

Children of Abraham

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Actually, I think I'd better just have a Bible open. Stop having to flick between my sermon notes and the Kindle on my iPad.

! Let me just open the Bible up to that passage. One place.

Better. Okay, so here we are in this rather dense and perhaps slightly intimidating argument of Paul that we find in chapters 3 and 4 in Galatians.

Remember, the context of this is that some Christians of a Jewish background were insisting that converts should be circumcised.

And in particular, we're refusing to eat with those Gentile converts who had not been circumcised.

And Paul says that even Peter and Barnabas were sucked into this and did not, in a sense, were being hypocritical because they didn't really believe that, but they were just giving in, presumably, for the sake of peace.

[1:39] And Paul is very keen to say how we cannot do this. It just doesn't make any sense.

And last week, we looked at the first part of this, chapter 3, in which we can think of it as Paul trying to answer three questions or objections that the circumcision party might raise.

And the first of these was this one that we looked at last week. We could have said, is circumcision the most important covenant marker? Because after all, it was given to Abraham, not even to Moses.

It's not initially part of the Mosaic law. It was a command given to Abraham as part of the Abrahamic covenant. And Paul first makes the point, and we looked at this last week, that no, it's not circumcision that's the important thing you need to know about Abraham.

It's Abraham's faith that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. But then somebody might go on and say, well, okay, I accept that Abraham had faith and it was counted to him as righteousness, but he was still required to circumcise his children, wasn't he?

[3:01] In fact, that command came after the promise. And so doesn't that mean that circumcision and the other rituals of the law, but particularly thinking about circumcision here, doesn't that mean that they still matter?

That's the question we're looking at this evening. And Paul answers this question in the second half of this chapter in a very sort of intense argument, as we shall say.

So we might put it another way. We might put it away, as indeed the Catholics argued at the Reformation. Okay, we accept that Abraham was justified by faith, but it's not faith alone, is it?

There are other things that need to be added to faith. Now, of course, in a sense, that's true. Peter talks about adding to your faith, but the point here is to hear that it's not things that needed to be added to faith in order to be justified, in order to be right with God.

Abraham, yes, he had the sign of circumcision, but it was his faith that marked him as a member of the covenant. But still, the argument might have some weight, and so I think it's worth actually just briefly considering the way that the circumcision party might have argued.

[4:28] And they might indeed have quoted this passage, which is actually from Genesis 17, which shows that, in fact, that the circumcision was part of the covenant promise.

And so the passage starts in verse 4 in Genesis 17. I won't read all of it. The main part is 10 to 14, but I'll just read verse 4 as well.

So this is Genesis 17, verse 4, and then verse 10 to 14. As for me, this is my covenant with you.

You will be the father of many nations.

Then going on to verse 10. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be a 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.

[5:32] 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. So on the face of it, this objection would seem to have some weight, wouldn't it? Circumcision was indeed a sign given to Abraham, and it did indeed come after the promise.

In fact, this passage said it was given to confirm the promise. This all seems pretty clear. Those males of Abraham's household, those who claim to be children of Abraham, whether they're direct descendants or bought in, must be circumcised in the flesh.

And if you relate that to what God had said earlier about being the father of many nations, and in him all nations will be blessed, it would seem to imply that the sign of circumcision must also apply to all the people who claim to be the children of Abraham.

So the argument at first sight seems to have some weight. But Paul answers this objection with what is a remarkable stroke of theological insight. In fact, in a sense, he agrees with it, as we shall see when we dive in.

[7:03] Certainly, he says in verse 15, a covenant cannot be set aside until it's been fulfilled. And you can't make a later amendment that overrules the original intention of the covenant.

He says that in verse 17. So how does Paul argue that circumcision, that those of us who claim in that sense to be children of Abraham no longer need to be circumcised?

And he does it by what I might call the rule of one. And I know I was bang on about structure and so on, but actually, the structure here is quite important.

And it is this sandwich structure. It's technically called a chiasm. And so I'd just like to make it very clear that you, that how that, this sandwich structure is actually worked.

So if you look, you'll see, first of all, there is one seed in verse 16. In that case, in that verse, the one seed is Jesus.

[8:14] But he also says in verses 26 to 29, there is one seed. But there, the seed is Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free.

And then, in verses 17 to 20, well, in 17 and 18, Paul tells us that law and promise cannot be set in opposition.

And he also has a bit to say about mediators. But you'll notice that in verse 19, he doesn't actually say who the mediator is, strangely enough. I mean, we all know it was Moses, but he doesn't actually say, name Moses then.

And then in, at the end of verse 20, you have this sudden affirmation, God is one. And at first sight, as you read through, you think, why on earth is that there?

But then the sandwich sort of unfolds again because in verses 21 to 23, he says that actually law and promise agree on faith. And he says that promise also has a mediator.

[9:24] And that's in verse 22. But here, the mediator is named. The mediator is Jesus. So as I say, I think it's particularly important to see this here.

Because otherwise, this last bit of verse 20, where he says God is one, seems to be a sort of almost irrelevant interjection. What's that got to do with the rest of the argument?

But if you see that there's this sandwich structure, and you remember when you see this structure, I say it's technically called a chiasm, that the most important bit is the bit in the middle, then you see that this whole thing about God is one is actually the key to the whole argument.

So I say, I know I tend to bang on about structure, but I think it's worth, particularly worth, important here to notice that. This idea that God is one is the key to the whole argument.

And as I say, we could call this the rule of one. There is one seed. You can't have two or more ways of justification, or as we might, if we wanted to use theological language, we could say that God is

not a dispensationalist.

[10:33] It cannot be one rule for Abraham, another one for Moses, and a third one for the Galatians, and a fourth one for us. It doesn't make any sense.

There has to be one promise. There is one gospel. God is one. The promise is one. The law is one. And crucially here, as I say, the seed is one.

And it's worth noting the distinctions he makes in verse 28. Verse 28 is one of these verses that's always being quoted out of context, isn't it? But just let me read it to you.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you're all one in Christ Jesus. Well, I say, I'm sure you, like me, have heard that often, quoted out of context.

But it's really here for the context, because we're all one in Christ Jesus. There is one seed. And notice the distinctions he makes there. They're particularly relevant, because he says, well, there are Jews.

[11:37] Some of you were Jews, and you probably were circumcised, and some of you are Gentiles. So that's one distinction. Some of you are slaves, and some of you are free-born.

Some of you are, you know, some of you's job, the slavery's job, it is to wash feet, and some of you are aristocrats. But you're all one in Christ Jesus, and you're all inheritors.

And that's, of course, what chapter four is about. So he's going to go on and expand in that in chapter four. And, of course, he says there is neither male nor female. Now, one thing you probably noticed about the sign of circumcision is it can only apply to males.

It says every male in your household, not even the New International Version, the New New International Version can make that bit gender-free. It can only apply to males.

But does that mean the covenant only applies to males? Well, clearly not. And, in fact, if you read on in Genesis 17, we find that Sarah also is given a promise and a new covenant name.

[12:42] Certainly, the covenant was meant to apply to women as well. But how can that be if they can't have this sign of circumcision?

So these distinctions here are actually very important and very relevant to Paul's argument. He says that, actually, the sign of freedom and the sign of circumcision apply to all of these without distinction, whether you're Jew or Gentile, whether you've got the physical sign or not, whether you're slave or free, or whether you are a male or a female, a man or a woman.

Don't quote verses out of context. I know we all do it, but that one is really an important part of the argument there.

So let's look in more detail at these three basic points then of the argument. I don't think I'm going to go on very long tonight, but it is quite intense. So first of all, let's look at this idea that there is only one seed.

Now, of course, Paul knows as well as anybody else that the term seed in Greek, just as in English, can mean a descendant or descendants. That's certainly true in Greek.

[14:11] And yet, Paul says that there is only one seed. It's true that the seed of Abraham must be circumcised to be fulfilled, but it was in Christ Jesus.

In the end, there can be only one law and Jesus fulfilled all of it. So, you can imagine he was saying to the Jewish believers that, well, you don't actually sacrifice animals anymore, do you?

Because you realize that Jesus is the one true sacrifice, the perfect male from the flock. But if you apply that to the sacrifices, the law is one.

How can you not apply that to the sign of circumcision? But then, you might argue, okay, well, fair enough, but how does that actually work? Luke, and Paul argues with this, I say, remarkable insight that Jesus is the true child of Abraham, the true heir of the promise, the true descendant, and he's fulfilled this requirement for circumcision.

just as he gave his life, he was dedicated in the temple. Luke actually records it in chapter 2, that he went to the temple on the eighth day, although oddly, it doesn't actually say he was circumcised, just that he was dedicated, but part of that dedication would, of course, have been the sign of circumcision.

[15:38] And so, Luke says that Jesus has fulfilled that. He focuses on Jesus' consecration to the Lord. So what does that mean?

And again, Paul uses what seems a difficulty to introduce a great Christian principle, a great theological principle, that we are all included in Christ.

That's why he can say that there is only one descendant of Abraham, one seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, but he can then say at the end of the passage that we are all children of Abraham.

Slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, we are all one, notice, in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed.

You are, you come under that fulfillment of the law of Christ Jesus, and you are therefore heirs according to the promise, which is what he's going to go on to talk about in the next chapter.

[16:41] And just in case we haven't got the point, he clarifies it in verse 27. He says, in baptism, by faith, notice, he mentions faith, where does it say that, oh yes, the faith comes in 26, sorry, you are all sons of God through faith, all sons, notice, even if you're women, a woman, you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

In other words, God looks at us and says, yes, this necessity for cutting, as it were, cutting into the male line has been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus because we've clothed ourselves with Christ.

we'll sing that hymn later, Inflaming Worlds, Worlds with Joy, I've forgotten the words, I shouldn't try and quote it from memory, but Jesus, your blood and righteousness, my glory are my glorious dress.

We're going to sing that at the end. We are clothed in Christ, in baptism, and so, God looks at us and says, yes, that requirement of the law, like all the others, has been fulfilled because we are adopted into Christ.

So there is only one seed. And then he goes on to say, the law came through Moses, but when he talks about the mediator, he doesn't actually mention Moses.

[18:18] He even mentions the angels. It says the angels stuck a wing in there as well, it seems, in verse 19. And yet, actually, Moses is not explicitly named here. Now, maybe, I'm not entirely sure why, but it might well be to imply that the true mediator, of course, is not Moses himself, but the Lord Jesus, as he says in verse 22.

And the point Paul is making, of course, is that law cannot, verse 17, and does not, verse 21, overrule the promise. It just wouldn't make any sense because God is one.

There can be only one promise, only one gospel. And so, the symbols of the law, the sacrifice of rams and bulls, the circumcision of male offspring as a covenant marker, are pointers to the promised seed, the promised descendant, the Lord Jesus.

And now that the seed has come, the pointers are no longer so relevant. Well, they're no longer relevant at all, in fact, because they are fulfilled in Christ.

So instead, all of us, whether we're male or female, are inheriting sons through faith. And sons here are important because, of course, under Roman law, it wasn't quite as clear, actually, under Jewish law.

[19:46] Occasionally, daughters did inherit under Jewish law, but under Roman law, the son always inherited. And, so, I say, whether we're male or female, we are, in that sense, firstborn sons, the one who is entitled to inherit the promised estate.

So, the law and promise actually agree. The law actually points forward to the sign of inheritance in the Lord Jesus.

And, just to remind you what we, of course, this is carry on Paul's argument from the first part of chapter 3. Remember, Paul had already argued that while God declares the heirs of Abraham are righteous by faith, the law, of course, declares us all unrighteous.

And so, he goes on to remind us that there is no distinction. in verses 21 and 22, he says, the law declares all of us unrighteous before God, the whole world unrighteous before God.

The law doesn't make a distinction in that sense. It declares everyone unrighteous. So, if there is only one law and only one condemnation, there can be only one gospel.

[21:21] As Paul has already said in verse 8, the gospel that was preached all those years ago to Abraham. Now, we have it more clearly in the Lord Jesus Christ, but the same message was preached to Abraham all those thousands of years ago.

And then, Paul starts to work towards that great affirmation in the middle that God is one. Well, what does he mean by that? Well, he's already said normally, of course, if there's a covenant, if there's a contract, there were several parties to the agreement.

It's usually a contract between at least two people. And if there's a mediator, it usually means that there are two people who are slightly hostile to each other for some reason.

And there's a mediator. And often, of course, there's also, a covenant also has an executor, somebody whose job it is to put the covenant into practice.

[22:36] But then, Paul makes this remarkable statement that God is one. It's almost as if God is negotiating with himself here.

Because who is the inheritor? Who is the beneficiary of the will? The one who inherits? Well, it's the Lord Jesus Christ, isn't it? Who is the mediator?

It is the Lord Jesus Christ who is the mediator. Who is the one who makes the promises, who makes the covenant?

Well, it is God the Father, isn't it? And who is it who executes the covenant? Well, that is the spirit. He says this in verse 3, didn't he?

It's the spirit who you began by the spirit. And then in verse 14, he says, that's right, that's the wrong chapter.

[23:37] Verse 14 says, Christ redeemed us, that's the wrong verse, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law becoming curse, sorry, have I got the wrong verse there?

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles. It's verse 14, yes, through Christ Jesus. So that by faith, sorry, let me start it again, Christ redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the spirit.

And the spirit is both the one who is promised but also the one who executes the promise. God is one. God and there's an even more remarkable implication of this and one I almost wouldn't dare to say if it were not for the fact that Peter says the same thing.

Peter remembers one of the people who'd originally disagreed with Paul but he's obviously mightily impressed by Paul's argument because in his letter to Peter chapter 1 verse 4 Peter writes he has given us his very great and precious promises so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world caused by evil desires.

This actually says here we may participate in the divine nature and indeed that seems to be the implication of Paul's argument doesn't it? If we are all one in Christ Jesus then if we have the spirit given within us then in a limited sense I hasten to add I don't think you should push this idea too far but we do in a sense participate in the divine nature we participate in the inheritance if there is only one seed the Lord Jesus Christ and we are included in the Lord Jesus Christ then in that sense we are participating in the divine nature that's a natural outcoming of Paul's argument perhaps he's saying that the image of God which we were created before the fall is restored in Christ Jesus in in that sense perhaps we participate in the divine nature but of course why do we do that what does

[26:13] Peter actually say he says we do that to escape the corruption of the world caused by evil desires Christ and so that's going to lead us on to Paul's argument next week I said it wasn't going to be very long tonight and I haven't been but it's rather intense isn't it so it's been too long thinking about it because Paul is going to say because we are included in Christ that doesn't mean once we've inherited we can do what we like history is littered with examples of sons who have inherited the estate and gone on to blow it all on gambling or some other wasteful way it doesn't mean that at all if we inherit this we're responsible for it we need to live in a way not caused by the evil desires it's true he's going to say we don't need the rules of the nursery anymore the supervisor is no longer required but that's not so that we can go away and do what we like but rather that we can live as true sons of the living God so God is one and Christ is all in all so I'm going to stop there those Thank you.