

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Lord God Almighty

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Scripture: Genesis 17:1-5,15-19

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

¹⁷ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

¹⁹ Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."

Transcript:

Hello, my name is Scott. I'm the senior pastor here. I just want to say thank you so much for joining us. It is great to have you. We are so glad that you are here with us this morning. The scripture comes from Genesis chapter 17. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Everyone fell facedown and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham for I have made you a father of many nations." And then down to verse 15, God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai. Her name will be Sarah. And I will bless her, and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her."

And Abraham fell facedown. He laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing." And then God said, "Yes, but your wife, Sarah, will bear you a son and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him and as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." So, Holy Spirit, as we turn to your word, ask that you help us to learn from it, be encouraged by it, know you better because of it. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, years ago when my kids were little, I took them to Snowflake Lane here in Bellevue one Christmas, and they were super excited to go. But we were late, and so I had to park in a galaxy far, far away, and then we had to walk and we were late so I was walking pretty fast. And my two older kids, Holly and Jackson, were keeping up with me just fine. But Lucy, my youngest, she was kind of struggling, though not for lack of trying. I mean, she was just picking them up and putting them down just as fast as she could, doing her best, but she was still falling behind because I was walking fast. So, eventually, she got fed up, sat down on the sidewalk, and started to cry, waiting, probably, for a better family with a good, nicer dad who doesn't walk so fast to come along and take her home.

So, my older two, Holly and Jackson, turned around and went back and picked Lucy up and started carrying her, which was hard because they were all about the same size. And it was also unnecessary because by that point I had stopped. I had turned around. I was headed back to Lucy but they wanted to help. I know. So many questions that story raises. Right? Like, "Why is this man our pastor? Bad dad story." But I think sometimes, sometimes I, you, we feel a little bit like Lucy. We're headed towards something good, something exciting, but there's a lot of obstacles, and there's hardships, and we get discouraged. And sometimes you just want to sit down on the sidewalk in discouragement.

Discouragement is something that happens to all of us, at least once in a while. Maybe you're waiting on a college to admit you and it hasn't happened yet, and you're discouraged. Maybe you're waiting to get married, but nothing seems to be happening. Or maybe you

thought you'd be further along in your career by now. Or maybe the state of our country and its politics and everything that's just been so hard this year. And COVID. We're just sick of it. Right? Like, I mean, there's hope on the horizon, but there's still ways to go, and it's been so long. Or maybe you've achieved a lot of what you hope for. House, spouse, job, all of that stuff. But maybe you're a little bit bored and you want a bigger adventure, but that might involve taking some kind of a risk, and so it's easier to just kind of scale your vision down and settle with what you've got.

Well, the story I just read speaks to that where God refers to Himself by the name El Shaddai, which means Lord God Almighty. And that is a name that gives us courage to keep going when we feel discouraged. The context of this story is that about 25 years earlier, God had come to a man named Abram and said that his descendants would become the nation of Israel, whose job it would be to carry the good news of God to the entire world. But that was a long time ago. And Abram and his wife, Sarai, are past childbearing years and they don't have any kids.

So, as we saw last week in the chapter that precedes this one, they decide to give God an assist, to do things their way, to help Him out. So, they decide that the best way for them to have a kid is that Abraham would sleep with a slave named Hagar, which he does, and then she has a son named Ishmael. And that created all kinds of problems. Because once that happened, Sarai got jealous of Hagar. There was all this tension and fighting. They made a mess. God doesn't need you to use means He has not sanctioned to get His promises done. He doesn't need you to do that.

And a lot of us have created messes in our lives by doing things our way, not God's way. Well, in the text I just read, it's now 13 years later. 13 years later, and both Abram and Sarai are old, tired, worn out, and they're given up. I had hoped for so much more, but I guess I need to just settle for this. But then God shows up and refers to Himself as El Shaddai, God Almighty, which means just what it says. Almighty, mightier than all other things. And God isn't just a bigger version of us. God is vast on a scale that we can't comprehend. And when we understand what that name means, it defeats discouragement.

So, if you're discouraged about anything, state of our world, state of your life, I think this is going to speak to you. And if you're not discouraged, pay attention because someday you will be, or maybe you know someone who's discouraged and you can listen to this for them. God says to Abram, "No need to give in to discouragement, no need to scale your vision down for your life. I am God Almighty." And one of the things that means is that God is a promise keeper.

It is significant that the first time this name of God is revealed in the Bible is in the context of making a covenant. After God refers to Himself as El Shaddai, He makes a sacred promise called a covenant to make Abram a great nation. And as a sign of this sacred promise, one of the signs, He renames Abram Abraham, which means father of many nations, which may have seemed like a cruel joke to Abraham because he only had one kid and that wasn't by his wife.

Now, God had originally made this covenant way back in chapter 15 but a lot of years have gone by. Abraham and Sarah have made a mess of things by using the Hagar option. So, God shows up here again to reiterate His promise as a way of saying, "I know you've been waiting a long time. I know you've messed up. But in spite of that, my promise still stands." He says, "As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai. Her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and surely give you a son by her. By her, Abraham. Not Hagar."

Now, you can hardly blame them for losing hope. I mean, he's 99. She's 90. That seems like a big obstacle to having kids. Right? Besides, what sane person would want kids at this age? Can you imagine standing with the other parents at the soccer games and having them go, "Oh, are you here to watch your great-great-grandchildren play?"

But notice how the first sentence of this chapter is written. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty." The text deliberately juxtaposes 99 years old with the name God Almighty. It's God saying, "You may be 99, Abraham, but I am Lord God Almighty. You may have given up hope waiting, but I am Lord God Almighty. You may have screwed things up incredibly by doing things your own way, but I am Lord God Almighty, and your screw-ups do not cancel my promises. You may have shrunk the vision for your life down to what you can accomplish on your own steam, but I am God Almighty. And I know it seems impossible. And I know you feel defeated, and discouraged, and demoralized. I know it doesn't make sense to you right now, but I am El Shaddai and I can do things you don't think I can do in ways you don't know I could do them. I am mightier than all other things, which means I am mightier even than the hard things in your life. And I always keep my promises." And then the text says at that, Abraham fell facedown because the only way to respond when you encounter God Almighty is worship.

Where do you feel discouraged? God is almighty. Mightier than all things which means He is powerful enough to keep His promises and to sustain us while we wait for His promises. The root word for Shaddai, as an El Shaddai, is shad. And one of the meanings for that is breast. It's an image of nourishment. God can nourish us as we wait for His promises to unfold. He can nourish us with His presence, with a word from a friend, a sermon, a song. God is a promise keeper.

When my son was younger and in Little League, I would play catch with him and my promise, on a lot of days, I would promise him that we would not stop playing catch until he said we were done. Not when I said we were done, until he got done. Now, obviously, there were some days I could not make that promise because I had other obligations. But on a lot of days, I promised him not to stop until he said that we were done. Lord have mercy. That kid was inexhaustible. I mean, he just never got tired. We would play catch forever and ever, and ever until he said we were done. And I'd come inside afterwards sometimes, and I say to my wife, "Okay, if when he's adult, he tries to play the you never played catch with me card." My wife said, "I got your back. I'll vouch for you. I remember."

I could not make that promise to him every day. But what I did imperfectly with my son, how much more our heavenly father does for us, who can make that promise every day and who keeps His promises every time, and He will not let go, and He will not give up. He will not stop playing ball with you.

And when we understand that, when we understand that it leads you to my second point, which is you shift from saying what if to even if. Fear says what if. Faith says even if. Fear says what if. Faith says even if. I have spent too much of my life asking what if, and that just leads to worry and stress. Abraham and Sarah were what if thinkers. What if God doesn't come through? What if God doesn't keep his promises? What if we never have a kid?

You ever do that? What if this bad thing happens? What if I don't have enough money? What if I lose my job? What if that person won't date me? What if I never get married? What if? What if? Then I'm doomed. I can't be blessed. But El Shaddai, Lord God Almighty means there is no circumstance that God cannot turn around for our eventual good. He says to Abraham and Sarah, "Even if you screw up, even if you're very old, even if it's been a very long time, I'm El Shaddai. I can do all things." And when we move our thinking from what if to even if, it gives us courage and hope. Even if this bad thing happens, even if I don't get married, even if I run out of money, even if I get fired. It may be hard. It may involve pain. But El Shaddai, Lord God Almighty will meet me in it, get me out of it, deliver me through it, bless me because of it, and make it the eventual servant of my joy.

And that, when you make that shift, it gives us courage to do the third thing, which is to do ridiculously bigger things. When you understand that God keeps His promises, that helps you shift from what if to even if. And when you do that, it gives you courage to do ridiculously bigger things that may require some risks, but they're so much bigger. After God reiterates His promise to Abraham that he and Sarah are going to have a son, He then tells Abraham to create a visible sign. As a visible sign of this covenant, He tells Abraham to go get circumcised, as a visible sign of the covenant, and then God reiterates His promise yet one more time. And He says, "I will bless Sarah so that she will be the mother of nations. Kings of peoples will come from her." And it says, Abraham fell facedown and he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90?"

And notice he doesn't just laugh. He fell facedown, laughing, ROFL. Right? Rolling on the floor laughing because it's ridiculous. It's like comically impossible. And that expression fell facedown is the exact same one used back in verse one where Abraham fell facedown. Only there, it was in worship. Here, it's in laughter because it is ridiculous that at their age they would have a kid. And Abraham doesn't believe it, doesn't believe it's going to happen. So, he says to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing." Oi vey, back to Ishmael again. Abraham, give it a rest. And God says, "Yes, yes, yes. I'll take care of Ishmael. Don't worry about him. But Sarah, your wife is going to have a son. Stop trying to scale down the vision." Because, see, that's what Abraham is doing. He's lowering expectations. Scaling down the vision to what he can accomplish, has already accomplished in his own strength, Ishmael.

But that's a smaller vision than God's given him. That's a smaller life. God wants to do a bigger miracle. Here's the problem. See, if you do not understand the significance of the name El Shaddai, Lord God Almighty, you will settle for the little that you can do in your own strength rather than the so much that more that only God can do in His. If you don't understand how powerful God is, you will settle for the little you can do in your own strength, rather than the so much more that only God can do in His. Where do you shrink a vision, settle for what you can accomplish in your strength, not God's? Maybe it's in your marriage where you just accept the status quo. Maybe it's in your career where you feel trapped, but getting out of it, it would

involve a risk, and you're not sure you want to take that risk so you just kind of scale your vision down and settle for what's happening where you are.

Where are you scaling down your vision? A sure sign that your vision is too small, and a sure sign that your vision is too small is that it's just about you, your comfort, your success, your reputation. When God first spoke to Abraham, He said, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. And you will be a blessing, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." All peoples will be blessed through you. In other words, it ain't about just you, Abraham. My vision ain't just about giving you a kid. It's so much bigger than that.

See, Abraham is the start of God's salvation story, God's salvation plan, and his descendants are going to become the nation of Israel whose job it is to carry the good news of God's love to the whole world. And from that nation comes Jesus, who is crucified to pay the price for our sin and rose from the dead again three days later to reconcile us to God. That's so much bigger than just one man and his wife getting a kid. God is doing so much more. If the blessing you are seeking is just about you and yours, your advancement, your career, your comfort, your success, then your vision is too small.

Jesus, please get me into this college. That is a fine prayer, but think bigger. Jesus, send me to the college where you can best use me to make a difference in people's lives and build your kingdom. Jesus, please give me this promotion. That's an okay prayer, but think bigger. Jesus, I want to be part of your rescue mission. Assign me the place in your rescue mission, where I can do as much damage as possible to the devil's plans. And that may not mean the promotion. That may mean a job that pays less with less prestige, but you can bless more people because of it. See, bigger in God's eyes may be smaller in the world's eyes. If your vision is no bigger than just you, it's too small.

You know, we American Christians, we have been taught to pray, "God, what is your plan for my life? What is your plan for my life?" Wrong prayer. Here's the right prayer. "God, what is your plan, period? And how can I attach my life to your plan?" And see the difference? See, God will not keep the promises He did not make. And He's never nowhere promised us to be healthy, wealthy, happy all the time. He's promised to bless us, to make us whole, to give us meaning, purpose, and joy. And some of us are holding God to a promise that He never made.

It's like when my kids were little and, sometimes, they would ask for something like a extra cookie or something like that, and I'd say no. And sometimes they'd try this out. They'd say, "Oh, why not? You promised." I did no such thing, and I am not so stupid as to fall for that ploy. Besides, I already ate the extra cookie. God never promised to bless your plans. He promised to bless His plans and you if you're part of them. Jesus, what is your plan in my school, office, home, marriage, neighborhood, and how can I attach my life to your plan?

So, then how do we know what His plan is? Well, a couple of things from this text. First, walk with Him. God says to Abraham, "I am God Almighty. Walk before me faithfully and be blameless." Blameless doesn't mean perfect. Abraham wasn't perfect. What it means is to walk

with God daily, asking Him, "Show me what you want me to do today, God." Reading His word, being connected to Him so that you can learn from Him. It may mean joining an all in group because we learn scripture better in community. And if you're not in one, I encourage you to join an all in group. They started last week but it's not too late to join. Walk with Him. Second, obey Him even when it doesn't make sense because usually bigger things require a step of obedience that doesn't always make sense to us at first.

In this chapter, God tells Abraham to get circumcised as a visible sign of the covenant. And so the text says Abraham and his son, Ishmael, were both circumcised on that very day. That very day. Okay, that might've been one I waited on that. That might've been one where I'd say, "God, I just want to make sure I heard you right so I'm going to pray on this a little while longer." But Abraham obeyed in spite of the pain involved. I mean, there was no anesthetic back then. And he circumcised Ishmael too, who at this point is 13 years old. 13 years old. How do you think that conversation went? "Hey, Ismael, come here. I got a surprise for you. You're getting circumcised."

"Oh man, Dad, do I have to? Can't I just take out the trash instead?"

But if you want the bigger vision, then you have to do what God says to do, even if it doesn't make sense. And that always raises the question, well, how do I know what God says to do? And I always give the answer, well, you start with the Bible because He's given us a lot of instructions in the Bible, and then pay attention to those nudges that the Holy Spirit gives you.

So, for example, one person who has done this is named Dr. Heber Brown. And he is pastor of a Baptist church in Baltimore, which is a predominantly black church. And he noticed how so many members in his congregation were suffering from diet-related illnesses, like heart disease, and diabetes, and things like that, that affect black Americans disproportionately. And he was always visiting members in the hospital being treated for these diet-related diseases. He said, in seminary, they taught him to give people in the hospital a scripture and a prayer. And he did that and that's fine, but he wanted something bigger. He didn't want to just settle for that small vision. He believed God wanted more. He believed God's will is that all of His people should thrive. And one of the problems was that in Baltimore, as in a lot of American cities, 34% of black people live in food deserts where there's no practical access to food, let alone healthy food.

For instance, when I lived in the Bay Area, East Palo Alto was an underserved community at the time, and it had 70 liquor stores and zero grocery stores. And to get to the nearest grocery store involved a two-hour round trip bus ride with all kinds of transfers. Most residents didn't have a car. They were working one, sometimes two jobs. So, that two-hour bus ride, that was an obstacle. So, instead, folks just go to the Kwik-E-Mart and buy what you can find there, which is what? What can you find in the Kwik-E-Mart? Right? Nothing good. Nothing green, that's for sure. If it is green, it shouldn't be, and you don't want to eat it. I mean, it's scary stuff in those places. Like, the thing that always grosses me out, the liquid cheese that you pump out of the container. Right? You know that's not cheese. Right? That's radioactive goo from the Hanford plant.

Well, this isn't, and this isn't just a health issue for African-Americans who are in food deserts. It's not just a health issue. It is that, but it's also a social mobility issue. Because when kids aren't getting the right food, they don't have the right energy to learn in school and do all of those things. So, Dr. Brown, he prayed and he prayed and he prayed. And one day, he was looking at a plot of land in front of his church and he got an idea for a community garden. So, he went and he raised some money to start that garden, and today that garden grows everything from squash to kale, 1,100 pounds of produce to feed the people that are part of his church.

He also reached out to black farmers who have, for a lot of historical reasons, black farmers have a harder time getting their crops to market. And so he reached out to them and he started some pop-up markets in his church parking lot after Sunday services, kind of like the farmer's market we have here in the summer in our parking lot. And he said he even saw an increase in attendance in their church services. It's not charity. It's empowerment. People helping themselves.

Well, it went so well that he started this thing called the Black Church Security Food Network, and it's helping other churches do the exact same thing. And he points out that all throughout scripture, there are these connections between the land, and farming, and spirituality, and think, especially, of Jesus' parable. So many were about farmers and farming. So, he's meeting needs on both ends of the spectrum. He's providing healthy food for communities in need and giving black farmers a place to bring their goods to market. People can come and praise and worship and hear God's word preached, and also get a big chunk of the groceries that they need for that week.

And it wasn't easy to do this. There were obstacles. It couldn't have been easy for an under-resourced church to raise the money to get the garden for the land and start the garden in the first place. There would have been all kinds of issues around zoning, and permitting, and all kinds of stuff. It wasn't easy, but El Shaddai, the Lord God Almighty, is with him. And when you look at a problem the size of food insecurity, it would be really easy to just kind of sit down in discouragement and despair. What can one under-resourced church do about a problem that big?

But Dr. Brown believes in El Shaddai, God Almighty, who keeps His promises and has promised us that as His church, when we move out into the world to make a difference in His name, He empowers us. And Dr. Brown didn't ask what if. What if it doesn't work? What if we don't get the money? What if it fails? He said even if. No matter what, God is God Almighty. And because of the faith and confidence that gave him, he is now helping to solve a really big problem in the name of Jesus.

So, where are you feeling discouraged? Or who do you know that's discouraged? Or where are you paralyzed with the what-ifs of life? And what are the bigger things God could do through you when you believe that He is almighty? And you don't have to solve the food crisis. It could be something like spending more time with your kids to raise godly difference-makers and launch them into the world. Bring it all to El Shaddai. In fact, this week start all of your

prayers with that name for God, God Almighty, hear my prayer, as a way of reminding you that he is almighty. And that when life says, what if, El Shaddai says even if.

When life drains us of energy and vision because of problems or just the monotony of day after day after day, El Shaddai says, "I am with you still, and I will carry you." When life says, "It's impossible, it can't be done. Shrink your vision down to what only you can do. You might as well give up," El Shaddai says, "Don't you dare. For I am Lord God Almighty, and I am with you. And I will make a way where there seems to be no way."

So, God almighty, thank you. You are mightier than all things. You are mightier than all of our hopes, all of our problems, all of our dreams. Every opportunity, every setback, and hardship, God Almighty, you are mighty over all of them. And so, Lord, we bring you those things and ask that you would build our faith in your power so that we would have hope and courage and that you, through, us could do great things to heal your world. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Genesis 17

Opening Questions:

- Icebreaker: Are you a morning person or a night person?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How does Abraham shrink the blessing God is giving him? Where do you shrink your vision to what you can accomplish in your own strength compared to the bigger vision God Almighty can accomplish through his strength?
- Where are you saying "what if" in your life? How would thinking of it as an "even if" change things for you?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?