

“COVENANTING WITH GOD” **(Genesis 17:1-27)**

In a dating relationship there comes a time when every couple has a DTR. How many know what a DTR is? A DTR is where you “define the relationship.” You start spending time with someone and develop an interest in them, but you don’t know exactly how they feel about you and there comes a point when you need to clarify your relationship. I recall one particular DTR I had with a girl in college that I really liked, but I wasn’t sure how she felt about me. We spent a lot of time together but had never really talked about our relationship. Towards the end of the school year, I decided I was going to go for it and leave all my cards out on the table. I took her up to the Rose Gardens in Portland – a very romantic setting overlooking the city; and I told her how I felt about her. Then she told me how she felt about me – she said, “I think we should just be friends.” And just like that, our relationship was defined. It was a long drive back to campus.

As relational beings there must be a communication in order to have a relationship, and through communication you define or clarify what is expected and required of that relationship. When you make a business deal, you enter into a partnership with another person, you define the terms of the deal, and you sign some form of contract to seal the deal. When you interview for a job, your employer defines the responsibilities of the job, how much you will get paid, and when you will get paid. Communication is essential to every relationship.

Our ultimate and most important relationship in life is with our creator, and it’s clear from the beginning of the Bible that God desires to be in a relationship with us and has communicated to us through His Word. One of the primary ways God communicated to His people in the Bible was through covenants. Understanding the covenants God made with people in the Old Testament is vital to understanding the overall story of the Bible.

One person defined a covenant as “a covenant is a chosen relationship or partnership in which two parties make binding promises to each other and work together to reach a common goal.” One of the most common examples of a covenant is marriage of a husband and wife – who out of love for each other – enter into a formal relationship binding themselves to one another in lifelong faithfulness and devotion. They then work as partners to reach common goals such and build a family.

The idea of God covenanting with people began to the Garden of Eden when God created Adam and Eve and defined His purpose for them – “I want you to fill the earth and rule over it – I want you to partner with me and spreading my glory throughout the world – I want you to enjoy all the blessings of life as you live according to my order and design.”

But Adam and Eve’s relationship with God became fractured when they chose to disobey God and live life on their terms, and their sin brought the curse of sin and death upon all humanity. Our relationship with God would still be fractured were it not for the divine intervention of God through the covenants He made with people. Through these covenants God communicated His plans to reverse the curse and restore our broken relationship.

This morning we’re going to talk a covenant God makes with Abraham – a covenant that plays a central role in the storyline of the Bible – and the details of this covenant are found in Genesis 17.

God's covenant with Abraham actually begins in chapter 12 when He establishes a relationship with Abraham and promises him a huge family that will inherit a promised piece of land in Canaan and will bring universal blessing to the whole world. Now in chapter 17 God is going to reaffirm His covenant and further define what He promises to do on his end, and what He expects Abraham to do on his end.

Let's first look at the parties... In verses 1-2 we read... "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.'" Abraham is now ninety-nine years old and it's been twenty-four years since God first appeared to him in chapter 12 and called him into a covenant partnership. But twenty-four years later none of the promises of the covenant have been fulfilled, and last week we saw in chapter 16 how Sarah gets tired of waiting and devises a plan for Abraham to have a child with Hagar, and Abraham goes along with it. Despite the fact that Abraham is a less-than-perfect partner in this covenant, God is going to be faithful on His end and He's going to give to Abraham everything that He promised.

Verse one says that God appears to Abraham, and in the rest of the chapter God speaks to Abraham, disclosing who He is and what He wants Abraham to do. The Lord identifies himself as "God Almighty" – which is *El Shaddai* in Hebrew. One of the ways God reveals Himself to us is by His names, and *El Shaddai* speaks of his power and ability to do anything.

In the ancient world there were two kinds of covenants – one was a *bilateral* covenant where both parties negotiated the terms of the covenant – and the other was a *unilateral* covenant where one party alone sets the terms of the covenant. A good example of a unilateral covenant was when a big, powerful nation offered protection to a weaker nation in return for their loyalty and obedience. The weaker nation then had a choice: it could either surrender and enter into the covenant and enjoy its benefits or it could remain independent and risk being wiped out.

This is similar to the covenant that Almighty God makes with Abraham. He calls it "*my* covenant" Since it's His covenant, He sets the terms. Many people approach a relationship with God as if they were interviewing Him for a job, and if He measures up to their standards and expectations, then they might let Him be the personal deity in their life. But you don't get to pick and choose what you want God to be like or what you want Him to do – God is the creator of the universe and He sets the terms of our relationship, and we get to decide if we will except His terms and be blessed, or reject His terms and face the consequences.

In verse one God tells Abraham what he expects of him. "Walk before me faithfully and be blameless." As the greater party in the covenant, God calls on Abraham to live in a manner that glorifies God...

Walking has the idea of living in close fellowship with God, where you walk and talk with Him as friends and you share life together. Walking carries the idea of progression, of putting one foot in front of the other over a long course of time, walking in rhythm with God. As Galatians 5:25 says, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." To keep in step with the Spirit means that you're not running ahead of the Spirit in your own power and you're not lagging behind, giving into sin. Your steps are in beat, and are synchronized, with the Holy Spirit.

To walk *faithfully* means that you belong exclusively to God – you do not make covenants with any other god, but are loyal and obedient to the one, true, living God.

To be *blameless* does not mean that you're perfect, but that you live in such a way that reflects well on God. In Philippians 1:27 Paul says, "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Since you have been blessed to be in a relationship with God through Christ, live in a way that represents Him well.

In verses 3-8 God lays out the details of his covenant, and what He promises to do... "Abram fell facedown (a sign that he acknowledges who the greater party of the covenant is), and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.'"

These promises sound very familiar because God keeps repeating them to Abraham over and over and over – almost like a broken record. Why does He do this? It's the same reason we come to church week after week and hear the same truths over and over and over because in life we're always dealing with a new trial or circumstance that wears on us and tests our faith, and we need fresh reminders of basic truths again and again. In Abraham's case, he's been waiting twenty-four years for God's promises to be fulfilled, and hearing the God's promises repeated helps strengthen his faith that God will fulfill His promises.

Here God reiterates His promise that Abraham will be the father of many nations and his descendants will possess the whole land of Canaan. One thing that stands out in these verses is the phrase "I will." The words "I will" is used 12 times in chapter 17. God does not bargain with Abraham or ask for Abraham's input – as God Almighty He announces and declares what He's going to do, and nothing can interfere with or stop His plan.

God sets the terms of the covenant and decides it's time to give Abraham a different name. Up to this point his name has been Abram, which means "*exalted father*." Imagine Abram meeting someone for the first time and the person asks, "What's your name?" "My name is Abram." "Oh, exalted father – how many children do you have?" "Well, none yet." You can imagine how much this name must've bugged Abram, and now after twenty-four years of waiting God says, "I'm going to change your name." And Abraham thinks, "I am all in. What is it?" "Your name will be Abraham which means, '*father of a multitude*.'" "Father of a multitude? I don't even have a single child!" God says, "Yes, but you will, and your new name confirms that it's going to happen."

So far we've seen God's state what He's going to do – He's going to bless Abraham with land and many descendants – and we've seen what's expected of Abraham – he is to walk faithfully before God and be blameless. Now in verses 9-14 Abraham is told what he must do to signify his participation in the covenant...

"Then God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or

bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Several of the covenants God made with people were accompanied by signs to help people remember them and keep them. When God made a covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth by a flood, He gave him the sign of a rainbow to be a perpetual reminder of God’s faithfulness. When God made a covenant of the law with Moses, the sign was the Sabbath. When Jesus instituted the new covenant, the sign company in the covenant was the Lord’s Supper. The sign of God’s covenant with Abraham is circumcision.

I can imagine how excited Abraham was to hear this... “Can’t we sign some papers to ratify the covenant? Why circumcision?” These verses do not tell us why God chose circumcision as a sign of the covenant, but when you look at what the rest of the Bible says about circumcision, two reasons come to light. The first obvious reason for circumcision is that it has to do with the male reproductive organ, and God has repeatedly promised Abraham that many descendants would come from his body. Circumcision would be a continual reminder to Abraham and his descendants that their race began as a supernatural act of God – that God gave life – He gave fertility – to a couple who were physically incapable of having children

The second reason for circumcision is that it granted males entrance into the community of Israel – the community that that God chose to possess the exclusive truth of who God is and how humanity can be in a right relationship with Him. God set Israel apart from the other nations, so that they could be a light to those who did not know the truth of God – and part of what set them apart was circumcision. This is reflected in what David said about Goliath. “Who is this uncircumcised philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” Circumcision set Israel apart from the other nations, and signified that they belonged to God.

Women were also included as members of the covenant community through their marriage to a circumcised man or by being born to Israelite parents. In the Old Testament law God forbid women to marry uncircumcised men from other nations because they were not part of God’s covenant community. Circumcision signified the purity of membership in the covenant.

Membership in the community was important to signify that only this community had the truth – what Paul calls the “oracles of God” in Romans 3:2. It was through the Jewish people that God communicated who He was and how people can’t be rightly related to Him. Only Israel had the truth, and the truth was revealed through the Old Testament scriptures and the ultimate revelation of Jesus coming to earth as the son of Abraham. Circumcision granted inclusion into the community that had the truth.

So important was circumcision that any male who was not circumcised would be cut off from the community. For New Testament believers this reminds us that there is only one, exclusive way to God and that is through Jesus Christ – who is the way, the truth, and the life – no one comes to the father except through Him.

As New Testament believers the sign of our inclusion into the new covenant is the Lord’s Supper and baptism. Our participation in these ceremonies visualizes in a public way that we belong exclusively to Christ, and that we are members of His family of believers known as the church.

After telling Abraham to participate in the covenant by getting circumcised, in verses 15-16 God gives further revelation regarding the covenant, starting with the change of name for Sarah... “God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’”

The meaning of Sarai is uncertain, but the name Sarah means “princess,” which speaks to the fact that she will be the mother of a royal nation. Abraham and Sarah’s new names bolster the certainty that God’s promises will be fulfilled.

Upon hearing that Sarah will have a son, verse 17 says, “Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’” Laughing is the natural response to hearing that your 90-year-old wife is going to have a child. It would be a miracle for them to have a baby, and he laughs. “Me and Sarah have a baby at our age, that’s crazy!” It’s a laugh of amazement.

But Abraham already has a son – Ishmael. Ishmael is now 13 years old, and Abraham sees him as the natural heir to God’s promises. Verse 18, “And Abraham said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!’ Then God said, ‘Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.’”

Why can’t Ishmael be the promised son? Paul explains in Galatians that Ishmael came through natural means – through the human effort of Abraham – but Isaac’s birth came through the Spirit – through a supernatural miracle of God. Isaac’s birth is a picture of how we are saved. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Ishmael represents our human efforts to be saved, while Isaac represents salvation as a gift of God’s grace received by faith.

God says, “I will bless Ishmael, but I will establish my covenant through the miracle son you have with Sarah,” and for the first time God announces the name of their son: Isaac, which means “laughter.” Whenever Abraham and Sarah looked at their son, they would remember how they laughed at the thought that he would ever be conceived, and they would remember that God had the last laugh – He did what He said He would do.

In verses 20-22 God gives further revelation to Abraham about both Ishmael and Isaac... “‘And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.’ When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.”

Ishmael will be blessed to be the father of a great nation with many descendants, but the covenant promises will come through Isaac, and for the first time God gives Abraham a specific due date... “By this time next year, you’ll be holding your son in your arms.” Hallelujah!

Throughout this chapter God has stated what He will do in His covenant and what He expects Abraham to do. God says, “I will give you a child and I will give you land, and to solidify my promise, I will change your name and Sarah’s name. As for your part, Abraham, you are to walk before me faithfully and be blameless, and you and everyone else in your household are to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant.”

All that’s left in the covenant is Abraham’s response. Will he accept the terms of the covenant relationship and receive its benefits or will he reject God’s terms and face the consequences?

Versus 23-27... “Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. And every male in Abraham’s household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.”

On the very day that God appeared to him, Abraham complied with God’s terms and was circumcised along with Ishmael, and every male in his household. It was Abraham’s way of saying, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” By being circumcised, Abraham demonstrated his participation in the covenant and that he and his people were set apart to the Lord.

What does God’s covenant with Abraham mean for us today? It tells us that God desires to have a relationship with us, and through this covenant He takes the initiative to restore our relationship that was fractured by our sin. This covenant tells us that a relationship with God will come exclusively through Abraham and his people, and we now know that the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is Christ – Abraham’s direct descendant. Jesus is the Messiah who brings blessing to the whole world by delivering us from the curse of sin by taking the sins of mankind upon Himself and dying in our place.

The New Testament tells us that through faith in Christ we become spiritual sons of Abraham and are grafted into the blessings promised to Abraham. As children of Abraham, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ – we have forgiven, we have hope, we have peace, we have joy – we have all this and more through Christ.

As the initiator of the covenant, God invites you to enter into a relationship with Him on His terms – through trusting Christ as your Savior from sin. And once you are saved by grace, God calls you to walk faithfully before Him and to live a life that is set apart to God and that reflects well on Him. If you have not entered into a relationship with Christ, He offers to begin one with you today.