

Genesis 17

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[0:00] Please do turn back to Genesis 17. We'll be looking at verses 9 to 27. So we've come to the end of this short series in Genesis. I'll jump back into Genesis at some point in the future, but Sam Tunncliffe's going to be preaching next Sunday evening.

We're looking at Genesis 17, verses 9 to 27. And this chapter has lots of unusual things, doesn't it? There's a covenant, promises about nations and kings, new names, and circumcision. Lots of things that seem very distant from our lives. But this chapter is doing something very important for us. God is laying out the blueprint for the church.

God has promised his plan of salvation to restore this world. It is to make a people for himself. That is the big promise we saw last week.

I will be your God and you will be my people. That is, God has chosen a people, made a contract, a covenant with that people, and bound himself to them in that covenant.

[1:07] Bound himself to be their God and fulfill these promises. That is what the church is. We are God's people bound to him.

And here in this passage, God is showing us what this covenant looks like. What his people will look like. How God relates to them.

Who they are. How they function. How God's promises and salvation comes to that people. And how we are to hold on to them. It's a blueprint.

A blueprint. Of having their own unique relationship with God. And people can speak of it very much on our own terms.

They might say, you know, I like to think of my relationship with God like this. This is who I think God is. And this is how I connect with him. And it's true, we do have a relationship with him.

[2:04] But it's not on our terms. No, God is saying this is what the relationship is to look like. It's this covenant. In short, this is the blueprint for what the church is to look like.

This is like the architect's design for God's people. Because remember, look back to verse 7. This is an eternal covenant running right up to now, into the future, running throughout our lives.

And in the church today. We, the church, we are God's people in this covenant. And this is God telling us, okay, now you are my people. This is my blueprint.

This is my design for how this covenant will play out. Which is why, in verse 9, do you see, God begins with, as for you.

Up until now, God has been saying, as for me, what God will do. As for me, I am God Almighty. I have made you. I will be to you. I will bless you.

[3:09] That's what God will do. But now, Abraham, as for you, this is what happens on your side of the contract. This is what my people will look like.

And how you keep this covenant and stay in it. These are the blueprints. Now, follow them. But remember, this is still gracious.

This is all grace. This is God providing the plans. And he's doing this for a doubt-filled and fear-filled Abraham. For those who are fearful of the future, filled with doubts about, can God really bring any blessing to my life?

And for those just feeling small and weak in a cursed world, well, God says, here are my designs for the church. For you to be safe in and reassured in and to find real blessing.

And so I want us to look at these blueprints today. And I want us to see how God's covenant works in our lives. And the first and very important thing to see is God's covenant has a sign.

[4:21] God's covenant has a sign. Look at verse 10. 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 shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins. And it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

So God makes a covenant, a binding contract with Abraham to be his God and to bless him and to make nations come from Abraham and save the world through him.

To finally bring the savior serpent crusher. But these promises, they don't just stay verbal. No, God also gives a physical sign to confirm these promises.

This sign is like God's official stamp that God stamps onto Abraham to say, This promise really is for you.

[5:18] So you know when you get a stamp in your passport that says you are officially, truly allowed into this country. Well, this sign is like God saying you are officially, truly my people.

It's like in word God says, I will be your God. But when someone has this sign, God is saying, I will be your God.

Abraham, if you have any fears about anything that I'm doing in this world for you, here is a sign showing you. So this sign, it's not just an extra visual aid.

No, it is inseparably tied to the covenant. In fact, it is so tied that it is called the covenant. Verse 10. This is my covenant. The sign.

To have this sign is to be in the covenant. Officially stamping it on Abraham. And so this sign is key to understanding what God is doing among his people.

[6:26] How this covenant works. And what is the sign? Let's get the awkwardness out of the way, shall we? The sign is circumcision. And let's get more awkwardness out of the way.

If you don't know what circumcision is, circumcision is when you cut off some of the flesh, some of the unclean skin, from the end of a male's reproductive part.

And usually a knife or a sharp stone was used to do that. And it was to be done to every baby boy in this covenant, eight days old. Do you see that in verse 12? That's what circumcision is.

It's the cutting off of flesh. And there's a reason I wanted to preach Genesis in the evening service. Because in the morning, preachers have to make a kid's sheet for sermons.

And I don't want to make that. And no one wants to color that in. But with that out of the way, it is worth asking, why this sign of everything?

[7:35] Why not cut off anything else? Well, although it is a bit awkward, this sign is actually really appropriate to the covenant.

This sign gives clarity to how exactly God is making a people, bringing blessing, how he is saving this world. So just think of how a sign points to a reality.

So you know when you're on the motorway and you see a sign, a blue sign on the motorway, and it's got a picture on it, and you see a knife and a fork symbol. That's a sign saying, service station one mile ahead.

And that is an appropriate sign because that knife and fork accurately tells you about the reality up ahead. There is food and rest and knives and forks up ahead, one mile.

A picture of a deer on that road sign wouldn't tell you that. No, the sign tells you about the reality. Well, this sign, circumcision, tells you about the deeper reality of God's promise in the covenant.

[8:49] But what is circumcision telling us? Why has God given this sign of all things? Well, I want us to see a few things. First, circumcision physically marks out who God's people are.

That's why verse 14, God says anyone who does not have this sign will be cut off from God's people. This is how God marks out the boundary of his people, like the stamp in the passport. Those aren't my people over there, but you, with this sign, you are my people. So I don't treat you like I treat everyone else out there.

No, my covenant and blessing and all the benefits are with you. And likewise, as for you, you mustn't act like everyone else out there, like the nations out there.

No, you have special obligations to me now. You are to walk before me and believe these promises. This sign physically marks out God's people as separate and holy to the Lord.

[10:05] And also, circumcision, it not only shows who God's people are, but how God's people are made right with God. By cutting off the flesh, God is showing that salvation will not happen by your flesh.

It's not your strength. It's not from you, but salvation will only come from God. That's partly why it happens at eight days old. It's not about the child earning righteousness before God.

It's just graciously given to the helpless, which says something about how covenant signs work. They are not primarily about us declaring our faith to God.

They are God declaring his faithfulness to us. And there's another significance in circumcision. There's a reason it's in that place, because that is where the promise of offspring and nations will come from.

God is saying to Abraham, the future of your family and the future of the world, it is all under my control. And the Savior will arrive.

[11 : 20] But it won't happen through Hagar. It will happen through 89-year-old Sarai, which is why in verse 15, Sarai is renamed Sarah.

Sarai literally means my princess. But now she is being renamed Sarah, which just means princess. So she was princess to King Abraham, but now she's going to be princess to another greater king, a king who will come from her womb.

So they don't realize it, but this is God's sign saying, I am going to bring Christ, even if it takes a miracle birth. This sign is about guaranteeing the impossible.

But circumcision shows something else, something spiritual. Because circumcision cuts off the unclean parts of the body, this shows what God will do to his people's hearts.

He will cut off the unclean and the sinful, circumcise our hearts, and make them new. So just like in surgery, you cut off the infected bits, and you save the patient, don't you?

[12 : 48] Well, God is saving his people by circumcising our hearts, which is why boys were to be circumcised on the eighth day of all days.

Creation happened in how many days? Seven. But what does day eight signify? New creation. God is marking out his people and saying, you are my new creation with new hearts.

And so circumcision is not a random sign. No, it is really appropriate. God is saying, the great reality of this sign, being my people, being righteous, not because of your flesh, but because of me, the promise of offspring, and a saviour, and circumcised hearts, that promise really is for you.

It belongs to you. You are in this covenant, and I am bound to you. But there is one other thing circumcision shows.

This sign is very appropriate because it shows all this will happen through judgment, by flesh being cut off, and by blood being shed.

[14 : 07] This is a sign pointing to the greater reality of the crucifixion. In fact, Colossians 2 even calls the death of Christ the circumcision of Christ.

Because how is the uncleanness of our hearts taken away? by our sin being placed on one man and him being cut off in his flesh.

And how is the curse of this world undone? By the curse falling on one man. And how does God create a new people, a new creation, cleansed and made right with God?

It is by blood being shed. flesh torn apart. Nails driven through flesh. It is through judgment.

And from that, blessing gets poured out into the world. This is how God claims a people and claims nations for himself.

[15 : 20] We are seeing here the blueprint for how the church is made. Christ claims his church through his flesh being cut off.

And so as the church, we, we have a remarkable privilege. God has separated us from the world and he says to us, I treat you differently to how I treat anyone else.

You are mine. You are my covenant people. You are holy to me and I've bound myself to you through the blood of Christ and I will bless you in my son.

And so this sign, it isn't just a helpful illustration for Abraham. No, this sign is God declaring centuries before the reality, Abraham, the saviour is coming and he's already yours now.

Which goes to show this is how believers were saved in the Old Testament. Although Christ wasn't born yet to this point, they still had faith in him because they had faith in the promise that he will come.

[16 : 40] You can think of the story of the Bible like a tapestry and from Genesis onwards, we see the tapestry slowly unfolding.

We are seeing it unfold bit by bit. In a way, it's already written, it's already been made, God's written it, but we're just seeing it unfold. And when we get to the New Testament, it unfolds finally in all its glory to reveal Jesus Christ.

all the threads of the tapestry that they all lead up to him and are connected to him. And so if you hold on to one thread in the Old Testament, you are actually holding on to Christ.

Well, that is what's going on here. The promise and covenant and sign that this is the thread Abraham is holding on to. He's to hold on to it and to believe it.

We look back to Christ and Abraham looks forward, but it's all the same saviour, the same reality.

So we are looking at the early blueprints of the church and how this covenant works.

[17:57] God's covenant has a sign. But we also see, it's my second point, God's covenant is with families. God's covenant is with families.

So if God marks out his people with this sign, who does he mark out? Verse 12, Abraham is to be circumcised and every boy, eight days old in his household, his children.

And that is because who is this covenant with? Who is God making these promises to? It's to Abraham and his offspring. God's covenant is with families.

God says, I will be your God and you will be my people to believers and their children. This is how the covenant works.

God works through families, which is why the sign is to be for the males of the household. So men are the heads and the representatives of their families.

[19:06] And so when God stamps his promise on them, God is claiming that person and their families. Which is also why even servants were included.

Did you see that in verse 12? Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. And this goes against our modern individualistic instincts, doesn't it?

We can be quick to think, well, salvation is just about me and God and that's it. And yes, of course, we relate to God personally and God saves individuals.

But as we see these blueprints, God's plan for his people, it's far bigger than that. God saves in covenant and that covenant is with families and that includes children.

even before they could talk or even understand these promises, yet God sees the children of believers differently. There is something different for those children than the children of the pagan families in Canaan.

[20:20] God says to that eight-day-old newborn, these promises are for you, little child, and I am marking you out as mine. Now, that doesn't mean they are magically instantly saved as soon as the blade hit the flesh.

No, it still requires faith. It requires God's people to believe this sign and trust the promises God has made. It still requires surrender and holding on to that tapestry thread for adults and children.

Yet God graciously says this covenant is with you and your family. the promises are for all of you. You're born into this covenant and now by faith never leave it.

And so it is possible to break this covenant with unbelief. That's why verse 14 speaks of people being cut off from the covenant. We see that with Esau, we see that with rebellious Israel.

Ishmael. We even see it here with Ishmael. Look at verse 25. Ishmael is circumcised. He's in the covenant. Yet, look back to verse 21.

[21:35] But I will establish my covenant with Isaac. It is possible to be in the covenant but not actually of the covenant. You can be circumcised in the flesh but not in the heart.

And so we see in this blueprint what the church is like. The church is going to be a mix of Ishmael's and Isaac's. God's people, it's never purely only belief this side of heaven.

No, it's mixed. Some won't believe the promises given to them. And sadly, we've seen that, haven't we? People walking away from the faith.

both adults and children. It's a painful breaking of the covenant. But that isn't because God's promises have failed. It's because they haven't been believed.

But this isn't to fill us with doubt or to make us worry about our children. No, this is here to help us understand the nature of the church and make us realize what we need to do.

[22:48] God has given us promises and we must believe them. As the church, we are in this covenant. We have the promises and now we must never, ever leave.

Because the blessing is only found here. This is the only place we can be sure God is my God and I am cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

us. And like Abraham, we need to recognize the sign God has given us and believe it. But what is the sign for us?

If this is the blueprint of the church, if this is the same eternal covenant we're in now, what is the sign we have? Well, it's no longer circumcision.

God's covenant sign is now baptism. That's my third and final point today. God's covenant sign is now baptism. Listen to these words from Colossians 2.

[23 : 49] In Christ also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism.

If Christ's death is the true circumcision, the reality Abraham's circumcision was pointing forward to, well baptism is now the new sign that points back to that same reality.

And it works with the same blueprints. It is in baptism that God marks out his people. It is his covenant sign to separate his holy people from the world.

God's sign pointing us back to the deeper spiritual reality. In baptism God declares to us you are washed by the blood of Christ.

You have died with him and now you have my promised spirit poured out on you. And so baptism is fundamentally not about us declaring our faith to God or to the world.

[25 : 01] No, baptism is God declaring his faithfulness to us. I am your God. It is his official stamp on us showing these promises really are for you.

Now always trust me and don't go anywhere else. God knows we have doubts. And so God says look to your baptism.

if you have doubts and fears and you feel wobbly in the faith and you wonder is this really for me? And it is very easy to look into ourselves and see our sin and our weakness and to doubt everything.

Well if that's you that's exactly what Abraham went through. But God says when you have those doubts don't look in look out. Look at the sign God has given you.

in your baptism God says I am your God and with me you may have wobbles but I will never let you fall.

[26 : 13] But let's also address the question that may be on your mind. If this is how the covenant works and this is how God deals with his people and this is the blueprint for the church then that means this eternal covenant is still for us and for our children.

God is still working through families today. That is why at Pentecost Peter preaches the promises for you and for your children and all who are far off.

It's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians when a believing parent has a child that child is holy. Our children belong to the covenant they are born into it and God says they are not like other children to me.

No, they are mine and my promises belong to them. And if this covenant is for them, so is the sign. The covenant and the sign go together. And that is why we baptise children. That is why we raise them saying, you belong to God.

[27 : 24] You are not your own, little one, but you have been bought with a price. You can pray, our heavenly father, my love, he is your heavenly father.

You really can sing, Jesus died to take my sin away. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so, and my baptism tells me so.

God is even more gracious than we realise. His grace is for you and your children.

Through every trial, his grace surrounds your whole family. And so children, if you have been baptised, please know that.

God has given you a sign, baptism. And that sign is God saying to you, you belong to me. You are already in this covenant, which means you are to believe the promises God has given you.

[28 : 33] Like Ishmael, growing up in a Christian home, it doesn't automatically save you, but it does mean you are in this covenant. And God has given you promises, promises to love you and bless you and save you through Jesus.

Those promises are yours, you must believe them. And that goes for every adult as well. Now we are in this covenant, we mustn't go anywhere else.

Because this is where we have God and this is the only way to find blessing, to find true happiness and eternal life. God has given us this gracious sign, so let's not ignore it.

Let's not forget it. but let's believe it. He has marked us out, his promises are for us, and as his church incredibly we can say he is our God and we are his people.

Let's pray.