

Scripture Reading: Genesis 17

“9 And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; 11 and 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 child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. 13 He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

Abraham and the Promise of a Son

A Chiastic Structure in the Book of Beginnings
Taken from The Literary Structure of the Old Testament by David A. Dorsey

- A: Introduction: journey to Canaan & the promise of descendants (12:1-9)
- B. Abram lies about Sarai in Egypt: God protects her in foreign king's court (12:10-20)
- C. Lot settles in Sodom (and Abram settles in Hebron) (13:1-18)
- D. Abram intercedes for Lot and Sodom militarily (14:1-24)
- E. Promise of a Son: from Abram himself (15:1-21)
- F. Ishmael's birth: promise to him (16:1-16)
- G. CENTER: Jehovah's covenant: Abram's and Sarai's names changed; Circumcision instituted; promise of a son reiterated (17:1-21)
- F'. Ishmael and Abraham circumcised (promise to Ishmael) (17:22-27; 17:18,20)
- E'. Promise of a son: from Sarah herself (18:1-15)
- D'. Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot in prayer (18:16-33)
- C'. Lot flees Sodom, which God destroys, settles in Moab (19:1-38)
- B'. Abraham lies about Sarah in Gear; God protects her in a foreign king's court (20:1-18)
- A'. Conclusion: birth of Isaac (and tension resolved) (21:1-7)

Understanding the Covenants & Promises made with Abraham

Category of the Covenant or Promise	Abraham Must Receive the promises by Faith	Fulfilment of these promises prior to the birth of Jesus	ALL Fulfilled in Jesus Who is the Seed!	Fulfilled in history after the Ascension of Jesus
Abraham to have a multitude of decedents	Abraham has NO decedents because his wife is barren	Abraham has many decedents from Ismael, Isaac & even children of Keturah	Jesus is the true seed [singular] of Abraham	All who put their faith in Jesus are the true sons of Abraham so his decedents continue to grow
Abraham is to be the Father of many nations & bring forth kings	Abraham has no title and holds no office	Abraham's line brings forth Kings & nations: Twelve tribes of Israel, twelve nations from Ismael & others	Jesus is the King of Kings!	The Saints are called Kings and priests and reign with King Jesus!
Abraham is to inherit the land of Canaan	Abraham owns no property and is a sojourner	Israel conquers the land of Canaan and it grows until the Kingdom of Solomon	Jesus is the Creator & owner of all the earth	We are commissioned to bring ALL the nations of the earth under the feet of King Jesus!

"The Covenant Sign of Circumcision"

This morning I will begin to consider two important portions of this chapter where we will learn about circumcision today and obedience next week! *[I need four sermons instead of three].*

While studying circumcision this week, I was struck by something that Pastor Uri Brito shared when he observed that, "One of the beauties of redemptive history is that though our sins are great, God's history of grace is greater." As we have been studying the Book of Genesis we have learned how it lays all the important foundations for this grand story of salvation and in the past two weeks we have seen how the 17th chapter is central to a very long portion of this Book of Beginnings!

- I have included the study materials from last week again to help us see that fact and how Jesus is central to all the promises given in this covenant of salvation.

Thus we read at verse nine, "And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations."

The first thing we must remember is that God is NOT calling Abraham to some sort of works based salvation that he would be sure to fail... Remember how God cut the covenant in chapter 15 by passing through the pieces of the animals by Himself alone! *[seen again with the lamb at the sacrifice of Isaac]*

Abraham believed God by faith and now the sign of this covenant is given: We see Abraham given the command for circumcision, and carrying it out, but it is not some work he must do in order to be righteous before God!

Remember how the Apostle Paul explained this in Romans chapter 4: "7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

- That is the Gospel that was preached to Abraham!

9 "Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. 13 For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith."

So Paul speaks of righteousness, faith and a seal: As Robert Candlish rightly points out, the righteousness is that which God provided in his Son, faith is the "believing with the heart unto righteousness that we see in Romans ten and the seal which comes last, is something different from both.

It is added as a token or pledge, a confirmation and assurance of the covenant transaction with which it is associated. It does not itself constitute or make the covenant on the part of God.

Pastor Candlish continues saying, "Nor is it that which, on my part, gives me an interest in the covenant. What makes the covenant, as the ground or reason of it, is the righteousness of God...

"It assumes or takes for granted the validity of the previous transaction.

It proceeds upon the supposition, first, of the covenant being itself made and ratified, exclusively on the footing of the perfect righteousness of God; and, secondly, of its being made over to me, and made practically and personally mine, exclusively through faith.

Then comes in the seal, closing, and, if you may so say, crowning and consummating the whole procedure, -- the entire negotiation of my peace and my fellowship with God."

Now that may sound more like the way a Baptist preacher would speak about baptism rather than circumcision, and if it does it is because we have some very confused thinking in our time.

So before we dig into this, lets take a moment to evaluate some of our thinking...

- What comes to mind when I mention circumcision: Grace or law?
- When we talk of circumcision is it faith or works that pop into your mind?

Now I ask you to ponder these questions because there is a great deal of confusion about what we did with little Frederick this morning or the Batels children yesterday in many corners of the Church today and I want to argue that it comes in large part from a major misunderstanding of circumcision in general and this chapter in particular.

Thinking about circumcision as more related to the Law than to grace or to works rather than faith is understandable for a couple of reasons. First we know how the faithless Jews made it an object of their national pride! And then the early legalists of the Church, whom the Apostle Paul sets straight in Galatians, had made it a work-based or merit-based requirement for salvation!

- Now, as a warning for us today, we should remember that the very same errors can, and sadly often are applied to baptism as well!
- Thus, I would argue that understanding Biblical circumcision is very important!

As I prepared to make these points I did a bit of research on the use of the words related to circumcision and found it very instructive [always good for a pastor to keep on learning!]

I want to quickly review some of it to help us see how wrong-headed much of the thinking is today, not only “out there” but in our own minds as well.

My first surprise was to find that the word ‘circumcise’ only appears eight times in the Bible AND four of those are in the New Testament. Those who want baptism to be a different sort of sign for the new covenant in contrast to the old covenant sign of circumcision would assume that the Old Testament talks of circumcising the flesh and that the New Testament is where we find a new concept of circumcising the heart! However when the word circumcise is used in the New Testament ALL four occurrences speak of circumcision in the flesh and in the Old Testament two speak of the flesh and two of the heart!

You have the word ‘uncircumcision’ used seven times in the New Testament to refer to the Gentiles and in the Old Testament the word ‘uncircumcised’ is used 35 times to speak of those outside the covenant and 12 more in the New Testament again referring to Gentiles.

As we see in our morning text, God did use this sign to set apart his people so it should not surprise us to see the terms circumcised and uncircumcised referring to the Jews on the one hand and Gentiles on the other. There is one text that speaks of Joshua circumcising the people.

This leaves us with the two most common words, circumcision and circumcised... Circumcision is used 26 times... Anyone want to guess where they occur:

- Only once in the Old Testament!
- Again it is used either to describe the act of circumcising the flesh or national Israel.

That leaves us with circumcised which occurs 42 times and is the most balanced of these terms with 23 in the Old Testament and 19 in the New Testament!

However, TEN of those 23 Old Testament occurrences are right here in the 17th Chapter of Genesis, so I hope you can see that it is pretty important to get this right!

To think that circumcision is simply Old Testament and baptism is New Testament is a faulty assumption:

- If we put all those variations together you have 131 occurrences with 64 in the Old Testament and 67 in the New!

As I did last week, I want to argue again that this 17th Chapter is central to our understanding that Jesus is the fulfilment of ALL the Covenant promises AND how Jesus is the object of ALL the covenant signs & seals.

So we read in verse ten: “This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; 11 and 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 child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. 13 He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.”

I want us to quickly look at three very important truths from this passage:

- The sign is NOT the covenant!
- Circumcision is a bloody sign
- Circumcision is an 8th day sign.

Just as we know is the case with baptism, circumcision is a sign of the covenant and not some work that we must do to earn God’s favor! We know this is true from what we have learned here in Genesis AND from the clear teaching we have from the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. I already touched on the dramatic way that God demonstrated how this covenant of salvation works back in chapter 15: It was God alone who passed through the pieces of the animals. We also saw that the Apostle Paul makes it very clear in Romans chapter four that Abraham was given the gift of faith BEFORE he was circumcised!

Our Baptist brothers want to argue that the pattern of the New Testament is that we see repentance and belief and then the giving of the sign of baptism!

- These chapters from Genesis along with Paul’s clear interpretation of what they mean certainly confirms this truth!

However, you won’t find them using it as part of their argument for believer’s baptism because they have no way to get around the fact that Abraham was instructed to not only take the sign himself, but to give it too his infant children!

- Thus they must try to divide circumcision and baptism making one a sign of national identification and the other a sign of grace.
- I hope that we learn this morning that they are BOTH signs of God’s Grace!

Of course they would quickly argue that the New Testament does speak about the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and how the New Covenant has better promises! Thus to them circumcision is the sign of the Old and baptism the sign of the New!

We will certainly concede that point but not because there are two covenants of salvation:

- God has only one covenant of salvation and it has always been a covenant of Grace!

There have always been signs related to that covenant and Pastor Wilkins has rightly pointed out that there have always been two signs:

- A sign of entrance into the covenant and a sign of continuance or communion in that covenant.

This was true even before the fall of man, where Adam entered the Garden as a righteous person via his creation... And he could have communed with God at the Tree of Life as God walked with him in the Garden of Eden! After the fall God immediately gave Adam and Eve the promise of salvation and God's covenant of salvation comes again with two signs: Two before the coming of Jesus & two after His coming.

- **In both cases a sign of entrance and a sign of continuance or communion.**

Here in the Old Testament we have circumcision as the sign of entrance and Passover and other sacrificial feasts as the communion with God. Obviously in the New Covenant we have a new sign of baptism as the sign of entrance and the Lord's Table as the place where we commune with God.

- **So the question to ask is whether the covenant changed and if not then why the change in the signs & seals?**

To help us answer that question we will consider our second lesson about circumcision: What is common about both signs that we see here in the Old Covenant?

- **Yes, they are both bloody!**

The cutting away of a man's foreskin is a bloody event and the lamb had to be slaughtered to hold a Passover feast or any of the other sacrifices.

- **So where is the blood in the New Covenant?**
- **Yes, it is the blood of Jesus!**

The blood of Jesus that was first shed at his own circumcision as a baby and later given for us as the payment for our sins in His suffering and death. It is what these Old Covenant signs and seals pointed too and now it has been accomplished by the Lamb of God Who came to save His people from their sins: The Lamb, that all those sacrificed lambs pointed to!

- **The sacrifice of Jesus was a once for all sacrifice and thus bloody signs would longer be appropriate.**

And that brings us to our third lesson: When was circumcision to be given to a new covenant son?

- **On the eighth day!**

What is the significance of the 8th day? Kids, we need to think about the math a bit here: If we are working on a seven day week, as we have since the Creation, then what is the 8th day?

- **It is the first day of the next week!**

It is the day that we gather for worship and we do so because it is the Day of Resurrection: Jesus was raised on the first day of the week, or the 8th day! Yes, the work of Jesus was how God would carry out His covenant of salvation: The covenant that the sign of circumcision pointed to and sealed unto the people of God.

- **A bloody sign for a bloody sacrifice, but a sign given on the 8th day pointing to the victory of Jesus!**

In the New Covenant we have again two sacraments or signs and seals:

One of entrance and one of communion. But they are no longer bloody signs, but rather we have the water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion:

- **Symbols of life and living, washing and feasting, yes signs of power and victory!**

Now if what I am saying is true it should not surprise us to see these signs spoken of in both the Old and New Testaments!

As we have seen from my brief word summary that is exactly what we do see and the Apostle Paul relates both signs to the victory of Jesus because they are both signs that point to God's gracious salvation which we have in Jesus!

And yes it is why we baptize the covenant children that God blesses us with because God has always promised to be a God to us and to our children. The Jews who gathered on Pentecost would have known Genesis chapter 17 very well and thus would have known exactly what Peter meant when he declared that the promise of salvation, now with a new sign and seal, was for them and their children!

So I trust I have given you some things to think about when we consider circumcision and how it relates and contrasts with baptism. I trust it will help in those places where the Apostle Paul speaks of circumcision and baptism and how they relate... But we must remember that the center of ALL the signs and seals that God has given is Jesus and the victory He has won!

I want to close with a passage from the Apostle Paul that confirms this truth, and points to the importance of the 8th day symbolism of circumcision...

Colossians 2:9 “For in [Jesus] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; 10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. 11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, 14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. 15 Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. 16 So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

Communion Meditation: Psalm 97

**8 Zion hears and is glad, And the daughters of Judah rejoice Because of Your judgments, O Jehovah.
[the name that Jesus claimed]**

9 For You, Jehovah, are most high above all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods. 10 You who love Jehovah, hate evil!

**He preserves the souls of His saints; He delivers them out of the hand of the wicked. 11 Light is sown for the righteous,
And gladness for the upright in heart.**

12 Rejoice in Jehovah, you righteous,

And give thanks at the remembrance [or memorial]of His holy name.”