

October 9, 2011

Sermon Overview:

Genesis 17 introduces the most significant ritual of the Old Testament—circumcision—as a sign of the covenant. We shouldn’t think of this as some separate covenant from the one outlined in chapter 12 and ratified in chapter 15, especially since the promises expounded here only expanded on the promises that God already made there. Chapter 17 is best read as filling out the details of a single Abrahamic covenant, by which God would bless Abraham and through Abraham to bless the world.

Circumcision is a Sign of the Covenant Promise: In chapter 17 God’s promise is fully and forcefully asserted: Abraham will be the father of a multitude of nations; his offspring will come through Sarah and inherit land of Canaan. All these promises hinge on the central promise that God will be God to him and to his offspring forever. Since the promise of offspring is of central concern for Abraham, it is appropriate that God would use circumcision—an act thought to expedite procreation—as a sign of that promise. The fact that this was performed when Abraham was 99 only reinforced how Abraham’s fruitfulness was due to God’s supernatural power and not through Abraham’s biological maturation.

Circumcision is a Sign of the Covenant Requirement: But circumcision was not only a sign of what God pledged to do for Abraham and his offspring, it was also a sign of the commitment the covenant demanded of Abraham and his offspring. First, in order to keep the covenant Abraham and those who came after him must be circumcised. This is because the covenant sign has an intimate relationship with the covenant itself. So close is the relationship between the two that circumcision is described simply as “a covenant” in verses 10 and 13, and not as “a sign of the covenant” (v11). The signifier has a role in the things signified. From Abraham until Christ, circumcision was an entry rite into covenant relationship with God and his people (note the horizontal dimension of v14 *cut off from his people*). It is not difficult to see how baptism now performs this role as an entry rite into the life, loyalty, and community of the covenant (see Rom 6:1–5; Col 2:11–13; Gal 3:27–29).

But it would be reductionist to read Genesis as if this is all that God required. Verse 2 tells us that in order for the covenant to go forward, Abraham must walk before God blamelessly. The requirement was not just external obedience, but an internal disposition. Circumcision signified such allegiance; anything that impedes fidelity was to be excised from life.

Circumcision is a Sign of the Covenant Curse: The ratification of a covenant often included a sign, denoting what would happen to a person who breaks the covenant. In fact, covenants weren’t “made” in the ancient world, they were “cut”. The person who failed to keep the covenant would be “cut” off. Circumcision graphically depicted how covenant breakers would be “cut off” from the promised seed (v14), as would their progeny.

Chapter 17 introduces a great tension: How do we reconcile the seemingly unconditional expression of the Abrahamic covenant in chapters 12 and 15 with Genesis 17’s very conditional expression (vv2, 14)? The apostle Paul found that tension resolved in Christ (Gal 3:7–16).

Questions for Preparation and Discussion *Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D). Study based on the English Standard Version*

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. Can you think of a time in which a promise made to you by another person was confirmed by some kind of action or object other than words? What impact did this have on you? Or was there a time in which you confirmed a promise without words? Why did you do it that way? [D]

Looking at the Bible:

1. Read Genesis 17:1–27. How does God expand his promise beyond what he said in chapter 12:1–3 and chapter 15? [P/D]
 - a. How is Abram's fatherhood expanded? How does God signify that to Abram? [D]
 - b. How else is the promise of God expanded? [D]
 - c. Read the words of the Apostle Peter as he spoke in Solomon's Portico 2500 years later (Acts 3:11–16, 24–26). How does the New Testament further open our understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant? [P/D] Note – there are over 70 references to Abraham in the New Testament.
2. How does God further specify the means of the promise (vv 15–21)? [D]
 - a. How does Abraham react? How does this shed further light on the choice Abram made with Hagar? [P/D]
 - b. God promises to renew his covenant with Sarah's son (not Hagar's son Ishmael), specifying the child's name and timing of his birth. What do you think Abraham is thinking at this point? Feeling? [D]
3. Circumcision is required of Abraham and his entire household as a sign of the covenant.
 - a. Why would circumcision be a meaningful sign for this covenant? [P/D]
 - b. What made Israel's circumcision different from the circumcision performed by the surrounding peoples (Jer 9:25)? [D]
 - c. Why does God use a common rite as a sign of the covenant? [D]
4. Unlike chapter 15, the covenant now has a conditional aspect. What is that? [D]
 - a. Is this conditional aspect disturbing to you? Why? [D]
 - b. How does Christ reconcile the unconditional promise with the requirement of faithfulness? [D] Read Colossians 2:11–13 alongside Romans 2:25–29 as you discuss.

Looking at Our Hearts

1. "So you say you are a child of Abraham," a friend asks. How would you respond? [P/D]
2. Which promises of God are the hardest to accept?
 - a. What signs has God given you that you can hold onto when you doubt? [D]
 - b. What signs has God asked you to be a part of in the lives of others? [D]
3. Do the conditions of faithfulness apply to you? Why? How do you deal with this? [P/D]
4. What distractions of the heart would God have you circumcise? [P]

Praying for Each Other *(Use these suggestions alone or with other prayer requests to help focus your time in prayer together).*

- Pray for specific ways in which members of your group are wrestling with the tension between God's unconditional promise and the requirement of faithfulness.
- Pray that we would faithfully attend to the signs (and seals) of God's grace in our lives.