

## Faith that Doesn't Limit Almighty God

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Rich Nathan  
November 5 & 6, 2016  
The Journey of Faith  
Genesis 17

Genesis 17 begins this way:

Genesis 17:1

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

For the first time in the Bible, God calls himself Almighty – "God Almighty" or El-Shaddai in Hebrew. What does it mean that God is almighty? God is saying to Abram, "I am able to handle any situation that confronts you no matter how difficult. I am God Almighty. I'm able to fulfill any promise I've made to you, no matter how outrageous the promise appears to be. I am God Almighty. I am able to heal any person or relationship no matter how hopeless the diagnosis is or how estranged the relationship. I am God Almighty. I am able to overcome any obstacles that are in the way of my people, no matter how daunting. I am God Almighty." I can do anything as easily as I can do anything else.

If God really is almighty, why don't we see more of his almightiness at work in our lives and in the world?

I read a story by an old preacher that went this way: A tourist was visiting a fishing village and walked out on a pier. There he saw a man fishing who was doing something really strange – at least to the tourist. The fisherman would catch a big fish, measure it and throw the big fish back in the water. Every so often, he caught a small fish, measured it and threw the small fish in a bucket. The tourist watched as this fisherman kept repeating the same behavior. Big fish got thrown back into the water. Small fish were put in the bucket. The tourist finally asked the fisherman, "Why are you throwing all the big fish back, but keeping the small fish?" The fisherman replied, "Well, you see, I only have a 10-inch frying pan at home and the big fish won't fit."

He limited the size of the fish that he was willing to keep by the size of his frying pan. I would suggest to you at the outset of this message that because of the limits of our faith, we throw back the big promises that God wants to fulfill in our lives and keep only the small promises. We throw back the big miracles that God may want to work through us, and believe only for small miracles. We throw back the awesome possibilities of what might occur in our families or what might occur in our marriages or what might occur in our workplace or in our relationships, and keep only what our

limited imaginations allow us to believe for. We regularly stop short of the incredible things that God might want to give us, because the scope of God's promises are simply too big for the little frying pan of our faith.

I've been doing a series here at Vineyard Columbus this autumn titled "The Journey of Faith". We've been looking at the meaning of faith as it played out in the life of one person, a man named Abram. What we are discovering as we look at faith as it plays out in the life of Abram is that a person who aspires to have a relationship with God needs to have faith, not only at the beginning of their relationship with God, but every step along the way.

Faith is required for every stage of life, every season of life and every part of life. Today as we continue this series, I'd like to consider with you how you and I might acquire a "Faith that doesn't limit Almighty God". That's the title of today's talk.

Let's pray.

Genesis 17:1-2

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. <sup>2</sup>Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

Thirteen years have passed between Genesis 16 and chapter 17. There's no fresh appearance of God for 13 years. No new announcement that Abram and his wife, Sarai, are going to have a child. Imagine waiting 13 years for God to answer a prayer. It's hard to wait through long silences by God. The silence of God has always been a challenge to God's people. The Bible doesn't cover up the stress that people feel in the face of God's long silences.

Here's what we read in Psalm 28:

Psalm 28:

<sup>1</sup>To you, LORD, I call;  
you are my Rock,  
do not turn a deaf ear to me.  
For if you remain silent,  
I will be like those who go down to the pit.

Here's what read in Psalm 83:

Psalm 83:1

<sup>1</sup> O God, do not remain silent;  
do not turn a deaf ear,  
do not stand aloof, O God.

It's difficult to keep waiting for God when God doesn't seem to be doing anything. What was the challenge of faith throughout Abram's life? How did Abram limit God? What is the faith lesson? Let me repeat a lesson we learned last week from Genesis 16:

Don't limit Almighty God by your impatience

We live in a society and at a time in history where we don't want to wait for anything. I've read that it's a little known secret that many "close door" elevator buttons are just mechanical placebos. They aren't hooked to anything. They are put there to pacify impatient people making them think that they can speed up the elevator's programmed functions.

We don't want to wait for anything. You need some nutrition, but you only have half a minute? No worries. Here's a 30-second meal.

They must think that everyone in America is always participating in a Triathlon – no one has the time to sit down and eat. Half a minute – that's all the time I allocate for eating!

Do you need to break a bad habit that you've pounded into your life for decades? A habit that is hard-wired into your brain? You need to break a bad habit, but you've only got a minute to do so, no problem.

Here's a 60-second fix, subtitled "The Brain Changing Toolkit that stops unwanted habits and starts Surprising Joy". One minute and your life is changed.

Of course, Christians have gotten in on the act. Do you want to grow spiritually, do you want to be close to God. If you are working on a really tight schedule – no worries. Here's the 30-second Bible.

Subtitled: "30 Seconds a Day can change your life".

All of the saints in the history of the church are rolling over in their graves. Americans are saying, "You know, I think I can give God 30 seconds a day. I'd like to find inner peace and become a deep person. A person with a beautiful soul. I'll give that quest half a minute. I believe I can have spiritual depth and gain that in 30 seconds a day."

We limit God by our impatience. God works by a different measure of time than we do. We measure things with a stopwatch. God measures with a calendar. We measure things by seconds. God measures them by seasons and by centuries. We count the

minutes. God looks at the millennia. God generally doesn't work with the speed of a bullet, but the speed of a glacier.

Why does God make Abram and Sarai wait until they are in their 90's to have children? What's the faith lesson there? Why does God make us wait... and wait... and wait? And continue to pray? Because God wants to reveal himself to us as El-Shaddai, God Almighty, who is able to do what we think is impossible to do. God shows his power most when we are at our weakest.

Brothers and sisters, virtually every change in this world that is really significant requires patience. So many do-gooders have plans for turning around urban schools in the next week, in the next month, this year. We want the school board to set a two year goal of increasing graduation rates by 25% and announce these grand goals with lots of fanfare. Only those who don't limit God by their impatience understand that something as complicated as a child's success doesn't come about in a single meeting or at a rally. If we're going to see success in an urban school district like Columbus, it's going to be the result of engagements by thousands of people including some of us here at Vineyard Columbus. Thousands of mentors in our schools focusing on one child at a time. Slowly, slowly, slowly – tutoring, assisting, talking, creating vision for a different future. Helping with college applications, advising through family, academic and peer issues.

Almost every major change that's really matters is not happening on the first day of the presidency or the first week or the first 90 days – despite the presidential candidates promises. Anyone who has ever worked in tough places understands that real progress requires patience. If you work with addicts, you know breaking addiction is slow, hard work. If you're a follower of Jesus and you want to see Muslims or Hindus or Jews or atheists embrace Christ, you better not limit El-Shaddai by your view of time. The frying pan of faith, regarding what God may want to do in your family, in your children's lives, in a relationship, in a ministry, needs to be stretched from moments to months and from days to decades.

We limit Almighty God by our impatience. How else do we limit what Almighty God will do by the little frying pan of our faith? What do we learn from the life of Abram?

Don't limit Almighty God by your age

Genesis 18:1

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.

In the scriptures, people regularly complained that they were the wrong age to be used by God. When God called Jeremiah to prophesy, Jeremiah complained he was too young.

Jeremiah 1:6-7

6 “Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

7 But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.

Others believe God Almighty can’t use them because of their season of life – we’re raising three children. They all play sports. We’re caring for a sick parent.

Abram clearly believes that God Almighty could never produce a child through him and his wife because they are too old.

Here’s what we read:

Genesis 17:17

<sup>17</sup> 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?”

I want to speak to those of you who are Baby Boomers like me. Why can’t the next 10 or 20 or 30 years be the most impactful years of our lives? Is El-Shaddai God Almighty really limited by our age – young or old? By our stage of life? Why can’t we Baby Boomers go out with a bang for the Lord instead of a whimper? Why can’t we leave it all on the field and ask God to do something really great through us to make a difference in this world, in our families, among our friends in the church even as we age?

You know, we are all put in a box, the size of which we don’t get to determine. A box measured by our gifts, our talents, our opportunities, our circumstances. We’re all put in a certain sized box. The goal of life is to fill as much of the box that God has put you in as you can. Most of us, because of weakness, because of our frying pan-sized faith, live in a corner of the box. We never achieve all that God would have us achieve. Baby Boomers, don’t spend the next decade or 20 or 30 years figuring out different ways to to indulge yourself in retirement. Let Almighty God fill you with fresh vision for this next season of life. Let’s go out strong.

Let’s continue with this story. We read:

Genesis 17:1-2, 9-10

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. <sup>2</sup> Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

<sup>9</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant with you and

your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

What are the faith lessons that we're learning? Don't limit Almighty God by your impatience. Don't limit Almighty God by your age. And...

Don't limit Almighty God by your passivity

We read this in verse 1:

Genesis 17:1

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.

Those of you who have listened to me for any period of time know how much I love this metaphor of walking as a description of the Christian life. The Lord could have chosen any number of verbs to describe what he was asking Abram to do. He could have told Abram to run before him. He could have told Abram to pole vault. He could have told Abram to long jump into victory. He could have said, "Hurry along. There's no time to waste." Instead, God chose the image of walking. One foot in front of the other, left foot, right foot, left foot in describing what life with God looks like.

Why do I stress walking so often? Why do you hear me say over and over again that the Christian life is left foot, right foot, left foot? Because we live in a society that engages in magical thinking – "I don't need to do anything". God will do everything, I can just sit back and watch God change my life. And we live in an instant society.

Proverbs 13:11 says this:

Proverbs 13:11

Dishonest money dwindles away,  
but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow.

But no one in America wants to gain wealth little by little. You don't want to gain it a handful at a time. We want a bucket at a time, a bathtub full at a time. I'll start a software company and sell it to Google for a billion dollars when I'm 26. Wealth accumulated not a handful at a time – a dump truck at a time. The Ohio Lottery and all the gambling casinos tell us to scratch off this little card at the gas station and you'll be wealthy. God says, "Walk before me. One foot in front of the other. Slow, steady progress." Success in life is not instant.

You've got to be a wise investor – invest in your children's lives little by little and most of the time it will pay off when your children are older. Not always in this fallen world,

but mostly. Invest in your marriage little by little and most of the time it will pay off when you are older. Not always in this fallen world, but mostly. Invest in your friendships. Little acts of kindness over many years and most of the time it will pay off for you. Invest in your relationship with God. Walk before God. If you sow, you will reap. And if you don't, you won't.

Genesis 17 eliminates all the magical thinking and all the instant thinking of our society. There are some things we need to do if we are going to have a life-giving relationship with God. We must learn to walk with God.

Don't limit Almighty God by your passivity.

Don't limit Almighty God by your past experience of God

Here's what we read:

Genesis 17:3-8

<sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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."

Names were really significant in the Bible. They weren't just labels picked out of a baby book because parents liked the sound of the name. Names spoke about the anticipated character and the anticipated destiny for a person.

When Marlene and I chose our son's name, Daniel, it was because I heard a Sunday School song when I was 18 that had the refrain,

Dare to be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone!  
Dare to have a purpose firm!  
Dare to make it known.

I thought, if I ever have a son I want to name him Daniel. I prayed that he would grow up to be a man of conviction, a man who could stand alone against the crowd and against the culture.

We had a daughter. We named her Sharon because I loved the prophecy concerning Jesus, that he would be the Rose of Sharon, we prayed that our daughter, Sharon, would have a beautiful soul and resemble Jesus.

Before we had our granddaughter, Naomi, I was praying for her while she still in the womb. I felt like the Lord said, "Name her Naomi because she's going to be resilient. She's going to be able to overcome obstacles in her life and succeed like Naomi in the scriptures."

Names are really important in the Bible. They speak about a person's character. They speak about a person's destiny. When God gives somebody a new name, it means that God is giving them a new destiny. A new future. An expanded horizon. God says in Genesis 12, your name was Abram, which means exalted father, but I'm going to change your name to Abraham, which means the father of many nations. You're not just going to be the father of the Jews, you're going to be the father of all who have faith in me. God gives Abraham a new name. He gives him a new destiny. He gives him new promises.

How do we limit God by our little frying pans of faith? Because we say that the only way Almighty God will work in my future is the exact same way he's worked in my past. Because we say to Almighty God the only way God will speak to me in the future is the same way he's spoken to me in the past. The only spheres I'll get to work in are the spheres I've worked in in the past. God is regularly in scripture saying, "I want to do a new thing in your life." Do you believe that God could do something radically new?

Consider how often the Bible speaks of God Almighty bringing about a new thing in his people's lives.

2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

In Isaiah we read:

Isaiah 65:17

"See, I will create  
new heavens and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.

In Revelation we read:

Revelation 21:5

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Don’t limit God to what you’ve experienced in the past. Ask the Lord to do a new thing in your life. To give you a new vision for your future. El-Shaddai, Almighty God, is a God of surprises! He doesn’t just do the old expected things. Expand your faith and believe him for something new – in your life, in your relationships, in your ministry.

Don’t limit Almighty God by your impatience. Don’t limit Almighty God by your age. Don’t limit Almighty God by your passivity. Don’t limit Almighty God by your past experience of God. And, finally:

Don’t limit Almighty God by your past failures

In Genesis 16, we read that Abram and Sarai were impatient. They limited how God would work in bringing them a son because of their advanced age. So, Sarai, in accordance with ancient Near Eastern custom, tells her husband, Abram, to sleep with her servant, Hagar, and to bring forth a son through the servant girl. Abram does sleep with Hagar and she has a baby named Ishmael.

Abraham and Sarah’s lack of faith brings problems into the family. Ishmael becomes a symbol of not waiting on God, of doing things our own way, of the mess we make when we rely on ourselves and run ahead outside the will of God. Ishmael is a symbol of what the Bible calls the “arm of the flesh” – self-reliance that doesn’t take account of God. Despite the mess Abraham and Sarah have made, we read these incredible words in verses 18-20:

Genesis 17:18-20

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. 20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation

What do these words say about faith? Abraham showed his faith by asking the Lord, “Would you bless Ishmael? I know I messed up. I know I got myself into this situation because I was impatient. My wife was impatient.” I know I screwed up. But Abraham believed that God is so gracious that if we come to him sincerely, acknowledging our failure and our sin, we can even ask God to bless the mess we made. Friend, have you ever humbly asked God to bless the mess you’ve made or do you limit God to blessing only your successes and when you’ve been 100% obedient? Listen, most of us believe

that God will forgive us for our sins. But we stop there. We struggle to believe that God will bless our Ishmaels.

Have you ever said anything like this to the Lord: “Lord, I know I could have invested better with my child than I did. I foolishly spent too much time chasing my career or pursuing my hobbies or indulging my appetites. But, Lord, even now, would you heal my relationship with my child? I know I messed up by getting into this relationship, I know I disobeyed you by dating or marrying or divorcing this person. I know I’ve made a mess of things, Lord. But would you mercifully bless this relationship now? I know that if I had done things your way, I would not have hurt the people that I did. I know that if I had done things your way, Lord, I would have even more. But, Almighty God, I ask you to not be limited by my past failure. Bless me even now.”

Friend, everyone in the world says, “You made your bed, now lie in it. You fooled around, now it’s time to pay the piper.” But Abraham, because he knows Almighty God, asks, “Lord, will you bless even my Ishmael?”

Friend, is there any mess that you just decided to live with because you said, “Here’s the size of the frying pan that I got. I made it so I’ve got to throw back a blessing that God may still want to give me”? Have you limited Almighty God’s infinite grace towards you? I love watching God bless Ishmaels. So many extraordinary things have been done in this world because people said, “God bless my Ishmael.”

AA was started by a Christian. He’d been an alcoholic for years and realized there was no healing from alcoholism by just beating ourselves up or by magical thinking. There was a way forward. There was a way to heal. God used the Ishmael of this man’s former alcoholism to bring blessing to millions of people over the last 75 years.

Our Value Life ministry was started by a woman who herself had an abortion as a teenager. God blessed her Ishmael, the mess she made, by allowing our Value Life ministry to come alongside of more than 2,000 women in the last 5 years. 2,000 babies were born because God blessed Diane’s Ishmael.

Don’t limit God by anything. Not your stage of life. Not your past experiences. Not the stupid things that we have done. Allow God to be El-Shaddai God Almighty in your life.

Let’s pray.

## Faith that Doesn't Limit Almighty God

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- I. Don't limit Almighty God by your impatience
  
- II. Don't limit Almighty God by your age
  
- III. Don't limit Almighty God by your passivity
  
- IV. Don't limit Almighty God by your past experience of God
  
- V. Don't limit Almighty God by your past failures