

Genesis 17, The Beginning of Hope in the Promises of God: A Life of Abraham, Preached by Michael Gunn @ Harambee Church on March 2nd, 2008

"I resonate with Abraham, and I identify with his frailty and his humanity. I love the fact that from this story I know that an eternal god will be in conversation with the most broken, mischievous, pragmatic, and self centered individual"

Eugene Rivers

Intro

Last week we saw that it is easy to take God's will into our own hands, without thinking/praying through God's timing for His own reasons. It is easy to get off track trying to do the right thing, if we are doers, and not meditators. Sometime that can allow us to justify our means because of the sincerity of our ends. In today's passage we take a look at a good God enlarging His previous covenant, and including two significant acts by God. The first is the changing of Abram's and Sarai's names emphasizing His Lordship, and their new identity, and secondly, the command to circumcise, reminding them of their covenant with god who will "Give" them posterity, and their need to be obedient to Him as their God.

From the Head...

A. The Covenant Expanded (Genesis 17:1-8)

This piece starts with a delay of 13 years. When we left Abram (Genesis 16:16) he was 86 years old. Verse one of this chapter begins with Abram at 99 years old. There has been a delay in the plans of at least 13 years. As we saw last week, waiting on God's timing is often as important as doing His will. We can jump the gun on a good thing, and realize that the timing isn't right. For whatever reason, God has not spoken with Abram for a while, and it seems obvious that Abram assumed that Ishmael was the promised child. But God is faithful to His promise, and to the covenant He made with Abram, and has not forsaken him. In these first eight verses we see God re-establish the covenant and expand it to include nations. In the original call (**Genesis 12:1-3**) we are told that the nations would be blessed, but in no way could a barren couple believe that they would be the parents of a multitude of nations and a royal line. This assumes Ishmael's birth, and in spite of Abram and Sarai's questionable action to make it happen, God was sovereignly in control. Isaac and Ishmael would beam his story throughout the world. Within the DNA of this gospel is the inclusion of all nations, not just Israel. This fact is expounded by the apostle Paul in Romans 9: 4-9, when he reminds us that this promise is not an earthly, fleshly one, but a promise of blessings to all who are in Abraham spiritually. The connective point to this covenant is covenant obedience (**Genesis 17:1**). We are called to walk before Him, and "*Be blameless.*" This is the first condition of any kind that God has placed on Abram. Before, the choosing of Abram was unconditional. There was nothing special about Abram at all. He was a pagan worshipper of false gods, when God pursued him. Yet, as he has walked with God, he begins to realize that God calls him to separate from his idols.

The very idea of "*Walk before me,*" is taken from the way sheep walk before their shepherd, and takes directions from him in order to remain safe and well taken cared of. When we are called, then regenerated by God, there is the assumption that we'd submit to His Lordship. This is a marriage we are speaking about, not a date. We saw a couple of weeks ago that God is the one taking the risk, as He is the one that passed through the dead carcasses as a symbol of His accepting the "Curse" of the terms of the covenant. God secure the terms of this covenant by His action on the cross of Jesus Christ. All of God's wrath and judgment are placed on Christ in order for us to be made blameless (See **1 Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:23**). In no way does the covenant assume obedience as a means to enter the covenant. This covenant was instituted and ratified by God alone, but in our passage, we come to realize that obedience and holiness is a result of this covenant God makes with His people. When we begin to understand the love and the grace by which this covenant is ratified, we will be motivated to keep its terms out of a love and devotion to the God that made the covenant with us. In a show of authority, God changes Abram's name (Meaning "Exalted father") to Abraham ("Father of a multitude"). As usual, God begins to work on our identity, before He can really do anything through us. Until our identity changes from sinner, to one who is righteous in Christ, we can't get beyond the fact that we are a sinner. In Christ we are children of the most high, most powerful God (El Shaddai). In spite of our propensity to keep on sinning, we are made blameless in Christ Jesus. We are not able to be blameless, without a "Most powerful God!" We are blameless because He walked between the carcasses and became our curse on the tree of pain; the pain of God's wrath, and the curse for the broken covenants, and for our heinous sin.

In this set of verse God expands the covenant from making him a great nation (**Genesis 12:2**) to making him the father of many nations, and granting him the land of Canaan, and a royal line (**Genesis 1:1-8**). In spite of the fact that Genesis 17:8 calls this an "Everlasting covenant," Nehemiah reminds us that the land and royalty has been fulfilled by a faithful God (**Nehemiah 9:7-8**). The everlasting nature of this covenant is seen through Paul's pen (**Romans 4 and Romans 9**).

B. The Covenant Expressed (Genesis 17:9-14)

A ritual called circumcision expressed the sign of the covenant. The ritual, like many other rituals in the bible are not necessarily unique to the bible, and demonstrates that God is truly a missional God, who uses many customs in the culture he is speaking into in order to contextualize His message, and often complete the story with His own. God is the initiator of the covenant, but man must respond (See John **1:12-13; Romans 10:9, 10**). Why circumcision? That question

has been asked forever, but I think there are at least a few things that can be added to the conversation. First, it is a sexual sign, executed on a man's sexual organ. This is a reminder that it is not man's sexual/physical ability that fulfilled the promise, but God. God is in control of every aspect of human endeavor, including our reproductive ability. Man didn't generate the promised seed, God did! The promises are fulfilled by Him, and not us (See too **John 1:12-13**). Secondly, that organ must be used in fidelity, as a sign of one's fidelity to the covenant (See **Job 31:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5**). A godly line is most often produced by preserving purity in your marriages (**Malachi 2:10-17**). Thirdly, I find this quite interesting that God made this covenant with the man, and not the woman. This highlights once again the fact that God elects heads of every major movement, and for whatever reason He uses men to be responsible for that role. It is not that He doesn't love Sarai, or that she is incompetent, and Abram is more competent. It is no different than the fact that God chose Abram out of paganism, and not Immanuel. He just does what He wants in His free, unconditional and sovereign manner. For whatever reason He makes man responsible for the spiritual growth of his home, and with responsibility comes greater sacrifice.

Now is circumcision like baptism? Do we then baptize our infants as a sign of the new covenant? While I understand this reasoning from scripture, I don't believe we ought to for the following reasons. First, this does not correspond directly to baptism. It is only performed on male babies, and done on the eighth day. Secondly, circumcision is a physical act, where baptism is a physical act done in a private ritual, whereas baptism is a spiritual act done in a public ritual (**Colossians 2:11-13 cf. Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 12**). Thirdly, baptisms done in the New Testament under the new covenant appear to be done to adults as a sign of their understanding of the regeneration done to them by the power of the Holy Spirit, while circumcision was performed on every male in Israel. Lastly, if baptism does correspond to circumcision in the Old Testament, then why doesn't communion correspond to the Passover, since it is also instituted by Christ as a symbol, and is a sign of the fulfillment of the type of Passover? I also believe that Acts 16:33-34 is not a clear case of baptizing infants, especially when the context appears to narrow the parameters of who might be saved, and subsequently baptized.

Subsequently circumcision was a symbol of the covenant that it would be God who would bring forth the seed through Abraham, and that seed would culminate in the Christ, who would save Israel (Physical and Spiritual) from their sins (See **Galatians 3:15-18**).

C. The Covenant Explained (**Genesis 17:15-22**)

A couple of weeks ago we saw a bit of Abram's doubt (Genesis 15:2-3, 8), which reflects the reality of his faith. Faith without doubt is not faith; it is certainty. Those that go their Christian life without asking the hard questions about their faith, will find themselves at odds with their "Faith" when they are confronted by tragedy or a smart enquiry or attack. A healthy doubt (Questioning) is important to the sharpening of our own understanding of the real truth. The sign of a healthy organization is the opportunity to ask questions and raise doubts and gain clarity. God is a healthy entity, which allows His people to wrestle with huge questions about God, faith, life, etc. Once again we see Abraham laughing in doubt. Does this make any sense? Does changing Sarai's (Strive/persist) name to Sarah (Rule/Princess) matter? They are old, and old people don't have babies in their world either. It's not a hyper mythological world, where animals talk, dragons rule, and old people get pregnant. Doubt is part of their world, because miracles don't happen, and life goes on. How is this possible? How can a barren, old woman get pregnant? Hmm? By a miracle? And once again, in Abraham's mind, Ishmael must be the promised child. It must be done through physical means? Ishmael is now 13 years old, and Sarah is still not pregnant. Sarah's scheme of having Abraham sleep with Hagar worked, and the promise was safe, except that's not what God planned, or at least not how He planned it, when He planned it. God once again, shows amazing grace by blessing this union, and promising a great posterity for Ishmael, but He clearly states for the first time that the promise to Abraham would come through Sarah having a son. God doesn't destroy us when we make a mistake, especially when that mistake is a sincere effort to do His will. We will see however that all of our choices do have real consequences, and God most often chooses not to quell the results.

D. The Covenant Executed (**Genesis 17:23-27**)

In spite of the fact that the covenant would be ultimately fulfilled in God's promise that would culminate in His Son Jesus Christ dying on the cross for the sake of this covenant, man is called into obedience in relationship to the covenant promises. There is hope in the future because of the promises of God, and the sovereignty they witness in the course of their lives, but may never see the fulfillment of the promise. Hebrews chapter eleven reminds us of this very reality, many have lived faithfully in anticipation of the promise (**Hebrews 11:13, 39, 40**), as we are called to live in faith and hope that we would one day be fully redeemed and in the presence of our God and savior (**Philippians 1:20; Colossians 1:5**). It is because of our hope in the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we can execute obedience through the power of the Holy Spirit (**Romans 15:13**).

What's interesting is that both the elect (Isaac; once he is born) and the non-elect (Ishmael) receive the sign of the covenant, which reminds us that God is a missional God, and those that we think are "Elect" may not be, and those we think are not may well be (see **Romans 9**).

...to the Heart

God is faithful, and as we continue to walk with Him, He continues to reveal His will and Himself to us. Even when we doubt, He is faithful and His grace abounds. With that we are reminded throughout scripture that it is not a physical circumcision that sets us apart, but a circumcision of the heart (**Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 2:28-29; 2 Corinthians 3:2-6; Galatians 6:15**). Baptism, like circumcision isn't the outward physical act that matters. But the inward act of the Spirit of God that cleanses us from our sin, and changes our attitude toward God, people and life, (**Colossians 2:11**) and that our life is characterized by living supernaturally by faith as we are buried with him in baptism, and raised to new life in the resurrection (**Colossians 2:12; Romans 6:1-6**). God changes lives. It is by His grace that people are moved, and transformed. We are not called to clean up our act to come to Christ; our hearts are first changed, and then our hearts begin to transform our behavior, as our attitudes and motivation is radically shifted to follow Christ, and to love God and others more radically than we ever have. It is then, when we can turn to the mission that God has called us to and minister to others out of abundant joy, with our identities firmly in Christ!

Books for further study: *Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis*, Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, Bruce Waltke, *The Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, Gordon J. Wenham, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, John H. Walton, *Creation and Blessing*, Allen P. Ross

Next Weeks Verses: Genesis 18

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