



Christ Reformed Community Church

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“God’s Covenant of Grace, Part 2” Genesis 17:1–14

Well, this morning, we want to return back to our study in Genesis chapter 17 and look at the second part of God’s covenant that He made with Abraham. In order to do that, I want you to stand to your feet and allow me to read, beginning in verse 1 of Genesis 17, and I’ll read down through verse 14. This is the text we began studying last week and that we will conclude, Lord willing, this morning. Now hear God’s Word:

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. 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. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 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. 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.”

And 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. 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, 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. 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.”

May God bless the reading of His Word. Please be seated, and let’s go to Him in prayer.

Our great God, we come before You with open Bibles. We also come before You with open hearts, Lord, asking that You would speak to us by Your blessed Holy Spirit in Your Word. Father, we pray that we might feel the weight of the authority of Your Word; that we might sense, Lord, the application of Your Word in our own hearts, in our own lives, Lord, all the families represented this morning. Grant us Your grace. Grant us Your peace, Lord, a peace that passes all

understanding, knowing that if Your Word tells us something, we must do it; knowing that if Your Word comforts us with the truth, we can cling to it. So, we pray all of this for Your glory and for our good. We ask it in the blessed and holy name of Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

It is always interesting to me to see the difference between driving in on Sunday morning to worship the Lord here at the church, and Monday through Friday when I see what goes on outside of this building, not only in the parking lot outside with all of the cars and all of the businesses and those sorts of things, but also the traffic going up and down County Road 210, which I assure you looks quite a bit different Monday through Saturday than it does on Sunday morning. It was this past week that I was coming back from the little gas station over here, walking back to the church when I saw an individual back his car into a \$130,000 truck that was brand new. And of course, I witnessed this occur, and he immediately saw what he had done and began to pull forward, opened his door and got out of the car and began looking at the truck. And so, I sort of just kind of in a laid-back way walked by and said, “Ah, well, I see the damage that you have done,” and basically kept walking my way. Well, when I turned my back, I saw that he was beginning to knock on the various businesses in this complex to seek and find who the owner of that truck may be, and so, I thought that was a good thing and began to continue walking my way into the church, but before I knew it, I heard a door of a car shut, and I turned around and saw this individual driving away.

I immediately entered one of the businesses close by. I know the owners of the business quite well, and I said, “This might be a shot in the dark, but someone just hit a brand-new truck out here. Does it belong to anyone who is here?” and they told me initially that it didn’t belong to anyone there until they went back and found one of the patients who were visiting this doctor, who was a man of about six-foot-five, roughly 340 pounds, who said in a deep voice, “That is my truck, and it is a new truck.” Well, I began to lead him out to where the accident occurred. Of course, he knew where he was parked, and he and another man began yelling at the man who was driving away to stop. Well, the man was stopping. He was pulling into a parking spot to get out to knock on other business doors, but this big six-foot-five fellow was having none of that, and a big dispute arose in the parking lot that got very loud, and words were used that I cannot use this morning. And I found myself in the middle of all of this, and so finally, I just sort of walked away to allow things to cool down a little bit, and I said, “You know what? I’m going to go back and try to fix this.” And so, I walked over to the smaller man, who was not six-five, and I said, “I just want you to know that I saw what you were trying to do. You were trying to find the owner of the vehicle, and I want you to know that I went to get the owner of the vehicle to help the situation.” Well, the other man gets off the phone, the six-five guy, whose \$130,000 truck had been damaged, and I knew this was risky, but I did it anyway. I said, “I just want you to know that he was trying to find the owner.”

Well, before you know it, the situation was completely relaxed, and before I left, these two men who were once enemies were now friends. The one smaller man happened to be a cop, and he told me, “You did the right thing by seeking the owner. I was not going to drive away, but you did the right thing.” In one sense, I sort of just found myself in that situation, we could say, as a mediator, a go-between between two men where a trespass had been committed, and they were enemies. And in the same way, God through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ has provided a Mediator; a Mediator of the covenant of grace, the head of the covenant of grace where Jesus Christ represents God to man and represents man to God. He is the go-between. He is the one that brings peace

between sinful man and holy God. He is the one who was crucified on the cross of Calvary, shedding His blood in order to bring us access to the Father. It is by faith that we are justified. It is by faith that we are declared righteous and have peace with God. That is what Paul says in Romans chapter 5, and what is Paul speaking about in Romans chapter 5 other than covenant theology? He’s speaking about the fact that Jesus Christ is our federal head. Jesus Christ is our Mediator. Jesus Christ is the go-between between holy God and unholy sinner.

As we discussed these matters of the covenant of grace, we mentioned last week that this covenant of grace, which is realized in human history through various covenants, whether it be the covenant that God made in the garden and the promise that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, or the covenant that God made with Noah that He would never flood the world again; the sign being the rainbow in the sky. Or the covenant that God made with Abraham that we’re looking at here in Genesis 17, or the covenant that God made with David, or the new covenant that we see was sealed by the blood of Christ; the new covenant of which we are celebrating this morning, as we partake together of the Lord’s Supper. Regardless of which administration of these covenants there are, it is all one large covenant of grace, which flows from a covenant that took place in eternity past that we referred to last week as the covenant of redemption. It is that bond and pledge that took place between the three members of the Godhead in which the Father was the originator of that covenant, the Son was the executioner of that covenant, and the Holy Spirit was the applier of that covenant in which the Father sent the Son into the world, John 3:16, to die for sinners; and a covenant in which the Holy Spirit seals, as the Holy Spirit regenerates God’s elect people.

That covenant of redemption manifests itself in the covenant of grace, and part of the covenant of grace, one of the administrations of this covenant of grace is found here in Genesis chapter 17. God is making a covenant with Abraham. It’s important to understand that Abraham was a pagan. There are some people that will make the argument that Abraham was not only a pagan but that he was a pagan priest. He was called out of Ur of the Chaldeans. Abraham was not Jewish until God made him the father of a brand-new people. Abraham was essentially a gentile. Abraham was just like everybody else, and God in His sovereignty made a covenant with Abraham, piggybacking on the covenant that He made in the garden that the seed of the woman, the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. That is why in all the language that we read here in Genesis 17, there is a lot of talk about offspring and children because it is from the loins of Abraham that the offspring, that the seed of the woman would come to crush the head of the serpent and to undo the curse of sin, to be our Mediator, to be the surety and head of this one covenant of grace to redeem God’s people. And in looking at this, we saw that this, of course, takes place according to the secret counsel of God, going back all the way in eternity past. We looked at just a couple of verses to remind us of this. We read, for example, in 2 Timothy 1:9 that *“God [who] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of Savior Christ Jesus.”*

According to the eternal purposes of God and that covenant of redemption, it was determined that Jesus Christ would be sent. He would be manifested in this world as the surety and head and Savior of His people. He would be the Mediator, and that is exactly the type of thing that God is promising to Abraham in Genesis chapter 17; that these covenants of grace are not to be separated from one

another. For example, we saw last week that when Moses received the law of God and when God made a covenant with Moses—we refer to it as the Mosaic covenant—this was not an undoing of God’s covenant of grace with Abraham. We know that Abraham believed, and it was counted unto him as righteousness. Paul is clear about that in Romans chapter 4. So, when Moses comes along, and there is a law given, it’s not as if God is saying, “Salvation used to be by grace alone through faith alone, and now it is by obedience to the law.” That is not what God is saying, and in fact, Moses understood that. The people of God understood that because we read in Psalm 105 that:

*[God] remembers his covenant forever,
the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant.*

The same covenant that God made to Abraham was passed on generation after generation, culminating in the forming of the nation of Israel where they were made into a nation on Mount Sinai, given a law, given prophets and priests and kings. God had remembered His gracious covenant. And so, throughout these covenants that we see throughout Scripture, culminating in the new covenant when Christ comes is this one covenant of grace. God did not save His Old Testament saints a different way than He saves New Testament saints today. It has always been by grace alone through faith alone and Christ alone, and there has always been one people of God. That has not changed, whether you are in the Old Testament or you are in the New Testament; and Genesis 17 makes those things abundantly clear. Now, we have said that there are three parts to this covenant of grace, and we looked at the first one last week. We saw, number one then, the sovereignty in the covenant’s activation, the sovereignty in the covenant’s activation.

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old,” verse 1 says, “the LORD appeared to [him]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.’” And verse 3 says, “Then Abram fell on his face.” This is not Abram coming to God. This is God sovereignly coming to Abraham. This is God sovereignly communicating and activating and validating the covenant that He had already made in chapter 12 and in chapter 15 and in chapter 13. He is telling Abraham that he can trust in God’s covenant promises. At this point, Abraham has committed a sin. He has gone to Hagar, not Sarah, to have a child—not Isaac yet but Ishmael—and he was satisfied with the fact that Ishmael would be the promised heir. The problem with that was he wasn’t trusting fully in the promises of God. God had said quite literally and quite clearly that Abraham’s seed would be as many as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore or the dust on the earth. Abraham trusted in the promise of God, but he began to think that maybe he understood the literal fulfillment of that because God had only given him one son, and Romans 4 tells us that he was about one hundred years old and as good as dead, reminding us that he’s in his twilight years.

He is trusting in the promise of God. Faith is there, but his faith needs strengthened. And so, God sovereignly comes to him, and He reminds Abraham that “I am the God of this covenant. I am the one that has made these promises. You need to trust Me,” and the way you trust Me is tucked away there in verse 1: “Walk before me, and be blameless;” that there is a sense in which Abraham must

respond in faith to the promises of God by walking uprightly and walking blamelessly. That is a walk of faith, and quite frankly, he had not been walking perfectly by faith because he had committed a sin with Hagar. He had committed adultery. He had violated God’s purpose that one man should be with one woman for all time. God did not give multiple wives to Adam. He only gave him one wife, and so Abraham has committed sin here, and God wants to remind him that this covenant has a conditional element to it; that His true people who He enters covenant with will prove their faith by their works that someone who is truly in covenant with God will walk blameless before God, will walk a holy life.

We said last week this means to have a constant regard for God’s Word as our rule and His glory as our end. True believers will prove their belief by their actions, by the way that they live their life. And, of course, there are many verses that bring this out even in the New Testament. Paul says, *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* Paul says, *“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,”* but remember, *“it is God [who works] in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* God is sovereignly appearing to Abraham. God has sovereignly called Abraham out of all of the other people in the world to be the one in which He would make His promises. Abraham was elect of God, and that is important to understand when we speak about the covenants of God. There is one elect people of God, and God is the one who chooses who He will save. God is the one who chooses who He will redeem. He only redeems one way, and that’s through the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why we preach the gospel unhindered to everyone because that’s the only way people are saved, and we don’t know who the elect are, but the elect are those God has chosen. The elect are those to whom God has appeared to. The elect are those who fall like Abram on their face in worship to God and prove their faith by walking a holy and a blameless life, and that’s the first part of this covenant—the sovereignty in the covenant’s activation.

Secondly, I want you to see with me the scope of the covenant’s administration because the sovereignty in the covenant’s activation reminds us that God is the one that initiates it, but the scope of the covenant’s administration reminds us that we have responsibility in responding to the sovereign grace of God in saving us. And really, this is a scope. This is a large sort of thing to view that comes to us in three different dimensions. There is, first of all, an international dimension, which we see in verses 4–6. There is also a generational dimension, verse 7; and finally, an eternal dimension in verse 8. When speaking about the scope of the covenant’s administration, this one covenant of grace. We could put it this way; what is true about the covenants of God in the Old Testament? These three things will always be true: there is always an international flavor; there is always a generational flavor; and this covenant always comes with eternal ramifications. So, the words that God promises to Abraham come with them international dimensions, generational dimensions, and eternal dimensions. To put it simply, what God tells Abraham is true for you and I today in the new covenant. This is a staple of understanding redemptive history, understanding the people of God, understanding your salvation, and understanding the promise of the salvation of your own children. It is all found right here.

Now, notice the first dimension. We’re talking about the scope of the covenant’s administration. The first dimension is international, verse 4, *“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.”* So, all believers in every age are considered the spiritual

seed of Abraham. They have the same faith as Abraham. They are given the same promises as Abraham. They have the same salvation as Abraham. That’s why we call him “father Abraham.” He is going to be the father of a multitude of nations. Now, it is interesting to me in Matthew chapter 28 that Jesus gives the Great Commission in which he says, “Go into all the world and baptize the nations.” In the heart of God is a desire to save all types of people out of this world. In the heart of God is a desire to save both Jew and gentile. In the heart of God from the very beginning is to save from the least of them to the greatest of them on every continent, in every country, from every culture. The covenant that God is making with Abraham is not merely ethnic and Jewish and national. It is international. The promise in verse 4 is that he will be the father of a multitude of nations, and that reminds of Genesis 3 that the seed, the offspring of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. Of course, the nation Israel would be a large nation, and of course, the nation Israel would be the vehicle through which the Messiah or the seed of the woman would come, but God never intended to merely save the Jewish race. From the beginning, Abraham who wasn’t even a Jew because there wasn’t any such thing as Jewish people, was told by God, “My covenant is international in nature.”

So, if you flip with me over to Romans chapter 4, which we have quoted time and time again, we see, for example, in verse 16 speaking about the promise of salvation realized through faith. *“That is why it depends on faith,”* that is, the receiving of this promise, *“in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring,”* talking about Abraham’s offspring, *“not only to the adherent of the law,”* that is, the Jew to whom the law was given, *“but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham,”* that is, the gentile, who didn’t receive the law of God as an ethnic Jew because *“[Abraham] is the father of us all,”* verse 17, *“as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’—in the presence of God.”* Abram is in the presence of God in Genesis 17, and God has said in verse 4, *“[I will make you] the father of a multitude of nations,”* which by the way, was a reminder of what he said back in chapter 12 and verse 2, *“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.”* Or chapter 13 and verse 16, *“I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.”* Or chapter 15 and verse number 5, *“And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”*

You see, Abraham is not called a father because his seed was divided into many nations but because many nations were gathered into him. So, of course, from the loins of Abraham came Ishmael, which produced the Ishmaelites. From the loins of Abraham came the children of Keturah, but also from the loins of Abraham came Isaac and Jacob and the people of Israel. There were many nations that came from Abraham. Perhaps there has not been any man in the history of the world from which more people have come other than, of course, Noah, whose last name was Smith. *[Laughter]* And from Noah Smith came a number of different people, but from Abraham, many people were produced. It’s not that through his seed many nations would be divided but that through his seed, many nations would be gathered; that through faith, we become the sons of Abraham. And if you notice there in verse 5, God reiterates this: *“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.”* The title *Abram* simply means “exalted father.” And I imagine that every time Sarah called out to Abram, that it was discouraging because he only had one heir, Ishmael, not even from Sarah. And here, every time he hears his name *Abram*, which meant “exalted father,” he perhaps

thought to himself in his weakest moments, “What a sham! I’m no exalted father. I have one child.” And so, God in His condescending grace and love, changes his name from *Abram*, “exalted father” to *Abraham* “father of a multitude” to drive home to Abraham, “You can trust My promises.”

It's, as it were, that God is repeating these promises. It's sort of like a hammer beating down the loose boards of doubt in Abraham's heart and driving into him the type of faith that Abraham needs to have. Now, every time Abraham hears his name, it is not *Abram* “exalted father.” It is *Abraham* “father of a multitude,” and this is according to God's gracious promise. Oh, how gracious God is! Because you do know that Abraham was given a letter that is found in the title of God: *Jehovah*. It is the letter *H*. God adds the letter *H* from *Jehovah* to Abraham's name as if to say, “Every time you now hear your new name, *Abraham*, you will be reminded of *Jehovah*'s promises, of *Yahweh*'s promise to make from you a great people. A multitude of nations shall come from you.” And it is interesting when you study the Old Testament that there were times in the life of Israel when there were men such as *Jeconiah* who had the first syllable of *Jehovah*. *Jehovah* had His name partly in *Jeconiah*'s name, and God removes that first syllable, and he no longer is referred to as *Jeconiah*; he's referred to as *Coniah*. And God is clear in *Jeremiah* chapter 22 that because of this evil king's sin, who was the grandson of *Josiah*, God would remove from his name the very first syllable of *Jehovah* because he was not worthy of that, and we read about that in *Jeremiah* 22:

*Is this man Coniah a despised, broken pot,
a vessel no one cares for?
Why are he and his children hurled and cast
into a land that they do not know?
O land, land, land,
hear the word of the Lord!
Thus says the Lord:
“Write this man down as childless,
a man who shall not succeed in his days,
for none of his offspring shall succeed
in sitting on the throne of David
and ruling again in Judah.”*

No more offspring. The promises of God that came to his line were not fulfilled in his particular line. He is no longer *Jeconiah*. He is *Coniah*. *Jehovah* has cut him off, and in doing so, He has cut part of *Jehovah*'s name out of his very name. But here was Abraham; He is given a letter of *Jehovah*, *Abraham*, to remind him that his offspring will endure and that from his offspring will come—listen to this—many kings and nations. Verse 6: “*I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.*” Many kings. In fact, skip down to verse 16, “*I will bless her,*” that is, Sarah, “*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.*” Or chapter 35 and verse 11, “*And God said to him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.*” Is this not a reference to the fact that the King of Kings would come? Is this not a reference to the fact that there would be another covenant, one made with David in 2 *Samuel* 7 in which the son of David would rule over the throne of Israel forever? His would be an everlasting kingdom. He would be given power

and authority and honor and glory, and that is why the apostle Peter is not afraid to refer to the church in 1 Peter 2:9 as *“A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession [to] proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

To Abraham is given this promise that has an international dimension that God’s people were always meant to be made up of people from different nations, different colors, different tribes, different backgrounds—Jew and gentile alike. The starting point was simply Abraham, the father of the Jews, but God’s promises were way bigger than just saving one nation. It has an international dimension, and the scope of the covenant’s administration not only has an international dimension, but it also has a generational dimension. Notice with me in verse 7, God goes on to say, *“And,”* moreover, there is more to this, *“I will establish my covenant between me and you,”* now, let us slow down, *“and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you,”* let us slow down again, *“and to your offspring after you.”* There is a corporate element to the promises of God that include the offspring of Abraham. As I said, God worked through the physical seed of Abraham, through Isaac, through Jacob to create the nation of Israel from which the Messiah would come; and we read, for instance, in the New Testament that there is only one family tree. Turn with me to Romans chapter 11. Paul speaks about in Romans 9–11, a larger passage that we cannot look at in any sort of detail this morning; that his family tree has branches. And he speaks here to the gentiles; that is, gentile believers who have been grafted in, and he speaks now to these gentiles about the nature of this tree before they were grafted in, before the Spirit of God was poured out at Pentecost, before the nations began to really be evangelized into this tree and then grafted in.

Paul says in verse 16, *“If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.”* The branches of this tree are holy. The branches of what tree? The branches of the tree of Abraham, the offspring of Abraham, the physical, ethnic children of Abraham. They were called “holy branches” because through that tree, God was working to produce the fruit of the Messiah who would come from the family line of Abraham. Those branches are holy. Now, if you follow that line of thought and just go with me to the next book to 1 Corinthians chapter 7, we see something very interesting. Paul now is just speaking to the church, and he’s speaking in the context of a woman who has a husband who is not a believer, and Paul says, *“If you are a woman who has a husband who is not a believer, don’t divorce him if he wants to remain married to you.”* He gives a very interesting reason why, verse 14, *“For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife,”* now, note this comma, *“and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise,”* Paul says, *“your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”* Paul says it doesn’t take two believing parents in the new covenant for their children to be holy. It only takes one. If one spouse or one parent is a believer, then their children are considered holy.

Now, that does not mean that they are automatically saved, just like it doesn’t mean that the “holy branches” of Israel, the offspring of Abraham were all believers. Case in point, Ishmael. Ishmael was not a believer, but he was a holy branch. He was uniquely set apart by virtue of the fact that he was the son of Abraham. And it seems to me that what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 7 is that the parents who are believers in the new covenant who have children, their children are set apart as holy. They are connected to this family tree. And that would, of course, make sense of what

Paul would say, for example, in Romans 2 that *“No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”* Circumcision may have made those children in the old covenant holy or set apart, but it didn’t make them saved. And in the new covenant, a believer’s children are not automatically saved because they come to church or because they are baptized or because they received the Lord’s Supper. They are set apart from the world because they are receiving privileges that pagan children don’t receive, but they’re not automatically true believers. And Paul kind of repeats this throughout his epistles. He says, for instance, *“This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”*

So, if you go back with me to Romans chapter 11, we’ll see the fuller effect of this and the implications of this because we’re speaking about the generational dimension of the one covenant of grace. God has said in Genesis 17:7, *“My covenant [is] between me and you and your offspring...throughout the generations.”* There is a sense in which your children are part of these promises is what God is telling Abraham. So, now notice with me in verse 17 of Romans 11, *“But if some of the branches were broken off,”* that is, unbelieving Jews, though they were circumcised, though they were part of the people of God, though they were of the offspring of Abraham, Paul says some of them were broken off. And the reason they were broken off is because they weren’t true believers. But he says, *“If some of the branches were broken off and you,”* talking about gentile believers, *“although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree,”* In other words, there’s one tree of God. There’s one people of God. There’s one olive tree. God didn’t uproot the whole nation of Israel and burn it. He saved a remnant, and He grafted in gentile believers. And Paul says in verse 18, *“Do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’”*

And Paul says in verse 20: *“That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches,”* that is, Jews, *“neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”* Cut off. Now, how in the world can children considered to be holy be cut off? How in the world can people considered to be part of the olive tree be cut off? Well, here is the answer. Not everyone in the covenant is a true believer, but the promise of the covenant is to believing parents like Abraham and to their children. The condition is always faith. The condition is always belief; and where there is faith and where there is belief, there is the surety of the promise. Where there is not faith, where there is not belief, there is no surety of the promise. Circumcised or baptized matters not. Church member, non-member matters not; but the children are included generationally.

So, when we’re talking about God’s one covenant of grace, and when we’re speaking about the scope of the covenant’s administration, God is very clear to Abraham—turn back to Genesis chapter 17—that there is an international dimension and there is a generational dimension. These promises are for the children. *“I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations,”* and notice it is called, verse 7, *“an everlasting covenant.”*

Now, the last time I checked; everlasting means forever. So, since the children of Abraham are included in this covenant and the children of believers are included in the new covenant, this is generational. This is everlasting. This is eternal. This is non-negotiable. But there is a third dimension in the scope of the covenant’s administration. It’s not only international and generation but I just sort of said it, it is also eternal. Notice verse 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.”* Very interesting. Abraham was a sojourner. Abraham was a stranger. Abraham only received the title to the land. Abraham never entered the land, but it says, *“I will give to you and your offspring...the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan,”* that’s the Promised Land, *“for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God,”* the God of Abraham and His children.

Now, what in the world could be happening here for God to promise this to happen, and yet, there’s sense in which it didn’t happen? Abraham only received the title to the land. He never actually received the land. Well, the answer is found in Hebrews chapter 11. Turn with me to Hebrews chapter 11, which speaks about the faith of Abraham. And we’ll pick up in verse 8, which says that *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”* Again, verse 9, *“By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was,”* notice this, *“looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”* And notice this, verse 13, the author of Hebrews said, *“These all died in faith, not having received the things promised.”* What things promised? The literal land, the literal land, but they did receive the spiritual land.

“But having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is,” mark it, underline it, *“a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”*

God has just told Abraham in Genesis 17, “I will be your God. I will be their God; the God of you, the God of your children, the God of your offspring,” and Abraham believed all of that. Even though that physical land was promised to him, it was only a type of the heavenly blessings of God and the eternity of heaven that was promised to Abraham. And he believed in faith that heaven would be his. Do you see where I’m going with this? There is a spiritual dimension to the promises made in Genesis 17. This is not merely to an ethnic, physical, national people. These are spiritual promises that go generationally, and they are eternally so. It’s the promise of heaven itself, eternity itself given to the people of God upon the condition of faith, but to the people of God. And that is why Jesus said in John 8:56, “Abraham saw my day, and he rejoiced and was glad.” Abraham had faith in a land he couldn’t see. Abraham had faith—listen to this—in a son he never saw. That son, being the Lord Jesus Christ, who would descend from his loins, would

leave heaven and come to earth as the God-man and die for Jew and gentile alike because He came to save the world. The scope of God’s covenant administration has an international dimension, a generational dimension, and an eternal dimension.

And that takes us now to the third part. We’ve seen the sovereignty in the covenant’s activation, the scope of the covenant’s administration; now the sign for the covenant’s affirmation. Then this is very simple. In verses 9–14, the topic is one, and the topic is merely that of circumcision. Circumcision is the sign of God’s affirmation. God uses circumcision to validate His promises. Circumcision is essentially a sacrament. What is a sacrament? It is a visible sign attached to the promised Word of God, and that is what is given here. So, we read in verse 9, *“And God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.’”* There’s the offspring and generations mentioned again. *“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.”* Now, it’s interesting that he says that the covenant is circumcision. If you want to keep the covenant, you will circumcise your kids. In fact, in Acts 7:8, it’s called—well, let’s just turn over there because this is in the New Testament. In Acts 7:8, there’s the same sort of language that is being used in Stephen’s speech. Stephen says, *“He gave him,”* that is, the Jewish people, *“the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.”*

The covenant God makes with Abraham is called a covenant of circumcision, and it was imperative that Abraham circumcised his children in order to be obedient to God. This was a matter of obedience; the application of the sign confirming God’s promise. Listen to this from Deuteronomy 7, *“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,”* and how do you keep the covenant but through circumcision, through obedience. *“You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.”* What is included in the statutes and rules of the covenant? It’s circumcision. It’s what God is telling Abraham here in Genesis chapter 17. Notice that this is not an issue of faith on the part of the child. This is an issue of faith on the part of Abraham. *“Abraham, I’m giving you a sign to confirm your faith. Do you trust Me enough to obey me and have your children circumcised? Abraham, I’m giving you a sign that you can teach your children when they are of age that is a visible token of the word that I have promised to you.”*

So, God attests to promise His covenant blessings through the sign of circumcision, and in the first instance when it is applied to Abraham’s children, the sign of circumcision is not the answer to faith, but faith is an answer to the sign, and there is all the difference in the world to that. You say, *“Well, but Abraham believed God and then was circumcised.”* Of course he was. He was a first-generation Christian, but the covenant is generational, and it’s not as if the sign confirmed Abraham’s faith. That would be to get it backwards. The sign confirmed God’s promise, and what was the promise? That if Abraham had faith, it would be counted to him as righteousness. The sign confirms God’s promise. The sign does not confirm individual faith, and so therefore, the sign of circumcision was applied to children before there was any faith present because the sign is not meant to validate faith. The sign is not meant to be a profession of one’s individual faith and commitment to God. No, that is to get it backwards. The sign is meant to point to God’s

commitment to you—not your commitment to God—God’s commitment to you, promising on the condition of faith that He will save you. Not based upon anything that you have done but purely through simple faith and trust, He will declare you righteous, and the same thing is true in the new covenant. We are justified by faith, and we are declared righteous, but the sign of circumcision was validating God’s promises. So, we read, notice in verse 11, it’s repeated. *“You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.”* You see that it’s a sign of the covenant, and the covenant is wrapped up in the promises of God. It’s not wrapped up in individual faith. The sign is that of the covenant. Verse 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, 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.”

It has an everlasting dimension, an eternal dimension, we already saw. The sign is applied in an eternal and generational way, affirming the covenant promises of God, even to the point that the gentile slaves in Abraham’s household had to be circumcised as well because the covenant was with Abraham. Abraham had a mighty responsibility on his hands with all these children and all these servants. God was after the nations. God was after saving an international people, and so He even included the slaves who were gentiles, slaves from all sorts of other countries, like Ishmael, who was not going to be part of that Jewish line to be circumcised. And every Jew that came after would have circumcised their gentile foreigners, those from far off places, to be part of the covenant. Now, we need to pause here for a moment and ask why in the world, as awkward as it may be, would God require circumcision? You could read tomes of literature on how there were all sorts of people that practiced circumcision as some sort of religious rite, and that God is somehow copying off of all these other pagans. Hogwash. God is the one who invented circumcision. God is the one who made this the covenant sign, number one, because it’s bloody, and if you’ve ever had a baby boy, you know that it’s bloody, and you know that it’s painful just watching. What does the Bible say? Without the shedding of blood, there is what? No remission of sins. There was a lot of cutting and a lot of blood in the Old Testament, slaughtering this lamb, this sheep, this dove, cutting off foreskin, blood everywhere.

When Christ came, this rite was stopped partially because Christ’s blood was shed. No more blood needs to be shed, but it’s been replaced by another sign, and that is the sign of baptism, a much more pleasant experience unless you are the pastor who baptizes someone bigger than you and you almost drown in the water. *[Laughter]* Other than that, baptism is pretty non-threatening. It’s certainly not bloody. Why circumcision? Because it’s bloody. Why circumcision? Only applied to males because Christ is the covenant head of His people, and from the loins of Abraham would come this son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would be the head of His people. He would represent His people; the baby boy born in Bethlehem. And also circumcision because—and this is key—that is the organ of the body by which sinful humanity is produced. David said that: *“In sin did my mother conceive me.”* You are a sinner this morning not because you have sinned, although that’s true. You are a sinner because you’re a human being. You are the product of your parents, and in sin did your parents conceive you and me. We’re all equal here this morning in terms of our status being in the category as sinners. And then you study the fact that circumcision had to be done on the eighth day. Why was that? Many ancient commentators believe it’s because God wanted one

Sabbath to pass by. After the birth of this child, one Sabbath passes by, eight days. Why? Again, the blood pointed forward to Christ. The Sabbath day points forward to Christ. He is our Sabbath rest. He is the one that we’re longing for. He is the one that we’re looking for; and you say, “Well, that was a bloody rite, and there were many who had that bloody rite applied to them who were unbelievers. What about the branches cut off?” I’m glad you brought that up. Turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 10 because all along, this physical circumcision was meant to point to something spiritual. In Deuteronomy 10:12, we read this:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.

But then God says, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.” The same thing in Jeremiah 4:4. You stubborn, stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart, people. Just because you’ve had some bloody rite applied to you does not make you saved. It makes you a recipient of the sign of the attestation and affirmation of God’s promise that He will save a people, always met, however, by the condition of faith. Without faith, circumcision does nothing, and that is why we read from Colossians chapter 2 earlier this morning because in Colossians chapter 2, we see very clearly that baptism in the New Testament has now replaced the circumcision of the Old Testament, and how does this happen? Well, Paul says in Colossians 2:11, “*In him,*” that is, in Christ, “*you were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*” What is baptism? What is the physical rite of baptism? It is simply pointing to the fact that your heart has been circumcised, or it’s pointing to the fact that God will circumcise the hearts of all of those who have faith. Spirit baptism, regeneration, circumcision of the heart—it’s all the same thing, and in the Old Testament, the language was circumcision of the heart. In the New Testament, it’s baptism of the Holy Spirit, and that is why baptism is the sign that replaces circumcision because water baptism symbolizes cleansing. Water baptism symbolizes the cleansing of a heart. The sign of baptism—listen to me carefully—is not an affirmation of an individual’s personal faith. It is simply an affirmation of God’s promise that if you have faith, God will save you; the same application as it was in the Old Testament, and it’s generational, and it’s international, and it’s eternal. That much has not changed.

If you go back to Genesis 17 quickly, and we’ll wrap this thing up. I want you to notice with me verse 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.*” It’s not the children’s fault of the parents who didn’t circumcise their kids. God says, “I’ll hold you liable. Just as I want that foreskin cut off, I’ll cut you off because by not circumcising your kids, you’re spurning the covenant of God. You’re saying you don’t believe in the sign of the covenant I’ve given you that if you have faith, I will save you.” It’s a serious thing to spurn the covenant promises of God. Those early Christians in the first century church finally understood what all this was about. If you turn with me to Acts chapter 2, we’ll close with this. Peter stands up, and he tells the house of Israel that this Lord and

Christ, verse 36, this Lord and Christ, this Jesus is the one they are guilty of crucifying. They’ve killed their Messiah. And in a sense, Jesus was cut off, was He not? He was crucified outside of Jerusalem, cut off outside of the camp, died. He was cut off for His covenant people, and Peter says, “You’ve killed Him. You’ve killed your Messiah.”

Verse 37: “*Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart,*” Interesting language, “*cut to the heart.*” They were circumcised in the heart. Their eyes were opened. They now had soft hearts, no longer stony hearts. They saw what they had done. They recognized their guilt, and they say in verse 37, “*to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’*” We have no hope. What do we do? Verse 38, “*Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’*” You’re not being baptized because through that water rite you’re being cleansed; but that water rite is a symbol or a sign of God’s promise to forgive you even of killing the Messiah. And then interestingly, Peter goes on to say in verse 39, “*For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*” And verse 41 says, “*Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*”

How many of those souls were kids? How many of those souls were infant babies? Well, the text doesn’t say, but verse 39 does say, “*The promise is for you and your children.*” The promise of baptism, which is a sign of God’s covenant promise to cleanse hearts. That is for your children..” Then the debate ensues, “Well, are these children who have viable faith we can see and then are baptized, or are they infants who can’t have faith who have baptism applied to them just like Abraham circumcised his children because the covenant promises were to the children of believers generationally?” That’s a very good question, and there are scholars and theologians on both sides. The waters are divided—Baptists and the Presbyterians. Which side do you land? What do you believe? May I boldly suggest this. If you have a view toward your children or the children of believers that says they have nothing to do with the promises of God, I would urge you to repent and read your Bible more carefully. The most important thing is to understand circumcision doesn’t save. Baptism doesn’t save. It is not the sign that saves. It’s Christ that saves, but where is your faith? Your faith should be in Christ, and you should look at the covenant sign as not a sign so much of personal individual faith but as a sign that is applied, and when it is applied, it is a reminder of God’s promise that if you or the person who receives it has faith, they receive salvation. It is counted to them as righteousness.

And I simply refuse to reject those Christians who have baptized their children because I think that they are trusting in the promises of God, and I refuse to reject those who don’t baptize their infants because they too may be trusting in the promises of God so long as they understand that those promises are for their children. The baptism issue is not an issue to divide people, but we must set the record straight. What exactly is this sign? If it is a sign that validates someone’s faith, then please tell me why Baptist churches and Southern Baptist churches, in particular, are filled with unregenerate people? If it is a sign that validates someone’s faith, then it’s a sham. And how many Presbyterians baptize their infants, and those infants grow up into adults that hate God? If the sign is a validation of someone’s faith, then let’s close the church doors and do something different.

Your position on baptism is not the most important thing, but your position on the sign of the covenant and what it communicates is vitally important because if you believe that sign validates faith, either in an infant or in an adult who has made a profession, you’ve misunderstood the gospel. We must trust God’s Word, and the sign is a sacrament. It’s simply a visible reminder of God’s promised word. It’s to help us in our weak faith. May we cling to God’s covenant promises, even as father Abraham did. May we all have faith in our hearts, not trusting in the sign but trusting in the promise that the sign represents; that God is faithful to save all of those who place faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of their sins. Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank You for Your Word, the truth of Your Word which is convicting but also comforting, Lord, reminding us, Lord, of Your promises, of Your sovereign grace. Lord, we thank You so much for Christ. Lord, He was cut off for our sake. He was crucified for us, and if we are true believers, we’ve been circumcised by the circumcision of Christ. We’ve been regenerated. We’ve been washed and cleansed, purified, set apart. We want to be a people that honors You. We want to be a people that glorifies You. Help us to be people of the covenant. Help us to be people who trust in the promise of the covenant; that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It’s always been that way. It’ll always be that way. And then as we seek to apply the sign of baptism appropriately and properly, help us to be gracious toward others so long as the gospel is right, rightly articulated. We pray now as we move to partake of the Lord’s Supper, we ask that You would bless us. May our time of feasting be a reminder of Christ’s shed blood for our sakes. We pray all of this in Jesus’ name. Amen.