

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

A Sign of the Covenant (Genesis 17:1-27)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 4, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ Lately, we've been going through the middle chapters of Genesis, covering the life and story of Abraham. **And one of the major themes we've encountered so far is the theme of waiting on God.** Abraham was blessed to be the recipient of such great promises from God. But he was also expected to patiently wait on God to fulfill those promises. To not take matters into his own hands. But instead to exercise faith and wait.
 - ▶ Think about how difficult it was. We learned in Genesis 12 that he's **seventy-five** when God promises to bless him and to make out of him a great nation (12:4). Then, Abram waits for **eleven years** for his first child. And that only happens because he grew impatient and took matters into his own hands. Genesis 16 ends by telling us that he was **eighty-six years old** when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram (16:16).
 - And then we're told at the start of chapter 17, that Abram was **ninety-nine years old** – so **thirteen years** later – when the LORD appeared to him again (17:1). To tell him that he and his wife Sarai would have a son this time next year (17:21). This is the promised child they were supposed to be waiting for.

- ❖ **Did you notice how the author made a point of identifying Abram's age at each key moment in his story?** We're given this information because we're expected to calculate how long it's been. How long did God expect Abram to wait? **When you add it up, we learn that between Genesis 15 (and the promise of a chosen offspring) and the provision of that offspring in Genesis 21 (with the birth of Isaac) – Abram was expected to wait on God for a quarter of a century.** For twenty-five years.
 - ▶ How many of us are prepared to wait on God for that long? Some of you have yet to even live that long. Imagine going your entire life waiting on God to fulfill a promise. **Or for the rest of you, think back to where you were and what you were doing twenty-five years ago.** I was halfway through college. Just getting back on track with my faith – walking with God again. I'm trying to imagine, in those days, embracing a promise of God, and then having to wait a quarter of a century. That's hard. Or what about looking forward twenty-five years from now for God to fulfill a promise today? I'll be almost seventy. Can I handle the wait?

- ❖ And, of course, that question is for all of us to answer. **Can you handle waiting on God?** And not just for a few weeks; not just a couple months or a year or two – but for decades? For a quarter century? For half a century? For your entire lifetime?
 - ▶ **My wife and I know how hard it is to wait on God to provide a child.** We waited over three years for our first to arrive. And then over ten years for our second. And we weren't even promised children! We couldn't bank on that. **So I can't imagine how much harder it was for Abram to wait on a *promised* child for twenty-five years.**

- ❖ By Genesis 17, it's been almost that long. **So we can understand if Abram's faith is wavering.** His wife's womb is still empty. And yet his home is filled with strife – all because of his impatience and foolishness in how he dealt with Hagar and the son they bore.

- ❖ **So I'm not surprised if Abram is wondering if the covenant is still in tact.** Perhaps God has amended it some? Maybe he's abandoned it altogether? I'm sure there was some fear and anxiety building up in his heart.
- ❖ **But God shows up in chapter 17 with blessed assurance.** He reaffirms his commitment to his covenant and all of the covenant promises regarding land and offspring. **And he seals the covenant by giving Abram a covenant sign.** We know it as the sign of circumcision.
 - ▶ Now this can be an awkward topic because, in our day, circumcision is a private medical matter between parents of a newborn son. But in the OT, and in the NT, circumcision was a heavily discussed matter with social and religious ramifications. So it's important for us to understand the significance of this covenant sign.
- ❖ So, as we study Genesis 17, I want to make three observations that I hope will bring blessed assurance to all who are in a covenant relationship with God – or who desire to be in one through faith in the gospel. (1) God's covenant is meant to bless the nations through a blessed people. (2) God's covenant is sealed for Israel by the sign of circumcision. (3) God's covenant is secured for the nations by the circumcision of Christ.

Blessing the Nations Through a Blessed People

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the purpose behind God making a covenant with Abram. **It was to bless the nations through a blessed people.** God entered into a covenant relationship with Abram and was committed to blessing the man that he might be a blessing to others.
 - ▶ That intent was already laid out in **Genesis 12:2-3**. Those two verses are foundational to the Abrahamic covenant. They contain six promises from God. **The first three are directed towards Abram:** (1) *I will make of you a great nation.* (2) *I will bless you.* (3) *I will make your name great.*
 - **And then the last three promises are directed towards the world (the nations):** (4) *I will bless those who bless you.* (5) *I will curse those who dishonor you.* (6) *I will bless all the families of the earth through you.*
- ❖ **But ever since chapter 12, we've seen Abram primarily concerned with the fulfillment of those first three promises.** The ones that relate to blessing *him*; giving *him* a great name; making *him* into a great nation. So far, he has shown little interest in the last three promises that are more concerned with blessing all nations through him.
 - ▶ Which is severely shortsighted according to God's purposes. Those first three promises are foundational. You could argue they're the priority. But the reason you're seeking the first three is because you ultimately want to see the last three fulfilled. **Abram should be seeking to be blessed so that he might be a blessing to others.**
- ❖ Think about it this way. **I recently watched these documentaries on big cats like lions.** The plot line was the same in all of them. The momma lion goes out hunting, and she has all these near misses and faces all these new hardships due to climate change. The herds of natural prey have dwindled. She hasn't eaten for days. But she doesn't give up. She keeps hunting.

- ❖ Until finally she snags a prey, and now she's gorging herself on her kill. Warding off scavengers until she's had her fill. **But then, what do you see in the final scene? It's the momma in her den nursing her newborn cubs.**
 - ▶ Yes, she was seeking to satisfy her hunger. She was seeking the blessing of a satisfying meal. Why? **Because only until she was nourished could she produce the nourishing milk that her babies needed to survive.** She sought blessing to be a blessing to others.

- ❖ **Friends, it is good and right for you to seek God's blessing in your life.** You should pray for good health. You can pray for prosperity. You can ask God to get you into that school or to get you hired at that company. You can ask him for a spouse or for a child. **You don't have to feel bad asking him to bless you.**
 - ▶ But what do you plan to do with that blessing? Are you going to keep it for yourself or are you going to share it? What is the final objective of that blessing you seek – your good or the good of others? **You are authorized by Scripture to seek out God's blessings for yourself so that you might be a blessing to others.**

- ❖ That's a message many of us need to hear. It's what Abram needed to hear in Genesis 17. Notice the emphasis here on the fulfillment of those last three promises to bless the nations through Abram. Look at v4. He's reminded that "*you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.*" Or v6, "*I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you.*"
 - ▶ **And, of course, he's given a new name to underline the ultimate objective to bless the nations.** Listen to v5, "*No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.*" That's what Abraham means – father of a multitude.
 - **This change of names is meant to change Abraham's outlook – expanding the range of his concerns to go beyond himself – beyond his own family – to reach all the nations of the earth.** Ultimately, he should seek blessing in order to be a blessing – not just to Israel; to one particular people group – but to be a blessing to all the people groups of the world. All nations.

- ❖ Now God could foresee Abraham's doubts that he would ever live up to his new name. So the LORD began this encounter in chapter 17 by revealing a new name of his own. In v1, he says, "*I am God Almighty.*" **I am *El Shaddai*.** **That name is meant to signify God's power and sovereignty over all things.** And when a name like that is revealed in conjunction with covenant promises – the point is that these promises are guaranteed by none other than God Almighty. *El Shaddai*.
 - ▶ Abraham needed to hear that. Look at v17. He was definitely skeptical. "*Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*

- ❖ **It's ironic that in the very first instance in Scripture where Abraham's new name is used, it's in the context of him laughing at the very idea that his new name is meant to convey.** He can't see how this is going to work. He has a basic understanding of biology and knows that he and his wife are past their childbearing years. So he urges the Lord to consider fulfilling these promises through the son he already has – through Ishmael. Look at v18, *“And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”*
- ❖ He thought it was more feasible to go through Ishmael. **It's easier to work with the child you have than to wait on a child of promise.** The first only requires sight. The other requires faith. Which is why God reveals himself to Abraham as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty.
 - ▶ It's like the LORD is saying to him, “Don't give up on your hope of numerous offspring. There's no need to resort to human solutions or shortcuts. Everything I promised you will come to pass. Don't forget, I am *El Shaddai*. I am God Almighty. Nothing is too difficult for me.”
- ❖ **And now we have a better understanding as to why God had Abraham wait a quarter century before giving him that promised child.** Because, early on, he was too self-reliant. He thought he was mighty enough and clever enough to make things happen. Chapter 16 was the perfect example of that.
 - ▶ **But now, after all these years, exhausting all human options, Abraham has been brought to a point of utter dependency.** Now his only option is to trust that God Almighty will pull through. And that's what happened to him as he laid there on his face. Abraham believed in spite of what seemed impossible. **Romans 4:18** tells us that, *“In hope [Abraham] believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations.”* **In hope he believed against hope.**
- ❖ In other words, there was no human reason to have any hope of this promise being fulfilled – and yet he still hoped. Because he hoped in *El Shaddai*. Nothing is too difficult for God Almighty. **No addiction is too great for God to break. No sin is too evil for God to forgive. No heart is too hard for God to melt.** You have good reason to believe against hope – if your hope is ultimately in God Almighty to pull through.

Sealed for Israel by the Sign of Circumcision

- ❖ Now if we go back to our text, starting in v9, we see the LORD graciously grant greater assurance by giving Abraham a covenant sign. This is our second observation – **God's covenant is sealed for Israel by the sign of circumcision.** As we mentioned earlier, God has a tendency of sealing his covenant promises by granting a covenant sign.
 - ▶ We've already seen him do this before in our earlier study of Genesis. We saw back in Genesis 9, God giving Noah **the rainbow** as a sign of his covenant promise to never again destroy the earth by flood (9:13). So you would look to the rainbow as a sign and reminder of that particular promise.

- ❖ Or later on in Exodus 31, we're told that **the Sabbath** was a sign of the covenant between God and the people of Israel (Ex 31:13, 16-17). The Israelites were to observe the Sabbath, and that entire day of resting from labor served as a reminder that they ultimately trust in the Creator God for their daily provision – and not their own hands. **And so now, in similar fashion, he gives Abram the sign of circumcision as a reminder of his covenant promise to bless him and the nations through him.**

- ❖ Now think about this – just as the rainbow and the Sabbath day already existed long before their respective covenants were established – **in the same way, circumcision already existed as a cultural practice long before Genesis 17.** But now being associated with a covenant of God, the practice carries new significance.
 - ▶ **But to appreciate this new meaning, we need to understand how circumcision was practiced in Ancient Near Eastern cultures.** Now that might surprise you. Many of us were led to believe that circumcision was unique to the Jewish people. But it was already part of ancient Egyptian culture. And that's important because Egyptian culture was the primary backdrop, as Israel was forming its identity as a nation with its own cultural practices.

- ❖ **So how did the ancient Egyptians practice circumcision? They treated it as an initiation rite for priests.** It wasn't for all male Egyptians. Only those of the priestly class were circumcised and either in adulthood or at puberty. It was how a priest would demonstrate his total devotion to the gods.
 - ▶ But in contrast, in Israel, every male was obligated to be circumcised, and it occurred right after birth. Eight days later to be exact (v12). **And that's because – unlike Egypt – Israel was meant to be a “kingdom of priests”** (Ex 19:6). So every male is circumcised as a means of consecrating himself to the LORD to serve as his priest.
 - So while the tribe of Levi eventually goes on to play a unique priestly role in Israel, there is a sense in which all Israelites males functioned as priests. **It makes sense considering how Abraham and his offspring are uniquely responsible – as covenantal partners – to mediate God's blessings to the nations.** And mediating on behalf of God is the role of a priest.

- ❖ So as a sign, that was circumcision's primary message. **But it also served as a warning sign.** You see, the ancient Egyptian practice of circumcision didn't involve the complete removal of the foreskin. You would merely make an incision.
 - ▶ This is where Israel's practice of circumcision was unique. In Israel, the foreskin was completely cut off. **And the primary reason is to graphically convey the covenant curse of being cut off from God's people.** You see this warning issued in v14, “*Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*” **In other words, be cut or be cut off from God's covenant community.**

- ❖ So what does the sign of circumcision signify? **It signifies that you are set apart as a member of the covenant people of God and that you're uniquely called to mediate his blessings to the nations.** So if you refuse the sign, you are rejecting the role of priest and cutting yourself off from God's kingdom of priests.
 - ▶ **Now granted, there was no female equivalent.** The daughters of Israel obviously could not receive the sign, but they were still recognized as members of the covenant community. Most commentators say that they lack of a female equivalent is best explained by the fact that it was a heavily patriarchal culture and that daughters were expected to eventually be in a one-flesh union with their husbands. And so only one sign of the covenant was needed for a pair that enjoy a one-flesh union.

- ❖ Now all of this raises an important – but sort of awkward – question. **If circumcision is a sign, then who is this sign intended for? In other words, who's supposed to see this sign?** Israel's observance of the Sabbath was a sign that the watching world could actually see. It set them apart from the surrounding nations.
 - ▶ But circumcision, as we already mentioned, was not a practice unique to Israel. And, besides, how is the watching world going to know that you're set apart by circumcision when the sign itself is concealed by your clothing?
 - **And that's why it's argued that circumcision is a sign primarily for the one who is circumcised.** Every time you look at your body, you are reminded that you have been set apart as a member of the covenant people of God.

- ❖ Think about it this way. **Why do I wear a wedding ring?** Does it carry any inherent powers in itself? Does it make me married the moment I slip it on? No, when I first bought this ring during our engagement, I obviously tried it on. But in that moment, I wasn't suddenly married. **This ring is only significant because it serves as a sign of my marital covenant.** Every morning when I put on my ring or when I look at it throughout the day – my wedding ring serves as a reminder that I'm in a covenant relationship with my wife.
 - ▶ So in the same way, circumcision, in and of itself, means nothing. It has no inherent power to save. But when associated with a covenant – as a covenant sign – circumcision serves as a powerful reminder. **Every day, the men of Israel would have a clear reminder that they are in a covenant relationship with God and are set apart to serve as his priests, mediating his blessings to the world.**

- ❖ And think about how circumcision was a blessing to Abraham. After receiving the sign, he still had to wait on God. All those promises were still a future possibility and not a present reality. **But at least now he has a sign that he can carry with him wherever he goes.** He has a constant reminder of God's promise to bless him. A reminder that he's in a covenant relationship with God Almighty. **That's what the sign of circumcision was intended for – to assure you of God's covenantal love and commitment.**

Secured for the Nations by the Circumcision of Christ

- ❖ But if you trace out the story of Israel, **we see the covenant people of God take a sign designed to offer assurance and turn it into a rule designed to exclude the nations.** Circumcision was supposed to serve as a reminder of a covenant meant to bless the nations through a blessed people. But instead it became a tool of exclusion and a means of othering people. The term “*uncircumcised*” quickly became a pejorative, an insult.
 - ▶ But that’s why another covenant had to be established and another sign had to be given. So the nations won’t be neglected. Which leads to our third observation – **God’s covenant is secured for the nations by the circumcision of Christ.**

- ❖ But before we consider how the practice of circumcision developed as Scripture was progressively revealed – **there’s evidence in today’s text alone that would push back against this tendency to turn circumcision into a tool for exclusion.**
 - ▶ Look at vv12-13. The LORD says that every male in your house – both your sons and your household slaves who are foreigners – all shall surely be circumcised. **That accommodation to welcome foreign slaves into the covenant community (by giving them the sign of circumcision) – that should signal an open stance towards the nations.** Again, God’s people are to be a kingdom of priests mediating blessings to the nations. Here it starts in the home by blessing the foreigner under your roof.

- ❖ **And then, if you keep reading in places like Deuteronomy 10, you come across more signals telling us that – even though circumcision of the flesh is important for God’s covenant people – what’s more important is the circumcision of the heart.** Listen to Deuteronomy 10:16, “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*” Or Deuteronomy 30:6, “*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*”
 - ▶ **So what’s more important than the outward sign of circumcision is the inward reality it’s meant to signify.** Setting apart your heart for God is far more important than marking your flesh as different than others.

- ❖ But unfortunately the people of God didn’t pick up on these signals. **So by NT times, the early church had to contend with Jewish Christians who treated circumcision of the flesh as the defining mark of who is in the covenant community.** They insisted that Gentile converts to Christianity had to receive the sign of circumcision.
 - ▶ That false gospel became a stumbling block to faith for the nations. It undermined the sufficiency of Christ to save. **It was sending the message that if the nations want to join the covenant people of God, they’ll need to rely on Christ *and* circumcision.**
 - And that message stirred up no little debate. The first theological controversy the early church faced centered on circumcision and the question of whether Gentiles had to bear the mark if they wished to share in the covenant blessings given to Abraham and his offspring.

- ❖ **The biggest defender of the sufficiency of Christ and the biggest advocate for removing the stumbling block of circumcision so that God’s blessing might overflow to the nations – was the Apostle Paul.** In **Romans 4:9-12**, he reminds us that Abraham entered that covenant with God back in Genesis 15. That’s when Scripture said he believed God’s promises and his faith was counted to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). And from then on, he was in a right relationship with God – a covenant relationship.
 - ▶ And then, almost twenty-five years later, Abraham finally received the sign of circumcision. **So it should be obvious that his circumcision was merely a sign pointing to the inner reality of a heart of faith in God and his promises.** And Paul goes on to say that another purpose for why there’s a quarter century gap between Genesis 15 and 17 is – not only to teach Abraham how to wait on God – but to make Abraham “*the father of all who believe without being circumcised.*” (Rom 4:11) **In other words, those who share in the faith of Abraham are the true descendants of Abraham and recipients of all his covenant blessings** (Gal 3:7)

- ❖ And the reason why we can be saved – and can enjoy the covenant blessings of the covenant people of God – is not because the sign of circumcision suddenly lost its significance so we can just toss it aside. **No, it’s because a certain circumcision took place in the course of redemptive history that fulfilled (and superseded) the sign of circumcision.**

- ❖ In **Colossians 2:11**, Paul talks about how Christians have been “*circumcised with a circumcision made without hands . . . by the circumcision of Christ.*” (Col. 2:11) At first, you might be confused – wondering how our salvation is tied to Jesus’s circumcision.
 - ▶ But then you realize that Paul is not referring to the cutting off that happened to Jesus when he was an eight-day old baby. No, he’s referring to what happened to Jesus on the cross. **On the cross, Christ experienced a cosmic cutting off.** He was cut off (forsaken) by the Father. He bore the covenantal curse that our sins deserve.

- ❖ And just as God took a preexisting sign like circumcision and incorporated it in his covenant, transforming its meaning and significance – **Jesus took a preexisting symbol, the Roman cross; incorporated it into the New Covenant; and transformed its meaning and significance.** It no longer communicates a message of Roman power and cruelty.
 - ▶ **Now, the cross communicates the good news that we can be recipients of all the covenantal blessings found in Genesis.** We can be secure in God’s love because Christ received the ultimate circumcision for us. At the time, we can be challenged, as a kingdom of priests, to mediate this gospel and all of its blessings to the nations. That’s what the cross now signifies.

- ❖ Maybe some of you are hesitating to give your life over to Christ. **Because you’re waiting for God to show you a sign.** A sign that proves that he’s real and that he wants a real relationship with you. **Could it be that the sign has been in front of you this whole time?**
 - ▶ Look to the cross, my friends. That’s the only sign you’ll need if you want to know that a covenant-making God is real and that he really loves you.