. In the case of Lazarus, he was not just dead, he had been dead for 4 days removing any doubt that a miracle occurred when he was raised from the dead. God had promised a son to Abraham years earlier but He waited until Abraham was 100 years old, again proving His power. Two other examples of God showing His power in the extreme: Sending fire to Elijah that consumed water soaked wood and stones (1st Kings 18:30-38) and culling Gideon’s army from 32,000 to 300 before they defeated the Midianites (Judges 7:1-8). You might say these were not just miracles, they are miraculous miracles so over the top that they astonished those who witnessed them.

Bringing new life from death seems unnatural to us but consider what Jesus said: Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:24). Just as the birth of Isaac from the dead womb of Sarah produced many nations, the death and resurrection of Jesus brings new life to all Christians.