

Genesis: *The Covenant of Circumcision*
Genesis 17:1-26

As we resume our journey through Genesis, we come now to the Covenant of Circumcision in Genesis 17. I will be preaching through the whole chapter, but on account of time, we will only read the first ten verses together. Please stand for the reading of God's Word: 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,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.⁵ 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.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."⁹ 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: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

My message will fall under four subheadings according to the flow of the chapter: 1) As for God; 2) As for Abraham; 3) As for Sarah; and 4) As for Ishmael.

I. As for God

If you recall, thirteen years prior to this moment in Genesis 17, having grown impatient waiting upon the promises of God, Abram and Sarai decided to take matters into their own hands. Sarai sent her husband Abram into the tent of her handmaiden, Hagar; and, consequently, Hagar bore Abram a son and named him Ishmael.

Ishmael was clearly not God's plan, and that fact has become unavoidably obvious over the last few years. Ishmael is now a teenager...enough said! His unruly behavior along with the not-so-veiled contempt between Sarai and Ishmael's mother serve as a daily reminder that Abram and Sarai failed to trust God. What is even more concerning, however, is the silence of God. It has now been many years, perhaps as many as 15 years since God last spoke to Abram.

No doubt this absence of communication has caused Abram to wonder where he stands with God. God made magnificent promises to Abram, but then Abram took on a concubine and had a son. Was God angry with Abram? Was this transgression so great that God moved on to begin a nation with a new representative? Was God O.K. with their plan B? Would Ishmael suffice to serve God's promises of a great nation and a multitude of descendants?

Those questions would go unanswered for years until finally, in Abram's 99th year of life, God once again appears to Abram, and that is where our text begins this morning. We learn that the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell on his face.

Once again, the LORD makes a personal appearance to Abram, but this time, God reveals Himself as *El Shaddai*—God Almighty. This title is not insignificant. Abram’s faith has grown weak along with his aged body. Abram is pushing 100 years of age, and his 89-year-old wife is long beyond the age of ovulation. It will now take a supernatural miracle for the promises of God to come to pass. Perhaps that is why the LORD now appears before Abram as *El Shaddai*—the Almighty God—the worker of miracles. God commands Abram saying, “Walk before me and be blameless that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”

The time of equivocation has come to an end. God is not demanding Abram to be a man without sin; He is calling Abram to walk in faith and to be wholehearted in his commitment to the LORD. No more plan B’s; there is only God’s way, and Abram needs to be all in. Appropriately, Abram falls on his face as an act of repentance, worship, and reverence.

Seeing the appropriate and faithful posture of Abram, God issues forth a new covenant with Abram, saying: 4 “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 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. 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.”

The Almighty God has not changed His mind; He has chosen Abram as the man with whom He will establish a covenant. But now, in his 99th year of life, God pronounces that Abram will not only become a great nation, but he will father multiple nations. For this reason, God will give Abram a new name. His name shall be Abraham, for God has determined to make this man the father of nations and kings.

Now, let’s take a moment to pause and reflect on Abram’s life up to this moment. Since his birth, Abram has carried a name that means either “father of many”¹ or “exalted father” depending how you translate the Hebrew. In either case, we must imagine the countless occasions when house guests and those they encountered on their travels asked Abram, “So, you who are called ‘father of many’ ...you who carry the name ‘exalted father,’ tell us how many sons you have?” Time and time again, Abram would stare at the ground and say, “None. I have no sons.”

In the ancient world, infertility was assumed to be a curse from the gods. And we must remember that Abram and Sarai lived in world of cloth and skin. There were no soundproof walls in Abram’s world, so he would have heard the snickering, the jeering, and the astonishment of those who could not help but point out the irony of his name and his childless household. He would have heard people wonder aloud who had brought about the curse of infertility: Was it Sarai or Abram?

¹ In researching this message, Donald Barnhouse writes that Abram means “father of many” as quoted in Boice, *Genesis*, p 575. Dr. Kent Hughes writes that Abram meant “exalted father” (Hughes, *Genesis*, p 247).

Finally, at the age of 85, Abram impregnates Hagar, the maidservant, and she bears Abram a son. He may not be “the father of many,” and one could hardly call him the “exalted father” of a half-breed son, but at least Abram finally had a son.

Now, though, as the LORD appears to Abram in his 99th year, God Almighty tells Abram—change your name to Abraham, meaning “father of nations.”

Can you imagine the meeting that Abram called following this encounter with the LORD?

“Gather around everyone, I have an announcement to make. I am going to change my name.”

We can imagine the whole community looking at each other with a knowing grin: “It’s about time he changed his name. Maybe there’s a good word for ‘father of one annoying son’--that would work. Or, better yet, maybe choose a name that doesn’t beg the question about children since the subject is clearly hurtful to his barren wife.”

To the amazement of all, however, Abram announces, “I am changing my name to Abraham—father of nations!” You can imagine the awkward silence that followed. As far as his people are concerned, Abram has finally come unhinged. He had one 13-year-old boy with a slave girl, and now he’s “the father of nations?” The old man is out of his mind. It would be like me changing my name to “He who is destined to play in the NBA.” (create AI image of me surrounded by NBA players???). You get the picture.

God goes on to say, “I will establish this covenant with you and your descendants 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.”

Note the language of this covenant. It begins with God once again declaring what He will do. There are seven commitments that God makes in the covenant, essentially saying, “As for God”...:

- 1) God will make His covenant with Abraham and multiply him greatly.
- 2) God will make Abraham the father of many nations.
- 3) God will make Abraham exceedingly fruitful.
- 4) God will make Abraham into nations and kings will come from Abraham.
- 5) God will establish His everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants
- 6) God will give the land to Abraham and his descendants as an everlasting possession
- 7) God will be their God.

Like all the covenants of God, this covenant is first and foremost *unilateral*. God establishes the covenant upon His own mind and providence. This covenant is not up for discussion, collaboration, or compromise. Secondly, God’s covenant with Abram is *eternal*. God does not change His mind when He establishes a covenant. As for God, He will remain forever faithful to His promises. And third, God’s covenant with Abram is *gracious*. Abram deserves nothing.

Everything that God promises to Abram and his descendants rests upon God's good pleasure and His infinite mercy. Nothing about the terms of this covenant rest upon Abram's merit or what Abram deserves.

That said, because of all that God is going to do, the covenant does require Abraham's participation in response to God's promises. That leads us to our second subheading.

II. As for Abraham

Whereas God's first call upon Abram's life required him to simply start walking, the covenant that God now establishes with Abraham some 25 years later will require a sign that will set God's people apart. We read in vss. 9-14: 9 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: 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 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."

The sign of the covenant for Noah was the rainbow, though rainbows likely existed before that covenant was made. In the same way, circumcision was already a practice in some ancient cultures (ex. Egypt), but God now chooses male circumcision as the sign of the covenant that He has established with Abraham and his descendants. All men, be it by birth or those brought into the Abrahamic community by other means, will be required to undergo circumcision or risk being cut off from the covenant community.

Now, I know some of our young people may be wondering, "What is circumcision?" To which I will say, ask your parents when you get home!

Let's face it: this is an uncomfortable subject to talk about, but we simply cannot read the Bible or ask our children to read their Bibles and not address the question of circumcision. So, to be clear, circumcision is the cutting away of the foreskin from the male genitalia.

The next question is: why circumcision? Why not a tattoo? Why not shave your head or wear some special kind of clothing? Why would God choose circumcision as a sign of the covenant community?

The only reason given comes in vs. 13 when God says, "So shall my covenant be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant." This may be where we get the saying, "They needed to have skin in the game." In other words, to be in the covenant community was more than lip-service. Circumcision was a commitment of the flesh; and that seems to be the point.

Here are few things to consider: 1) Circumcision is irrevocable. Once the cutting is done, it cannot be undone. 2) Circumcision is bloody, painful, and intimate—it is not something to take

lightly. 3) Circumcision reminds the Abrahamic community that covenant unfaithfulness will lead to being cut off from the promises of God.

As God states to Abraham in vs. 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.

Church, right here in the covenant of circumcision is the first time that human accountability to covenant faithfulness is explicitly established. Man's covenant accountability was implied in the covenant of pieces, but what was formerly implicit has now become explicit in the covenant of circumcision.

I am going to circle back to this observation at the end of my message, but let's move on to look at our third subheading...

III. As for Sarai

God continues speaking to Abraham in vss. 15-19: 15 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I 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." 17 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?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" 19 God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

God turns His attention now to Sarai and twice promises to bless her. Consequently, Sarai's name is also to be changed to Sarah. Now, both Sarai and Sarah mean "princess," which is fitting because the son of a princess will often become a king, right? And that's the plan. God states, "I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

This is an astounding promise for a woman who is 89 years old, and we'll get to Abraham's response in a second. The question you may be asking is: why change Sarai's name if the meaning is the same? That's a good question. One thing to note is that after the name changes, there is an "h" sound now in both names. Abra-h-am and Sara-h. The "h" sound essentially adds a breath into their names, and that may be more significant than immediately meets the eyes. The word for "breath" in the Hebrew (*ruach*) is the same word used for "spirit." So, it may very well be that the change of names also represents the Spirit of God now dwelling in and accomplishing a miraculous conception that will bring about their one and only son, Isaac. That's a theory posed by some scholars, and I think it's worthy of our consideration.

Now, we must circle back to Abraham's response to God's promises for Sarah. We read in vs. 17, "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?"

Church, you have to love the honesty of the scriptures. Abraham is our representative, and the whole thought of him and Sarah having a child is simply laughable. What is more, Abraham has already come up with a great plan B, and he offers that now to God. In vs. 18, having laughed and mused to himself, Abraham now speaks back to God for the first time in this encounter, asking “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

It feels to me like Abraham is pressing his luck! Not only does he laugh at God’s promise of Sarah bearing a son, but now he’s once again advocating for Plan B. But we can’t blame him, right? Abraham loves his son Ishmael. He has been spending every day with the boy for thirteen years. But, Church, pay very close attention to this exchange, because Abraham is once again our representative. Abraham and Sarah were impatient and chose to stray outside of God’s plan. Now they want God to bless their Plan B.

This is so often how we engage with God. We laugh at God’s plan, as though it is totally impractical, then we beg God to bless our Plan B. We know it’s not God’s plan to engage in sex out of marriage; we know it’s not God’s plan for us to cheat on our exams; we know it’s not God’s plan for us to cut corners at work; we know it’s not God’s plan to look at pornography; we know it’s not God’s plan for us to harbor resentment; but we do it anyways and then we want God to bless us when those choices create unintended consequences. Many lead characters in the Bible have a story similar to this one because it is our inevitable human tendency: we think we know better than God. But here’s the truth: God’s plans are immutable and non-negotiable. God is merciful when we go our own way, and we’ll see God’s mercy played out here in a minute; but God is not going to change His plans in order to bless our plans.

God is not going to change His immutable laws in order to accommodate our preferences and our opinions.

Which is why God simply replies, “No.” There is no ambiguity about God’s answer to Abraham’s request for Plan B. The answer is “no.” God then reminds Abraham of God’s plan as previously stated: “But Sarah (YOUR WIFE!) shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.”

God’s plan leads all the way to the tribe of Judah, the line of David, and a virgin named Mary. The covenant God is establishing now with Abraham, Isaac, and eventually Jacob will lead to Jesus, so—no, Plan B will not work. What about Ishmael, then? That leads to our fourth and final subheading:

IV. As for Ishmael

God concludes His conversation with Abraham addressing the question about Ishmael. In vss. 20-21 God states: 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 I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

God will not turn away from the non-elect son of Abraham. Ishmael has already benefited from the blessing of God, and he will go on to father twelve sons who will form a nation. Sadly, the descendants of Ishmael will famously resist and oppose the elect-children of Abraham, and that is true even to this day. That said, God will bring redemptive value out of Abraham's plan B, but Plan B is no substitute for God's ultimate plan which God restates with a very specific due date in vs. 21: But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

So, how did Abraham respond to this encounter with God Almighty? He got busy circumcising the boys and men in his camp, and then 99-year-old Abraham submitted to circumcision himself. We read: 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. 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.

Abraham's response set the tone for the covenant people of God. If God says it, that's what we need to do. Abraham responded with faith and obedience even in the midst of his doubts and his sadness for Ishmael.

Again, there is so much for us to learn from this story, and we will spend some time reflecting more on this covenant in the days to come.

I want to finish this morning by pointing you back to Jesus. Remember how the covenant of pieces revealed how God walked through pieces for both God and for Abraham, who was man's representative, such that when the covenant was broken by man, the penalty would fall on God. I hope you can see that the covenant of circumcision also points us to Jesus.

I touched on this a bit last Sunday as we briefly looked at Colossians 2:11 which reads: In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.

I hope now this verse makes a little more sense to you. Do you hear what Paul is saying? He's saying, "In Jesus, you were brought into the covenant community. You have been adopted into the people of God who benefit from God's eternal and gracious promises. And how? Through a circumcision made without hands, 'by the circumcision of Christ.'

What is the circumcision of Christ? It is the cross. On the cross, Jesus was "cut off" because that is the penalty of covenant unfaithfulness according to the covenant of circumcision. Jesus was cut on our behalf, because that is the requirement of the covenant of the pieces for those who break the covenant.

Church, Jesus endured the cross to satisfy covenant justice and to make a way for those who should be cut off to be ushered into the eternal community of the redeemed.

So, what is our response to the merciful, eternal, unilateral work of Jesus on the cross? We are to circumcise our lives of the “body of flesh” that once dominated our existence. Do you see that? Paul uses the language of circumcision as a way of painting our response to the finished work of Jesus on the cross. We don’t put off the flesh in order to be saved, we put off the flesh because we have been saved! We fix our eyes on Jesus; we set our minds on things above, not on the things of the flesh, and that is how we show ourselves to members of the community called the Body of Christ!

Church, I hope you can see how Jesus fulfilled the covenant of the pieces, and Jesus fulfilled the covenant of circumcision. Everything in Genesis is constantly pointing to Jesus. Jesus was always the plan, and because Jesus came and died and rose again, we are those who have been brought into the community of the redeemed by grace and grace alone, amen?

I will close with this imperative: If you are grateful for what Christ has accomplished on our behalf, then put off the body of flesh, and put on Christ. What does that look like? It looks like baptism. Baptism is the sign of the New Covenant...the covenant of grace. Your baptism should be as meaningful and as intimate and as irrevocable as circumcision was in Genesis 17. And that is exactly how Paul finishes his thought in Colossians 2:11-12: In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Here’s a good way to sum up this teaching: Circumcision says, “If I break the covenant, I am cut off. So, I will try very hard to not break the covenant so I can remain in the community.”

Baptism says, “I broke the covenant, but Jesus was cut off in my place. My hope is not in my own righteousness, but in His righteousness alone.” This is the Gospel.

Church, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Repent, believe, be baptized, and be grateful. Will you pray with me?