

In the Beginning

Message 14

The Sign of the Covenant

Genesis 17:1-27; Psalm 105:1-12

The Covenant Reaffirmed

Last night we saw what happened when Abram and Sarai lost faith in God and tried to fulfill His promises for Him. God had promised to make a great nation of Abram and use him to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. The only problem was that Abram had no children! In spite of this Abram believed God, and God considered Abram righteous because Abram believed in Him. But the years rolled on, and Abram and Sarai grew more and more anxious. Then after waiting ten years Abram turned 85 and Sarai turned 75. Very soon they would be physically unable to have children. So Abram and Sarai cooked up this scheme to get God's program into production. Sarai gave Abram her servant as a surrogate mother. Sure enough, the servant produced a child, but she was unwilling to let Sarai claim him as her own. A son was born into the household, but at the cost of terrible domestic turmoil.

God promised the servant that her son would be a wild man, so we can safely assume that Ishmael grew up to be a sturdy, robust lad. Again the years rolled by until Ishmael was 13 years old. By this time Abram was 99 and Sarai was 89. She had passed menopause and Abram was no longer fertile. So their hopes for the future lay entirely with Ishmael, whom they shared with a servant. Then out of nowhere God appeared again and said, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." (Genesis 17:1-2)

Now God already made a covenant with Abram. We covered that when we studied chapter 15. Abram was nervous after he and his allies attacked and defeated four kings. After the battle he didn't take any loot, but gave everything back to its owners. So Abram returned home empty-handed and vulnerable. At that time God appeared to reassure him. God said, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." (Genesis 15:1) In other words, "I will protect you and be your companion." And to solemnly confirm that He meant what He said, God made a covenant with Abram. When we examined the nature of a covenant, we defined it as a personal bond established with a self-maledictory oath which lasts for all generations. The core concept of a covenant is the personal bond. Marriage is the best contemporary example of a covenant. Marriage is not merely a contract or a promise. It is much stronger than that. It is a life-long bond with another person. In marriage two people share their whole lives with each other. Nothing is held back. Biblical covenants were made with an oath in which each party cursed himself if he was unfaithful to the other party. This was graphically illustrated by slitting open some animals and laying the pieces out separately in two rows. The message was, "May I be split open like these animals if I fail to keep the covenant." And a covenant is perpetual. It is in effect throughout life and applies to succeeding generations. But we noted a startling and wonderful difference between God's covenants and those made among people. God took the oath by Himself. Abram didn't swear to keep the covenant. God promised to see that the covenant was maintained by Himself. So now, 20 some years later God is not initiating a covenant – He is reaffirming the covenant He already made.

Covenant Names

We saw that a major part of God's promise was descendants. And not just a decent family, but a host of descendants. God told Abram his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. We're talking about billions of people. This is a curious promise considering that the word "Abram" means "father of many". But just imagine the embarrassment of such a name. We recognized last night how humiliating it is not to have children. But here poor Abram has the name "Father of Many". Can't you just picture the scene as Abram interacts with the traders that would pass by from Egypt to Mesopotamia and back.

“And your name is...”

“Abram.”

“Ah, Father of Many – an impressive name. And how many children do you have?”

“None.”

(Snicker snicker.) “Too bad.” (Snicker)

And you can imagine the talk later among the traders. “Did you meet that old guy near Shechem, Abram? He doesn’t have any children! Ha ha ha! What a joke!”

Well due to Abram and Sarai’s great plan, now Abram has one child. At least that’s something. So now God comes to Abram and reaffirms His covenant. Again, He promises a huge number of descendants. And now as a sign that God is serious, He gives Abram a new name – Abraham, “Father of a multitude”! Now let’s stop and consider what this will mean for Abram.

“Greetings Abram! How have you been?”

“Greetings Serug! I have a new name.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“Father of a Multitude.”

“Wow! And how many children do you have now?”

“One.”

And behind his back people are going to say, “That silly old geezer has one child and it goes to his head. He thinks he is so great he changes his name.”

What would you have done in Abraham’s position? Would you endure such ridicule? How would you like being the butt of every joke because of your name? Would you change your name? What if God gave it to you? It is one thing to have faith in private, but is your faith strong enough to withstand the ridicule of everyone in your neighborhood? You see, now Abraham not only has to endure the wait until God keeps His promise – he also has to endure the mockery of those who think he is crazy. Would you do it?

Abraham isn’t the only one to get a new name. God also renames Sarai. Her new name is Sarah, which means “princess” – an appropriate name for a woman destined to be the mother of kings. While He is at it, God also provides a name for a child that Sarah will have. “Isaac” means laughter – for Abram and Sarah will be deliriously happy when they have their own baby boy. Of course it’s too much to expect, for as we said, Abraham and Sarah are physically too old to conceive children anymore. But God seems determined that they shall have their own child.

Who names people? Parents name their own children, of course. Here is God naming Isaac and Abram and Sarai. Do you see the significance of this? God is treating this family as His own. Abraham may be the father of a multitude and Sarah may be a princess, but God is the Father of them all. He is the great divine father of all other fathers. In fact there would be no fathers if God were not a father to us all. But here God is more than the father of the human race – He is a special father to His special family – the one He bound Himself to by a covenant.

The Covenant Sign

The other significant thing God does in this visit with Abraham is to give him a covenant sign. It does not seem that covenants between people involved signs, but those with God do. When God covenanted with Noah never again to destroy the earth by a flood, He gave the rainbow as a sign. When God established a new covenant with Israel through Moses, He gave the Passover as a sign. And when Jesus established the

New Covenant in His death, He gave us the signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Why does God provide a sign when He makes a covenant? At the simplest level the sign is a reminder of the covenant. As a reminder, it is a comfort and encouragement. We look into the sky and are reminded of God's promise never to destroy the earth with a flood. Abraham carried the covenant sign in his body as a vivid reminder of God's promise of a child and a land. We receive baptism and eat the Lord's Supper and are reminded of Christ's death and resurrection to save us from our sins. One of our biggest problems is forgetfulness. Life moves on and we forget God's promises. We can get overwhelmed with work and problems and distracted by the stuff of life – and just forget God. This was a major criticism of the prophets. They railed against Israel for forgetting all the wonderful things God did for them. So covenant signs minister to our human frailty by vividly reminding us over and over of God's promises.

Covenantal signs are particular types of reminders. Scripture is also a reminder, but these signs are physical symbols. Scripture affects us as we hear the words. Covenant signs affect us by touch, smell, sight, and taste. All are visible, but baptism feels wet and the Lord's Supper smells enticing and tastes delicious. It's as if God exerted Himself to hit all our senses with the reality of His bond to us. Saint Augustine called the sacraments "physical words" to indicate that they declare the same salvation we hear in the gospel, but in visible form. We might go further and say the covenantal signs are visible, edible, tactile, and olfactory words! God overwhelms us with the guarantee of His bond to us.

But the covenant signs are more than reminders. There is a power in these signs – a divine power that actually saves. Notice verse 10. "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised." (Genesis 17:10) In this verse the covenant sign is called the covenant. That is because the sign has the power to apply the covenant to someone.

Now at this point we need to make a crucial distinction between a covenant sign and witchcraft. Witchcraft is the attempt to force supernatural powers to do what you want through some ritual. The idea is to mix some potent or say some formula and presto! you get what you want. Witchcraft is blasphemous. God hates witchcraft. God is too great to be manipulated, and He is too majestic to tolerate it. We don't manipulate God in a covenant sign. There is no magic in the knife, or the lamb, or the water or bread. The bread and wine do not turn into flesh and blood, or other such nonsense. Neither is there magical power in a priest. Human beings do not save each other by rituals. If anyone is saved, God does it. There is no magic priest or magic bread. There *is* a powerful, loving God who gives eternal life to His people. And part of the way He gives that eternal life is through the signs of the covenant.

The sign of the covenant is not a magic charm. But neither is it a powerless ritual. Circumcision actually accomplished something. It made someone part of the covenant. It's very simple. Before a man was circumcised, He was not part of God's people. After He was circumcised, He *was* part of God's people. His relationship to God fundamentally changed. This was not because of magic powers in the knife. The change was caused by God. God made that man part of His people. But God used circumcision as the means of making that change. The power was in God, not the knife – but God applied that power during the cutting. God was present in the circumcision and during that ritual God made the former alien a citizen of His Kingdom. The same thing happens today when we baptize people. There is no holy water or special priest. But when a pastor applies water in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, God acts to make someone previously outside of Christ a Christian.

At this point it is important to note that we are talking about the people of God, the community of God's people. Circumcision for Abraham and baptism for us gives us citizenship in God's Kingdom. Neither ritual was a guarantee that every person circumcised or baptized was born again. This was not the

intent. Go back and re-read this chapter. We know Abraham had true faith in God because we were told that in chapter 15. But absolutely nothing is said about Sarah or Ishmael, or the servants. But all the men were circumcised. That's fairly easy to understand when you remember that circumcision did not give the people a new heart. In fact Moses later urged the people to circumcise their hearts. "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer." (Deuteronomy 10:16) Moses also prophesied a day when this would indeed happen in Israel. "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." (Deuteronomy 30:6) Moses spoke these words to the citizens of God's Kingdom – the Israelites – those who were part of God's covenant by circumcision. It was scandalous that some who were bound to God in the covenant were not faithful to that covenant, so Moses pleaded with them to keep the covenant.

A comparison with marriage will help here. Anyone who takes a marriage vow and has sex with his or her spouse is married. Perhaps they are in love, but some couples aren't. Being in love or not has no bearing on whether you are married. Being in love has an enormous effect on the *happiness* of your marriage, but not on the fact of it. Of course we wish all married couples were in love, and we would hope that in those marriages where there is no love, love will arise. If the couple never learns to love each other, the marriage will be unpleasant. In a similar manner not all Christians love God. They are bound to Christ by baptism, so we call them Christians. We wish they would love God, and we urge them to repent and believe the gospel. As long as they refuse to love God, they will be unsatisfied and in the end they will perish. But for now they are part of God's covenant.

We also notice here that the covenant sign is given to all men eight days old and up. That is because a covenant extends to all generations. A bond that doesn't include children is a temporary contract. A covenant, by its nature, includes everyone in the household.

A final point to make about covenant signs. We have discussed their role in reminding us of God's promises, but they also remind God of His promises. I know, God doesn't forget. But scripture tells us that the covenant signs are important because they remind God of His promises. Turn to Genesis 9:8-17.

Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." And God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth." Genesis 9:8-17

The key verses are 15 and 16. "The rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." The rainbow reminds God not to destroy the earth with a flood. Wow! There is a similar passage in Exodus.

Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: 'On the tenth day of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbor next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man's need you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat it raw, nor boiled at all with water, but roasted in fire -- its head with its legs and its entrails. You shall let none of it remain until morning, and what remains of it until morning you shall burn with fire. And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. 'So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance. Exodus 12:3-14

The focus here is on God's role in seeing the blood on the doorway. The covenant sign is for God as much as for us. Notice also how the covenant sign actually did something. In this case the blood really saved the inhabitants from death. Again, we don't know whether everyone who participated in the Passover loved God. That's a vital issue of eternal significance. But it's not addressed here. These two passages also mentioned that the covenant was for all generations

One final point about the covenant signs. They symbolize what they do. For us baptism in water symbolizes cleansing from sin. The rainbow symbolizes the war bow hung up after battle. So circumcision symbolized the cutting away of the flesh so that we might live by the Spirit. Paul developed this point extensively in his letter to the Galatians.

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish....And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Galatians 5:16-17, 24-25.

By this sign of the covenant Abraham symbolically cut off the flesh so that he could live by the Spirit. Circumcision was especially appropriate for Abraham. His failure of the flesh was in procreation, so it was fitting that the organ of procreation was cut. Now his only hope for a child is by the power of the Spirit.

There are various views of these covenantal signs, but one thing all Christians agree on – they point to God's grace. The fundamental point which we all agree on is that salvation is by grace. Abraham blew it with Hagar and Ishmael, but salvation never depended on Abraham's faithfulness anyway. For Abraham as well as for us, our salvation depends on God's faithfulness to us. And that is the chief value of the signs of the covenant. They proclaim and convince us of God's undying love for us.

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