

Genesis 17
Psalm 111
Romans 4

“My Covenant in Your Flesh”

July 12, 2009

Introduction: Psalm 111 and the constancy of God’s covenant.

Some have argued that Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 are two different covenants.

They argue that because God says,

“Walk before me and be blameless”

that therefore this cannot be considered purely a covenant of grace.

They say that God established his gracious covenant with Abram in chapter 15,
and now God is establishing an external and temporary covenant.

But none of the biblical authors

acknowledges this sort of distinction between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17.

Rather than say that they are different sorts of covenants

we should say that there are two parts to God’s covenant:

1) in Genesis 15 we see the sovereign, unilateral nature of the covenant.

God promises that he will accomplish what he has said.

But the sovereignty of God does not mean that Abram can ignore his responsibility:

2) in Genesis 17 God makes it clear

that man also must keep covenant with God.

As Meredith Kline says well, “the divine promises of the covenant

never existed apart from human obligations.” (Kingdom Prologue, 309)

Abraham cannot do anything to earn God’s promise.

God has promised Abraham an inheritance.

And God Almighty is the one who will fulfill the covenant,

But Abraham is called to walk before God and be blameless.

In one sense the covenant is sovereignly established and fulfilled.

God will do what he has promised.

But in another sense the covenant is conditional:

Abraham must obey God.

Psalm 111 helps us understand how this works.

When David speaks of God’s covenant

he does not distinguish between different covenants.

He simply says that God “remembers his covenant forever.” (v5)

His mighty deeds are revealed in the faithful works of his hands

as he gave to his people “the inheritance of the nations.”

The reason why the Psalmist does not distinguish between the Abrahamic Covenant,
the Mosaic Covenant and the Davidic Covenant,

is because he understood that all of God’s covenants

are simply different administrations of one gracious covenant.

Sing Psalm 111
Read Romans 4

Last time, in Genesis 16, we looked at the theme of Sex and the City of God.

Abram and Sarai tried to deal with the problem of barrenness in a human way.
Sarai gave her maidservant, Hagar, to her husband in order to obtain a child.

This is an attempt to accomplish the promises of God according to the flesh.

But the flesh is weak and powerless.
The flesh cannot bring the kingdom of God.

Abram should have understood this from Genesis 15 –
when God made it clear that he alone would fulfill his covenant,
as God alone walked between the cut animals –
God alone bound himself by oath to accomplish what he promised.

Genesis 17 now continues the emphasis on sex.

Verses 1-8 talk about the everlasting covenant in terms of Abraham's seed –
his offspring (which will come about only through sex).

Verses 9-14 talk about "my covenant in your flesh" –
and particularly the flesh of the foreskin –
which is the cutting of the male "seed-producer" (you might say).

Verses 15-21 then turns to Sarah and the bearing of the promised seed,
and verses 22-27 concludes
with the account of the actual circumcision of Abraham and his household.
In a nutshell, the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament
is all about sex.

This shouldn't surprise us.

After all, ever since Genesis 3:15 we have known that God's promise
hinges on the coming of the seed of the woman.

From Genesis 3, woman's unique child-bearing ability
is at the heart of the covenant promise.

Her womb was consecrated by that promise in Genesis 3:15.

Now, in circumcision, the male organ is consecrated
for the service of producing the heirs of God's promise.

God's address to Abraham has three parts.

Verses 1-8 is focused on who God is and what he will do.

Verses 9-14 is focused on who Abraham is and what he should do.

Verses 15-21 then turns to Sarah and what she will do.

You can see the transitions in verses 9 and 15:

"And God said to Abraham, As for you..."

"And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife..."

Then in verses 22-27 we hear of how Abraham was faithful to God's word and did what God said.

1. The Everlasting Covenant (17:1-8)

17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him,
"I am God Almighty;

Here God reveals the name that is at the root of the Abrahamic Covenant:
El Shaddai – God Almighty.
He is the God who is able to make the barren fertile.
He is the God who took the tohu vbohu (the barren wasteland)
and made it into a pleasant garden.

Even so, he is the God who takes the barren wasteland of Abram and Sarai
and brings life from the dead.

I am God Almighty.

You need to hear this!

Your God is God Almighty –
the God who takes that which is hopeless and brings hope,
the one who cares for widows and orphans,
the one who sees those who are forlorn and brings comfort!
who hears the cry of the oppressed and delivers them!

But while in chapter 15 God's message to Abram was:

Don't just do something, stand there!
In other words, in Genesis 14-16, God wanted Abram to understand
that there is *nothing* that Abram can do to *make* God's promise come true.
(Abram cannot take possession of the land –
Abram cannot bring about the promised seed –
Abram cannot bring God's blessing to the nations)

Now God says, But there is something that you can do – indeed, something you must do!

walk before me, and be blameless,

Earlier in Genesis we were told that Enoch walked with God.
Noah also walked with God and was blameless in his generation.

Now God calls Abram to be like Enoch and Noah.

“To walk before God means to orient one's entire life
to his presence, promises, and demands.” (Waltke, 259)

We saw earlier in Genesis 12

that God was calling Abram to leave his father's inheritance,

and to go to the land that God would give him.
In short, God is calling Abram to be his son.
All throughout Israel's history, Israel is called to walk before God.
And when Israel fails, God calls the sons of David to walk before him.

Walk before me and be blameless.

What does it mean to be blameless?

It has to do with integrity –

with having a right relationship with God and man.

It doesn't mean that you never sin –

it means that when you sin, you repent!

It means that you strive never to wrong someone else –

and that if you do wrong them, you seek to make it right!

Abraham is to be the father of many nations.

(Abraham means "father of crowds")

Kings will come from him.

Therefore he must be an example to all those who will call him "father."

Walk before me and be blameless,

*2 that I may make my covenant between me and you,
and may multiply you greatly."*

It would be better to translate this,

"that I may *give* my covenant" –

because this is not the normal phrase "that I may cut my covenant"

nor even the occasional "establish" my covenant –

but the word for "give" – *nathan*.

The choice of words here makes it clear that the covenant is a gift.

There is nothing that Abram has done to earn it.

3 Then Abram fell on his face.

And God said to him,

And in verses 4-8 God lays out the obligations that he alone will do.

4 "Behold, my covenant is with you,

and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

5 No longer shall your name be called Abram,

but your name shall be Abraham,

for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful,

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

It is worth pointing out that if you read this section carefully
you will note that Abraham's seed

includes more than just his biological descendents.
Certainly the phrase “kings will come from you”
indicates biological descent,
but the language of “I will make you into nations”
is deliberately ambiguous.
After all, in the next section God will include servants and foreign slaves in the promise.
All who attach themselves to Abraham and to Abraham’s God
are properly considered Abraham’s seed.
If God’s purpose was only to include biological descendents of Abraham,
then he would not have commanded Abraham to circumcise his household.

But the heart of the covenant is found in verses 7-8:

7 And I will establish my covenant between me and you
[This is the word “to establish” – or perhaps, “to confirm” –
the word means “to make stand”]
and your offspring after you throughout their generations
for an everlasting covenant,
to be God to you and to your offspring after you.
8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you
the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan,
for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

This is an everlasting covenant:

“to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

Notice the legal phrase that occurs three times in these two verses:

“to you and to your offspring.”

“to you and to your seed.”

Remember, this is being promised by El Shaddai – God Almighty –
the one who is able to do what he has promised,
and the one who will do it!

But also remember who is the one listening to God’s promise!

Abram – now 99 years old.

It has been 24 years since he came into the land.

What have you been doing for the last 24 years?

Abram was sojourning in a land that was not his own.

After 24 years of listening to God’s voice and obeying the LORD his God,

Abram has no land, no seed, and no blessing for the nations.

This is why the faith of Abraham is truly magnificent!

As Paul says in Romans 4:13,

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring
that he would be heir of the world

*did not come through the law
but through the righteousness of faith.*

(See how Paul connects the promise of the land, with the blessing to the nations:
if God promised Abraham a piece of real estate in the middle east,
and promised that this blessing would come to all nations,
then, Paul says, the promise is really
that he would be heir of the whole earth!)

And in spite of the lack of fulfillment over 24 years, Paul comments in 4:20
*No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God,
but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,
fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.*

And why is this so important?

As Paul concludes in Romans 4:23-25,

*But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone,
but for ours also.*

*It will be counted to us who believe in him
who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,
who was delivered up for our trespasses
and raised up for our justification.*

The promise to Abraham has come true.

God has done what he promised.

And now the promise of Abraham has come to you!

2. My Covenant in Your Flesh (17:9-14)

Having laid out what God has obligated himself to do,

God now turns to Abraham and says, "As for you..."

9 And God said to Abraham,

*"As for you, you shall keep my covenant,
you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.*

*10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep,
between me and you and your offspring after you:*

Every male among you shall be circumcised.

*11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins,
and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.*

12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised.

*Every male throughout your generations,
whether born in your house or bought with your money
from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,*

*13 both he who is born in your house
and he who is bought with your money,
shall surely be circumcised.*

*So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.
14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin
shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”*

Notice first the language:

“this *is* my covenant”

Think of the way Jesus speaks of the cup at the Lord’s Supper:

“this is the new covenant in my blood.”

The sign of the covenant (v11) *is* the covenant (v10).

When Norah is baptized in a few minutes,
it is not just that she receives the sign of the covenant;
she receives the covenant through the sign.

By virtue of her birth into a covenanted home
she is supposed to be brought into covenant with God,
but the covenant relation is intimately connected with the covenant sign.

As verse 14 points out, the one who is not circumcised
shall be cut off from his people because he has broken God’s covenant.

It is not the parents who are cut off, but the child!

The uncircumcised child was a covenant breaker –
was considered outside of the people of God.

Notice also the timing of circumcision:

“He who is eight days old”

This is the introduction of a theme that will run throughout the scriptures –
the theme of the eighth day.

In the beginning (before the fall) God blessed the Sabbath day – the seventh day.

But then man fell into sin.

After the fall, the Sabbath becomes a perpetual reminder
that man is barred from the presence of God.

This is why God chooses the eighth day as the day of circumcision.

Seven days are not enough.

You cannot enter God’s rest on the seventh day.

There must be another day!

If the seventh day points back to Creation,

the eighth day throughout the OT will always point forward.

The eighth day is the day of entering God’s rest.

In circumcision, the child enters the covenant community.

In Leviticus after seven days of cleansing and consecration,

the priest enters his priestly service on the eighth day;

and also the leper is restored to fellowship on the eighth day.

Likewise, the feasts of Israel are oriented around worshipping
on the first or eighth day of the festal calendar.

And so we should not be surprised that in the NT

the church gathers not on the seventh day of the week,
but on the first day of the week (or as John says so tantalizingly in John 20:26,
“eight days later” after the resurrection),
on the first day of the new creation we rejoice that we *are* God’s people.

But also think about the sign itself:

circumcision is a cutting –
the symbolic wielding of God’s sword of judgment
cutting away the old flesh.

This is why God says,
“so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.”

God’s covenant is in your flesh.

The snipping away of the foreskin gets dangerously close
to potentially cutting off the possibility of descendents.
It is intimately connected with the promise of the Seed!

Therefore circumcision is both a sign of blessing: the consecration of the seed,
but also a sign of judgment: the cutting off of the flesh,
and the shedding of blood.

This is why Paul will say in Colossians 2:11-12

“In Christ also you were circumcised with a 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.”

Christ was circumcised on the cross.
He was cut off – snipped off from the land of the living.

And your baptism, Paul says, is a kind of circumcision as well!

In your baptism you put off the body of the flesh –
you have passed through the waters of judgment.

Both circumcision and baptism have to do with putting off the flesh.

Both have to do with passing through judgment:
whether passing under the knife of God’s judgment,
or passing through the waters of God’s judgment.

Notice the difference, though, between circumcision and baptism:
in circumcision we see the shedding of blood;
while baptism is not a bloody ritual.

Once Christ’s blood is shed, there is no longer any place

for literal blood in the worship of God.
The OT sacraments all involved blood (whether sacrifices or circumcision).
The NT sacraments both point to the blood of Christ,
which cleanses us in baptism
and nourishes us in the Lord's Supper,
but do so through unbloody signs.

And this is because all that the OT sacraments pointed to has been fulfilled in Christ,
who is himself the son of the covenant.

3. The Son of the Covenant (17:15-21)

And it is this that we turn to as we consider the third part of our text,
God's renaming of Sarai:

*15 And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai,
but Sarah shall be her name.*

There is no real difference in the meaning of the name:
both Sarai and Sarah are variants meaning "princess."

The key is that *God* is renaming her.

In Genesis 2, God created Adam and Eve,
and allowed Adam to name his wife.

Here in Genesis 17 God makes Abram and Sarai the new Adam and Eve,
but here God names them both –
again emphasizing the fact that *only* God can save.

*16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her.
I will bless her, and she shall become nations;
kings of peoples shall come from her."*

*17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself,
"Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?
Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"*

*18 And Abraham said to God,
"Oh that Ishmael might live before you!"*

*19 God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son,
and you shall call his name Isaac.
I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant
for his offspring after him.*

*20 As for Ishmael, I have heard you;
behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.
He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.*

*21 But I will establish my covenant with Isaac,
whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year."*

We'll come back to Ishmael later
(that's one of the nice things about Genesis –

each of the themes of the book keep weaving in and out of the story,
so you can focus on one thing at a time!),
but the main point here is that God here explicitly promises
that the son of the covenant will be a son of promise.
He will not be a son born according to the flesh,
but according to the Spirit.

Abraham laughs at the word that his 90 year old wife will have a son,
but God says that this child shall be named “laughter” (Isaac).

God’s promise is not only for Abraham.

It is also for Sarah.

And God rebukes Abraham for his dismissive attitude toward Sarah.
It is a sobering rebuke, brothers!

How often do we have the same attitude toward our wives?

Of course, we are even worse than Abraham!

Abraham has good reason for thinking that it is impossible for Sarah to conceive:
she is past menopause!

But what excuse do we have?

Too often we take our wives too lightly –
we assume too much, and communicate too little –
all the while thinking that we are doing well!

4. The Circumcision of Abraham (17:22-27)

But one thing you can say for Abraham

is that when God speaks, Abraham listens, believes, and obeys!

22 When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son

and all those born in his house or bought with his money,

every male among the men of Abraham's house,

and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day,

as God had said to him.

24 Abraham was ninety-nine years old

when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old

when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

26 That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised.

Notice that Abraham does not wait.

When God speaks, Abraham believes and obeys – *that very day!*

Do not wait to obey.

Do not say, “tomorrow I will do it...”

...because tomorrow will never come!

*27 And all the men of his house,
those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner,
were circumcised with him.*

We know that some 20 years earlier Abraham had 318 trained servants (14:14).
If you include all the women, children, and aged servants this represents,
this would suggest that Abraham
probably had a couple thousand people in his household.

And so perhaps 1,000 men and boys were circumcised that day.
We don't know whether all of them believed.
But we do know that to be part of Abraham's household meant to be circumcised,
and therefore to become a part of the covenant community.

Baptism works the same way.
Whether you are baptizing infants or adults,
you do not know a person's heart.
Those who are baptized become part of the people of God.
God says to you in your baptism: "This one is Mine!"
"I will be God to you and to your offspring after you."
And so to Ishmael and Isaac and all the males of Abraham's house,
God said, "you are mine."
And then, to them as well as Abraham, he said,
"walk before me and be blameless."

Baptism is a reminder that salvation is entirely the work of God.
In baptism (as in circumcision) the recipient is passive.
In circumcision, the one who is circumcised does nothing.
Likewise the one who is baptized does nothing.

But baptism also obligates us to live as God's people.
As Heinrich Bullinger said: "For as the water washes away all the dirt of the body,
the stains and spots and any kind of impurity,
so also the one over whom the baptismal waters have been poured,
is received by God's grace, washed by the blood of Jesus,
and obligated to live a new life."