

# Why Do You Go To The Old Testament To Prove Infant Baptism?

Genesis 17:7

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The question arises from some when the subject of infant baptism is discussed, Why do you go to the Old Testament to prove infant baptism? In other words, since baptism is the sign of the New Covenant shouldn't we simply focus our attention upon what the New Testament teaches about baptism?

When Christ preached and taught and when the apostles preached and wrote letters to the churches that were being established, what was the primary, authoritative source to which they continually appealed for the doctrine and practice they brought forth? It was to the Old Testament Scriptures that they regularly appealed (whether to establish marriage in Matthew 19:4ff; whether to establish the resurrection of the dead in Matthew 22:29ff; whether to establish the first and great commandment in Matthew 22:36ff; whether to establish justification by faith apart from works in Romans 4; whether to establish unconditional election in Romans 9:10ff; whether to establish gifts of the Spirit in Ephesians 4:7ff, and many more examples might be given).

In fact, the Lord Jesus commands the Jews to search the Scriptures (the Old Testament Scriptures) if they would have eternal life and would know of Him (John 5:39). When the Apostle Paul preached in the city of Berea, what he preached was received by the Jewish Bereans and taken to the Old Testament Scriptures to determine the accuracy of what he preached—and the Bereans were commended by the Holy Spirit for doing so (Acts 17:11). Remember what Paul declares in 2 Timothy 3:15-17. The Scripture that Paul and the Church possessed in its entirety was the Old Testament Scripture.

Thus, since it is to the authoritative Old Testament Scriptures to which Christ and the apostles regularly appealed in order to establish New Testament doctrine and practice, let us likewise seek God's wisdom in understanding those to whom baptism is to be administered in the New Testament by first considering what the Old Testament teaches, and then we can move to briefly consider what the New Testament teaches.

Let us then turn to our text in Genesis 17:7 and consider three characteristics that are essential to the covenant God made with Abraham: (1) The Covenant with Abraham Promised Spiritual Blessings; (2) The Covenant with Abraham Was Established with Believers and Their Children; (3) The Covenant with Abraham Was an Everlasting Covenant.

**I. The Covenant with Abraham Promised Spiritual Blessings** ("to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee" Genesis 17:7).

A. The reason I turn to the covenant God made with Abraham is because the Apostle Paul does so when discussing the spiritual blessings that belong to Gentile believers as well as to Jewish believers (in Galatians 3). You see, in God's plan to save sinners through Jesus Christ, God made that plan known by way of gracious covenants He established with undeserving sinners and by way of promises made to undeserving sinners in these gracious covenants. In fact, these gracious covenants in the Old Testament (whether the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, or the Davidic Covenant) are called by Paul "covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12), that is, the essence of these covenants was not works of men in order to be saved, but promises freely offered by God to be saved.

1. The gracious covenant God established with Abraham is noteworthy because the Jews were descended from Abraham as his natural posterity. The Jews at the time of Christ and of the apostles

believed their mere physical relationship to Abraham by way of God's covenant and by way of the outward sign of that covenant (circumcision) entitled them to the salvation of God. Rather than understanding that the only righteousness of which God would approve (since the fall of man) was the righteousness of Christ received by faith alone, they sought to establish their own righteousness through their physical relationship to Abraham and through their imperfect obedience to God's law. In so doing, they turned the covenant with Abraham into a covenant of works to obtain the blessings God promised to them rather than a covenant of grace to receive by faith alone the blessings promised to them.

2. Just as many within churches today take the promises of salvation in the New Covenant and likewise turn this gracious covenant into a covenant of works by proclaiming one must be baptized in order to be justified, or one must be obedient to the commandments of God in order to be justified, so did the Jews at that time. All those who are justified will want to be obedient to God's commandments as an evidence of their love for, gratitude to, and submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, but they do not do so in order to be justified, but rather they do so because they have been justified by grace through faith alone in Christ alone.

B. As we now turn our attention to Genesis 17:7, consider with me the spiritual promise made to Abraham and to his seed after him. God freely and graciously promised, "to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee". It was God that graciously appeared unto Abraham and initiated this covenant with Abraham and his seed—it was not Abraham and his seed that first came to God and sought out a covenant with Him. Sinners do not seek God (Romans 3:11—"there is none that seeketh after God"); God seeks out and saves sinners (Luke 19:10—"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost").

1. When God freely and graciously promises to be a God unto

Abraham and to Abraham's seed after him, God promises to be the God of salvation through the gospel of Jesus Christ to Abraham and his seed (Galatians 3:8). This spiritual blessing that is promised is the essence of the covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 17:7), with Israel (Leviticus 26:12); with David (2 Samuel 7:24), with believers under the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 6:16), and with all God's redeemed in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:3,7).

2. By essential I mean, that which is absolutely necessary for the covenant to exist (I can live without an arm or a leg, but I cannot live without a heart—a heart is essential to my existence in this earthly body). The Old Covenant may exist and live among God's people in the Old Testament without being in the land of Canaan (as was true of Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Jacob [Acts 7:5; Hebrews 11:13], as was true of Moses who could not enter into the land, as was true of Daniel and Ezekiel who lived in captivity), but the Old Covenant could not exist or continue to live among God's people in the Old Testament without the gospel promises made in it. Thus, the spiritual blessings promised in the Old Covenant (and in particular, the covenant made with Abraham) were essential to the existence and life of that covenant.

3. For, dear ones, the essence of the Old Covenant is the gospel, just as the essence of the New Covenant is the gospel. The essence of the Old Covenant was not material blessings of the land of Canaan. Yes, God promised material blessings to Abraham and to his seed, but material blessings were not the essence of that covenant—the gospel of salvation was the essence of that covenant. Likewise, there are material blessings promised in the New Covenant, but material blessings are not the essence of the New Covenant (Matthew 6:11; Matthew 6:33; Philippians 4:19).

4. That the essence of the Old Covenant with Abraham was the gospel of Jesus Christ is also revealed in the declaration of Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist) in Luke 1:71-75.

5. Lastly, we know that the essence of the Old Covenant was the promise of spiritual blessings because of the outward sign God gave to Abraham and his children (Genesis 17:11). Please note (and I emphasize) that this outward sign did not signify primarily a national and ethnic identity, or carnal and material blessings, but according to God's own testimony circumcision signified spiritual, gospel blessings (Romans 4:11; Deuteronomy 30:6). Thus, if the sign of the Old Covenant (circumcision) represents the spiritual blessings of the gospel, the Old Covenant is essentially a spiritual covenant.

**II. The Covenant with Abraham Was Established with Believers and Their Children** (“And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in thy generations”; “to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” Genesis 17:7).

A. We now move to the next characteristic about this covenant God made with Abraham: the Old Covenant was not only made with Abraham who believed, but also with his infant children who could not yet express their faith in the promises of the covenant.

1. This is clearly the case because the same sign of circumcision that was applied to Abraham was to be applied to male infants, the females being represented by their male head in the family (Genesis 17:11-12). Now God (not man) instituted and required that the same outward sign of gospel promises (circumcision) be applied to the infant children of believers as was applied to believers (Romans 4:11). This did not guarantee the salvation of these infants who were circumcised (consider Ishmael, Esau, etc.), nor of adults who came from outside the covenant people of God and were circumcised as proselytes. However, circumcision did mean that God **objectively and visibly** made promises of salvation to the infants of believing parents (and to adults as well), and that these infants as they matured must receive by faith the

promises of the gospel made to them and represented in circumcision if they would have the spiritual blessings of the gospel represented by circumcision (the same was true of adult proselytes).

2. So when one objects to infant baptism on the basis of the child not being able to understand or express faith in the gospel, or not being able to understand the meaning of his/her baptism, it must be remembered that neither could Isaac understand or express faith in the gospel, nor could he understand the meaning of his circumcision (though spiritual blessings were objectively and visibly promised to him by God in his circumcision). In other words, what the objective and visible sign of circumcision (and of baptism) declare is that God promises the benefits of the gospel, but those benefits of the gospel can only be received by faith alone in Christ alone. **Promises objectively made are not necessarily promises subjectively received** (spiritual promises were objectively made to both Jacob and Esau, but spiritual promises were subjectively received only by Jacob through faith alone).

B. The Holy Spirit has left His own testimony that all the men of Abraham's house (or household) were circumcised (according to Genesis 17:27). In other words, God called Abraham and all those who followed in the faith of Abraham to practice **household circumcision** (which included believing parents and infant children). There were to be no exceptions—in fact, those infants who did not receive the sign of God's gracious covenant (circumcision) were to be viewed as cut off from God's covenant. You see, dear ones, the sign of God's gracious covenant and promises of God's gracious covenant go hand in hand (whether in the Old Covenant or in the New Covenant).

C. This outward sign of spiritual blessing was applied to the infant children of Israelites for over 2,000 years until the coming of Christ, where we clearly see that Christ institutes another sign of God's gracious

covenant with His people in the New Covenant—baptism (Matthew 28:19). Just as circumcision was the Old Covenant sign of gospel promises through Christ, so likewise baptism is the New Covenant sign of gospel promises through Christ. The sign has been changed from a bloody sacrament that only males could receive to a bloodless sacrament that males and females alike could receive.

D. Let's now skip ahead about 2,000 years from the time in which the Old Covenant was made with Abraham, where we find the Apostle Peter preaching the gospel on the Day of Pentecost to the Jewish men and proselytes who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this feast. These were likely men (not families) because it was the men of Israel that were commanded by God to appear at three feasts each year (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). Also note that the form of address to these Israelites is, "Ye men of Judea" (Acts 2:14); "Ye men of Israel" (Acts 2:22); "Men and brethren" (Acts 2:29). What did these Jewish men hear?

1. They heard that Jesus Christ whom they had put to death was raised from the dead, that Christ had ascended into heaven, and that as God's Christ (Messiah) He had been seated in heaven as the Lord and Ruler over all. They also heard from Peter that the miraculous display of speaking in languages of the world that the apostles had never learned was a blessing of the Holy Spirit from the reigning King, Jesus Christ.

2. Then their hearts and consciences were pricked by the Holy Spirit, and they cried out in Acts 2:37, "What shall we do?"

3. Peter responds with these instructions in Acts 2:38. The men of Israel who were gathered there and had heard the gospel message about Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God, must respond to it in order to be saved: they must **repent** (which includes turning to Christ in faith) and **receive the outward sign of baptism**, which as a sign points to the promise of the forgiveness of sins in the New Covenant (Acts 2:38). It is always the pattern that

adults who are coming from outside God's covenant people (the Visible Church) and into God's covenant people must first make a profession of faith before they receive the outward sign of the covenant (whether Abraham, whether proselytes in the Old Testament, whether Paul, whether Simon the magician, whether the Philippian jailer, whether the Ethiopian eunuch, whether Lydia, or whether the Israelite men that heard Peter preach the gospel on the Day of Pentecost).

4. Now we come to the stated reason for the sign of the New Covenant in Acts 2:39. The first word in our English text is "for". Why are these Israelite men to repent (believe) and be baptized? "For" (or because) the promises of the gospel (including the gift of the Holy Spirit) are offered to them in the gospel they have heard.

a. God's promises in the New Covenant have been proclaimed to these men who did not believe in Christ, now they are called to repent (believe) and to be baptized. But not only are the promises offered to these adult Israelite men who heard the gospel preached, but as they repent (believe) and are baptized, the promise of salvation (and the Holy Spirit) is also to their children, which promise is signified in the New Covenant by baptism. Just as Abraham believed and Isaac (8 days old) was circumcised; so likewise the same promise applies to believers (like Abraham) and to their children (without qualification of age).

b. We must interpret this promise in light of how these Israelites would have understood the promise to their children (at least male children and female children by representation). Unless Peter clearly excluded infant children or disqualified them from the promise of the New Covenant, we should not understand their exclusion any more than these Israelite men would have understood their exclusion. For this promise is simply the same promise made to Abraham (that God would be a God to Abraham who believed and to his children—even infant children).

5. If this promise only refers to the adult children of believing



parents (and not to infant children of believing parents), why is the relationship of the children to their parents even mentioned at all. If only the believing children of believers are intended by Peter, there is no reason to mention parents and their children, for regardless of the parental relationship or lack of parental relationship, the promise is only for those capable of exercising faith (in such a case the family relationship has nothing to do with it). Had the Apostle Peter only intended the promise of believing children who would later come to faith, he could not have given the promise **presently** (at the same time) to both fathers and to their children. Peter does not say that the promise is presently to you Israelite men standing before me, and shall be later to your children if they believe. Peter says, “For the promise IS unto you and your children” at the very same time (and that same promise is proclaimed to all Gentiles who are called by the word).

6. Just as there was **household circumcision** (which included infant children in the spiritual sign of the gospel in the Old Covenant), so likewise there is **household baptism** (which included infant children in the spiritual sign of the gospel in the New Covenant). This is a good and necessary inference to make, unless the Lord clearly reveals in the New Covenant that infant children have been excommunicated from God’s covenant relationship in a household which they always enjoyed for thousands of years. Thus, when Lydia and her household were baptized, there is no biblical reason to exclude infant children from that household, especially when we do not exclude them from many other passages of Scripture that use the same Greek word for “household” (literally “households of faith” Galatians 6:10—infant children were in these “households of faith”).

**III. The Covenant with Abraham Was an Everlasting Covenant** (“for an everlasting covenant” Genesis 17:7).

A. Note that the Old Covenant made to Abraham is everlasting in its spiritual promises. And incidentally, so is the New Covenant (Hebrews 13:20). Two everlasting covenants cannot mean that these covenants are essentially different (a covenant of works and a covenant of grace), but rather that both covenants are essentially the same (one Covenant of Grace) fulfilled and fully realized in the work of Jesus Christ.

B. Finally note that it is not only the covenant and the promises that are everlasting to both professing believers (like Abraham) and their infant children (like Isaac) in Genesis 17:7, but also that it is the sign of the covenant in the flesh (whether circumcision or baptism) to both professing believers (like Abraham) and their infant children (like Isaac) that is a sign of that everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:13). The outward sign of spiritual and everlasting promises to those who profess faith and to their children in the Old Covenant of grace was circumcision; the outward sign of spiritual and everlasting promises to those who profess faith and to their children in the New Covenant of grace is baptism. Dear ones, it is not an everlasting covenant if the promises no longer apply to infant children or if the sign of those promises no longer apply to infant children. It is in reality not an everlasting covenant, but is rather a broken covenant (which God cannot do and will not do).

C. So in summary, the Covenant of Grace which God made with Abraham proclaimed spiritual promises, just like the New Covenant of Grace. The Covenant of Grace which God made with Abraham included parents who professed faith and their children (even infant children), just like the New Covenant of Grace (“the promise is unto you and your children” Acts 2:39). The Covenant of Grace which God made with Abraham was everlasting (as was the application of an outward sign to professing adults and their infant children in their household), just like the New Covenant of Grace (household baptisms).

D. This is a time for great joy and blessing, but it is also time to give ourselves to sober reflection and meditation in regard to our own baptism, in regard to our child's baptism, and in regard to our embracing by faith the promises made to us and to our children. This is a time for covenant renewal in our lives. For we belong to the Lord and the Lord belongs to us by covenant.

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