

The Covenant with Abraham and the People of God

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[0 : 00] I'm glad that you all are here with us this morning.

We've been walking our way through the middle of the book of Genesis. We're focusing primarily upon the lives of what we might call the patriarchs.

That is, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. We haven't made it past Abraham yet. We're not going to make it past Abraham this morning or next week or any time within the next month or two. I promise you that. But we've been walking our way through the life of Abraham since really the middle of chapter 11, but really chapter 12.

And so we are now back again in Genesis chapter 17. The week before last, we covered all of this chapter in one big shot. And I promised you then that the Lord willing, we would come back to chapter 17.

And we're doing that this morning. However, the sermon that Ryan preached last Sunday while I was out of town on the mission trip is not unrelated to what we were talking about the week before and what we're looking at this morning.

[1 : 11] Ryan gave us a wonderful overview of the idea of covenant within the Bible. And he showed us that it was not limited merely to the book of Genesis or to the life of Abraham or to the handful of covenants that we've seen thus far in the book of Genesis.

But in fact, the concept of a covenant is something that spans all of the pages of the Bible and binds together all of the stories of the Bible and all the various events that take place and are recorded for us within the Scriptures.

So that one of the things he said in his sermon that struck me as true is that you cannot really understand the Bible unless you understand the concept of covenant. That stood out to me as he was preaching that sermon.

As I listened to it, it hit me. That's true. We cannot fully grasp the intent of God and His Word unless we understand the significance of covenant.

Andy helped us by pointing out to us that covenant is more than a contract. That a covenant signifies a new relationship, the creation and maintenance of a kind of relationship.

[2 : 16] In the biblical covenants, a relationship usually between God and His people. And here in Genesis chapter 17, we are seeing and revisiting the covenant that God made with Abraham in chapter 15.

I said two weeks ago that Genesis chapter 17 is not the introduction of another covenant that God makes with Abraham, but it is an adding to, it is a completion, it is a revisiting of the covenant that God established initially with Abraham in Genesis chapter 15.

And now He is confirming that covenant. And as God confirms that covenant in Genesis chapter 17, we are given a more complete picture of what God expected from Abraham within the covenant relationship that He established with him.

Now this morning, we're not going to read through the entire chapter because we've done that, but we are going to read through the first paragraph of chapter 17. And I'd like you all to stand together as we read. Moses records for us, When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abraham 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 Abraham 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.

[3 : 35] 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. Father, we want to enter into covenant relationship with you as Abraham did. So that we might say that you are our God.

So help us to understand what it means to trust in you and the work of your son this morning and help us to understand what it means to be a part of the people of God.

I pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. I believe that I've told you the story before of how years ago, several years ago, in fact, I think it was I think it was before Allie and I were married, although we might have been newly married, but it was several years ago.

[4 : 51] And she had, some of her family was in town visiting and her younger cousin, I think he might have been her second cousin or something along those lines, her younger cousin, who was, I don't know, 13 or 14 at the time, he wanted to go see a movie and everybody was kind of busy and so I was volunteered or rather maybe I volunteered.

I don't know. I think it was one of those directions, right? But I got to be the one to take him to the movies. And so I took him to a movie and I had no idea what the movie was or what it was about. I didn't really know anything, but it was a Harry Potter movie.

At the time, I didn't know anything about the books. I hadn't read it. Obviously, I didn't know anything. And so we go into this movie, but it wasn't the first movie. I don't even know which one it was, like second, third. I have no idea to this day which one it was.

But I sat there throughout the entire movie totally confused by what was going on. I had, I really had no idea what was happening. There was a giant snake and there were some kids that were scared of the snake and running around and that's about all that I could get out of it.

I mean, I was just confused. And I was confused because I didn't know the context that this movie belonged within. I didn't, it certainly wasn't the first one and I didn't know what had happened in the first movie or the first book and whatever had come previous to that.

[6 : 07] So I didn't understand the conflict. I didn't understand anything really of what was happening before me. I could understand basically who the good guys were, who the bad guys were, but in terms of really understanding what was going on, I didn't understand it because I hadn't been there for the beginning of this sort of journey and this story.

And often times when we jump into the scriptures, wherever it is that we might happen to jump in, part of the reason that we find it to be sometimes confusing and even perplexing is because we don't know the context in which these things ought to be fit.

And we don't know the context often because we don't know what's happened previously in the story. We don't yet understand the beginning of the story and if you don't understand the beginning of it, while you may understand the basics of who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, you won't fully understand, you certainly won't see all of the connections and you won't understand all of the things that are happening as they unfold before you as you read the Word of God.

And so one of the reasons that we have gone back to Genesis is so that we might have a better understanding of what was happening at the beginning of the story. But we've only jumped in in the story of Abraham.

It was, I think, maybe four years ago that I preached through the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis. And honestly, looking out here, most of you were not even here for that. And so even jumping in to Genesis in the middle of Genesis can at times leave us a little bit confused because we don't see everything that has led up to the events as they're unfolding before us.

[7 : 34] And what we need to realize as we look at the story of Abraham and especially as we consider the covenant with Abraham and where it's heading in the future in the rest of the Bible, we need to understand that God is not doing something entirely new here.

When God calls Abraham in chapter 12, that's not an entirely new thing that He's doing. It's new for Abraham, but God has not taken upon Himself a new agenda or new goals or a new purpose.

And when God makes a covenant with Abraham in chapter 15 and then confirms the covenant in chapter 17, God is not beginning a new program. He's not starting all over again.

He is actually still seeking to accomplish the very thing He was seeking to accomplish in Genesis chapter 1 when He created Adam and Eve.

In fact, we're told in Genesis chapter 1 that God created the earth and then He set things in order and He created the skies and the seas and the land and the animals and finally, after all that had been created, He created man and woman in His image.

[8 : 39] God says, let us make man in our image and after our likeness. God created man for a purpose. And what was that purpose? From the very beginning, man was to exist as God's representative upon the earth.

He was to be like a mirror reflecting the perfections of God to the rest of creation. And He was to be a kind of vice region, a kind of ruler underneath the king of all the universe, representing and ruling on behalf of God upon the earth.

And so, God from the very beginning was going about the business of creating a people and creating a place that would be dedicated and set apart for the praise of His name.

That's what God has been doing. That's what He was doing in Genesis chapter 1. Not merely creating the universe and then putting people in it and saying, let's see what happens here. He had a goal in mind.

He had a purpose in mind. He wanted a people. He wanted a place for them to dwell and all of that was to be dedicated and set apart for the praise of His own name. That's what God was doing in Genesis chapter 1 and that's what He is doing in the life of Abraham when He calls him out of Ur of the Chaldeans as He moves him into the land of Canaan.

[9 : 51] In chapter 15 when He establishes His covenant with Abraham and now in chapter 17 as we begin to see and learn more about the nature of that covenant and what it involved and what it demanded, God is about the business of creating a people and putting them in a place for the sake of the praise of His name.

That's what He's doing and if we lose sight of that we will miss the purpose for which God is moving and acting throughout these chapters. And not only will we miss the purpose for which God is moving and acting throughout these chapters, we will very likely miss the trajectory of these chapters.

We will very likely not see what God is doing as the story begins to unfold through the descendants of Abraham all the way into the New Testament where Jesus Christ comes on the scene. We may not see precisely what God is up to.

And so I have said repeatedly over and over as we've been walking through the life of Abraham that God is creating a people and a place for the sake of the praise of His name.

If you remember anything from our study of these chapters of Genesis, I want you to remember that statement. He is creating a people and a place for the sake of the praise of His name.

[11 : 04] And He enters into covenant with these people because the covenant is the context in which all of these things happen. As Ryan told us last week, a covenant signifies more than a contract.

It tells us that we're entering into a relationship with someone so that we see in the marriage covenant a new relationship is being established, a new family is being created in which two people from two different families are now becoming one flesh and they are now one family.

A new relationship and a new family is created and that's what happens when God makes a covenant with Abram. He is creating a new relationship with Abram and He's making promises to Abram and He's requiring certain responses of Abram back to Him.

And all of that, all of that is aiming at the creation of these people and the giving to them of a place where the name of God will be forevermore praised.

But the question that I want us to wrestle with this morning as we look back at chapter 17 again is what does this mean for us? What does this mean for our assessment of how we fit into the people of God?

[12 : 18] And what does this mean about in general in a more broad sense, what does this mean about our understanding of who the people of God are? And so we're going to reflect upon that in two ways as we look in chapter 17.

First, I want us to stop and think about the identity of the people of God and how people come to be a part of the people of God. Who are they? So how does that impact our perspective on those who are not yet currently a part of those people?

How do we view and how do we interact with people who are not a part of the covenant family? How should we relate to them? How should we view them? And what should be our goal as we

consider our relationships with them?

And then secondly, a more internal investigation of the people of God, and that is, how do we go about identifying those within the people of God? How do we go about marking them out?

Who do we know? How can we know? And who do we know belongs within the people of God? So an external question is in terms of how do we relate to those who are not yet within the covenant? And how do we relate to those and identify those who are within the covenant people of God?

[13:28] But first, let's turn back to chapter 17 because I want you to see first and foremost what God promises to Abraham regarding the future.

Take a look at verse 4. He says, 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.

Now, I want you to mark those two words, if not in your Bible physically, then at least in your mind, a multitude of nations. God intends to create out of Abraham multitudes of nations and out of those nations, a people for himself.

That's what God is doing. Abraham will not merely be a small limited tribe in the Middle East, but from Abraham will come a multitude of nations.

And even beyond that, he promises, I will make you exceedingly fruitful. I will make you into nations and kings shall come from you. God is doing something here.

[14:41] And it's not something small. It's not something limited. You can read through the entire story of the Old Testament and you can see how in a very limited fashion, Abram, even within the pages of the Old Testament, his descendants do become a multitude of nations.

You have, of course, the descendants of Ishmael who pop up here and there. Of course, you have Israel. And then you also have those who are the descendants of Esau. So we do see in a limited fashion that Abram becomes, his descendants become, nations in the plural.

But I think God is doing something much greater than that. I think God is going about the business of creating for himself a people from among all the nations of the earth so that in a very real sense, the covenant people of God will be a people made up of many, many nations.

Now, where am I getting that from? I'm getting that from the end of the story in the book of Revelation. I want you to hold your place in Genesis 17. And turn to Revelation chapter seven. Now, remember, I told you to highlight, to mark down, to remember those words multitude and nations, because they're going to pop up here in Revelation chapter seven. Revelation chapter seven, verse nine.

[15:56] John says, after this, I looked and behold a great multitude. So there you have you have a great multitude that no one could number. Now, that sounds familiar because when God speaks of the covenant with Abraham elsewhere, he talks to the fact that Abram's descendants will not be able to be numbered, which seems strange initially because later on, David himself takes a census of the people of God and they can in fact be numbered.

David shows that they can be numbered. He is judged for that, but it can be done. But this multitude cannot be numbered. A great multitude that no one can number.

Now, here it is. From every nation. Now, that word nation is the very same word that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the apostles had access to during their lifetimes.

So that I think that as John is writing this, I think John intends for our minds, if we know the Old Testament well, to immediately jump back to the words that God had with Abraham, both in chapter 12, chapter 15, and now chapter 17 where God is going to make Abram into a multitude of nations and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed according to chapter 12.

This, the fulfillment of the promises made to Abram in the covenant are finding their realization here in this vision that John sees of the people of God.

[17:20] They cannot be numbered. They come from every nation. They are a great multitude.

And then look at what they're doing. They are from all tribes and peoples and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hand and crying out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

What are these people doing? They are praising the name of the Lord. That's what they have been created to do. That's precisely what God has been doing since Genesis chapter one that he continues to do through Abram.

This is his work. This is his great sovereign work throughout human history so that when we come to the culmination of it all in Revelation chapter seven, we are actually seeing it portrayed for us through John as he tells us about his vision.

God promised Abram that he'd be a multitude of nations, that they would exist for the praise of his name. And here it is a people from every nation standing and praising the Lamb together. Who are these? Who is this people of God? Who are they? They are those from every tribe, tongue and nation who have trusted in the name of Christ. And therefore, as we will see in a moment in Galatians, and therefore they have been made sons of Abraham.

[18:40] And they are in a very real sense the people that God promised that he would make and bring forth through Abraham's seed. They are from, though, every nation.

Every single nation upon the face of the earth. Literally, the word is the Greek word *ethne* or *ethnos*. And it refers not to a political nation the way that we think of them like the United States or Canada or Mexico or Russia or anything like that.

It actually refers to ethnic groups where we get the word ethnic. To people groups and missiologists, that's those who special in missions and the study of missions and the study of people groups have debated precisely what is the precise definition of an ethnic.

How should we define an ethnic group? And while they differ on that to some degree, they're all agreed upon the fact that that this involves a great variety of people, not just political boundaries that we define for people, but people groups as God himself sees them.

And God is drawing from all of those people groups as he sees them and creating out of them a people for the praise of his own name. And that's necessary because just before we begin the story of Abraham, we are told that the one united people descended from Adam are fractured and split into many peoples at the Tower of Babel.

[20:10] So God himself is the one who originally fractured and splintered humanity into all these ethnic groups and God himself will unite some from among all of those ethnic groups for the sake of the praise of his name as he creates this people.

This is what God is doing. All of these diverse peoples, all of them descended from Adam and therefore all of them having the same original purpose as Adam and Eve to exist for the praise of God's name.

And yet all of them affected by the sin of Adam in Genesis chapter 3. And so all of them alienated from God and in desperate need of God himself to do something so that he might draw them to himself and create from them a people for himself.

Desperate. And how does God answer that desperation? By means of the covenant with Abraham, which finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And so in answer to the question, how does the identity of the people of God, this people that God is creating for himself, this covenant people, how does it affect our view of those that are currently outside of the covenant people?

It means, I think, first and foremost, that we recognize that they share with us a common history. They do. They are as as we are.

[21:37] They are descended from Adam and therefore they need to be rescued from the very same sinful nature that we need to be rescued from. So those of us who went to Guatemala this past week, we we did not spend most of our time in a city, in a modern city.

We we went further up into the mountains so that we were we were among people who were primarily of Mayan descent. In fact, in the in the country of Guatemala, there was for many years a civil war between those who identified themselves as as being more or less Latino and those who identified themselves primarily as as being of of descend from the Mayan people.

And therefore, they they saw themselves as being the natives who belonged in the land. It was a civil war that stretched out over many years. And what we saw as we were primarily among the Mayan people is we saw a people whose lives are very different from our own.

They are filled with all sorts of strange superstitions and strange practices and behaviors. And we found it at times difficult to communicate with them because though Spanish is the official language of the country and we had translators who could translate what we were saying into Spanish, they speak another language known as the Kiche language.

The small children could speak Spanish because they'd gone to school. But some of the older people knew only enough to conduct business in the market. And so we found ourselves at times being it was difficult to communicate with them.

[23 : 07] We were in their homes trying to build stoves for them so that they could cook and not have smoke in their homes and trying to improve their lives in some way. And at times we we found it difficult to communicate with some of them.

There were two ladies as we were building one of the stoves. My group was building one of the stoves. They stood probably four feet from us the entire time just watching us and speaking in Kiche the entire time.

We had a Spanish translator with us and she had no clue what they were saying. None of us knew what they were saying. We all had this distinct feeling that they were sitting there saying these people don't know what they're doing. They don't know how to build a stove.

You're supposed to do it this way. That's probably exactly what they were thinking, but they they didn't say it to us in any way that we could understand. But as distant as they seemed at times from us, their dress was different, their culture was different, their language was different, their understanding of the world around them was different from ours.

As different as they may have seemed from us, the reality is, is that they they are no more distant from Adam than you or I. They are in they have they have a problem that is not any different than the problem that you and I have.

[24 : 09] We are fallen, sinful creatures, descendants of our father Adam. We are we are covered in his fallen nature. And in desperate need of a new covering. We are in desperate need of being rescued because we are the sons of Adam and they are in desperate need of being rescued, not because they're poor and not because they have a different culture.

They are in desperate need of being rescued because they are sons and daughters of Adam. So as we look at different people who stand currently outside of the covenant, we do not look at them as altogether alien and altogether separate from us because but for the grace of God that brings us into the covenant family, we are absolutely no different in regards to our relationship with God than are they.

Which means that we ought to be all the more dedicated to reaching them, all the more inclined towards trying to draw them into the people of God in whom we have been blessed to become a part. We should be fully engaged in all of our lives with trying to reach lost people. That's what we should be about and we don't have to go to Guatemala to do that. That was a wonderful place to go and I hope that we return there and do more ministry there. But we don't have to go somewhere far away in order to do that. We can do it with our neighbors who are lost and our family members who are lost and our co-workers who are lost. There are lost people all around us and their problem is not simply that they have different priorities than us or they dress differently from us or that they live differently than us. Their problem is that they are descendants of Adam and they need to be set free and they need to be released from the effects of the fall and their own sinful nature. They need what we need. They need to be in covenant with God. If you rightly understand how the covenant with Abraham and how God's task of creating a people for himself finds its ultimate fulfillment as God creates a people from every tribe, tongue and nation for himself. Then you will begin to understand that we we don't simply have an obligation to go to those as we have the great privilege to go to those and say, come, come and be a part of the people of God. But then as people come and they become a part of the people of God, we, of course, do have the task of identifying them, of wanting to know. So who is among us? So who belongs and and who is a part of us? And we have, I think, a tendency as sinners, even those who are saved by God's grace, to want to simplify that process.

We have a tendency to want to be able to point to external realities to be able to clearly identify who the people of God are. And God knows that we have that tendency. In fact, as God gives to Abram the covenant here, as he as he confirms the covenant with Abram in chapter 17, he actually does give him an outward physical sign so that they might be able to identify who is in and who is out. It is, of course, the sign of circumcision. Take a look down in verse nine. 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. The text goes on to describe and say even more clearly that everyone in Abraham's household is to be circumcised. Those born to Abram, those who are his slaves and those born to his slaves, everybody in his household is to be circumcised. And then in verses 22 down through verse 27, we see as Abraham obeys God's command and he circumcises both himself and all the males within his household. But this was an outward physical marker of who could be said to be within the covenant people of God. And we might be tempted to think, well,

that's that's simple. That's an easy marker. Now we've got it down, except that this chapter will not let us off the hook quite so easily, because as we saw two weeks ago, the outward sign is not enough. It is not enough to guarantee that you are part of the covenant people of God because God goes on to reject Abram's first son, Ishmael. No, I will not carry forward my covenant promises through him. Your wife Sarah will have a son. You'll call him

Isaac. And it is through Isaac that the covenant promises will continue. Not Ishmael, though Ishmael is in fact circumcised in this chapter. The outward sign is never a guarantee that those who receive it are part of the covenant people of God. And one of the reasons for that, and this is something that we talked about two weeks ago, one of the reasons for that, the primary reason for that, is that physical circumcision was intended by God to point toward a spiritual reality. It was an outward physical thing that Abraham could see, but was supposed to be a teaching lesson for him and for his descendants.

[29 : 27] It was not supposed to be by itself sufficient to make someone a part of the covenant people of God. Circumcision was pointing forward to something that Deuteronomy chapter 30 and the New Testament tells us is called circumcision of the heart, which we know of as regeneration or being born again or being made alive by God himself. So that the identifying marker for the people of God ultimately is not an outward sign. It is not circumcision or anything else. The identifying marker of the people of God is that they have in fact been born again, that they do in fact trust in and walk with Christ as evidence of the work of the Spirit giving new life to hearts that were once dead. Let me show you where I'm getting this from turning to the New Testament again. To the book of Colossians. In Colossians chapter two. You guys spent some time in Colossians last week back again in

Colossians chapter two, verse 11, we read this in him and him there's Christ in Christ also. You were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands. So obviously this is not literal physical circumcision as Abraham was told. This is something different. You were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands. Now move down to verse 13. It's made a little bit more clear. And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive. So what is what happens to make someone go from being spiritually uncircumcised to being spiritually circumcised? It is being made alive and we are made alive together with Christ through the work of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. We are now made alive alive in Christ. That's what circumcision was pointing toward. Circumcision was always meant to say something must happen. A change must occur, but not merely outwardly, inwardly. So how do we identify the people of God? They are those who bear the outward marks and the outward signs of having been inwardly transformed by God himself? Who are the covenant people? Who are they? Who is the church? The church consists of all those who have been born again. That is to say, because being born again always results in trusting in

Jesus. The church consists of those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. That's who they are. Now, if you ask the question, how does how does that happen? Precisely how does putting your faith in Christ make you a part of the covenant people who began in some respects with Abraham and his descendants? How does that happen? Well, that question is answered in Galatians chapter three. If you'll turn there, this will be the last place I ask you to turn this morning. I apologize for not spending more time in Genesis. But here we are in Galatians chapter three. And we see in Galatians chapter three a reference back to the promises, the covenant promises that God made to Abraham. Verse 16. Now, the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. No doubt they are the recipients of the covenant. But then he goes on and says, it does not say that is the promises, the covenant promises and to offsprings referring to many, but referring to one and to your offspring who is Christ. What's Paul's point here? Why is he? Why is he focusing on the issue of offspring versus offsprings? Because there was a tendency among the descendants of Abraham to think that merely because they were offspring of

Abraham, they were automatically a part of the covenant people in God. And Paul is reminding the Judaizers, Jews who profess faith in Christ and yet who insist upon the need to become outwardly members of the family of Abraham. Paul is reminding them, no, it was never about. All of the offspring of Abraham, it was always about the one. It was always about the singular offspring. And Paul's not going out on a limb here. Because when you arrive at Genesis chapter 12 or Genesis chapter 15 or Genesis chapter 17, all these great promise chapters that involve Abraham and you find this language of an offspring or seed, it's always meant within the context of Genesis to bring

us back to Genesis chapter 3, where we are told that the woman will have an offspring, a seed, and he, we are told, singular, one singular seed will do the work of reversing the curse that has come upon Adam. And Paul is now reminding the Judaizers, these Jewish people who've trusted in Christ yet have a flawed understanding of how things work. He is now telling them the gospel tells us that we must simply trust in that singular seed. He is the one. [34 : 56] He is the reason for the covenant with Abraham. He is the one to whom all of the Old Testament is pointing. And in him, all the promises of God, all of the covenant promises of God find their ultimate fulfillment in this singular seed. And how do you, how do you become a part of the broader seed?

Verse seven, know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. In other words, what Paul is saying is, in one sense, the seed of Abraham is this one singular individual. In him, all the promises find their yes, and everything is pointing to him. He alone is the seed of Abraham. But in another sense, all those who trust in him, all those who trust in him, all those who trust in him, all those who trust in him, and in that offspring, become by faith in him, the offspring, the sons of Abraham.

So how do we think about internally who the people of God are? We would say they are all those who've been born again. Or we might say they are all those who have put their faith in Christ. Now you might be thinking, I have no idea where he's going with this, and I have no idea how this is in any way applicable in my life. I get the, I get the whole outreach and missions thing. I got that point. But where is he going with this? Here's where I'm going. Go back to Colossians. This has to do with internal things and how we view ourselves internally as the body of Christ. Back in the verse 11 again, in him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ. Verse 12, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead. Understanding internally how we identify the people of God affects our understanding of what we do with baptism. And what we do with baptism affects our understanding of who we are as a local body of Christ. So our name as a church is Church at the Cross, which can be deceptive because you don't know immediately without reading on our website or something that we're actually a Baptist church. But we are in fact a Baptist church and not simply because I was raised Baptist and some of you were, not simply because we decided to randomly choose some denominational affiliation, but because we actually believe in the central tenet of Baptist theology. And that is that the people of God are not those who trusted in Christ and their children. No, we believe that though the people of God are those who trusted in Christ. End of discussion. That's who the people of God are. And baptism, as it relates to the circumcision made without hands.

Is a pointing back to the reality that we have already been made alive, that we have already been born again and therefore have trusted in Christ. So people often ask the question, what why? [38 : 24] Why don't you baptize infants? Well, I don't think it's the biggest theological issue in the world. I don't think that at all. And I have many friends who would differ with me on this issue. But the answer to that question is has to do with what we think about the people, the visible people of God. Who are they? Who can we identify as belonging to the body of Christ? Well, we believe that circumcision in the Old Testament, which belongs to the belongs to Abraham and his children, points toward not a physical reality, but a spiritual reality of the new birth. And so though the old covenant people may be identified by virtue of their being born from among the old the the covenant people of God and identified by their circumcision, the new covenant people of God can only be identified by virtue of their personal faith in Jesus. So there are some who would say that baptism corresponds directly to physical circumcision. And since physical circumcision was done to infants, therefore baptism should be done to infants. And we would say, no, rather.

Circumcision, physical circumcision points to the new birth. And therefore, those who are a part of the new covenant body of Christ are those who have been born again. And baptism relates to that by pointing back to faith, the evidence of the new birth.

How do we identify the body of Christ? How do we know who's in and who's out? How do we know who gets to participate fully in the life of the local church? All of those very practical questions that inform who we are as a church.

How do we do all that? We say. Those who give evidence of being born again, namely those who put their faith in Jesus belong to the body of Christ.

So that externally, our understanding of the covenant with Abraham and how it finds its expression and its completion in the new covenant ought to be pushing us to draw as many people into the people of God as we possibly can through the preaching of the gospel so that others might trust in the offspring of Abraham and therefore be saved and brought into the covenant people of God. And internally, it ought to push us to look and ask and say, is this person saved? Because if they don't give evidence of being saved, we shouldn't just say, here, come on in, be a part. That's what wrecks church after church after church. If churches are filled with unregenerate, that is, people who have not been born again, then those churches are destined to eventually crumble and come to ruin because you have non-believers conducting the business of God and you cannot have that to take place. We ought to, with all zeal, want to bring people into the body of Christ.

[41 : 16] And we ought to, with all zeal, want to rightly and correctly identify those who belong within the body. So that there is a very real sense in which we are an open arm people reaching to grab and pull in.

And then there's a very real sense in which we are people saying, here's a border, here's a wall, you want inside, you must believe, you must give evidence of having been born again. Understanding this covenant that God has made with Abraham can be the fuel that fires our evangelistic efforts, but it can also be the means by which God keeps us as a people more pure and more holy as a local body of Christ.

Let's pray.