

Genesis 17 • The Covenant of Circumcision

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We are in Genesis chapter 17 so open your Bible there please. We're continuing our study here on Wednesday evening through Genesis. I got to tell you, I don't know how far I'm going to get tonight because I've planned to get through 3 chapters, but I don't know if we're going to be able to make it. We might only make 1, we'll just see how it goes. So here we go.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for the opportunity tonight to be together with brothers and sisters in Christ. It's always such a blessing to gather with our family and Lord, what makes us a family is you, it's not Calvary Chapel. It's not that we meet in the same building or even live in the same valley, you are the connecting element of our lives.

And whether I have known someone for years or just met them this evening or have not yet met, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. And Lord, for that, we thank you that we can come together and be a family and just enjoy what it means to be a family and to dig into the word together. To scoot up to the table and open our hearts to what you have for us this evening.

And we pray, Lord, as we go through this study tonight in Genesis, that you would use this time to really speak to our hearts, to nourish our souls. To increase our understanding, to strengthen and stabilize our hearts in faith. We ask this in the powerful name of Jesus Christ, amen. Amen.

Genesis chapter 17, it begins by saying, *“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,” (ESV)* Let me pause for just a moment and clear up a common misconception, I have even heard of pastors having this misconception. The word blameless does not mean sinless, we believe that many times.

I've talked to people, in fact, people have written in and been confused, how could someone be blameless when we know that, you know, we've all, we all sin and we all continue to have a sinful nature and that sort of thing. The Hebrew word means innocent of blame, literally. And so it's you know, a parent

might say to their child, listen, if anything goes missing, make sure that you are innocent of blame, you know. When something goes down that isn't good, make sure that you're not the one people are pointing the finger at, that's what it means. Be blameless, be without blame when whatever happens.

Verse 2, He says, “...walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.” That's interesting, isn't it? You know, we think of Abraham as the father of the Jews and of course he is that. But here the Lord tells him, he will be the father of many nations, isn't that something?

“⁵ No longer (He says) shall your name be called Abram, ...” I always love it when I come to this place in this chapter because I don't have to keep remembering to call him Abram and I can just go ahead and call him Abraham after this point. He says, “⁵ ...but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” And whereas Abram means exalted father, the name Abraham means father of many or father of a multitude.

So He names him accordingly and He says, “⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.” ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

Now, if you were to stop here and not read any further in the Old Testament and really have no working knowledge of the Old Testament beyond this point, what you've just read is that God said, I'm going to make you into many nations and I'm going to make my covenant with you that your offspring, and that can mean many, will possess this land in perpetuity. And it kind of sounds like, well, you know, anybody that you know, came from Abraham would be able to lay claim to the land of Israel. And we know that includes a lot of nations.

Ishmael has already been born, his firstborn son and so does that mean that God made his covenant also with Ishmael since, you know, he is one of Abraham's offspring? We know that after Sarah passes away, Abraham is going to remarry a woman by the name of Keturah and he will have 6 children with her in his old age. Go Abe! But, you know, does this apply to all of them as well? Since God says, your offspring.

Well, that's why it's important that we continue to study through the Word, that we continue to understand what the Word says, because we're going to realize as we get further into this, that these covenant promises dwindle down to one of his sons and do not apply to all of the offspring of Abraham and we're going to see that as we go through here.

Verse 9, it says, *“And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: (are you ready?) Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.*

¹² He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, ¹³ both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh (that is an important statement right there) an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ 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.”” So there you go, the covenant sign given to Abraham.

Probably not one that I would've picked, but there you are and it is circumcision as a covenant sign. Somewhat strange covenant sign, this cutting away of the flesh. But it went on to stand in a larger sense as a picture of what the apostle Paul would later say in the New Testament when he talked about putting off the sinful nature. And it's really the same sort of a picture; cutting away of the flesh, a cutting away of the flesh.

And you know, even in Old Testament times, God would refer to this circumcision in a more spiritual sense. There's a reference in Deuteronomy 10:16, we'll put up on the screen for you so you can see it together. It says, you know, Moses is preaching, you know, to the people. He tells them,

Deuteronomy 10:16 (ESV)

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, (now, obviously that's not a literal physical sort of a circumcision he's talking about there, but he says) and be no longer stubborn.

So he's basically saying, get rid of this fleshly, stubborn will that goes along with this opposition that is inborn in all of us, it seems, to the will of God. He says, put it off, cut it off, cut it away. So we can see that this whole idea of circumcision takes a much larger place in our understanding than merely the cutting away of the physical foreskin of an 8 day old male. And by the way, that is another interesting point, you will notice that God said, do this on the eighth day when a child, a male child, is born. Not on the second day, not on the sixth day, not on the tenth day, but on the eighth day, very interesting.

Perhaps you've heard before that there is a particular clotting agent that is at its highest level in infants on the eighth day, something we would expect the creator of the physical body to know and understand. Of course, modern medicine always takes time, you know, to catch up to what God knows, but you know, in God's perfect timing these things are accomplished.

It goes on in verse 15 and following, saying, *“And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, (but now you shall call her princess, because that's what Sarah means. He says, now) but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

¹⁷Then 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?”” By the way, these are not questions of doubt, these are questions of wonder and there's a big difference. To wonder is to say, Oh God, you are too good, this is amazing, this is incredible that you're going to do this. I don't believe that Abraham doubted this for a moment. We're going to find out Sarah has a rather different sort of a response, but anyway, God sees the heart, right?

Verse 18, *“And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” ¹⁹God said, “No, (okay here's important, here is important. Verse 19 is very important. God said, no,) but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. (and by the way, Isaac means laughter. And listen to this, very important) I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for (look at this) his offspring after him.”*”

So do all of Abraham's offspring become recipients of the covenant that God made with Abraham? The answer is no, they do not. God specifies right here, it will be Isaac and his offspring. And of course you know that Isaac and his wife will give birth to twins: Esau and Jacob. And even though Jacob is going to be the second born, he is going to be the one chosen to carry the covenant, not

Esau. And then Jacob will be renamed Israel and hence the nation that comes from him.

So, this is a very, this develops and shapes our view of what's happening in the Middle East today. You know, when you have a biblical worldview, it shapes your politics. I know you guys, I think you guys are aware of that. I've had people say to me over the years, pastor Paul, why don't you talk more about politics when you're teaching? Well, number one, that's not what God called me to do but number two, what I do, do, is teach the Word of God, which should shape your politics. Your politics should be shaped by the Word of God.

Everything you believe and how you vote literally should be shaped by your worldview, a biblical worldview. So when it comes to things like Israel, and when you hear things in the news about how Israel is being pressured, you know, to give away land for peace or something like that, well, you have an understanding about that now, based on your biblical worldview. Not based on your political worldview, because you may have a different opinion based on your political worldview and I probably would too.

I would probably think, oh, you know, hey, land for peace, maybe it's worth it, maybe that's a good idea. But again, when your understanding of this whole situation is based on the Word of God and you realize God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants through Isaac as an everlasting promise, it takes on a completely different sort of an understanding in your heart and mind as it relates to all these political things that are going on. It's very important that we understand those things.

So He says, verse 20, *“As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.”*²¹ *But (but, verse 21) I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.*²² *When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.*

²³ *Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him.*²⁴ *Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.*²⁵ *And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.*²⁶ *That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised.”* Interesting how it repeats that, isn't it? The author wants you to know that he wasted no time in his obedience to the Lord.

“27 And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.” So, we have this interesting chapter here in Genesis about this interesting covenant sign, which goes on to give us great insight into how the Lord would have you and me understand this whole idea of the flesh. Understanding as we do, that the flesh, the sinful nature, is something that is in us, even after we come to Jesus Christ.

Wouldn't it be great if you come to the Lord and the sinful nature were gone? Wouldn't that be wonderful? There are some Christians who are led to believe or who come to the conclusion themselves that once they come to Christ, they really should stop sinning, that sin is really going to stop at that point in time.

And of course, they become very disappointed and even to the point of questioning their salvation. Was this really real? Did I really get saved? Because here I am doing some of the same things I did before I got saved, so am I really saved? Am I really born again? And that comes from a misunderstanding.

Because even though Jesus has delivered us from the penalty of sin, He has not delivered us from the capability to sin. Now having said that, and this is something that was actually brought out in our Q&A that came out yesterday, our relationship to sin has changed when we come to know Christ as our Savior.

The relationship with sin is different. The relationship to the sinful nature, we now have been given through the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit; the capability to resist the flesh, whereas we did not have that capability before we came to Christ, not in any sort of an enduring victorious sort of a way. We do now have a different relationship to sin, but it is not gone.

And that is why, as believers, we are exhorted in the scriptures, as believers, indwelt with the Holy Spirit, to resist sin, to resist the temptations to sin and to put off the sinful nature. Which means, essentially, to die to self and live to Christ. Now, you're not going to do that perfectly, this side of glory, I'm sorry to say.

I wish that all of the holiness doctrine that's ever been preached in the body of Christ were true, I really do. Because there have been many churches and groups over the years that have taught what we call today the holiness teaching or the holiness doctrine, that you can expunge yourself of any remnants of a sinful nature and you can live an absolutely sinless life and it's just not true.

I wish it were true, but it is not. And that is why the apostle John said that he who claims to be without sin is a liar and the truth is not in him. (1 John 1:10)

And we understand that sin is a reality, failure at times is a reality, which of course is why John went on to say, I write this to you so that you will not sin but if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous, who is the propitiation for our sins. The word propitiation means to take away wrath. (1 John 2:1)

So, we still mess up. But the wrath of God is what's been expunged for you and me. The wrath of God has been expunged, it's been taken care of because Jesus bore it for us. And so that is not in any way to give anyone a license to sin. Sin is still very destructive and it still can cause separation between us and the Lord, but it can no longer separate you eternally because of what Christ has done through faith.