

Prayer Within The Covenant

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[0 : 00] So let's hear the word of God as we find it in Genesis 17. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless.

I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers. Abraham fell face down 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 are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you and I will be their God.

[1 : 09] 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. God also said to Abraham, as for Sarah, your wife, you're no longer to call her Sarah. 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.

Abraham fell face down. He laughed and said to himself, will a son be born to a man a hundred years old?

[2 : 24] Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90? 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. 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'll be the father of 12 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. On that very day, Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household and circumcised them as God told him.

Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised and his son Ishmael was 13. Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

[3 : 33] Now, I was walking through the meadows this week. I was mentioning to a couple of people. I saw this sign. I have no idea what the sign was for.

Who put it there? But it caught my eye. It said, be defined by a vision of something bigger than you. No idea. It was probably something to do with selling falafels or something.

But it struck me as a great message for the Christian life. And it seems really appropriate as we think about the story of Abraham. You know, what is our something bigger as Christians? Ultimately, that something bigger is the fact that the sovereign Lord is king. We celebrate and we find our strength in the sovereign rule of God. That is to define our vision for life, all of life, including our own.

The lordship of Christ and his kingdom is to dominate the horizons of his people. Again, on a related theme, I was reading a book called *The Preacher's Catechism* this week.

[4 : 41] And the author, Lewis Allen, he wrote this. He said, faith is a hungry business and true faith must be continually fed. Key to that diet is a robust confidence in Christ's lordship.

For our faith to be established and to grow strong, we need to understand that Jesus Christ is Lord. As we come to this part of Abraham's life, we see that he needs his life of faith to be redefined. Defined by a bigger vision, to be reminded of God's greater promise. And the God who makes covenant promises comes again to him. Just as he did last week, Genesis 15.

So we see him again coming to revive his faith. In the middle of Abraham's doubts and questions and fears, he discovers once again, our God reigns.

And that's good news for him. It was Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian, who said, not a square inch of all, there is not a square inch of all creation over which God does not say mine.

[5 : 52] So we live in that reality that every aspect of life, every aspect of this created universe belongs to God, belongs to the Lord Jesus.

So we find ourselves as Christians trusting in the sovereign rule of God. We are invited to live with faith that Christ is King.

We're invited to live in that reality in life's joys and in life's struggles. But I'm sure we've probably all come to understand that maintaining that faith is hard.

There are many obstacles, barriers, challenges to that. Abraham knew it. He knew it as he waited to see how God was going to fulfill his promises. And I'm sure we've come to find that too.

I still remember the first talk I ever gave on Christianity, probably because it took place on a camp bus on the way to Alton Towers at six o'clock in the morning.

[6 : 59] That's a tough shift, trying to talk truth to sleepy teenagers while riding a bus. But I remember, because we're heading to Alton Towers, talking about the theme of life being like a roller coaster, bringing with it ups and downs and lots of times where you're thrown for a loop.

And how do we learn to trust God in that situation? And the life of faith, likewise, can be for us something of a roller coaster with ups and downs and highs and lows and sometimes thrown for a loop.

We see it in the story of Abraham. We see it in many of the characters in the Bible. So we have the reality that King Jesus rules and reigns over all.

And it's critical for our lives to see that, to trust that, and to rest in that. But we also need to acknowledge that there are many ways in which that faith is challenged.

We are invited to trust in the promise-making God, especially as he is revealed to us in the Lord Jesus. Jesus, Jesus who is described as the cornerstone upon which our lives of faith are established.

[8 : 16] Also the anchor holding us to God. So we are invited to exercise faith, acknowledging that faith often is weak, and often we struggle.

So it's good to remember the sovereign rule of God, and that he is for his people. I was reading Richard Sibbes this week.

He used the image of a mother and a baby when talking about faith. You know, when a baby is little, for security it clings on to, he or she clings on to their mum or dad.

But ultimately the child's safety doesn't rest in their grip, it rests in their parents' strong arms. And we need to know that reality.

At times when life makes no sense to us, at times when our faith seems really stretched, and we find ourselves confused, struggling to hold on to the promises of God, we need this.

[9 : 23] We need Christ, the sure and steady anchor. So we find ourselves diving again into Abraham's struggle of faith.

In Genesis 17, he's still living, as we said last week, in that gap between the promise of God and the reality in which he finds himself in. It's 44 years that have passed.

Since in Genesis 12, he was called from worshipping idols to follow the living God, and he was given all those amazing promises. 44 years. It's 13 years that have passed since Genesis 16. Genesis 16 is when Abraham and Sarah decide to take matters into their own hands to try and establish a family through Hagar and Ishmael, hoping that the covenant promises of God will come in that way.

Now we find Abraham is 99 years old. Sarah is 90. Still, there is no child of promise. We see in chapter 17 and verse 18 an indicator that Abraham's faith needs revived because we find him here settling for less than God's amazing promise.

[10:40] So God had said that it would be through a child of Abraham and Sarah that the promise would come. But Abraham said to God, if only Ishmael, the child of Hagar, his servant, if only Ishmael might live under your blessing.

He needs his faith revived so he can believe in that greater promise that he was given. So again, let's think together, how does God strengthen his faith in that moment?

How does God strengthen our faith? How can we persevere and even grow in faith when life is hard, when challenges are frequent, when we find ourselves very aware of our weakness and limitation?

Well, the answer, as we've seen all along, is that we need to hear and be reminded of God's character and to receive and lay hold on God's covenant promise.

So that's where we're going to focus our time. Genesis 17 is one of those chapters where we could say loads and spend loads of time in it, but I just want to think about God's character and God's covenant promise as we see it, especially in the first 14 verses.

[11:49] But let's begin with God's character where we are reminded, and Abraham is reminded, that God is the God who is on the throne. Chapter 17, verse 1.

When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty. I am El Shaddai, the Almighty God.

Nothing is impossible with me, Abraham. God comes and says to him. When we think about Abraham's experience of life to date, this is something that he has come to know and see in a profound way.

He has already experienced the powerful call of God, bringing him from spiritual death to spiritual life. He has been protected by God in a powerful way through a period of unbelief.

When him and Sarah went down to Egypt and Abraham tried to deceive the king of Egypt, pretending Abraham and Sarah were just brother and sister, God protected the family, even as Abraham wavered in his faith.

[12:59] And then Abraham has seen the power of God in enabling him to rescue his nephew Lot, though he was just a small household compared to those who had raided Sodom and Gomorrah and taken Lot captive.

So already, Abraham has evidence that nothing is impossible to his God. And ultimately, Isaac is going to be proof of that. So that's what Abraham had.

Now we come back to our own day and we think, what view do we have of God's character? What proof do we have that God is almighty, that nothing is impossible with him?

Well, we have the whole testimony of the Bible. And we have the great stories of the Old Testament, stories of God's faithfulness, stories of God's amazing deliverance, stories of God's miraculous intervention on behalf of his own people.

And even more particularly, that we live this side of the coming of Jesus. What do we see when we look in the Gospels? We discover Jesus, the one who is Lord over the wind and the waves, and he still is today.

[14:09] We discover Jesus, Lord over sickness and death, Lord over angels and demons, Lord over life and death, and we see it in his own resurrection. And those realities are still true of Jesus today.

They're still true of our God today. So we have the whole story of the Bible to give us confidence that God is almighty, that God is on the throne, that nothing is impossible with our God.

But we also have the story of the church, church throughout the pages of church history. But we also have our own stories. We have the experience of others, where we can share stories of us praying in a sense of need and God answering.

We have our own stories of God providing in surprising ways to strengthen and to keep and to encourage his people.

This is one of those essential building blocks of faith. This is where we find stability in our Christian lives, the absolute rule of the almighty God as our king.

[15 : 24] It's something that we need to build into our understanding of the Christian faith in times when things are going relatively okay.

It's a good time to build this truth that God is sovereign, that he rules over all. And then it's also a truth that we need to cling to in the bad times, in the hard times.

I think there might be someone at the door. Oh, somebody's gone. Fine, fine, fine. So we've got God's character, and we've got the fact that he is God on the throne.

We've also got God's covenant promise. God's covenant promise. I will be your God. Look at verse two. I will confirm my covenant.

I will make sure I will establish my covenant between me and you, and will greatly increase your number. So he says, that thing that I promised, I'm going to make it firm and sure.

[16 : 29] And he goes on. The Lord goes on to explain and to demonstrate to Abraham how he's going to do that, promising him a fulfillment that far exceeds Abraham's expectations.

You know, Abraham says, oh, the Ishmael might live under your blessing, and God is going to show how he will vastly exceed that. So he says to him in verse five, for example, no longer will you be called Abram.

Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. That's what the name Abraham means, father of many. That kings will come from him.

Nations will come from him. And he renames Abraham in the prospect of that fulfillment. And we perhaps remember in the play, Romeo and Juliet, the question, what's in a name?

Well, in the Bible, a lot. In the Bible, God is here renaming Abraham as a statement of his intention to keep his covenant promise. In verse seven, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you.

[17 : 41] One of the things that we see about covenants is that God often chooses to work through families, that blessing that passes down through the generations. And because that's true, God is promising that he will give Abraham a family through Isaac.

Verse eight, the whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you. The land of promise, God's place will belong to them.

So just as he promised way back 44 years ago to make him a great nation, to give him the land, to cause him to be a blessing, to receive God's blessing, the same is still being promised by God now. And of course, when we get to the true climax, to the heart of God's covenant, we find it here as well in verse seven and verse eight, where he promises to be your God and the God of your descendants.

And in verse eight, I will be their God. This is the Emmanuel principle, the heart of the covenant, God with his people.

[18 : 59] This is the goal of salvation. This is the promise of salvation, God and his people together because of God's grace, because of God's initiative, because of God's covenant and his faithfulness to maintain the covenant.

Connected to that and to strengthen Abraham's faith. Again, a covenant sign is given. Verse 10 is striking language. This is my covenant with you, the covenant you are to keep.

Every male among you shall be circumcised. So God makes the closest possible connection between his covenant promise of grace and the covenant sign.

How so? Because the covenant promise, when we think about how the promises work themselves out in Abraham's experience, they're all wrapped up in God keeping his promise to give them a child of promise, to give them a family.

And so circumcision then, at one level, is a permanent reminder that God has made that promise to build a family through Abraham and Sarah.

[20 : 15] This is intended to strengthen his faith. In Genesis 15, Abraham was told, look up at the stars and believe. Now in Genesis 17, to strengthen his faith, he's told, look at your own body and remember and believe the promise that I have made to you.

So here Abraham is being invited to revive his faith, to trust and rely on God's character, to trust that God will keep his word, to trust in the friendship of God and the faithfulness of God.

Sometimes faith is caricatured as a leap in the dark. Maybe some of us will have seen Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

Well, as Indiana Jones finds himself looking for the treasure, ultimately the medicine that will heal his father, there is the idea of a walk of faith.

He finds himself at a cliff edge and in the vast distance, there's a cliff on the other side and then there's that huge drop in between. And so the walk of faith for Indiana Jones is to step out into the abyss.

[21 : 33] And only when he makes that step does this invisible path become visible. Now is that faith as we find it in the Bible? No, it's not. It's not a leap in the dark.

Faith is trusting in God as we find himself revealed in his own word. Faith is trusting in God as he is revealed in the gospel of his son Jesus.

So we're trusting in God's character, God's word, God's promise, God's son. It's not a leap in the dark. And we have the Bible to show us God's faithfulness to his promise.

Abraham was finding, even after 44 years, that he was having to wait and hope in future promises.

And so he was being called to trust once again in the promise-making God.

And that's so true for ourselves as well. We enjoy faith and we enjoy salvation in the present, but ultimately, our faith is future-oriented.

[22 : 40] It's eternity-focused. And Hebrews 11, verse 1, reminds us, faith is being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we cannot see.

faith is us exercising every day trust in the God of the promises to keep going on our journey of faith.

So we see God has given to Abraham a reminder of his character. God has confirmed once again his covenant promise. And then we see a little of Abraham's covenant responsibility.

So there was the, as for me, from God, I will do this, I will do this, I will do this. And now, as for you, in verse 9, God said to Abraham, as for you, you must keep my covenant.

So we've said all the way along as we've been thinking about the covenants, they're established by grace. It's a one-sided initiative. God is the king. He is the all-powerful one. He sets the terms of the covenant relationship.

[23 : 51] And yet we've also recognized that two parties are present. And we've seen that God's people have responsibility within this covenant relationship. So what does Abraham's responsibility look like?

You know, God is going to deliver a son and family and nations and kings and blessing. What is Abraham to do? He is to keep my covenant. Lots of detail on God's part for Abraham is to keep the covenant.

Boils down to be committed, Abraham. Trust me, Abraham. Live like my covenant promise is true, Abraham.

How does God talk to him in verse 1? He says, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless.

Walk before me, Abraham. Live in awareness that I am present with you, that I am for you. Continue to trust me and be blameless.

[24 : 56] Not be perfect. It was never the expectation, thankfully, for our point of view, because nobody can live up to God's perfect standard.

To be blameless means to be wholehearted. not to be double-minded, not to be hypocritical, to be truly devoted to God, to live by faith and trust.

The Christian life, too, is a call to live by faith. It's a call to live as those who believe that God's promise to us is true.

So we thought about this morning. We thought about the death of Jesus establishing the new covenant for the people of God.

And we are to live daily trusting in that promise that Jesus truly has forgiven us. Jesus truly is the means by which we can be reconciled to God and enjoy relationship with God.

[26 : 04] And so we are to live like God's promised us is true. To trust him as children trusting our father in heaven. To live for him, recognizing his promised reward is greater than anything else that this world can offer.

To live with loyalty to our king. To exercise hope in him. Believing that he will keep his covenant promise.

That he will keep us safe in his strong and loving arms. The story of Abraham reminds us that even when we live within the covenant faith is hard sometimes.

Faith is tested often. But the story of Abraham is also a wonderful encouragement to us. God the Almighty has committed to be the God of his people.

God has committed to keep his promises. And as we see in the coming of Isaac, he didn't fail Abraham. And he will never fail his own. So we can completely trust in him.

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