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A Covenant Renewed and Blessings Received (Genesis 17:1-27)

-Martin Rizley-

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Last week, we began to look at this seventeenth chapter of Genesis, in which God renews or reconfirms the covenant that He had made with Abram many years before. This morning, I want us to consider the promises that God made to Abram at that time, then the signs that God gave him to strengthen his faith in the promises of God.

Covenant-making is not as common a feature of daily life in our modern world as it was in ancient times, but we are not entirely unfamiliar with the concept. The best example of a covenant-making ceremony in modern times is the wedding ceremony, in which two people make solemn vows to one another, and then exchange rings as a perpetual reminder or sign of the vows which have been made.

We see both of these features, solemn vows and signs, in the covenant renewal ceremony that place here in Genesis 17. What makes God's covenant with Abraham unique and distinguishes it from a marriage ceremony between two adults is that God alone is Great Initiator in this covenant, as well as the sole Guarantor of its fulfillment. We saw that in Genesis 15, when God alone passed through the pieces of the slain sacrificial animals, taking upon His sovereign shoulders sole responsibility for the certain fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. The sovereign grace which underlies the covenant and guarantees its fulfillment does not mean that Abram was left without any duties to perform within the relationship established by God's sovereign action. Covenants are always relational, and as such, they involve duties on both sides within the covenantal relationship.

I. The Renewal of God's Covenant with Abraham-- Last week, we saw that when God appeared to Abram at the beginning of Genesis 17, he was ninety-nine years old. Thirteen years had passed since the birth of Ishmael; and in all that time, God had not spoken a word to Abram. When He finally broke His silence, the first word He spoke concerned His own divine character. He revealed His name to Abram as El Shaddai, the Lord Almighty. Thereby He reminded Abram that He is the God of all power who is able to do whatever He pleases and whose sovereign will directs the course of history. Then God called Abram to walk in a manner worthy of those who are in covenant with such a God. "Walk before me and be blameless," He said.

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That was the first thing God said to Abram; but then He went further and elaborated on Abram's motivation for obedience. Why should Abraham walk before God and be blameless? Not only out of reverent respect for who God is, but also out of gratitude for what He has promised to do. Look at verse 2-- "And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." When God here says "I will make my covenant," the word make here means give-- "I will give my covenant." God is not saying that He will give a different covenant to Abram than the one He had already made with Him in Genesis 15; rather, He is saying that He is now going to execute that covenant; He will give it to Abram in the sense that He will carry it out completely; He will do everything for Abram and his descendants, that He promised to do. That is why Abram must walk in a holy manner before God-- to show gratitude for all that God has promised to do for him and his seed.

So that brings us to God's promises to Abraham. What specific promises does God here confirm to Abraham? Well, we find here, as earlier in Genesis, that the promises of God to Abraham fall into three categories. First, there are promises concerning the seed that God will give to Abraham; second, there are promises concerning the land that the seed will inherit; and third, there are promises concerning the blessing of God that will be upon them. Seed, land, blessing-- those are the key words to remember when considering God's promises to Abraham.

A. The promise of seed-- Concerning the seed, God here makes several promises.

1) God will multiply Abram exceedingly (v. 2)-- First, He promises to multiply Abram's seed exceedingly. "I will multiply you exceedingly," he tells Abram in verse 2. This is really a repetition of the promise that God made earlier to Abraham, but its repetition here, after so many years of silence filled Abram with such awe, that he fell on his face before God. No doubt, he felt overwhelmed by the reality of God's supernatural power at work in him.

2) God will make Abram the father of many nations (v. 3)-- Having reiterated the promise of a multitudinous seed, God then goes on to tell Abram things about his seed that were not revealed before. For example, He tells Abram that he will become the father, not of one, but of many nations. Verse 3-- "You shall be a father of many nations," and again in verse 6: "I will make nations of you." Looking back at this promise from our vantage point in the year 2014, we can see how this promise has been fulfilled. First, on a purely earthly level, Abram became the father of various earthly nations mentioned in the Old Testament. Not only did he become the father of the Jewish nation through Isaac; he also became the father of the Arabic nations through his son Ishmael; the father the Edomites through his grandson Esau; and the father of

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the Midianites through Keturah, the woman he later married, after the death of Sarai. Moreover, on a spiritual level, Abram has become the spiritual father of all who believe from every nation on earth, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, as Paul says in Romans 4.

3) God will make kings to come forth from Abram (v. 6) -- God then goes on to tell Abram that kings will come from him, as well as nations. This stands to reason, since nations in the ancient world were always ruled by kings. We see this prophecy fulfilled, not only in the kings of Israel and Judah, but in other kings, as well, who trace their descent to Abram: for example, "twelve princes" descended from Ishmael who are mentioned in verse 20, the kings of Edom and Midian, of the Arabs, the Saracens and the Turks; and supremely, we see this prophecy fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And as John Gill points out, all the Christian kings and rulers of history who bowed the knee to Christ, may also be considered a part of this royal line of kings whom God says will come forth from Abram, since they shared his faith.

4) God will establish his covenant with all his descendants (v. 7)-- The fourth promise God makes to Abraham concerning his seed is that He will establish His covenant with all who constitute that seed. Look at verse 7-- "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." Here we see a striking difference between God's covenant with Abraham and a marriage covenant. A marriage covenant is between one man and one woman only, and when either party dies, the covenant is terminated. It is in force only until one of the parties involved in that covenant dies. But this covenant is an undying covenant; meaning that, even after Abraham has died, God will renew this covenant with his descendants. The promises that God gave to Abraham will be confirmed to his descendants.

However-- and this is an important point to observe-- some promises that God gave to Abraham concerned him alone and are not given to all His descendants. For example, God promised to make of Abram a great nation, but can all of Abraham's descendants claim that promise? Of course not! Moreover, God promised Abraham that kings would come forth from him, but can the same thing be said of every child of Abraham? I don't think so. So the question is, which promises given to Abraham can be claimed by all of His descendants? Only those in which the descendants of Abraham are specifically said to have a part. These include the promise of the land, and the promise that God will be their God-- that is, that He will be totally committed to them and give Himself to them always. We see both of these promises-- the promise of land and the promise of God being our God in v. 8: "Also I give to you and your descendants

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after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

For God to be our God is the greatest of all blessings, for it means that God commits Himself to us forever; and that means He commits to uphold us by His grace, to forgive our sins, to work in our heart by His Holy Spirit in order to make us receptive to the Word and believing and submissive. He promises never to abandon us, if we are truly Abraham's children.

But the question is, to whom does God pledge Himself in this way? To the descendants of Abraham, obviously. But who are the descendants of Abraham? Well, originally, this term referred in a collective sense to earthly Israel, the Jewish people, who were regarded as Abram's descendants in a corporate sense. To the Jews as a distinct earthly people God gave the land of Canaan. It is quite clear, however, as the Old Testament progresses, that on a personal and individual level, the promise "I will be your God" belongs only to those who are of the faith of Abraham. To believers only God solemnly pledges that He will be their God both now and forever.

We see this truth illustrated God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament. Consider how He dealt with the first generation of Jews who left Egypt. At first, He dealt in a gracious manner with all the children of Israel collectively by bringing them all out of Egypt as a community. To the Jews as a corporate entity, God said, "I will be your God." But of that first generation that left Egypt, how many entered into the Promised Land? Only two-- Joshua and Caleb--, for they alone exhibited faith in God and His wondrous promises; all the rest died in the wilderness without inheriting God's promise. In Joshua and Caleb we see illustrated the truth that the apostle Paul would later express in Romans 9, when he wrote, "They are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but 'in Isaac your seed shall be called.'" That is, those who are children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed" (Romans 9:6-8). So on a personal and individual scale, only those who are of faith constitute the true seed of Abraham. Only the believing remnant in Israel could claim the promise, "I will be a God to you," as applying to themselves personally and individually.

So the promise, "I will be your God" belongs to believers only; and from a New Testament perspective, we see that this promise is given to believers from every nation, and not just to the Jews. Believing Jew and Gentile together constitute the true seed of Abraham. Together they can say, "God has promised to be our God, now and forever."

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5) Sarah herself will bear the child who inherits these promises (v. 15)-- There is one more aspect of the seed promise that God gave to Abram,-- and that is the promise that Sarai herself would conceive the child through whom Abram would grow into a mighty nation and take possession of the land of Canaan.

Until this moment God had not made a promise regarding Sarai. This had led Sarai to fear that she would be left out of God's plan. Now she was to learn the truth. God had purposed to use her in His plan from the very beginning. She would be the matriarch of the great nation that would come forth from Abraham. She, not Hagar, would be the one to bear the seed of blessing.

When God told Abram about Sarai's role in his plan, he fell on his face and laughed (v. 17). This was not the derisive or scornful laughter of unbelief, but the joyful laughter of wonder and rejoicing. Abram must have thought, "This is what Sarai my wife has always wanted-- to be a mother-- and now she is going to get her wish, for God is going to bless her with children far beyond her wildest dreams! Not only will she conceive a child; she is going to become the mother of nations and of kings. Abram was thrilled to be able to break this good news to Sarai; but the more he thought about it, it struck him as so funny, from a human standpoint, that he burst out laughing. Imagine-- an eighty five year old barren woman and a ninety-nine year old man suddenly conceiving a child. It was joyful thought, but also, funny. Abram couldn't contain the sense of good humor and rejoicing that filled his soul, so he burst out laughing for joy.

B. The Promise of the Land-- In addition to the promise of the seed, God also renewed the promise of the land. He had earlier spelled out the borders of the land that He was giving to Abram and His seed in the covenant making ceremony of Genesis 15, so here he simply reiterates that promise. In verse 8, He says, "To your descendants I give all the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession."

Like the promise of the seed, we see with greater clarity how this promise is fulfilled from our vantage point in the 21st century. Although Christians differ in their understanding of how the land promise will be fulfilled in the future, I believe that any future fulfillment must take into account what we have already seen about the seed of Abraham. Under the New Covenant, the seed of Abraham includes all who have Abraham as their spiritual father, and that includes not only believing Jews, but believing Gentiles as well. So if there is to be a future fulfillment of the land promise, it must be a fulfillment in which believing Jews and Gentiles share equally. All who are Abraham's spiritual seed are destined to inherit the land. But how are we to conceive

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of the land at this point in history? Let me read you an illustration by Geoff Thomas that sheds light on this issue: "Think of a farmer who drives on a tractor with his ten year old son and takes him around the circumference of the great field which is like a sea of wheat. He says to his son, 'After my days this land will all be yours.' But the farmer lives another 45 years and in the meantime God prospers him and he buys other fields alongside the first field. Then he does the same across the country; he expands his lands with huge acres of fields and forests and rivers and lakes and mountains to the north and south and east and west. When he dies does his son just have the one great field that he promised him? Of course he doesn't. He has all the land that God has prospered him with. Hundreds of miles away he has thousands of acres in every part of the world and he even has holdings overseas.

So it is with the descendants of Abraham. It is not the physical children, those joined through the umbilical cord with Abraham, who are counted as his seed but those who like Abraham believe the promises of God and trust in the covenant mercies of Christ for salvation. These men and women are not only in Israel they are now all over the world. They are Aborigines and Chinese and Kikuyu. The kingdom of God is everywhere, and they are all looking forward to the day when the earth will be filled with the glory of the God of Abraham. This is their everlasting possession. There will be a new heavens and a new earth and it is God's gift to us-- far more than a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. The meek who trust in the God of Abraham will inherit the earth."

So that is how I understand the present and future fulfillment of the land promise-- in terms of all of Abraham's spiritual seed, believing Jews and Gentiles, inheriting the whole earth together.

B. The promise of blessing-- With regard to the promise of blessing, we have already considered that promise when we looked at God's words to Abram in verse 7, in which He promises "to be God to you and to your descendants after you." So I will not elaborate on that further.

Here, therefore, are the three fundamental promises God gave to Abraham-- the promise of a seed, a land, and a blessing. But in addition to promises, God also gave Abraham certain signs to serve as outward tokens assuring Abram of the certainty of God's promises.

This is something God often does throughout history as an aid to our faith. Since we are creatures of sight and sense, when God makes a covenant with men, He often gives along with His promises tangible signs to remind men of those promises and to

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give them added assurance of their fulfillment. By means of these signs, God is saying, "If you doubt for a moment the certainty of what I have promised you, look at these signs and let them bring to your remembrance the oath that has been given. My promises to you are not uncertain or unreal, but as certain and real as the sign you are staring at."

II. The Signs God Gave to Abram

Now, in the passage before us this morning, it appears that there are two signs God gives to Abram as tokens of His covenant, -- first, the new names that God assigns to Abram, Sarai and their soon to be conceived son; and second, the rite of circumcision, which God gave to Abram and His earthly seed, the Jews, to keep as a perpetual covenant for all succeeding generations.

A. the Assigning of Names-- I spoke last week about the significance of the names God gave to Abram and Sarai, so I won't elaborate on that here. Suffice it to say that if it took faith for Abram to go around calling himself Abram for so many years, even before having Isaac, for the name Abram means "exalted father." The Canaanites must have thought it pretty funny when Abram first arrived in the Promised Land that a childless man would walk around calling himself, "Exalted Father." How much more ridiculous when he turned ninety-nine and started calling himself "Abraham," which means "Father of a Multitude." Yet this change of name was designed by God to remind Abraham of the promises God had made to him. Every day that he called himself "Father of a multitude" Abraham was compelled to remember God's promises.

The same thing was true of Sarai. The name Sarai means Princess, and rather than give her a new name, God simply changed the spelling of her old name. Most Hebrew scholars believe there is no difference in meaning between Sarai and Sarah. Both names mean "Princess." Why then did God change the spelling of her name? Simply to be a sign to her that God had taken control of her life and was directing her steps. His promise guaranteed her destiny. She would be a princess, for she would be a mother of nations and kings.

We can also regard Isaac's name as a sign. After all, what does the name Isaac mean? It means laughter. We associate laughter with joy and rejoicing, and that is just what Isaac was to Abraham and Sarah-- a son whose late arrival and whose miraculous conception would inspired wide-eyed, awestruck amazement and provoke joyous peals laughter from both of his parents. Abraham laughed for joy when the birth of Isaac was announced. And Sarah would laugh for joy when at last the boy was born to her (21:6-7).

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All three of these names, therefore-- Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac were signs or tokens pointing to the certainty of God's covenant promises; they were reminders never to give up hoping in the promises of God, no matter how slow God may seem to be in fulfilling them.

B. The Rite of Circumcision-- The second sign God gave to Abraham was the rite of circumcision. In verses 9 and following, God gave Abraham very clear instructions concerning this rite. He was to circumcise every male in his household-- not only himself and his son Ishmael, but all his household servants as well, beginning with the youngest male child to the oldest adult. Every male in the household, whether born under Abraham's roof or bought with money, was to be circumcised. In the case of infants, the rite was to be performed on the eighth day. On that day, the foreskin of the male reproductive organ was to be cut off as a visible sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham and his descendants.

The rite of circumcision was not totally unknown in Abraham's day. The fact is, other nations practiced this rite. It was quite common. But as a general rule, among pagan people circumcision was practiced either for hygienic reasons or as a puberty ritual, to mark a boy's transition to manhood. Many African tribes even today practice circumcision for that reason as a rite of passage. But God commanded Abraham to circumcise infants on the eighth day, and that is because of what this rite symbolized, as we shall in a moment.

One thing is certain. The act of circumcision in itself did not confer salvation on anyone. That was the mistaken notion of some Jews. They thought that because they had received the mark of circumcision in their flesh, they were automatically by that act put in a right relationship to God-- automatically guaranteed possession of the covenant blessings. This was the error, however, for circumcision was never appointed by God to be anything other than an outward sign pointing to the Jews to lay hold by faith on the spiritual realities to which that sign pointed.

So what were the spiritual realities to which circumcision pointed?

1) First of all, it pointed to the need for spiritual cleansing-- The cutting away of the foreskin symbolizes the removal of defilement, and this points to the fact that we are all born into the world with a nature that has been defiled by sin. David said, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). He traced his personal acts of sin to the fact that he was conceived with a sinful nature and inclined to evil from birth. David realized that human sinfulness is something that

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lies much deeper than the outward actions; it is something rooted deeply in our nature, the fallen human nature that we are born with as sons of Adam.

The rite of circumcision pointed to the need of human nature to be cleansed in order for men to be enjoy fellowship with God. That is why this rite was performed on infants, as well as adults, because sin is not just an adult problem, it is a human problem. It afflicts all people from infancy to old age. It is a problem we carry from the moment of conception in our mother's womb. The seeds of sin are within us from the very beginning of our mortal life, so infants received this symbol, as well as adults, to show the universality of the sin problem. The rite of circumcision in itself, however, could provide no solution to the problem of sin-- it could only point to the problem. If our problem is spiritual uncleanness, the solution is that we must be cleansed. We must experience what the prophets of Israel would refer to as the "circumcising of our hearts." Moses exhorted the Israelites concerning their need to experience this internal cleansing; in Deuteronomy 10:16, he told them, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer." Later, He made clear to them that the Lord alone could perform such radical surgery on their hearts and so deliver from their ingrained rebellion against God. In Deuteronomy 30:6, Moses said to the Jews, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." So heart circumcision, on the one hand, is a human responsibility, for we are responsible to seek the cleansing of our hearts from sin; but at the same time, this is a blessing only God can bestow. It is blessing we are to seek, but at the same time, it is a grace bestowed by God's sovereign grace.

What is clear is that the mere outward sign of circumcision could not in itself confer the reality of spiritual cleansing for anyone. It was only a sign reminding the Jews of their need of cleansing and pointing them to God as the only One who could cleanse and renew their hearts.

That leads us the second thing circumcision symbolized.

2) It pointed to the promised "seed of Abraham" through whom cleansing from sin would come--If on the one hand, circumcision pointed to the need for spiritual cleansing and a new heart, on the other hand, it also pointed to the promised "seed of Abraham" as the one through whom that cleansing would come. How so? As a covenant sign, it pointed to the certain fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, a fulfillment that would come climactically when all the families of the earth were blessed through the seed of Abraham. God's promise to Abraham, you will remember was, "All the families of the earth will be blessed in you." The apostle Paul in Galatians

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tells us that this promise given to Abram was in fact a gospel promise-- it was foretelling the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, for He is the promised "seed of Abraham" through whom all the families of the earth are blessed (Galatians 3:8).

Since this gospel promise to Abraham concerned his 'seed,' it was only fitting that the sign of the promise be placed on the male organ of generation. This would be a reminder to the Jews that blessing would come to the world only as they faithfully had children year after year, until one day, a special child would be born from the line of Abraham who would bring blessing to all the families of the earth. So this sign was prophetic of the coming of Christ.

Circumcision was prophetic of Christ for another reason, as well. Because the performance of this rite involved the cutting of the flesh and the shedding of blood, that foretold the fact that blessing which would come to all the world through Abraham's seed, but only through violent means. The Messiah to whom this rite pointed would bring blessing to all mankind only as He would be cut off from the land of the living and would shed His blood for others. Through His death-- symbolized by the cutting of the foreskin and the shedding of blood--- new life would issue.

It is interesting to note, as well, that infants were circumcised on the eighth day after birth. The eight day is the first day of a new week, and in the New Testament, the first day of the week is associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So if, on the one hand, circumcision points prophetically to Christ's death through the shedding of blood, on the other, it seems also to point to His resurrection, to the new life associated His death.

Circumcision has now lost its purpose since Christ has come into the world, for His coming secures for us the spiritual realities to which the shadowy rite of circumcision pointed. By shedding His blood and rising again, abolishing the ceremonies of the Old Testament. His shed blood has brought the total cleansing which the blood of circumcision could point to, but could not effect. Through the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, Christ has given to every believer the "circumcision of the heart." Thus, the shadowy rite of circumcision has been replaced by the spiritual realities to which it pointed.

For Abraham and his household, however, who lived at an earlier moment of history, the duty of circumcision was immediate and pressing. If they wanted to enjoy the blessings of God's covenant, they had to show themselves faithful and undergo the rite of circumcision at once. So we read that Abraham wasted no time in that regard. (Read Genesis 17:23-27).

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Abram obeyed God, because He believed God, and that is the mark of faith throughout all the ages. If we truly believe in the Lord and His gracious promises, the proof of our faith will be shown by our eager obedience to God's commands. We will, in the words of verse 9, "keep God's covenant" by doing whatsoever God commands us to do in His word.

His command to you, if you are here this morning and have never received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, is to waste no time in coming to Him and embracing Him by faith. This is the first and fundamental act that God calls us to in this age in which we live. We are to respond to the preaching of the gospel by throwing down the arms of our rebellion against God, humbly bowing the knee before Christ, and embracing Christ by faith as our Savior.

Have you embraced Jesus Christ in this way, by faith, as your Savior? Have you called out to Him from your heart in believing prayer, and said to Him, "Lord Jesus, I believe that you are the one and only Savior of mankind. Please hear my prayer I humbly beseech you. Have mercy on me, and save me from my sins. Wash me clean by the blood you shed on the cross when you were cut off from the land of the living on account of my sins. Work in me the grace of spiritual renewal, and give me that circumcised heart of which I heard this morning, a heart that has been cleansed from sin." May God bless you as you seek Him with your whole heart. Amen.