

# Confirming the Covenant

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[ 0 : 00 ] And I would like you to open up your copy of the scriptures to Genesis chapter 17.

Then you simply need to turn to page 11, which tells you that we're very close to the beginning of the Bible if we're simply on page 11.

But you will find Genesis 17 on page 11 of your Bibles. Now we are going this morning to read through all of Genesis chapter 17. We will probably spend more than one week, Lord willing, in this chapter.

But this morning my goal is to give you a bit of an overview of this chapter and to show you how it relates to what has come previously in the book of Genesis. And then to look to the New Testament for some pointers to help us to understand exactly what's happening and what is unfolding in this chapter.

So we're going to do a little bit of moving around this morning from chapter 17 to the earlier portions of Genesis. And then from Genesis even into the New Testament a little bit here and there. But as you find yourself there in chapter 17, I'd like you guys to stand to your feet again in honor of the Word of God as we read through this great chapter.

[ 1 : 31 ] When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.

Then Abram fell on his face and God said to him, behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 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.

I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you. And 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.

And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession. And I will be their God. And God said to Abraham, as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You should be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins and it should be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

[ 2 : 53 ] He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised.

So shall my covenant be in your flesh and everlasting covenant. 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. And God said to Abraham, as for Sarah, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and moreover, I will give to you a son by her.

I will bless her and she shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?

Shall Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, oh, that Ishmael might live before you. God said, no, but Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son and shall call his name Isaac.

[ 4 : 03 ] I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply

him greatly.

He shall father 12 princes and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house. And he circumcised the flesh of their four skins that very day, as God had said to him.

Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his four skin. And Ishmael his son was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his four skin. That very day, Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised.

And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. Father, we thank you for recording these events from the life of Abraham. But not simply for the sake of giving us a record of history, which it is, but for teaching us about you and your ways, and ultimately about what you have accomplished for us in the true offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

[ 5 : 23 ] Teach us and instruct us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. You guys, take a seat for a moment. A couple of weeks ago, was driving down the road with a couple of boys in the car with me.

It's very rare that I'm going down the road without a couple of boys in the car with me. But a couple of kids were there with me and were driving down the road and one of them, I don't remember which one, said, Hey, Dad, put on some oldies. And I thought, put on some oldies?

Alright, I think maybe I've got a couple of Elvis songs on my phone. I mean, I don't know. I've got something on here. And I start to put it on and they say, No, no, no, like Bon Jovi or something like that. I'm thinking, when did Bon Jovi become oldies?

This is crazy. This is insane. But I suppose that's the reality now that I sort of have to live with. That the music from the 80s is now considered by my kids to be the oldies.

And I guess that's okay. There are certain realities that you live with when you look back and realize that your childhood took place three decades ago. That's alright. That's just the way that things go. But one of the lessons that I've had to learn in thinking through the differences between growing up as a kid in the 80s and now my kids growing up today is that the movie rating systems are different between movies in the 80s and movies today.

[ 6 : 39 ] There was no PG-13 rating in the 1980s, which a lot of people don't realize. That came along actually really probably, I think, towards the very end of the 80s. In the 90s, there were a lot of PG-13 movies.

But in the 80s, they were all just PG movies. And I don't remember all that well, all the movies that I watched. I don't remember all the details of those movies. But there have been an occasion when I thought, Hey, boys, let's watch this old movie that Dad watched when he was a kid.

It's a hilarious movie. And then we put it on about ten minutes into it. And I'm like, So, guys, I'd like to apologize for this PG movie that we just started to watch. But then there are other times when I will go back and watch movies that I saw when I was a kid or when I was a teenager.

And I realize as I'm watching this movie, for what could be the third or fourth time, sometimes it's only the second time that I've seen it, I realize that there are a whole multitude of things that I completely missed the first time that I watched through a particular movie.

It may be some sort of political message and overtone that weaves its way through the movie that I was oblivious to as a kid. Or it may be some social issue that's being addressed in the movie that I didn't notice at all.

[ 7 : 47 ] Or it may simply be that the movie is a really well-made, well-written movie so that parts of the movie at the beginning are giving you hints and tips as to what's going to happen toward the end of the movie.

And one of the most enjoyable things about watching a movie for the second time, if it's a good movie, is on your second viewing, you begin to realize and notice how frequently in these movies the events or the things that characters say in the first ten minutes of the movie really give you pointers to where things are heading in the end.

But you don't know that on your first viewing. And I think that that is also the case as we read through the Bible. Maybe you have read through the entire Bible. Maybe you've read through

chunks of the Bible.

Maybe it's been a long time since you've been through the whole Bible. Or maybe you're working your way through the Scriptures with a real serious effort to understand them for the first time in your life right now.

If that's the case, you especially need to realize that on your second trip through the Bible, or your third trip, or your hundredth trip through the Bible, you're going to be seeing things that were always there.

[ 8 : 52 ] It's not as if you're discovering some new meaning that was hidden and wasn't there before. It was always there. But on your second viewing or your hundredth viewing, sometimes you're able and God opens your eyes to better understand the passage you're reading because you remember something that came before that.

But one of my jobs as a pastor, as I stand in front of you each week, is to help you to see those connections without you having to be on your hundredth time trip through the book of Genesis or through any given book of the Bible.

And one of the things that we're going to see in this chapter this morning is that there are clear connections between the events and the description of the events of Genesis chapter 17 and the events and the description of the events that we find around the life of Noah, particularly in chapter 6 and chapter 9 of the book of Genesis.

Now most of you know the story of Noah very well. Noah was a man who lived upon the earth when the earth was incredibly wicked, when humanity had gone far astray and God decided that He would judge the earth.

And yet out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, God chose to save Noah because we are told that Noah, unlike everyone else in his generation, was a righteous man. And so the story of Noah precedes.

[ 10 : 08 ] God rescues him from the flood that He sends upon the earth by telling Noah to build a boat. And then at the end of the flood, when the waters have subsided and Noah and his family and all the animals that He took on the ark with them, when they exit the ark, God makes a covenant with Noah and He puts a sign in the sky, the rainbow, which God says will be a reminder, not to Noah by the way.

Often times we tell that story and we say, oh God's giving a sign of a rainbow to remind us that He's not going to flood the world again. But God actually tells us that He puts the rainbow in the sky as a reminder to Himself to say, don't do this again.

As if God needs reminders. He doesn't need them, but it's helpful for us to know that God is continually causing Himself to be faithful to all of His promises.

And so we have Noah exit the ark, make a covenant with God in which God gives to Noah a covenant sign that will be for all the earth. Now here we are with the story of Abraham.

In fact, finally now at chapter 17, we're at a place where we can actually call him Abraham. He has been Abram up to this point in time. And now finally in chapter 17, his name is changed to Abraham.

[ 11 : 27 ] Sarai's name is changed to Sarah. And now I don't have to worry from this point on quite so much about saying the wrong name as I'm talking to him. That's a relief for me. You probably don't care, but that's a little bit of a relief for me.

I don't know how many times, you can go back and count how many times I've messed them up if you listen to them. But now we finally get to the point to where they're given new names. But all of this is taking place within the context of some sort of covenant.

And I don't think that we can rightly understand what's happening here if we don't notice the connections back to the story of Noah. So let me show you what some of these connections are.

First of all, we have God approach Abram and what God says to him should cause us to remember Noah, to remember the description of Noah that we're given in Genesis chapter 6.

Take a look here in Genesis 17 verse 1. When Abram was 99 years old, so we are now 13 years removed from the end of chapter 16. There's a 13 year gap.

[ 12 : 26 ] When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless.

Now that terminology will sound familiar to you if you've been through Genesis a number of times because that's the terminology that is used in chapter 6 to describe Noah.

Hold your place there in chapter 17 and turn back three or four pages in your Bible to Genesis chapter 6 and I want you to take a look at verse 9. Verse 9 tells us, now these are the generations of Noah, which is kind of a way of saying, now here's the story of Noah.

These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man. Now here it comes. Blameless in his generation. And then we are told, Noah walked with God.

So Noah is called blameless and we are told that he walked with God. And now Abram is commanded, be blameless and walk before me.

[13:29] So Abram is commanded to imitate Noah. And yet I think that the commands given to Abram here even exceed the description of Noah that we're given in chapter 6. Because with Noah we are told that he was blameless in his generation.

Which I think is a way for Moses, the author of Genesis, to indicate to us that it's not that Noah was perfect. It's not that Noah's righteousness was the kind of righteousness that earned him a right standing before God.

But in comparison with the world around him, standing next to his peers, Noah was righteous. Noah was blameless in his generation. But there is no such addition in Genesis 17.

The blamelessness that God requires of Abram is to exceed the blamelessness of Noah. He requires of him nothing less than actual blamelessness, actual righteousness, and perfection. And then with Noah, of course, we're told that Noah walked with God, which signifies Noah's relationship with God. There's only one other person in the book of Genesis that we are told walked with God, and that's Enoch in chapter 5.

[14:34] And we know that Enoch walked with God, and then Enoch was not. He disappeared. He didn't die. He was just gone from the scene. And then the next person is Noah, walked with God, had a relationship with God.

But with Abram, it's not simply that he is to walk with God. It is that he is to walk before God, which I think does call us back to remembering that that has to take place within the context of a relationship like Noah had.

But you all know when you hear those words that something different is meant by the words walk before as opposed to the words walk with. I mean, if you were standing before a king, and the king said, come here and walk before me, that could be perhaps a little bit frightening.

Walk before you. What are you watching for? Are you watching to see if I walk incorrectly, if I stumble and fall, or if I make a mistake? As opposed to if the king said, come, walk with me.

At that point, you're thinking you're going to take a stroll through the royal garden or something along those lines. You're going to have a conversation with the king. So that there is a close connection here between what God commands of Abram, and now he describes Noah, but what he requires of Abram is to exceed even the character and even the life of Noah.

[15:50] Walk before me and be blameless, he says. And then he tells him why. And the words that he says may seem a bit surprising, even shocking to us.

In order that or that, I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly. What does he mean by this?

He says, live this kind of life. Be blameless. In order that or so that I can make my covenant with you.

Now this is not the normal language that you would find to describe the establishing or the initiating of a covenant. This is a sort of a broad term. Make a covenant can mean make a new covenant, enter into some sort of new covenant, or it could mean continue with a covenant relationship that already exists.

We don't know exactly what's meant by this particular word. That is, until we read further down in the passage and we see the language that is chosen to describe this covenant. The question that we're trying to ask here at the beginning is, is God entering into a new covenant with Abram?

[17:03] Is he calling Abram, now Abraham, to enter into a second covenant with him? Or is this some sort of continuation in addition to the covenant that we saw God make with Abram in Genesis chapter 15?

Well, let's read down through the passage and see if we can find some clues. And we can. Let your eyes pass down to verse 7 of chapter 17. God says there, 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.

Now look down further in the chapter all the way down to verse 19 where God says, 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.

So two times the ESV translates the word that we find here as establish. And once again, this is not the normal term for the initiating of a covenant.

In fact, this particular word is a very specific word that indicates not entering into a new covenant that God is making with Abraham, but the continuing on and the confirming of a covenant that has already been made.

[18:30] And here again, we're seeing an echo of the story of Noah. Turn back in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 9. There, after Noah exits the ark along with the animals, he makes a sacrifice to God.

And then God says something interesting to Noah. In verse 9, he says, Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you and with every living creature that is with you. The birds, the livestock, every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark, it is for every beast of the earth. And then again in verse 11, I establish my covenant with you. So two times here in Genesis chapter 9, God tells Noah, I'm establishing, that is, I'm confirming and continuing a previously made and ratified covenant.

What covenant could that have been? That was the covenant that God made with Adam in the Garden of Eden. There we don't actually find the word covenant. And we don't find the language of covenant in the Garden of Eden.

And I think that the reason for that is that the normal, regular language that would have been used, which we talked about a few weeks ago when we were in chapter 15, for the establishing, for the making, for the initializing of a covenant, is not simply to make a covenant, but it is to cut a covenant.

[19:49] That is, covenant ceremonies normally involve the sacrifice of animals. They normally involve the shedding of blood. And so, to enter into a covenant in the Hebrew language is to cut a covenant.

That is, to spill blood on the ground by cutting, by opening up an animal, which is exactly what happens in Genesis 15 when God initiates a covenant with Abram.

It's what happened in Genesis 9 when Noah offered sacrifices before God. But prior to the fall, when God made a covenant with Adam in the garden, there could be no animal sacrifice.

There was no death. And so, though we don't find the language of covenant in the first few chapters of Genesis, we have a covenant there. A covenant that God makes with Adam and with all of Adam's descendants and all of creation.

And that covenant is renewed with Noah. It's confirmed with Noah. Well, now we see the same thing happening with Abraham. God made a covenant with Abram in Genesis chapter 15.

[20:50] And now, in chapter 17, God's not entering into a new covenant with Abraham. He's not entering into a second covenant with Abraham. He's confirming the covenant that He's already made with him.

And that's significant. Because what we find in chapter 17 is an elaboration upon the covenant of chapter 15. What we find in Genesis chapter 17 is some information that's important for us that was not included in chapter 15 so that now we can come to a more complete and more accurate understanding of what was happening in Genesis chapter 15.

Now, if you think back to the sermon that I preached on Genesis chapter 15, you will recall that there in that chapter, blood was certainly spilt in the covenant ceremony.

that God commanded Abram to divide animals in half and to lay the halves of the animals beside each other. This was a normal sort of procedure for covenant making in the ancient world.

It's not unique even to the Israelites, but it happened among some of their neighbors. So they would cut these animals in half, which we said was a very bloody, messy event. And then those who were entering into the covenant, the covenant parties, would then walk through the pieces of the animal, literally splashing their feet through this bloody mess.

[22:12] And they were saying, in effect, if I break the covenant that I am making with you, may it be done to me as it has been done to these animals. May I be treated in the way that these animals have been treated if I break the covenant.

But what was striking about Genesis chapter 15 are two things. Number one, in Genesis chapter 15, we don't see, and we are not told specifically how the covenant might be broken.

There's no language there to describe what Abram might possibly do to even break the covenant. Now we are learning in chapter 17 as the covenant is confirmed, as it is reestablished in the life of Abraham, exactly what the expectations were for him.

And they were lofty, high expectations. Be blameless and walk before me. And they were saying, perfection and righteousness are demanded of Abraham.

But the other element that stood out to us and that we spent some time talking about a few weeks ago in chapter 15 was the fact that in the covenant ceremony, Abram never walked through the pieces of the animals.

[ 23 : 21 ] He never did that. That's strange. That's really odd because both parties should walk through the pieces of the animals. Both parties should say, may a curse be upon me, may I be treated in the way of these animals if I break the covenant that I'm making with you.

But Abram's never required to walk through. God and God alone passes through the pieces of the animals. In effect saying, I will take upon myself the covenant curses. I will endure.

I will suffer if the covenant is broken. And what have we seen in the life of Abraham? We have seen that he is a man prone to failure.

We have seen that he can do great things in the name of the Lord. We have seen that he can exhibit great bravery and incredible faith in God. And yet we have seen that he can be incredibly foolish.

That he can do terrible, awful things. We see him in chapter 12 virtually handing over his wife to a stranger in order to protect himself. We see him in chapter 15 entering into an illicit sexual relationship with his wife's handmaid.

[ 24 : 28 ] He's not the ideal figure. He is, in fact, by the time we arrive at the command to walk before me and be blameless, he is not one who can stand blameless before God.

He is not one who can walk before God with any sense of confidence. And he's not becoming that kind of person in this passage. That's not what's happening.

He's going to hand over his wife again and play the part of the fool again in a couple of chapters. So Abram is not being made perfect here. He is not suddenly going to begin to meet the standards of the covenant as they have been set out for him.

No. He's still foolish and faithless at times. And yet, now we understand more fully. Now we know with a greater sense of completeness what was meant in chapter 15 when God said that he would suffer the covenant curses.

Walk before me and be blameless. And Abram has and will continue to fail to do that. So that God himself will in Christ take upon himself the curses.

[ 25 : 41 ] He will in Christ bear the penalty that Abraham should bear. He will in his own body suffer upon the tree and endure his own wrath for the sake of all those in covenant relationship with him.

That's what God will do. That's what God means when he says I will take it upon myself. You are commanded to be blameless.

Jesus himself is blameless. You are expected to walk before God in perfection and Jesus himself walks before his father. He's able to say I have done all that my father commanded me to do.

Jesus is the great fulfillment. Jesus is the one in whom the covenant made with Abram comes to its fulfillment.

He is the one who satisfies all the covenant obligations and then suffers for all the covenant failures. We can't see that as clearly in Genesis chapter 15 until we arrive now at Genesis chapter 17 and we see exactly what is required of Abram.

[ 27 : 01 ] Blamelessness and nothing less. And yet he cannot and he will not do it. The promises though remain just as great as they've always been.

The promises do not fundamentally change from chapter to chapter as we read through the story of Abraham. In chapter 12 Abraham was promised that he would have numerous offspring and that he would have land.

He would be given the land of promise. He would have a people that would come from him and there would be a place given to those people devoted to the praise of God. That has been the theme through the story of Abram and it remains the theme in the story of Abraham.

When God makes the covenant in chapter 15 he promises him numerous descendants. He promises him a people and he promises him a place. The land of Canaan.

He promises these things and now he reiterates these promises in chapter 17. Notice verse 4.

Behold my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

[ 28 : 06 ] 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. I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you and I will establish my covenant between you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring.

People will come. Nations and kings will come from Abraham. There will be a people and in verse 8 there will be a place and I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings all of the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I will be their God.

These are the covenant promises given to Abraham. Promised in 12. Ratified in a covenant in chapter 15. And now repeated as the covenant is confirmed and established once again in chapter 17.

But God is going to add something else to this promise. He's going to tell us something else that Abraham must do. Just as he gave to Noah a sign after the flood had subsided now he gives to Abraham a sign of the covenant and that sign is the sign of circumcision.

Over and over and over. Some of you are probably thinking as we were reading through the chapter how many times is he going to say the word circumcision? How many times can you fit it into one chapter? A lot. Alright. Clearly.

[ 29 : 38 ] Alright. But that's the sign that God gives to Abraham. The sign of the covenant that will be passed on from generation to generation so that they have an actual outward physical right by which they can declare their faithfulness to their God.

Take a look at the text. Verse 11. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

It is a sign of the covenant. We're going to come back if the Lord wills and he allows us to. We're going to come back in a couple of weeks and we're going to spend some more time looking at the sign of the covenant circumcision.

But there's one thing that I want to point out to you this morning before we move on. And that is that if we focus too merrily, if we look only here at the sign of the covenant, if we look only here at the description of this sign, we will miss the full import of what God is saying to Abram.

We will not understand everything that he's requiring of Abraham and Abraham's descendants because the physical act of circumcision is meant to point them to something greater, something more significant and something more important, something that we don't even have to travel all the way to the New Testament to see.

[ 30 : 57 ] We don't even have to leave the Pentateuch or the Torah. Hold your place in Genesis and turn all the way to Deuteronomy chapter 30. Now Deuteronomy chapter 30 is getting us near the end of the Torah, that is the first five books of the Old Testament which are really one book.

And as we come near to the end of that, Moses is speaking to the people of Israel. Moses has given to the people of Israel the law that God gave them on Mount Sinai.

He's warned them about the dangers of breaking the law and then he's gone ahead and told them by the way, you're going to break the law. Israel is no different than their father Abraham. Much is required of them and they will fail over and over to meet the requirements.

But that's no surprise to God. He tells them before they even enter the promised land, He tells them before they even start making an effort to keep the law that they will fail to keep the law and therefore the covenant curses will come upon them.

But, He offers them hope that He will do a great work to restore them and draw them to Himself.

[ 32 : 09 ] But what I want you to notice is how this great work is described. Deuteronomy 30 verse 6 You see the language here?

No longer is circumcision merely viewed as a physical act that is performed upon one's offspring, one's children. No, circumcision is a spiritual act.

It is spiritual surgery that God performs on His children where He instills within them a new heart. He gives them spiritual life within themselves that they did not previously possess.

This is a real authentic circumcision. This is a real change in a radical removal of who they once were. This is new life being given to them.

And the New Testament writers pick up upon this reality. The Apostle Paul in particular picks up on this. I want you to turn all the way in the New Testament to Romans chapter 2.

[ 33 : 19 ] I find ways over and over to get us back to Romans. I can't help it. Three years was not enough in Romans. But Romans chapter 2 verse 28 Paul says something that if you lived during this time period would have sounded shocking especially if you were a Jew living at this time as Paul was.

Romans chapter 2 verse 28 Paul says no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly nor is circumcision outward and physical.

You might scratch your head at that and say I think by definition it's outward and physical. Right? Alright. I mean Genesis 17 is fairly explicit on that point. We don't have to go over all the language again but it's fairly explicit on that point.

But Paul is saying no no no no not really not really that's merely a sign pointing to a greater reality. Verse 29 but a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit not by the letter.

Circumcision is a matter of the heart. This is Deuteronomy chapter 30 this is Paul now saying you want to be a true descendant of Abraham? You want to really be a recipient of the covenant promises?

[ 34 : 38 ] You want to receive these things? It's not enough to outwardly be a Jew. It's not enough to merely be a descendant of Abraham. It's not enough to outwardly obey the law. It's not enough to be circumcised outwardly.

You need surgery. You need a new heart within you. That's what makes you a true Jew. That's what makes you a true child of Abraham. So that Paul is even able to say in Galatians chapter 5 that in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith working through love.

In Christ outward physical circumcision counts for nothing. And if we read Genesis chapter 17 as if merely the outward sign makes one a member of the covenant family and a recipient of the covenant promises, not only are we not reading Genesis 17 in light of the rest of what Moses wrote in the Torah, we're ignoring what the apostles themselves have to say about that right.

It was merely a sign. It was to point ahead to something greater that God would do within the hearts of His people. That takes me to the third point that I want to make this morning.

And this is really the last point that I want to make from Genesis chapter 17. And that is that the covenant people, those who actually really participate in the good things that God holds out for those who are His covenant children.

[ 36 : 09 ] That those do not belong merely to the children of the flesh, that is the physical descendants of Abraham. I think that's the point of God's final major speech to Abraham in this chapter.

He's given him the speech where he summarizes again the covenant promises that we looked at. He's given him the speech about the covenant sign, but now he's going to be specific about the recipients of the covenant.

Who are these covenant people? Who is it that will actually have a circumcised heart? Verse 15, God said to Abraham, As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah shall be her name.

I will bless her and more over. I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall become nations. Kings of people shall come from her. Now that should sound familiar because that's almost verbatim what God said to Abraham earlier in the chapter.

He gave Abraham the covenant promises. Multitudes will come from you. Kings will come from you. Nations even will come from you. Now he says the same thing about Sarah.

[ 37 : 18 ] I'm going to give you a son by her. I will give her numerous descendants. Kings and nations will come from her. To which you might expect Abraham to offer up thanksgiving to God and yet he does not.

In fact, he falls down before God and begs him to do something else. Do something different than what you have planned. Verse 17, Abraham said then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?

Shall Sarah who is 90 years old bear a child? And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you.

So Abraham has not yet escaped the faulty thinking of chapter 16. We said that one of Abraham's main faults in chapter 16 is that he does exactly what Adam does in Genesis chapter 3.

Rather than lead his wife and protect her and guard her against temptation, we are told that he listened to the voice of Sarah when she tempted him to enter into sin and to have a child with her handmaid Hagar.

[ 38 : 29 ] Abraham does not protect her. He does not lead her away from temptation but rather he joins her in it and he commits sin. And in that sin and following that sin we have Abraham making the assumption that for the covenant promises to come true he merely needs to have a physical child.

That's all he needs to do. And yet he's not considering the reality that he and Sarah are one flesh. That the promise of a child that would come quite literally from his belly is also a promise that a child would come from her.

He is not considering those realities. Not in chapter 16 and not now in chapter 17. Oh that Ishmael the son of my fornication might walk before you. What are you thinking Abraham?

It will not be. It will not happen. God has been explicit through Sarah you shall have a child. No he says verse 19 but Sarah your wife shall bear a son and you shall call his name Isaac and will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

Covenant is for him. Now God is not cold. He doesn't ignore Abram's concern for Ishmael his firstborn son.

[ 39 : 48 ] He does promise that good things will come to Ishmael. We saw that last week in chapter 16 as God spoke to Hagar and told her that good things would come from Ishmael. Though ultimately he would be a thorn in the side of God's chosen people good things would come.

Now here again God is not without some grace even for Ishmael. As for Ishmael I've heard you behold I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.

He shall father twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation. But now we are back to the main point. But I will establish that is I will confirm it's the same word. I will confirm my covenant with Isaac not Ishmael.

Which tells us that it is not the physical descendants of Abraham who automatically receive the covenant promises. But it is those whom God himself has marked out and chosen.

It is not the children of the flesh. It is the children of the promise. And those are not my words and that's not my language. I borrow that from the apostle Paul himself.

[ 41 : 00 ] Last time I'm going to make you turn to the New Testament but I'd like you to turn again to Romans. Romans chapter 9. Because there we have very clear, very explicit language about this very issue referencing back to the issue of Isaac and Ishmael.

We're going to jump in the middle of verse 6 of Romans 9. Paul says, Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel. That sounds like what he said in chapter 2 about those who are true Jews and not true Jews.

Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel. And not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. This is God's plan.

This is God's sovereign will at work here. God himself says, not Ishmael, I have chosen Isaac.

[ 42 : 10 ] Of course, the apostle Paul goes on to be more explicit. We'll come back to some of these verses in Romans 9 later in Genesis, but Paul wants to be more explicit and make sure that we don't make the mistake of assuming that it is simply because Isaac has Sarah for his mom that he's the child of promise.

Because Paul goes on to cite the instance of Jacob and Esau. Jacob I've loved, but Esau I've hated. God makes a sovereign choice between Isaac and Ishmael, and he continues to do that as we walk through the scriptures.

And that tells us that none of us naturally have a claim upon God. None of us can of ourselves say, I have a right. God owes me something.

God ought to give me this. None of us has a claim upon him. Because like Ishmael and like Isaac and like Abraham their father, we are utterly dependent upon the grace of God.

Isaac is chosen and not Ishmael, not because of anything in Isaac, but because of God's grace and mercy toward him. Jacob is chosen and not Esau, not because of anything that God saw in Jacob or foresaw in Jacob.

[ 43 : 29 ] But what does Paul say? In order that God's purpose of election might stand. These are mysterious realities. They really are. We can't run from them and we can't hide from them.

They are mysteries. They are miracles. And they are not riddles to be solved. They are miraculous events to be wondered at.

That God in His great mercy would choose Abram out of all the nations of the earth. And that God out of His mercy would choose Isaac out of all of Abraham's offspring.

And that God out of His mercy would choose Jacob, the deceiver, rather than Esau. God exhibits sovereign mercy from the opening pages of the Bible all the way through to the end so that we all can see and know that none of us has a claim upon Him.

None of us can claim to have walked blamelessly before God. Not one of us. And what we desperately need is the grace of God that gives us a new heart that circumcises our hearts and imparts real, authentic, spiritual life into us so that we might cling to the promises.

[ 44 : 57 ] What was it that we read a moment ago? Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith working through love.

From where does that faith spring? It springs from the work of God within the heart of His covenant people. We get caught up in trying to figure out and solve all the mysteries and boil it down to something easy and something simple that we can understand and I don't think that we're meant to do that.

We want to try to make it so that it's not difficult or so that it's not hard for us to believe. But instead we ought to read. We ought to stand back and we ought to stand in awe and wonder of the grace and mercy of God.

We want to ask questions like but how do I know if God gives sovereign grace and mercy to some? How do I know if I receive that? I say again what Paul says neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith working through love.

We never ask the questions that pertain to God's sovereign will. We never try to search out the mysteries of God that He's chosen not to reveal to us. What we do is we search our own hearts and we look and we say is there faith there that produces the works that reveal that God has changed us from the inside out?

[ 46 : 30 ] If you can't stand back and marvel at the wonder of God's grace displayed in the covenant mercies that He gives to Abraham and Abraham's true offspring then you need to pause and you need to pray and you need to return to the word and read it again and again and again until you begin to see and delight in all of these beautiful connections throughout the Bible that point us back to the reality that God is at work to save a people and put them in a place for the sake of the praise of His name let's pray for his name Thank you.