

Promise and Obedience

Genesis 17

Covenant Waterfall, 27 February 2022

Introduction

Perhaps you have heard it said that the gospel message is this, “God loves you unconditionally.” I’m sure it’s said by people who are well-meaning, and there is certainly truth in it. But, on its own, it’s incomplete. How come? The implication of it is that you can live how you please and God won’t mind, he’ll just love you anyway. No need for repentance, no need to change your behaviour, carry on living how you like. This is essentially the question that Romans 6:1 asks, **“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”** It’s a valid question – because we’ve been saved by grace, does it mean then that we can just carry on living as we please, knowing that God will forgive us anyway?

This morning, we’re looking at Genesis 17. Here we see that God re-affirms his covenant that he made with Abram in Genesis 15, but with some important additions. God promises to bless him, to be his God, to grant him many descendants. One of the important additions is that not only does God give covenant promises to Abram, but that he expects a response from Abram if he is to remain in covenant with God.

So what we’ll see this morning from our text is that because God has made a covenant with us in Christ, we are to respond in faith and repentance.

- Covenant Promise
- Covenant Sign
- Covenant Obedience
- Fulfilment in Christ

A. Covenant Promise, vv.1-8

Context - remember from previous weeks – in Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abram. Promised him innumerable descendants in face of old age and Sarai being barren. Last week, Genesis 16, Sarai and Abram get impatient, seems like God is not fulfilling his promise to them. So they take matters into their own hands. Sarai gets Abram to sleep with her servant, Hagar, in order for her to provide them with a child – surrogate mother. Result is that Ishmael is born.

Our text begins in verses 1-2:

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”

We’re told that Abram is now 99 years old, so 13 years have passed since Ishmael was born. God appears to Abram and he re-affirms the covenant that he made with him years before in Genesis 15, but with some important additions:

Verse 1 – God tells Abram that he must walk before him and be blameless. He must commit himself to following God in obedience. in the light of the covenant that God has made with him. Verse 2 – God re-affirms his promises to multiply Abram greatly.

Then verses 4-5 continue:

“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.”

God builds upon the previous covenant promises by promising Abram that not only will he be the father of a “great nation” (Gen 12:2), but that he will be the father of a multitude of nations. It’s for this reason that God changes his name from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude).

Then in verse 6, God goes on to promise that Abraham will be exceedingly fruitful, many nations and kings will come from him. In verse 7, God adds to the covenant promise that not only will he establish his covenant with Abraham, but also with his offspring after him. All of Abraham’s offspring will be included in God’s covenant, which is called for the first time

here an “everlasting covenant”. God promises to be their God, and they his people – **“to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”** (v.7).

And then finally, in v.8, God re-affirms his promise of the land of Canaan as an “everlasting possession” to Abraham and his descendants.

What then is the significance of these covenant promises? God is promising to restore what was lost in the Fall in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. There, sin and the curse entered the world. Result? Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, separated from God’s presence, no longer able to enjoy God and the blessed life that they had before the Fall. Genesis 3:15 – God promises that a descendant of Eve, seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent, break the curse and deal with sin, restore God’s people to God.

God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 is the start of this fulfilment. How? God promises that through Abraham’s seed he will establish a covenant people for himself. He will give them a new Garden of Eden – the Promised Land of Canaan, where they will dwell, God being their God, and they his people, enjoying him in a blessed existence. This is all a unilateral promise from God – a covenant of grace - he will do it all!

B. Covenant Sign, vv.9-14

Not only does God re-affirm his covenant promise to Abraham, but he tells Abraham what he expects from him and his descendants, as a response to his covenant with them. Verses 10-11 explain:

“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.”

In response to God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants, God commands that all males must be circumcised. From baby boys 8 days old, to all males in every household, even their servants. Why? It is a sign of the covenant. It’s a visible mark of the covenant on your body – v.13 – “covenant be in your flesh” – showing that you are a part of God’s covenant people.

Why specifically circumcision? The act of cutting away flesh shows the importance of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Verse 14 says, **“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.”** If you’re not cut, you’ll be cut off from God’s people, you’ll be a covenant breaker.

Here we see what God expects in response to his covenant – covenant obligation. God has unilaterally made the covenant – all his work, covenant of grace – he has promised to Abraham and his descendants that he will be their God, they his people, promised to give them the land and bless them. They can’t earn any of this, it’s all a gift of grace. Yet, God requires that Abraham and his descendants must respond in faith to his promises in obedience. They must walk uprightly, and in obedience to God, they must be circumcised, in order to enjoy the blessings and benefits of the covenant. Verse 14 is clear that if they don’t obey God in this regard – cut off from the covenant blessings.

C. Covenant Obedience, vv.15-27

Then in verse 15, gear change, God is still speaking to Abraham, and changes Sarai’s name to Sarah, meaning “princess”. Why? She is the one who will bear the son of promise. Like Abraham, she too will be blessed and kings and nations shall come from her.

In response to this, Abraham, in verse 17, finds it so incredulous that he laughs 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?”**

Abraham goes on to assume that the child God is promising must be Ishmael – surrogate child of Sarah via Hagar. In v.19, God says, **“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.”**

God really is going to miraculously provide a son of promise to Sarah. His name will be Isaac, meaning “laughter” (Abraham’s response), and the covenant will be established through him and his offspring – not Ishmael’s. While Ishmael will still be blessed, become a great nation – he is not the son of promise.

Then in verse 22 God finishes talking with Abraham. Immediately, “that very day” (repeated in both v.23 and v.26), Abraham is obedient to God’s command to circumcise all the males of his household – Ishmael, 13 years old, other male family, servants and himself. The women though not circumcised, are included in the covenant promises through their husbands and fathers – federal (representative) nature of the covenant.

What’s the significance of this? This is a key moment in redemptive history. It’s here where the OT church was born. God established his covenant with a chosen people of his own – Abraham and his descendants through the son of promise, Isaac. He will be their God, and they his people. In response to his covenant, Abraham obeys God’s command to circumcise all males of his household – marking them with the sign of the covenant.

D. Fulfilment in Christ

How does this all point to Christ and his gospel? God’s covenant with Abraham is ultimately fulfilled in the new covenant which Jesus comes to establish. How so?

In the fullness of time, Jesus, the promised seed of the woman, the son of Abraham, came to earth – truly man, truly God. He established the new covenant by dying on the cross, spilling his blood on our behalf as a penalty for our sins. Because of this, he forgives our sins, removing the curse from us, redeeming us to our God, and we his people.

Christ fulfils the key promises of God’s covenant with Abraham – God will give Abraham offspring (God’s people), and give them the Promised Land.

Promise of Abraham’s offspring: Galatians 3:7-9 says: **“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”**

God’s true people, his true offspring of Abraham, are not of a certain ethnic group, but are all those who as Abraham, by faith alone trust in Christ alone, and are justified by his work. This fulfils God’s promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, that through him the whole world would be blessed. The gospel would not remain exclusively

with Abraham's physical descendants (the nation of Israel), but, as God promised to Abraham, it would go to all the nations, as it is to be received by anyone who believes in Christ – both Jew and Gentile.

Promise of the Land: What then about the land? Was it not promised to Abraham and his descendants (Israel) as an “everlasting possession” (Gen 17:8)? The land of Canaan was just a type and shadow of the reality to come. The true Promised Land is the new heavens and the new earth. This is why Hebrews 11 says concerning the great Israelite leaders, they died *not having received the things promised*, but only having seen them from afar (v. 13). **“They desired a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”** (v. 16). This new promised city is indeed the new, heavenly Jerusalem. While the descendants of Abraham did indeed receive the promised land of Canaan, in reality they had not received the ultimate promise in their lifetime. The physical land was just a glimpse of something greater, the heavenly reality – the new heavens and new earth, which will indeed be the everlasting possession of all Abraham's offspring – all of us who are in Christ.

What significance is Circumcision in the light of Christ? Galatians 6:15, **“For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”**

In the new covenant, no need to be circumcised. Why? Jesus' blood has already been shed. Instead baptism replaces circumcision in the new covenant. Colossians 2:11 calls baptism the “circumcision of Christ”. Baptism (which is painless and blood-less) is now the sign of the new covenant which shows that we are part of the covenant community, the church. This is why in Acts 2:38-39, when on the Day of Pentecost (birth of the NT church), Peter preached the gospel, he concluded with:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Repentance, faith and baptism (sign of faith) is the appropriate response for us and our children who have received God's covenant promises in Christ – forgiveness of sins, new birth in the Spirit.

Conclusion

The question remains, if we've been saved by grace, does it mean then that we can just carry on living as we please, knowing that God will forgive us anyway? Absolutely not! God's grace does not give us licence to sin. Nor does God's grace mean that there are no obligations for us.

So what is the appropriate response to God's grace to us in Christ? Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 32:

Q. 32. How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?

A. The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provides and offers to sinners a mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promises and gives his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he has appointed them to salvation.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he offers us this free gift of grace – the new covenant – forgiveness of sins, the gift of his Spirit, everlasting life with him in the new creation. Correct response? Indifference, carry on living our self-centred lives, independent of God, in the muck of our sins? Never!

Brothers and sisters – right response to God's grace in Christ? Joyfully receive Christ by faith. Repent, flee from your sins, live your lives empowered by his Spirit in thankful obedience to God, knowing that he counts us as his covenant people – he our God, and we his people forever. Amen.