

# God's Everlasting Covenant

January 11, 2009

Purpose: To help us explore the meaning of rituals and symbols as expressions of God's promises to us and of our promises to God

Key Bible reference: Genesis 17

Key Verse: Genesis 17:7 *I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*

Background Material: In Genesis 17, we have a second tradition that recounts the covenant that God made with Abraham. The first covenant account is found in Genesis 15. The second account was written a good deal later than the one in Chapter 15, probably during the time when the Jews were exiles in Babylonia (587/586 B.C.-538 B.C.). It reflects their concern that they were strangers in a foreign land, removed from the source of their religious identity in Jerusalem. Circumcision became an important sign of their common identity as believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It distinguished them from the Babylonians, who did not practice circumcision. Circumcision became the sign of the covenant that God had made with this particular people: Abraham and his descendants.

Yet the Hebrews knew that the observance of ritual for ritual's sake was not what God had intended to establish through this covenant with Abraham. And so they began to describe the need for "circumcision of the heart": the need for an inward change to take place along with the outward sign of it. Look at other passages in the Bible that describe this call for a change of attitude and will as a "circumcision of the heart" (see Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25; Ezekiel 44:7).

Notice that in Romans 2:29, there are echoes of these Old Testament passages when Paul writes to the early Christians that true circumcision is a matter of the heart, not of the flesh. An inward change must accompany the outward sign.

Today we describe the sacraments of our church as "outward signs of an inward and spiritual grace." Therefore, both circumcision and baptism are outward signs of an "inward and spiritual" covenantal relationship.

Genesis 17, the chapter that gives an account of the origin of circumcision among the Hebrews, may be divided into three sections:

- (1) Verses 1-14 - the covenant with Abraham;
- (2) Verses 15-22 - a reiteration of the promise that a son named Isaac will be born to Abraham and Sarah;
- (3) Verses 23-27 - the enactment of the command to circumcise.

Our focus in this lesson will be on the first third of this chapter: the covenant with Abraham.

Thirteen years have passed between the birth of Ishmael in Chapter 16 and the story about Abraham and Sarah that we read in Chapter 17. Abraham is ninety-nine years old when God addresses him again. The promise of an heir has yet to be fulfilled. Why has there been such a delay? Is God going to keep his promise? Chapter 17 tells us that the answer is yes. The promise is not going to be worked out according to Abraham's schedule or in Abraham's way, but the promise will be fulfilled. All these chapters of Genesis are leading up to the fulfillment of the promise—the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:1-7).

Genesis 17:1-5 God appears to Abraham and tells him, "Walk before me, and be blameless." Then God tells Abraham about the covenant God will make with him and his descendants.

In Genesis 17:3, Abraham falls on his face, perhaps in humility, showing deference before God Almighty, or perhaps in an attitude of repentance. The message is clear: Abraham knows his place before God.

In verse 4, God continues to reveal the divine promises in the covenant relationship.

In verse 5, God changes Abraham's name from Abram to Abraham, reflecting Abraham's changed relationship to God through the covenant.

Genesis 17:6-8 The promise from God is here expanded from the earlier promise and becomes an "everlasting covenant," not only with Abraham but also with his descendants after him (Genesis 17:7). The promise of the land is mentioned again (Genesis 17:8), as had been promised in Genesis 12:1, 13:15, and 15:18. Yet this time there is a condition placed on the promise. Abraham and his descendants are expected to keep their side of the covenant.

Notice the closing formula in Genesis 17:8: "And I will be their God." Presupposed in this statement is the counter theme, "And they shall be my people" (see Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 24:7; 31:1). This phrase is echoed throughout the Old Testament, particularly in those books written during the Exile when the people needed a special reminder of God's faithfulness to them. This phrase closes the section in Genesis 17 that emphasizes God's part of the promise. Yet it also opens the way to hear what is to be the people's responsibility in upholding the covenant.

Genesis 17:9-12 The opening statement in Genesis 17:9, "As for you" begins Abraham's side of the covenant, just as the words "As for me" in verse 4 introduced God's promises in the covenant relationship. The focus of the covenant in these verses is the ritual of circumcision.

We do not know why the practice of infant circumcision developed. "Every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old" (Genesis 17:12). Circumcision was often associated with puberty rites in other ancient countries. It may have originally had some other religious connotation that is unknown to us today, or it may have been performed originally for purely hygienic purposes.

Whatever the origin, circumcision had a strong liturgical and theological significance for the Hebrew people. It was the outward sign of one's inclusion in the covenant community of God. Ask:

It is not until Genesis 17:23 that we discover that Abraham follows the command of God by being circumcised himself and then circumcising Ishmael and all the male members of his household. A year later, when Isaac

was born, as soon as Isaac was eight days old, Abraham kept the covenant by having him circumcised (Genesis 21:4).

In the account of the covenant that we read in Genesis 17, God promises to give to Abraham many descendants and the land of Canaan as a perpetual holding. Abraham, for his part, is to walk before God, to be blameless, and to practice circumcision as a sign of the covenant.

Throughout this account there is an emphasis on both God's promises and the expectation of human response. Furthermore, the ritual signifies both the outward sign and the inward reality of the promise made in the covenant.

Prayer: Our God, like Abraham of old, we fall on our face when we are confronted by your love. Let your Spirit remind us of your promises to us and ours to you, that we may walk uprightly before you. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen

## Credits

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