



Important Covenant Passages

(2) Genesis 17

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This morning we will administer and witness the second of three baptisms in about a months' time and what I thought we would do in connection with each of these baptisms is hear the word of God to us from a key covenant passage in Scripture. The occasion of a baptism is a good time to remind ourselves about and to celebrate the covenant relationship that God had made with Abraham and his offspring. That includes us since we are the offspring of Abraham by faith according to Galatians 3:29 which says, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

So today we will hear God speaking to us from Genesis 17 which is another of the key covenant passages in the Bible and since we are in Christ and thus heirs according to the promise, the covenant that God makes here with Abraham he also makes with us, except that the covenant that God makes with us is a newer version of this covenant called the new covenant. The Bible however, makes it clear that the essence of the biblical covenants is the same because all of them have to do with the salvation in Christ which is really what the whole Bible is about.

So, Genesis 17. It is important at the outset to see how Genesis 17 relates to Genesis 15. You may remember that a few weeks ago we considered Genesis 15 as a key covenant passage and we saw then that the focus in that passage is on the covenant as God buttressing his promise with an oath because, Abram, not surprisingly, was having trouble believing it. He and his wife were long past the age of having children and the fulfillment of the promise required them to have at least one child. The stress in Genesis 15, when it comes to the meaning of the covenant, is on God formally shoring up his promise by

performing an oath-ritual that meant, “Let me die if I do not keep my promises to you.” In that ritual, which involved moving through a pathway between the halves of a number of dead animals, God was the only one who moved through that path. Abram did not. And so, the emphasis there was on God swearing that he would do what he had promised to do.

Genesis 17 is still about God’s promises, but it includes the human-obligation-side of the covenant relationship. This is also a key part of the whole covenant relationship between God and his people. God not only makes promises to his covenant people. He also makes demands of them. And there is a complex relationship between the fulfillment of God’s promises and the obedience of the covenant people to the demands of the covenant. I say that this is complex because the significance of obedience in Scripture is complex. This complexity is due to the fact that we cannot earn our salvation by works, and yet works are the necessary result of salvation. Another aspect of the complexity is that salvation is a free gift and yet we must believe and repent in order to receive it, but at the same time faith and repentance are also gifts of God. It takes a bit of thought and pondering to get that all straight.

I mention that now because I want you to remember as we move through this passage that the role obedience in Scripture is somewhat difficult to understand because of this whole idea that salvation is by grace and yet obedience is necessary. Whatever God says about obedience it is never the way of earning his favor.

So, let’s have a look at the passage. Notice that in the first 8 verses, God mainly repeats the promises that he had already made to Abram. God is going to make Abram the “father of a multitude of nations.” He gives him a new name, Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.” He tells Abraham that he will be exceedingly fruitful and that kings shall come from him. He establishes his covenant between himself and Abraham and his offspring throughout their generations. He calls it an everlasting covenant and he proclaims the essence of the covenant: “to be a God to you and your offspring after you.” And then he promises the land of Canaan once again as an everlasting possession.

Three remarks on these promises before we move on. The promise of fruitfulness takes its deepest significance from its connection to God's original command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. The fact that God promises to make Abraham fruitful means that, what God is working toward through Abraham and his seed, is the renewal of his creation. This is "new-creation" language and it is found in many places in the story that leads to Jesus Christ and from Jesus Christ to the fulfillment of God's plan for a new creation. By promising that Abraham will be fruitful, God is telling us that what he is going to do through Abraham and his offspring is nothing less than a renewal of his original plan to have the creation filled with images of himself, managing it on his behalf and for his glory. This is one of the ways that this passage links to us for we too are part of God's plan for the renewal of all things and for us being fruitful and multiplying both by having babies and evangelism is still a key way that God's plan is fulfilled.

A second point from this reiteration of the covenant promises is that they involve Abraham becoming a great nations and kings coming from Abraham's seed. This is the language of kingdom. The initial fulfillment of that occurs when Israel becomes a nation and later on is ruled by kings, including King David. David, of course, is the king to whom God promises a dynasty that leads to Jesus Christ who is the ultimate Son of David. So, there is direct continuity between this promise that God makes to Abraham and the kingdom of God which was central in Jesus' teaching and mission and which is a key image for the biblical teaching about salvation. When we believe in Jesus we become part of the new Israel which means that we become part of God's kingdom of which Jesus is the king. So, covenant people are also kingdom people.

And notice, thirdly, that the tension between promise and fulfillment is still an important part of the story. The text makes a point of saying that Abram is 99 years old. God is still making these expansive promises about offspring for Abram and nations and kings coming from him and Abram is pushing 100 and still he and Sarah have no children. It shows once again that God is in no hurry to fulfill his promises and it seems that the more unlikely their fulfillment seems, the better he likes it. Sarah had not been able to have children when she was a woman of

child-bearing age. Then she passed the normal natural age for any woman to have children and now she was pushing 100 years of age and God is still making these extravagant promises of offspring like the stars in number who would be the means of salvation for the world. God clearly sometimes goes to great lengths to test people's faith and we should keep that in mind when we see a tiny beleaguered church being asked to believe that she will one day dominate the whole world. Clearly it is one of God's way of doing things to make promises that seem like they could never happen and then expect his people to live in hope on the basis of those promises.

But it turns out that this covenant and these promises are not unconditional in every sense. They are unconditional in the sense that they are going to happen, but they are conditional in the sense that in order for them to happen Abraham and his offspring must keep the covenant from their side which means obeying and serving God. Notice how God introduces the idea of obedience in verses 1-2, "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." This is what the ESV Study Bible says about this: "Here, a conditional dimension is explicit, indicating that this covenant will benefit only those who walk before God and are blameless."

So, the promises that God made to Abraham are both conditional and unconditional. In Genesis 15 where God alone goes through the divided carcasses, the promises are unconditional. These promises will be fulfilled no-matter-what. But here in Genesis 17 the promises are conditional in that they will only be fulfilled in the way of obedience of Abraham and his offspring. It is important for us to realize that some things in the outworking of God's plan of salvation are conditional and some things are unconditional. I can't get into all the various ways that we see that in Scripture, but just realize as we go along that what we are looking at here is part of the story and not the whole thing.

Perhaps the most important way that the covenant promises are unconditional and conditional is that they are unconditional in the sense that God is going to fulfill his purposes of salvation which are contained in the promises, but individual participation in that salvation requires

obedience which consists of faith and repentance and living a life that is generally a life of obedience. Perfect obedience is required, but that is accomplished by Jesus and so what is required from the people of God is an obedience that flows from the grace of God.

We must keep that in mind as we proceed. The obedience that God is talking about in this passage is not perfect obedience. When God tells Abraham to be blameless he does not mean sinless. Abraham was still a sinner as the story makes very clear. But his life was generally a life of faithful service to God and God accepted his imperfect obedience in the light of the forgiveness and righteousness that Christ would provide when he came.

In verse 9, God introduces the language of keeping his covenant. “And God said to Abraham, “As, for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.” This is another important part of the biblical teaching about this covenant relationship that God establishes between himself and his people. It involves God making promises and committing himself to be the God of the people whom he chooses to be his people, but it also involves God requiring that his people keep his covenant. The covenant relationship is one-sided in the sense that God alone is the one who establishes it. But it is two-sided in the sense that God requires something of his covenant people. They are to keep his covenant. That applied to Abraham and also to his offspring throughout their generations.

The children of those who are in covenant with God are born into this relationship. They are born as heirs of the promises of the covenant and they are born under the requirements of the covenant relationship. They are born under obligation to keep God’s covenant. There is a kind of election going on here. It is not necessarily election unto salvation, but it is election unto inclusion in this covenant relationship with God. The child of a couple who are members of God’s covenant people is not asked whether or not this is an arrangement he or she would like to be part of. They are in it by virtue of their birth into the covenant people.

Now as this passage will go on to show, in order to stay in this covenant relationship with God they must walk in obedience to God as they grows into maturity and if they do not, there comes a time when they

have broken the covenant and that means exclusion from the covenant people. But clearly such a person is born into the covenant – an heir of both the promises and obligations of the covenant arrangement.

Now the first thing that Abraham was to do to keep the covenant was to be circumcised and to have every male in his household circumcised as well. Verse 10 says, “And this is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.”

This circumcision was to be performed on Abraham’s male children and on the other male members of his household as well. In those days a rich man like Abraham would have servants. These people were under his authority and influence and so they were included in the covenant people and thus were to be circumcised if they were male. Since we don’t live in those kinds of households, the matter of baptizing servants and slaves is not an issue for us.

Now in our day we naturally wonder why only the males received the sign of the covenant. There are two things to be said about this. The reason that this question even occurs to us is that we live in a very individualistic society. The question of why women did not receive the sign of the covenant in Old Testament times does not seem to have occurred to the Old Testament people of God. It is something that is never discussed in the Old Testament. The society in Old Testament times was much more corporate in its understanding of the human race and so the idea of the males representing their families does not seem to have been questioned.

The second point is that as the Bible proceeds the relationship between men and women changes a little so that the sign of the covenant in the New Testament is one that can be applied to both males and females. This is an interesting subject, but it is not one that we have time to get into right now. There does seem to be somewhat of a shift between Old Testament and New Testament when it comes to the prominence of men compared to woman, but we still have the idea of male headship in the home and church in the New Testament. And that according to the New Testament itself is something that is rooted in the creation order. Anyway, girls are baptized today while only boys received the sign of

the covenant in Old Testament times. But girls, in Old Testament times were no less members of the covenant people than boys were.

Now from our perspective today, circumcision is a really odd symbol. Why not some kind of a mark on a person's left ear or some other place. Why circumcision? Well it is highly symbolic. The symbol of the covenant relationship is placed right on the male organ for procreation indicating the great significance of having children for the covenant relationship. The promises and the obligations of the covenant are made with Abraham and his offspring. The promises are fulfilled through the generations. The covenant is a historical arrangement. It is God's intention that his people move through time from one generation to the next. And the nurturing of children in what it means to belong to God's covenant people and in faithfulness to keeping the covenant is a huge part of the whole arrangement. This is why babies were circumcised – so that they might grow up in the knowledge of the promises and obligations of their covenant relationship with God. And the location of the sign places great emphasis on the fact that the covenant relationship is intended to be passed on down through the generations.

There are a few more points to be made concerning the significance of circumcision, which as we will see apply to baptism as well. In verse 12, God refers to it as “a sign of the covenant between me and you.” It is a sign – a symbol – a reminder of the covenant relationship between God and his people. It is a sign of and a reminder of the promises as well as the obligations of the covenant relationship. It was to help the people remember that they were in this covenant relationship with God – that God was their God and they were his people.

Remembering and forgetting are spiritually significant in Scripture – at least when it comes to remembering or forgetting that we are in a relationship with God – that God is our God and that we are his people. We are to live consciously in the light of God's promises and of his requirements for us. We are not to forget that we belong to God with all that that means for our lives. One of the purposes for the sign of the covenant is to keep our covenant relationship with God top-of-mind.

And it is fitting to ask whether our baptism does actually do this in our lives. It is fitting to ask whether we ever think about our baptism and what it means. God has given it to us as a reminder and so in order for it to fulfill its purpose it must remind. So, we should think about it once and a while or every day and one of the purposes of witnessing a baptism is to remind us of our own baptism.

Now it is worthwhile to reflect on the way that God speaks of circumcision in verse 10. He says there, "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised." Later on, God refers to circumcision as a sign of the covenant, but here in verse 10 he says that circumcision is his covenant. This is striking language and worth pondering. It suggests that there is a very close connection between the actual covenant and the sign of the covenant. The relationship is so close that God actually identifies them. He is saying that circumcision is his covenant. The New Testament uses the language of baptism in a similar way. It says for instance in Romans 6 that we are baptized into Christ. In both cases there is a very close relationship between the sign and what it signifies.

It is hard to get at what this really means. One thing it clearly does not mean is that everyone who receives the sign of the covenant is really and truly and everlastingly saved. As we have been seeing from our study in the book of Romans vast numbers of the people of Israel were not saved, but their males had all been circumcised. There is no one to one connection between circumcision and salvation or baptism and salvation. On the other hand, for true believers, there is a very close connection between the symbol and the reality. The symbol is of an existing reality so much so that the New Testament can speak of baptism as the washing away of sins.

We want to give the signs of the covenant all the weight that Scripture gives them without going beyond that. It helps to realize that it is possible to be a member of the covenant people without being truly saved. And even for such people, or people about whom we are not sure, it is still the case that the sign is a sign of something that is real. All covenant members are in a real covenant relationship with God. The

promises are made to them and sealed with an oath. The sign of the covenant symbolizes their obligation to keep the covenant by obedience. So, there is a very close relationship between the sign and the thing signified even in cases where the person is not a true believer. And it seems that that is what God means when he says in verse 10, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep ... every male among you shall be circumcised.”

Finally, with regards to circumcision, we will consider the relationship between the sign of circumcision and the passages that speak of the circumcision of the heart. For instance, in Deuteronomy 10:16 God says to his people, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” And in Deuteronomy 30:6 we read, “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.”

What these verses show us is that circumcision was a call to obedience and that it included a promise of God to circumcise Israel’s hearts. Circumcision was both a reminder of God’s call to the people to circumcise their own hearts – that is to turn from sin and to love and serve the Lord, but also a reminder of God’s promise to grant circumcised hearts to those who would look to him for that cleansing.

The same can be said of baptism. It is at the same time a command to wash the sins from our lives and a promise from God to wash the sins from our lives both in forgiveness and in renewal of life.

The New Testament sometimes calls us to cleanse our lives. 2 Corinthians 7:1 Paul writes, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” But baptism is also a sign of what God promises to do. In Ezekiel 36:25 God promises, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you.”

To summarize the covenant relationship between God and his people is a formal relationship of promises and obligations. God promises to be our God with all that that means, and we are required to be his people

with all that that means. Within this covenant arrangement there are both people who are saved and who are not saved. It is possible to break the covenant from our part and therefore to forfeit its blessings. To receive the blessings that are promised, we are required to keep the covenant which at the end of the day means trusting and obeying.

In the Old Testament, the covenant promises are promises of offspring and becoming a great nation and the land of Canaan. But these are promises of salvation. As the history of salvation unfolds it becomes more and more clear that these promises are fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in the salvation that is in him. One of the passages that makes this clear in Romans 4:11 which says that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” This verse shows that the promises sealed in circumcision were promises of salvation and the obligations that circumcision was a sign of were the obligations of faith and repentance, the call of the gospel.

This is why we believe that circumcision is replaced by baptism. The meaning is essentially the same. There are other verses and lines of argument, but this is one of the most clear. In Romans 4:11 Paul calls circumcision a sign and a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith. Baptism is a sign and a seal of the very same thing.

So, we can study a passage like Genesis 17 and apply what we learn to ourselves and to baptism. Circumcision, which Paul tells us is a sign and a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith must be administered to children. Children of believers are born into the covenant relationship with God. That covenant relationship has promises that are confirmed with an oath but also requirements that must be obeyed. Genesis 17 emphasizes both the promises and the requirements. Genesis 17 tells the story of God commanding the sign of circumcision and it introduces the language of keeping the covenant.

Baptism then is a sign of the covenant relationship with God and as a sign it is a constant reminder that we are in covenant with God and that we can trust God to keep the covenant, but we are required to keep it as well. Baptism is a constant reminder to us that we belong to God and that God requires us to walk before him and be blameless. God has

given us this sign as a constant reminder. He has given it to us to remind us again and again that we live by unbreakable promises and we live under the obligation to keep the covenant from our side. Let us take it a practice to regularly think about our baptism so that it can function in our lives as God intends for it to function.