



STEP 7: GRASP WHAT YOU SIGNED UP FOR

Most people have to undergo surgery at some point – even if it’s just a tooth extraction! However, very few will ever get to perform it (the closest most of us will get is playing that classic board game *Operation*, with its advertising strapline, “You’ll need a very steady hand!”). In fact, should western civilisation fall, there would be three people who will never be out of a job: farmers, engineers, surgeons.

Surgery is an essential part of a journey of faith, too. And today we’re going to look at an example which is a marker for a couple of faith-groups at least, and applies to Christians too, albeit in a symbolic sense (thankfully!).

Genesis 17

God, or *El Shaddai* (‘God the Life-Giving One’), appears to Abram, and says, “OK, Abram: time to grasp what you signed up for.” Now Abram, like so many of us, had probably assumed he knew what that was. For Abram, it would have been descendants, and a land to live in. For Christians, it might be going to heaven, and being blessed in the meantime. And don’t get me wrong, that is a part of the deal – but I’m not sure it’s the main part. The main part is you becoming the person God has called you to be. And for Abram, that was going to involve a little something called *b’rit-milah* – the covenant of cutting, or circumcision.

We’ll get to that. But there’s one thing I want to make clear, from the outset: none of this affects where Abram stands with God. God has already declared

Abram righteous (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:9-12), because that is down to God, not Abram. But becoming all that he's supposed to be?

That's going to require involvement, on both their parts.

So, what has God called Abram to? And us?

4 things:

1) He Calls Us To A Treaty. What God is commanding Abram to do here is part of a covenant, a contract, a treaty, or *b'rit* in Hebrew. It's used 14 times in this chapter alone, beginning in vs2 – so you get the impression this thing matters! And what few Christians realise is that, when you become a Christian, the same thing is happening: you are entering into a covenant-relationship with Jesus. It's a bit like a marriage (which, by the way, is also referred to as a covenant). A couple getting married are declaring certain, pretty important, things to each other, and to the world around them: no other lovers; lifelong commitment; that this person and this relationship are going to be the biggest passions in their lives. And when you became a Christian, you were saying the exact same things.

2) He Calls Us To A Surgery – to remove what is bad for our spiritual health. Now the Bible is not some kind of medical textbook, but even so, it has some sensible things to say, on a medical level. E.g. in a desert culture, the foreskin can cause some serious problems. You get a grain of sand in there, and boy, are you in trouble (hence why other Middle Eastern peoples practiced circumcision, too). Now as I've already said, for Christian men, barring medical issues, the physical act of circumcision is no longer required (I can almost hear the sighs of relief). But even so, God needs to cut away the things in our lives that are of no benefit to us, things that can cause infection and illness and even death (Matthew 5:29-30). And just like circumcision, that can be a painful experience.

3) He Calls Us To A Sanctity. Circumcision historically has made Jewish men ... somewhat identifiable. Which is why God refers to it as a 'sign' (vs11). Of what? Of the fact that they are God's people. And what is true in the physical is also true in the spiritual. God performs surgery in all of us to make us less like the world and more like Him. To set us apart or 'sanctify' us – to make us stand out. And by the way, if your faith doesn't make you stand out, you need to ask yourself why. I'm not questioning whether you're a Christian, but I would question how closely you're following the One you claim to believe in. It's like the Apostles in the Book of Acts: the Sanhedrin could tell from their words and their actions that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). If you're really following Jesus, it'll show.

4) He Calls Us To A Destiny. Obedience releases the promises of God. How many does Abram get? Count them. "You will be the father of many nations." "I will make you very fruitful." "Kings will come from you." "I will establish my covenant with you." "I will be your God." "And the God of your descendants." "I will give the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, to you." "And to your descendants after you." "I will bless Sarai." "I will give you a son – by her." "She will be the mother of nations."

"Kings will come from her." How many is that? I count 12! And to signify it all, God changes their names – from *Avram* or 'exalted father' to *Avraham* or 'father of many'; from *Sarai* or 'My Princess' to *Sarah* or 'Princess of all'. Because God doesn't just take away – He wants to add!

But for that to happen, we have to walk with Him (vs1).

We have to hand it all over.

Leave It Behind

What does Abraham do with all this? First of all, he assumes that this is a joke and falls on his face laughing (which is why Sarah's son ends up being called *Yitzhak* – or 'he laughs'); then he tries to convince God to make Ishmael the child of promise instead – i.e. "If only this could be easier to believe!" But eventually, when God makes it clear He's being deadly serious, Abraham does what God has commanded – that very day! To himself (at 99 years of age!), to Ishmael (at 13. Can you imagine that little father-son conversation?), and to all the male members of his house (no pun intended).

In the words of the *Operation* board game, he would have needed a *very* steady hand.

But what are *we* supposed to do with all this? For some of us, it might mean certain words have to go. Certain pastimes have to go. Certain traditions. Certain 'family traits.' Certain viewing habits. Certain websites. Certain online games. Certain kinds of reading material. Certain friends (sometimes). Certain lifestyle choices.

Any of the above.

But -

That's not where it begins. It begins where it always does - with the heart; and it's something that *Jesus* is doing, in us. Hence another promise, in Deuteronomy 30:6; and Paul's words in Colossians 2:9-12. It begins with us saying, "Lord, I'm not in charge here – You are. What are You happy with? What's beneficial? And what isn't?"

And understand: whenever God says, "This needs to go," be certain He is replacing it – with something better.

With a whole new status.

And a far better future.

Let's pray.