

The Covenant Story: Abraham

Series – What Is the Gospel?

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We continue to walk together through the scriptures as we learn and ask the question, “What is the gospel?” It is a question that can be answered from several different perspectives, but chief among those perspectives is a theme which ties all of the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation together. And as seeing what the Gospel is through the lens of covenant, we're looking at over these next several weeks the covenant story. Last week we look together at the covenant story as it is revealed in Noah. This week we look together at the covenant story as it is revealed in the life of Abraham.

There are two parts—or three parts, if you think about it—to this work of the covenant story in the life of Abraham, but it's only one Sunday, so there you go. We've heard it already this morning when God calls Abram from the land of the Chaldeans, and he in Chapter 12 responds by faith, trusting the Lord. Then in Chapter 15 we see how God shows his promise and his grace to Abram individually, as a person, in Chapter 15, as he gives of the promise and he ratifies it through the sacrifice of animals, which was the common way of making a covenant in the Bible. That if you were to have an agreement with another you were to take animals, you were to split them in half, and you were to walk through them—each one of the signatories to a promise or to a covenant. That if you failed to uphold your side of the bargain then what would happen to you is the same as that which happened to the animals.

But of course in Genesis 15 what we learn of is God's gracious provision. That instead of allowing Abram to be the one who walks through these animals that have been separated on either side of the road, God does unilaterally. He not only makes the promise or makes the covenant to Abram, but he also says I'll be the one who upholds it, showing grace to Abram, which then strengthens the faith and trust that Abram had in the Lord. And it shows God's grace—that God has commands, stipulations, but he also gives us the grace to obey.

But then in Chapter 17 we see the third part of this grand covenant story in Abram, where his name becomes Abraham. And now this covenant is not only just made with Abram, it is now made to a nation and to many nations. It is a covenant story which would continue to be revealed progressively, as we've walked from Genesis 1 and 2 and 3 all the way to Noah and now to Abram. What's happening is God is showing his electing, sovereign, providential love. And here he brings it about in the life of a man, and from a life of a man into a family, and from a family to a nation, from a nation to many nations.

So what are we to learn from what happens here in this story? You'll see **The Promise, The Stipulations, The Confirmation. The Promise, The Stipulations, The Confirmation.** First let's hear from God's word, Genesis 17:1-14, with the outline in mind.

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, ²that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” ³Then 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.” [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Now, Lord, we ask from the unfortunate title by which we know it, the Old Testament, may your word—be it in the old or be it in the new—may it come to us afresh because of the work of your Holy Spirit. May we receive it as a gift. May we receive in it a way in which we can grow in our faith and grow in what it means to understand the Gospel. We pray that by your Holy Spirit you will help us to respond in a way that demonstrates your grace doesn't just forgive us, it means to make us a new people. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Help the teacher. Amen.

So let's look together at these series of verses as we understand what is on promise here. For we've seen in the past, last week when we looked at Noah, that the promise and the sign—the sign being the rainbow, the promise being that God would no longer destroy all flesh by way of flood. And it would be a sign not to confirm that God might forget and therefore he remembers. No, it would be a sign visible to us as God chooses to remember actively that I will no longer flood the earth by way of removing all flesh. Even though God was grieved by the sin of man, God demonstrates his grace, and gives us something brilliantly glorious that we can see as a sign of his grace. But we must remember that it is an awful thing that happened at the flood, which is why, perhaps, we should think twice about hanging above our cribs of our children the little things about Noah and the ark. It's an awful thing that God judged righteously the sin of the earth and sin of men and women. But by his grace he demonstrates that instead of giving up, he renewed.

And from there we see that even the sign of the covenant of grace given in the rainbow, even God's preservation of Noah and his family, was not enough to stem the tide of sin in the heart of human beings. By Chapter 11 of Genesis we learn that man continues to rebel against God

and tries to remove God from the equation by building the tower of Babel so that he can have a common language to prove greatness, ability, success, provision. Now not that I want to make too fine of a point on this, but have you ever thought about the Internet as a sort of tower of Babel? How many of us feel unsuccessful when we don't have access to the things that the Internet provides us. It's become a common language around the world for commerce, success, entertainment. Just a curious thing. I'm not saying the Internet's bad. It certainly has bad things in it, because it comes from our hearts. We continue to want to demonstrate: *God, we got this.*

But God in his grace continues to demonstrate that he means to make known and to reveal to the world that he is a covenant God who means to be our God, and we are to be as people, and he wants us to drink deeply of his grace. And we see it first in **The Promise** given here to Abraham. First you'll see the promise as it's revealed in relationship. That despite man's sin, despite Abram's sin—he didn't come from a righteous clan. He says to Abram, verse 1: “When Abrams was ninety-nine years old...” by the way, after he had sinned against God by trying to procure for himself an offspring through Hagar. Despite that, God in his grace says, “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, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.’ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ‘Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.’”

God's promise first to Abraham—despite his sin—is one of relationship. And while it is palpably obvious from the text that that's what he's giving him, we so easily just glance over it. God had demonstrated his faithfulness to Abram over and over and over again. Yet Abram in his doubt thought maybe God doesn't have this. And so he tried to figure out a way to get an offspring, because that's what God said. And yet God says to him Chapter 17: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” You how hard it is for us just to forgive each other, and we're all sinners. Look at how gracious and loving the Father is. If you're ever tempted in thinking that anything Abraham has—and you can easily misread this from the New Testament—that anything Abraham has is because God foresaw righteousness in Abram, that is dispelled by reading this. He had no righteousness in and of himself, but in trusting the Lord, the Lord gave him righteousness. It was a righteousness that came by faith alone—nothing in Abram. God in his grace demonstrates: I will be your God. And he says that to you in the every day. Hallelujah. I am your God.

But not only do we see the promises revealed through relationship, it's also revealed through names. Oh, how we love good names. It's important here. Listen to the names that are revealed here. Verse 1: I am God Almighty. The Hebrew word there that is translated ‘God Almighty,’ the name that God reveals himself to be here is *El Shaddai*, which literally means that God is sufficient: the All-sufficient One. It would become Job's favorite name to call God. It becomes very pronounced throughout the book of Genesis. And it generally falls at the intersection of God's people worrying, *Is God going to come through?* And the Lord says, ‘I am the Lord God Almighty.’ So isn't it interesting. At the point in which he reveals that ‘I want to have a relationship with you, Abram,’ he does so with a name that says, ‘I am the sufficient one.’ And he says that to you and to me: I am the Lord God Almighty. Which is why we must be careful in using the name of the Lord, because only he is the one who has revealed how he should be named, and he says, ‘I am sufficient.’ You see where the grace comes from? You see where the righteousness comes from? Do you see where the faithfulness comes from? It comes from his

very name, because it is a picture of his character, of his person.

But then he says, because he is the sufficient one, he removes from Abraham the name Abram, which literally meant 'high father.' And now, he says, I will call you 'high father of many' or 'of a multitude.' A-bra-ham: three words, one meaning. You are a ninety-nine year old man, and I am about to make you a father of a multitude. Because I am *El Shaddai*, the All-sufficient One, and from you will come kings and many nations.

And that's the third thing about the promise: relationship, a new name, but then he has blessings. It's just easily enumerated. Right now you have your wife. Yes, you have now this illegitimate child. And yet I will make you a father, properly, of nations. And from you will come kings of those nations, and I promise that I will give you a land.

So it is a remarkable thing that the Lord, who is God, who says I am the All-sufficient One—in many ways we could really go deep in biblical theology and say even in the name God, Himself, he says: I am all of these blessings; I am the Father of all; I'm the Father of many nations—God the Father. I am the King. I am the Lord. But I am also the one who is your refuge. Yet God in his grace gives us a tangible way and gift to understand God's character. He gives him a family from which will come nations and kings and a land that they can call their own.

God's gifts are never meant to be a substitute for the giver. The gift always points to the ultimate gift, and that is the Father. And just before we get any further in his text—so you see relationship, names, blessings. And before it goes any further, he goes right back to relationship. He says this in verse 8: "And I will give to you and to your offspring after you a land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." He comes right back to relationship. The land is great; kings and nations—great. But it begins and it ends and it's all the way through suffused with relationship. That is the promise.

But then there are **Stipulations**. It's the second part, and this text is very clear. And something that we must understand in our own minds as we look at the nature of what God does in the covenant, and this is demonstrations of God's covenant of grace. You see, grace is a biblical term that says we receive from God that which we do not merit. We receive God's favor, his love, his mercy. And we receive it not from anything that we have done on our own, we receive it unconditionally, because we cannot nor will we ever be able to merit it. God's promises are absolute, but they do have conditions, and it is stipulated for us here in the text.

First, it is conditionally based upon Abraham walking before the Lord blamelessly. And as it says over and over again: Keep my covenant. And those after you—your offspring—ought to keep my covenant. But remember, it's being given by the one who All-sufficient. And so it's not expected that Abraham will be blameless—in other words, sinless. Surely he will [not] be. But God in his sufficiency, by faith, gives Abraham access to his grace that he has poured out on him.

There are conditions. And those conditions are seen to be that he is to be circumcised, and not only him, but any male that is born into his home or any of those who are bought from a foreign country, whether they be Israelites (which they will become), or they be Gentiles. All are to receive the sign. And if they fail to keep this covenant, this part of the stipulation, they

will be cut off. The implication is that God calls Abraham and all of his offspring to walk in his ways, by faith, but in failing to do so, they will be cut off because of this. God's promise is absolute. His grace is unmerited, unconditional grace, and yet unconditional grace brings about a changed life. It's not that the changed life merits anything back to get grace, but that grace absolutely will produce a new people. And they are to demonstrate it not by sinlessness, but by faith in the one who brings about the covenant. And when they fail, they have access to *El Shaddai* for forgiveness. This is God's stipulation: Walk in my ways by faith, but in failing to do so, you will be cut off.

But then finally we have **The Confirmation**. After God has announced both the promise and the stipulations there is a confirmation. And that confirmation here in Chapter 17 of Genesis begins the outward sign of circumcision. And when he says here, in the following verse he says: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised." And he says, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." It is to be this: It is to be a sign and a seal of God's promise.

But how are we to understand what it means by 'sign'? Now on the one hand we could go to the New Testament, and in Romans Chapter 4 we hear these words in Chapter 4, verse [9], that is speaking about this very text in Genesis, when Paul writes:

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but those who walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. [Romans 4:9-12, ESV]

So many have read that text, including within our own Reformed Presbyterian tradition, and teach Genesis 17 and even Romans 4 that the reason why he received the sign and seal of circumcision was because it was signing and sealing righteousness in Abraham. But indeed, that is not what is happening here. Because if that were the case, then somehow Abraham would have merited God's goodness and grace. But rather, in Genesis 17, what we see here is that the sign of the covenant confirms that the truths and promises have already been given by God. It is an outward sign of God's faithfulness, not of Abraham's faithfulness. It's not a sign that Abraham is faithful; it is a sign that God is. Because note this: If it were a sign that Abraham was faithful, then why was Ishmael not considered among the covenant, but was cut off? What about Esau? If circumcision is given because faithfulness is seen, then how do we explain Saul before he becomes the Apostle Paul? Therefore the sign of circumcision is pointing to something else. It's not pointing to the faithfulness of the recipient; it's pointing to the faithfulness of the one who has placed it on the recipient: *El Shaddai*, the Sufficient One.

But it's also a seal. It is a seal confirming that the one who receives the sign belongs to another. Seals were all throughout the Old Testament and, indeed, into the New Testament, because it

was used as a sign, an outward seal, of ownership. And that makes us very uncomfortable. The reason why is because as Westerners we don't like thinking about the fact that we don't belong to ourselves, but we belong to another, and that we belong to another because he found out us. We want to in some way...We want to be good Americans. We want to earn our own stripes, we want to pull up our socks and pull up our boots and tie 'em up and go to work. But that's not the way the Gospel of Grace works. It's not the way the Gospel works at all. God, in his gracious, loving, sovereign, electing hand pours out his grace on whomever he chooses. And we don't know who that is. But all who receive the gift of faith and trust in the Lord Himself receive the promises that are signified by the sign and sealed by the one who is the one who makes the covenant. That is to say, that God says to Abraham, 'I will make you a father of many nations' and he gives them a sign.

And I think—without going into a lot of detail—I think you get that the sign is directly tied to having children. So that every time Abraham would remember it's not through him that the sufficiency comes. It is through God Himself. It is not his faithfulness that seals God's goodness to him, rather it is the one who has poured out his grace on him, that is, God Himself. And that his responsibility, his responsibility, is to respond in trusting faith. That the God who has given these promises, who has given these stipulations, now has given a sign and a seal that he doesn't belong to himself, he belongs to God. I will be your God, and you will be my people.

Now what in the world does this have to do with us? It has everything to do with us because of what we've already participated in this morning. If you recall the questions which I read to the Simons family, it says this:

Do you acknowledge that although our children are born with sinful natures and therefore need to be saved from condemnation, that they are by virtue of the covenant of grace children of the covenant, and in accordance with the instruction and promises of scripture it is our privilege and duty to have them baptized?

Do you promise to diligently instruct them in the principles and truths of the Christian faith? Do you promise to pray with and for your children, acquainting them with their need of a Savior and teaching them the plan of salvation and the principles of the Christian faith?

So far, so good, but then there's this last question.

Do you promise to endeavor by all means of God's appointment (his sufficient appointment) to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (in his ways) and when they have come to an age of discernment to place their confidence (their faith, their trust) in the Savior, to encourage them to make a public profession of their faith (their trust), fulfilling their part of the covenant of grace?

Did you notice that distinction? Their part. We have a part to play. Abraham had a part to play. But the part to play was the act of faith. And we learn from the New Testament, as Paul teaches, faith itself is a gift. So God, in his sufficient glory, so demonstrates his powerfulness to Abram, that it is absolutely irresistible. Yes, you are God. And he believes by faith. And so God calls him to himself; God gives him the promises, the stipulations, of his covenant; and he says

this will be the sign and a seal, not of your faithfulness, but of mine. But know this: My faithfulness will make you a new people. My grace will make you a new people. Our response, our part, in the covenant of grace is what I said last week. The principal acts of saving faith in Jesus Christ and God Almighty, the Sufficient One, is to accept, receive, and rest upon Jesus Christ alone for salvation. So what was Abraham's part? What was he to teach his offspring? To accept, receive, and rest alone in God Almighty, *El Shaddai*. And they received the sign and seal.

But praise be to God, in the New Covenant that sign and seal has been replaced by a better sign and seal. Just as circumcision was to bring about purification—ultimately that led to the circumcision of the heart—so, too, this water has nothing magical in it, but it points to the washing with water of the blood of Christ for the removal of the crimson stain of sin. But the receiving of the sign doesn't mean in that moment that one is able to receive it. But it is promised. And as we teach our children, as you are taught as an adult, to walk in the ways of the Lord, therefore by faith we receive that which is signified and sealed by this water. Do you see? It's signified and sealed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

So as we believe by faith, God surely makes us his own. He calls us his precious ones. And the All-sufficient One says I love you. I am your God, and you are my people. And I will forgive you of your sins, and I will provide for you. I will provide for you a land, and that land will ultimately be realized when Christ returns in the new heavens and the new earth. Though we are sojourning now, and the Lord is about restoring all things, we await the revelation of the new heavens and the new earth, because the All-sufficient One has made his promise. It is absolute. It is eternal. And it will reach its ends.

And this picture of what happened in the life of Abraham, in receiving a new name, it was all backed up by the one name, God Almighty, *El Shaddai*, which ultimately would come from Abraham—all those who believe. Because from Abraham we go to Christ, and in Christ we find the better Abraham. We find the one who never had to offer sacrifices for his own sins. We find the best Lord, the best King. We find the ultimate revelation of *El Shaddai*, the Sufficient One, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And our response is do we trust him? By grace, as we trust, the Lord makes us new. Are you doubting this morning? Do you think you have a better way than the Lord? Do you have hope, but you can't see it? Or do you worry that tomorrow things will go sideways? The Sufficient One says you belong to me. And the sign and seal of my goodness is through Christ alone, by faith alone, in God alone. May the Lord give you grace today. May he give you hope in the All-sufficient One.

Let's pray. Now Lord, we ask that you would make us a people for yourself, recipients of your great grace. Enable us, we ask, to respond by faith, because your grace is greater than all of our sin. And we doubt. We doubt that you are the Sufficient One. We believe we have a better way. Lord, remind us today that your ways are above our ways. And just as surely as you gave Abram a new name, you give us new names as children of God through Christ. Help us to rejoice in this. May you give us grace in our doubt, hope in our darkness, strength in our weakness. In Jesus' name, whose name is above all names, at whose name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess—Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.