

Genesis 17B (2011)

- We stopped last week in the middle, in the story of two covenants

- Let's revisit the verses we read last week

Gen. 17:7 "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

Gen. 17:8 "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

Gen. 17:9 God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

Gen. 17:10 "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Gen. 17:11 "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Gen. 17:12 "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.

Gen. 17:13 "A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Gen. 17:14 "But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

- God presented Abraham with a new covenant, the covenant of circumcision
 - And God called this new covenant a sign of God's earlier covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant
 - This chapter is a tale of two covenants
 - And as Abraham himself was probably thinking at the time – it was the best of times, it was the worst of times
 - No doubt Abraham was pleased to know that his earlier missteps with Hagar and Ishmael hasn't weakened God's resolve to keep His promise to bless Abraham and his descendants
 - Nevertheless, he probably wasn't thrilled to learn that circumcision was to be the sign of God's resolve

- Last week, we were seeking to understand the spiritual meaning of the covenant of circumcision and its relationship to the Abrahamic covenant and to saving faith
 - We said that the covenant of circumcision was a two-way, cross-generational covenant
 - Unlike the earlier Abrahamic Covenant, this new covenant depended on obedience on the part of Abraham's descendants
 - Fathers must take action to participate in this covenant
 - If they failed to circumcise their male children as required, then they broke this covenant and also separated their family line from participation in the promises to Abraham
 - In effect, they ceased to be Israel
 - So the covenant of circumcision was a sign that the earlier covenant was in effect for this family
 - If a family denied the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, then they repudiated affiliation with the blessings to Abraham
- Why did God want Abraham and his descendants to forever carry this sign in their bodies?
 - First, consider what happened in the earlier chapter – Chapter 16
 - Abraham and Sarah left God's promises behind and made their own descendant through Hagar
 - This line of descendants will receive their own blessings, as God promised to Hagar
 - But they will not be parties to the Abrahamic Covenant
 - What will distinguish those descendants of Abraham who are in the covenant from those who are not?
 - Well, Chapter 17 is God's response to Chapter 16
 - God now establishes a second covenant of circumcision to designate those who share in the promise from those who do not
 - This covenant doesn't take priority over the earlier covenant

- A person like Ishmael couldn't force his way into the Abrahamic Covenant simple because he took the sign of circumcision
 - But if someone was a descendant of Abraham, they are told to also keep this covenant as a sign or reminder of the earlier covenant
 - To fail to keep the covenant of circumcision would not invalidate the earlier covenant in their life
 - But it would cut off his family from Israel and from access to the promises to Abraham
- Furthermore, to the nature of the sign itself (cutting of the male body), the sign is itself a reminder of the blood covenant to Abraham and his descendants
 - The process of circumcision involves blood, a reminder of the blood covenant between God and Abraham
 - And it involves the reproductive organ, which is a reminder of the eternal nature of the promise for every generation after Abraham
 - In Israel, Jewishness is transferred through the male, and therefore this sign was given to male children only
 - A woman was included in this covenant by her father and then by her husband
- But if someone in the line of Abraham should forgo the practice in their family, they bring their family's participation in the covenant to an end
- So by changing Abram's name to Abraham and making circumcision a sign, God meant Abraham's very life as a testimony to the nations
 - And this was the main point
 - In the first covenant, God delivered Abraham saving faith and the guarantee of eternal blessing
 - And it came strictly because God made a promise and He is faithful
 - Similarly, when God extended grace to each of us by faith, He grafted us into the promises made to Abraham

- We share in a similar future and will be part of the Kingdom alongside Israel
- And we glory in that future knowing that it depends solely on the faithfulness of God to His promises to Abraham
- But then God instructed Abraham and his descendants to keep a second covenant to acknowledge the reality of the earlier promise
 - If they obey this command, then the next generation carries the promise forward as an everlasting testimony
 - If they disobey, they cease the testimony and they are cutoff
- Likewise, we have a call to live our lives as testimony to the promises we received
 - Our faith has brought the expectation that we should live according to Jesus' commands
 - That's why we were told in the Great Commission to teach disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded
 - That is our mission of testimony having received the new covenant by faith
 - And if we fail in this regard, we don't forfeit the first covenant we received by faith
 - But we do put at risk the opportunity to see our testimony continue in future generations
 - This is the essence of God's command that we should train up a child in the way he should go and even when he is old, he will not depart from it (Prov 22:6)
 - When we live according to God's commands, we don't make our salvation more sure, but we do influence future generations
- Now Abraham has been told to receive circumcision
 - The command was given to produce a testimony not to produce salvation
 - This is clear enough in the fact that the covenant involved making a mark in an infant, someone who had yet to even understand the covenant

- Abraham's obedience was the issue, and the penalty for disobedience would come to the next generation
 - It couldn't invalidate his salvation by faith
 - What about those in later generations of Israel?
 - Like Abraham, all who wished to be called Israel observed the covenant of circumcision
 - Furthermore, each person must show faith in God's promises to be saved personally
 - Some in Israel believed while others did not
 - And those Jewish men who failed to believe in the promises were not be saved simply because their parents circumcised the boys
 - And obviously, the women weren't saved because their fathers' were circumcised
 - Obedience to the sign of the covenant does not equal faith in the covenant itself
 - As Paul taught

Rom. 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.

Rom. 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Rom. 3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?

Rom. 3:2 Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

Rom. 3:3 What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

Rom. 3:4 May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written,

**"THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS,
AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED."**

- Notice that Paul says the test of who is truly Jew is one of spirit, not flesh
 - A true Jew is the one saved by faith, resulting in the marking of the Spirit

- A greater circumcision is accomplished when we believe in God's promises, one done in the heart, Paul says
 - This is the work of the Spirit at the moment of faith, when we are marked forever as a child of God
 - The Spirit's marking is a sign of our covenant of faith
- Whether we receive physical circumcision today or not makes no difference in terms of our salvation
- So then Paul asks the obvious question: what advantage was it to be included in the covenant of circumcision and counted as a descendant of Abraham?
 - Paul says there was great advantage
 - First, those who complied with the covenant of circumcision were granted the privilege as part of the nation of Israel to be entrusted with the word of God
 - Scripture is written by Jewish men, and it was initially delivered to Israel
 - If someone refused to comply with the covenant of circumcision, they excluded themselves from this awesome blessing
 - And if they excluded themselves from the people of God, who had the word of God, then they left behind the very thing God uses to bring faith
 - Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ
 - Then Paul asks, what if some who received circumcision didn't believe and weren't saved? Did that suggest the promises God gave Abraham weren't kept?
 - In other words, was God obligated to ensure every circumcised member of Israel should believe and receive the promises of the Abrahamic covenant?
 - Paul says no
 - The benefits of being circumcised were simply the earthly benefits of being included in the work God performed in and through the Jewish people

- But those earthly benefits didn't replace nor guarantee the eternal blessings that come only through faith in the Abrahamic covenant
- Today, as Christians we find ourselves in a similar situation
 - We have received the promises of the one-way covenant given us through faith in Christ
 - Our belief in that promise brings us salvation
 - And those promises don't depend on our performance
 - But as a result of that covenant, there are commands Christ has given us to keep
 - For example, we are commanded to be baptized in water
 - Baptism is the step of obedience that welcomes us into the church body and allows us to enjoy the blessings of that association
 - If we believe in the gospel, we are saved based on God's faithfulness
 - Yet if we refuse baptism, we are excluding ourselves from the community of believers and the blessings that derive from it
 - Conversely, if someone requested water baptism without having true faith, they might gain an opportunity to share in the earthly benefits of the Body of Christ
 - But that affiliation can't provide the salvation that comes by faith alone
 - Ultimately, they must accept the gospel and be saved if they are to be counted a child of God and receive a circumcised heart
 - In fact, water baptism is the outward picture of the inward circumcision accomplished by the Spirit
- After God announced His new covenant to Abraham, He turned His attention to Sarai

Gen. 17:15 Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

Gen. 17:16 "I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

Gen. 17:17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Gen. 17:18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!"

Gen. 17:19 But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

Gen. 17:20 "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

Gen. 17:21 "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

Gen. 17:22 When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

- As He did with Abraham, God changes Sarai's name to Sarah – inserting a part of God's name into her name
 - Sarai means "my princess", while Sarah means "the princess"
 - The meaning of the names is less important than the fact that her name changed like Abraham's
 - She is the only woman in Scripture who experiences a name change because of covenant
 - Her experience is the proof for Jewish women that the covenant of circumcision covers them as well, either by their father and/or their husband
 - Sarah was receiving this name change because her husband was party to this covenant
 - And God reveals for the first time that it would be Sarah – not Hagar – who would give Abraham his descendants under promise
 - Nations and kings would come from her
 - Specifically, she has both Israel and Edom originate from her
 - And many other Gentile nations originated from the branches of Israel who were lost along the way
 - Obviously, this isn't what Sarah and Abraham expected to hear

- In fact, Abraham fell on his face and exclaimed in laughter, asking if he and Sarah would have a child at their ages?
 - At first glance, the comment seems to contradict the earlier statement that Abraham was righteous by faith in God's power to bring a child
 - In reality, this statement shows how much Abraham believed
 - Knowing that God could bring it about, Abraham falls laughing at the thought of them having a child at such an old age
 - The laughter was the result of knowing that God could very well do as He promised, and the thought seemed ridiculous to Abraham
 - Instead, Abraham suggests that God would be satisfied in Ishmael
 - Abraham is essentially saying don't go to so much trouble, just let Ishmael be the promised the child
 - But God quickly rejected Abraham's suggestion, and He did so with both compassion and firmness
 - God was determined to bring about His promise by His own hand, and according to His own plan, through Abraham and Sarah
 - And the child they created in their own flesh would not stand in place of God's work
 - For our work counts for nothing in God's plan
 - He will only be glorified by His own work
 - So God assures Abraham that Sarah will have a child in one year, and his name will be Isaac
 - The name Isaac means "he laughs"
 - Obviously, the child's name will be a reminder to Abraham of his laughing at God's word
 - So we wonder, was the child's name always to be Isaac?
 - God's sovereignty ensures that Abraham's response would match the name God was preparing to give Isaac

- He also tells Abraham that the covenant would transfer to Isaac, not to Ishmael
 - Abraham had offered Ishmael as the child to receive the promises of the inheritance, but God said no
 - Nevertheless, God understands Abraham's concern for the welfare of Ishmael
 - So God tells Abraham for the first time what He told Hagar earlier: Ishmael would have his own legacy
 - He would father 12 kings, the twelve tribes of the Arab nations
 - These people become the eternal enemies of Israel, and so the sin of Abraham leads to many generations of misery for Isaac's descendants
- And with this moment God concluded His appearance

Gen. 17:23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him.

Gen. 17:24 Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

Gen. 17:25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

Gen. 17:26 In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son.

Gen. 17:27 All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

- Abraham is one year away from having his son Isaac
 - And in this moment, he complies with the covenant of circumcision
 - It would have been painful for him and the others
 - He would have been unpopular in his home for sometime
 - But three months later, the covenant begins its work as he fathers the child of promise with a woman who had never received a child before
 - Sometimes God work in our lives comes in dramatic moments as it did for Abraham here
 - But usually, it's a long, slow struggle against flesh and the enemy
 - The way to saving faith was easy, in that God did all the work and we merely received it in faith
 - But the way to obedience is difficult and often painful
 - We have to risk being hurt, being unpopular, even having our blood spilled
 - We can't imagine how God will make use of our obedience
 - But He is at work in and through us, both to His own glory and to our blessing
 - Take a step of obedience, because our walk of faith is not one of perfection, but persistence