

Text: Genesis 17:1-27

Title: The Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant

Truth: God's unilateral covenant with Abraham had stipulations.

Date/Location: Sunday December 18, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

At least three of the Biblical covenants have “signs” associated with them. These signs serve as reminders of God's faithfulness and covenant requirements on His people.

The Covenant with Noah has the sign of the rainbow (Gen. 9:16-17).

The Covenant with Abraham has as a sign male circumcision (Gen. 17:11, Rom. 4:11). We will see this as we study Genesis 17.

The Covenant with Moses is signified by the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13, Ezek. 20:12, 20).

Of these three signs, the rainbow is still operational and relevant; male circumcision is not required; Sabbath observation is not required either. Jewish people are free to maintain the latter two signs if they wish. But neither Jews nor Gentiles are under the Law of Moses today, because it has been fulfilled in Christ and replaced by the Law of Christ.

Stop and think if there are any similar “signs” that we have in the church era of God's program.

I. Reconfirmation of the Abrahamic Covenant, 17:1-8

A. In this section the promise to Abram is confirmed once again. Specifically, Abram is promised many descendants (2 and 5b-6). Note Abram's posture before God in verse 3. He “fell on his face.” This is how almost everyone responds when faced with an appearance of God, particularly people of faith.

B. God changed Abram's name (exalted father) to Abraham (father of many nations). God has the authority to do that to anyone. If He can do it to someone as powerful as Abram, He can to you too! This underscores that our very selves are identified and defined by God. If you want to find out who you are, you do not look within—you look to God and His Word to learn.

This name change is tied closely to the fulfillment of the covenant promise. Whenever you think of Abraham, remember that his name

foreshadows the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to a multitude of people.

- C. One thing to keep in mind is that this is the fourth time that God has spoken of the covenant in Genesis. The first was in chapter 12, then 13, then 15, and now 17. At the first, Abram was 75 years old (12:4); then perhaps 80; then about 85 (16:3); then 99 (17:1, 17:17, 21:5). So at least over a period of 25 years God repeats the covenant to Abraham. This is no passing fad!
- D. The covenant itself is an "everlasting covenant" in verse 7 and it promises the land as an "everlasting possession" to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac (v. 8; see also 26:4).
- E. The terms of the covenant are these:
 - 1. Abram must walk before God blamelessly. It is easy to object to this and say, "Impossible!" That is too facile an excuse to hold water before God. But God said it, not me. Yes, of course, everyone is a sinner. If God commands you to live blamelessly before Him, you better get about doing that very thing. With God's help, yes. By faith, of course. Striving for holiness, absolutely. But get it done!
 - 2. God will multiply Abram exceedingly.
 - 3. Nations and kings will come from Abram.
 - 4. God will keep the covenant.
 - 5. God will be the God of the Jewish nation. This is where the idea "I will be their God" arises in Scripture. Scripture repeats it throughout, in such places as Jeremiah 31:33, Ezek. 11:20, Zech. 8:8, 2 Cor. 6:16, Hebrews 8:10, Rev. 21:3. This is God's desire—to have a substantial, eternal, blessed God + human relationship. To make this work, we must be purified by faith and washed clean of our sin. That is us "being lifted up." But also, God must "condescend" because He is so high no one could relate to Him without it.
 - 6. God will give the Jewish nation the land in which Abraham was currently dwelling as a sojourner.
 - 7. The people of God must keep their side of the covenant. This highlights that the covenant, although unilateral in the sense that God guarantees its fulfillment, is bilateral because it lays responsibilities upon the people as well. Enjoyment of and timing of the blessings of the covenant are dependent upon their obedience. In the last days, the nation will come to a place of repentance and that will be around

the time of the Lord's return. That is a critical element in the fulfillment of the covenant, which includes in it the mechanism to make forgiveness of sins possible.

II. Circumcision as the Sign of the Covenant, 17:9-14

- A. God gives a sign of the covenant with Abraham: the removal of the foreskin on the male child at 8 days of age. It is a sign of obedience and belief in the covenant that God gave to Abraham. It is a physical rite which does not transmit any grace or have any other sacramental value to the recipient of the sign.
- B. Researchers indicate some health benefit from male circumcision, but this is not the Biblical reason for it. Circumcision was practiced in history at the time of Abram, so it was not a new thing. The *meaning invested in it* was new, connecting it to the covenant with Abraham as a sign. It was a physical reminder to the men—and women—of the nation about their relationship with God. It served as a reminder of how to conduct themselves, especially about marriage and procreation.
- C. Circumcision of the flesh is an outward rite. God uses the physical as a figure for the spiritual. In Deuteronomy 10, He tells the nation of Israel to love God and serve Him because He chose them. Therefore, they must “circumcise the foreskin” of their hearts and stop being stiff-necked (10:16). This is an indirect way of saying that they must repent and be saved. This heart-circumcision is necessary so that they can love God: “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” (Deut. 30:6). Jeremiah 4:4 and Romans 2:29 also speak of heart-circumcision.
- D. There is a question here with respect to circumcision and salvation. Rom. 4:9-12 clearly tells us that Abram was saved *before* he received the sign of circumcision. This sign is not required for salvation, and it did NOT guarantee the salvation of the child who was circumcised. This is true despite the loud protestations of Judaizers in the first century who said that circumcision was required to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). The Jerusalem council unequivocally responded to this heresy by saying that circumcision is NOT required for salvation. Circumcision does not avail anything in Christ (Gal. 5:6).
- E. There is another theological issue about the relationship of circumcision to baptism. In churches which follow covenant theology, baptism is considered as the NT counterpart to circumcision, it is practiced upon

children, and it is considered as effectively bringing the child into the “covenant community.” It is not exactly salvation, but the next thing to it.

But the NT does not suggest this in the least. Baptism in the NT is for professing believers, not infants who have not professed faith in Christ. Baptism is for males *and* females, not just males. There is no “covenant community” today—God’s focus is on the Church. Remember in any case that the old covenant was broken and no longer is operative (Heb. 8:13).

III. Prophecies of Isaac’s Conception and Birth, 17:15-27

A. Amazing Promise of a Child to a Couple of combined age 190 years, 17:15-27

God also changes Sarai’s name to Sarah at this point (both names have the idea of princess). God says that He will bless Sarah with a child, and she will be the one through whom the covenant promises will come to fulfillment (v. 15-16).

B. Abram laughed at this (v. 17). In addition, he asked God to make the promise run through the line of Ishmael (v. 18). That just would not do for God, for He delights in doing the impossible (v. 19). Verse 19 also tells us that God had selected Isaac (so named even before conception) as the one through whom the promises would come. God promised the same everlasting covenant to Isaac that was given to his father.

C. While at least for a time Abraham was incredulous at this promise of a child in his old age, Romans 4:18-22 tells us that Abraham was strong in faith and believed God. Even those strong in faith have moments of unbelief and doubts, and even laughter at the seeming impossibility of the ways of God. Just keep on believing!

However, that is no excuse for *us* to doubt God. We have the benefit of far more revelation, many more recorded experiences of God’s people, a much longer record of God’s faithfulness, and it is all written down for us.

D. Abraham’s plea to God in v. 18 did not go unheard. Ishmael would also be blessed. But note that the blessing is limited by the fact that *Isaac* would be the recipient of the covenant with Abraham, not Ishmael. God has said so twice (v. 19, and v. 21).

E. Abraham did just as he was commanded with the circumcision rite.

Conclusion

What does all this mean for us? Obviously, we know that God keeps His promises. Remember that the Abrahamic Covenant impacts us in Christ. God can do things that seem impossible. God even blesses those outside the boundaries of the covenant—not with all the provisions of the covenant, but with some blessings nonetheless.

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