

The Life of Abraham

God's Covenant with Abraham

Genesis 17:1-27

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Scripture

Two Sundays ago, I started a new series of sermons on “The Life of Abraham.” We are examining only selected incidents from Abraham’s life.

Last time we examined God’s call to Abraham when he was still known as Abram and living in Ur of the Chaldeans. In obedience to God, Abram, at seventy-five years old, left family, clan, and land to follow God’s call to go to Canaan and claim the promises God made to him in Genesis 12:2–3, “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

However, a number of challenges threatened the promise to Abram. There was a famine, a trip to Egypt, the accumulation of wealth there, the return to the Promised Land, war between kings, and the rescue of his nephew Lot, to name just a few. After about ten years, God reaffirmed his promises to Abram in Genesis 15:1–21, and made a covenant with him that Abram would not be childless. At this point, however, Abram’s wife, Sarai, sought to resolve the problem of her barrenness and gave her maidservant Hagar to Abram to bear a child on her behalf. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram (Genesis 16:16).

Thirteen years later, when Abram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to Abram and reaffirmed his covenant with him.

Let’s read about God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1–27:

¹When 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.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.”

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.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.”

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. (Genesis 17:1-27)

Introduction

Occasionally, I receive a phone call from parents who wish to have their child baptized. After a few questions, I learn that the parents do not attend church regularly but think that their child ought to be baptized. They want their child baptized because that is the custom in their family. Or, perhaps, they may want their child baptized because of the superstitious belief that a baptized child will not go to hell if he or she should die. On the other hand, there are some people who neglect baptism and do not rightly understand the nature and necessity of baptism. And, further, many Christians who have been baptized rarely think about it again, and

do not put into practice what *The Westminster Larger Catechism* urges in answer to Question 167, “The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long....”¹

Our neglect of God’s sign of the covenant is not restricted to our generation. Indeed, God’s people in the Old Testament at various times also neglected to apply God’s sign of the covenant. The great Old Testament leader, Moses, failed to circumcise his own son (Exodus 4:25). After their exodus from Egypt, the entire nation of Israel did not circumcise their sons during their 40-year journey in the wilderness (Joshua 5:7).

So, let us go back to the beginning and see where God established the covenant sign of membership in his covenant family.

Lesson

Genesis 17:1-27 shows us that God Almighty established with Abraham and his seed an everlasting covenant with the stipulation that they receive the sign of membership in God’s covenant family.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Concept of the Covenant (17:1-2)
2. The Content of the Covenant (17:3-14)
3. The Consequences of the Covenant (17:15-27)

I. The Concept of the Covenant (17:1-2)

First, let’s look at the concept of the covenant.

Genesis 17:1a says, **“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty....’”** The Lord introduced himself to Abram as **“God**

¹ *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

Almighty,” *El-Shaddai*. This is the first time in the Bible that God is called *El-Shaddai*. Hebrew scholars are not exactly sure how to translate it. One commentator says, “The etymology of *El-Shaddai* is obscure, but wherever it is used in Genesis, it is associated with divine omnipotence, his ability to fulfill his promises and especially to make the barren fertile (28:3; 35:11; 48:3).”² Another commentator adds a further insight, “But I notice that the Hebrew word that lies at its root is *shad*, and *shad* means the female breast. I suppose it could also be applied to a male breast, a strong one by which a person might be protected and defended. But it really means a female breast, in this case suggesting that God is the one from whom Abram was to draw nourishment.”³ In a very tender way, God was encouraging Abram to know that the God who was speaking to him was powerful, omnipotent, able to make the barren fertile, and from whom Abram should draw nourishment.

God then went on to say in Genesis 17:1b-2, “**...walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.**” God announced to Abram that he was going to establish a covenant between them. The *Catechism for Young Children* teaches that a covenant is “an agreement between two or more persons” (Q & A 22).

This is not the first time that God made a covenant. We read about God’s covenant with Noah after the Flood (in Genesis 9:9-11). And we also read about God’s covenant with Abram in Genesis 15:1-21. James Montgomery Boice writes:

The covenants of God have three features. First, they are *unilateral*, that is, “one-sided.” This means that the covenant comes from God alone, not from God and man getting together to decide what the conditions of their future relationship are to be. We do not bargain with God in the same way we might bargain over

² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 169.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 584–585.

the sale of a house. Second, the covenants are *eternal*. That is, God does not change, and since the terms of the covenant come from him and are maintained by him, the covenant does not change either. The author of Hebrews makes this point clearly, saying, “Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged” (Hebrews 6:17–18). Third, the covenants of God are *gracious*. If the promises of God depended on anything to be found in human beings, they would never have been established, for we deserve nothing. That they are established is due solely to God’s good favor.⁴

Note also that God calls it **“my covenant”** in verse 2. In fact, God speaks of **“my covenant”** nine times in this chapter (17:2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19, and 21). It is God’s covenant. He is the one who initiates this sacred agreement.

II. The Content of the Covenant (17:3-14)

Second, let’s examine the content of the covenant.

In response to God’s words, **“Abram fell on his face”** (17:3a). Abram lay completely prostrate before God in an act of complete submission and subservience. Then, while Abram was lying face down before God, **God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 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”** (17:3b-5).

It is very significant that it is in the context of establishing his covenant with Abram that God changed his name. The name **“Abram”** meant “exalted father.” His new name, **“Abraham,”**

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, 581.

meant “father of a multitude.” So, from now on, whenever someone called his name, they were saying, “Father of a multitude,” and Abraham was reminded of God’s promise to him.

But more significant than the reminder of God’s promise every time his new name was spoken was the fact that his name, **“Abram,”** was changed to **“Abraham”** by the addition of “ha.” That is one breathy sound, especially in Hebrew. The significance of that is in Hebrew the words for “breath” and “spirit” were the same. It is *ruach*. Moreover, a breath was associated with God’s Spirit, and vice versa. In fact, the same is true in Greek. The Greek word for “breath” and “spirit” is *pneuma*. So, when God changed the name of **“Abram”** to **“Abraham,”** he was really adding his own mighty breath or Spirit to **Abram**.

But that is not all. The name for God in the Old Testament is Jehovah. It is composed of four Hebrew consonants that are called the Tetragrammaton, commonly transliterated into Latin as YHWH. Originally, Hebrew was written with consonants. Vowels were added to the written text almost a millennium later. So, James Boice notes, “If that is right, if that is the way the name of God is to be taken, then God was not merely breathing some of his breath into Abram, imparting, if you will, some of his spirit to Abraham (though that is also true). God was joining his name (which signifies all that God is) to Abram’s. Abram, the human ‘[exalted] father,’ becomes Abraham—‘Abram plus Jehovah, the mighty God.’ With God, all things are possible.”⁵

So, what does this mean? Twenty-four years earlier, God first promised that he would make of Abraham a great nation (Genesis 12:2). No child had come from Abraham and Sarah. But, once again, God reiterated that Abraham would be **the father of a multitude of nations** (17:4b), which is repeated in verse 6, **“I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.”** What God was saying

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, 584.

in effect to Abraham was, “Abraham, I will tell you how I am going to make you the father of a multitude. You are going to do it through my power. By changing your name to Abraham, I want you to know that I am joining my name to yours, and I am also giving you my Spirit. You will be able to be exceedingly fruitful because of me and my Spirit empowering you.”

As that truth sunk into Abraham’s mind, he must have thought to himself, “Well, God, if that is what it means to be in a covenant relationship with you, then do whatever you want with me. I trust you. I know that you are working out your promises in me for your glory. I want to live my life in dependence on your Spirit and strength every day of my life.”

At this point, **God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you”** (17:9-11). Although God established the covenant, Abraham had to respond by carrying it out. He did so, as we read in Genesis 17:23, “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.”

Boice makes a very important point. He says, “Abraham’s obedience did not mean that he was contributing anything to the covenant. In fact, it meant the opposite. The cutting away of the flesh meant the renunciation of human effort, which arises out of the flesh, and the willingness to bear about in the body the mark of the individual’s identification with God.”⁶ So, circumcision was the old covenant sign of identification with God, of initiation into

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, 585.

and membership in the covenant community.

The new covenant sign that corresponds with the old covenant sign of circumcision is baptism. Baptism, the sign of identification with God, of initiation into and membership in the covenant community, symbolizes three things. It symbolizes (1) dying to the past and to self, (2) rising to newness of life in Christ, and (3) identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in baptism that Christ's name is given to us (just as God's name was given to Abraham in Genesis 17), and we say to the whole world that we are now to be known as Christians.

III. The Consequences of the Covenant (17:15-27)

And third, notice the consequences of the covenant.

The blessing of God's covenant with Abraham now actually spilled over into blessing to others. In verse 15, **God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name."** Sarai, Abraham's wife, received a parallel blessing to her husband. Her name was changed to **Sarah** by God, who added his Spirit and name to hers. Then God also promised the barren, old woman another blessing in verse 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."**

In addition, though Abraham's son, Ishmael, was not God's promised son to Abraham (Ishmael was the product of Abraham's failure of faith), he too would be fruitful. God said to Abraham in verse 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."** And, of course, the Arab people descended from **Ishmael**.

Verse 22 says, **"When he had finished talking with him,**

God went up from Abraham.” We read in verses 26-27, **“That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.”**

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the incident of God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1-27, we should keep God’s covenant by applying the sign of covenant membership to all its members.

Today, some people question whether infants are to be included in the new covenant and receive the sign of baptism. The New Testament nowhere declares that little children are to be excluded. If eight-day-old infants were included in the old covenant, one would expect that infants are also included in the new covenant. God’s grace is not less in the new covenant than it is in the old covenant.

The silence of the New Testament about not baptizing infants is powerful. After Pentecost, Jews would have been stunned to learn that their children were no longer to receive the sign of the covenant. That is why the New Testament does not address the question because the assumption is that the sign would of course now be applied to infants as well.

Finally, notice that Abraham was circumcised “that very day.” When people come to faith in Jesus Christ, they should receive the sign of covenant membership in God’s family without undue delay. And similarly, when God gives children to his people, they too should be baptized without undue delay.

May God help all of us to obey as Abraham did. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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