

Sealed with a Cut

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[0 : 00] Many of you may be too young to remember, maybe not. But there was an American tennis champion in the 1990s by the name of Michael Chang.

Yes, got a photo of him there. He was the youngest player at the time, I think, to win a Grand Slam. So that was the French Open in 1989, and he was 17.

Now, I have a friend who is a mad tennis player himself. And in those days, whenever the Australian Open was on, Kian, that was his name, would start work at 5 in the morning, just so he could knock off at lunchtime to head over to Melbourne Park to watch the matches.

He's the same age as Michael and even looks a bit like him. So I've got a photo, two photos. Now, anyone wants to guess, who do you think is Michael? This is a couple of years ago.

Who do you think is Michael Chang? Who says the one on the right? Yeah, who? Who says the one on the left is Michael Chang?

[1 : 02] Yeah, yeah. You must have seen Michael Chang on the TV recently. But my friend, I've got to say, he does look a bit like Michael Chang, right? And so it wouldn't surprise you to know that Kian was a Michael Chang fan.

And each year during the Australian Open, he would stake out the hotel at which Michael was staying in search for an autograph or photo. Now, it so happened that Michael stayed at the Grand Heart, which was just opposite where I worked.

And so Kian would often drag me along to hang out in that, I don't know whether you guys remember that, classy food court just next to the hotel to wait for Michael to appear. For the, you know, that's quite common for tennis stars to go down there for a quick meal.

So there we were for hours on end playing the waiting game. And every time a short Chinese guy walked down the stairs, we'd get our hopes up, you know. We kept telling ourselves, he's got to come down soon, you know.

The guy's got to eat, right? Never mind that we never, you know, never crossed our mind that there was such a thing called room service. Now, as the hours wore on, my hope, my hopes would fade.

[2 : 07] But not Kian. Ever the optimist, he would say things like, I've read somewhere that Michael has late dinners. Or he's just had a tough five-setter. He's still at the physios.

You know, he'll come down shortly. Now, one time we even saw his brother, who was a coach, come down. And we got really excited because thinking, you know, if the coach's brother is here, Michael would come soon.

Sadly, Michael never appeared. But Kian kept hoping against hope. So even to the point where Michael got knocked out of the tournament, he would still say, Oh, no, he'll come down for one last meal before he flies off, you know.

The pressure of competition's over. He can come down and relax. But, of course, Michael never showed. Now, we've been following Abraham for five to six weeks now.

And each week, we've been reminded of God's promises to Abraham. And in particular, of an offspring. But we are now last week in this series.

[3 : 10] Not last week in Genesis, but last week of the series. And still nothing has happened. Last week, we even saw Abraham take things into his own hands. And so he did produce an offspring in Ishmael.

But it wasn't from Sarai. It was from Hagar, his slave. 13 years have now passed as we begin chapter 17. Ishmael is 13 and Abraham is 99.

But Sarai was still barren. Further, Abraham and Sarai are now beyond child-bearing age. If they were still hoping for a child together, they would be like my friend Kian, hoping against hope.

And it's into this that God now appears again to Abraham to confirm his covenant one more time. Now, I've divided God's speech in chapter 17 into four parts.

And each begins in the text with the phrase, as for. So in verse 4, you see, God is focused on himself. As for me, he says. Then verse 9, as for you, referring to Abraham.

[4 : 13] Verse 15, as for Sarai. And then verse 20, as for Ishmael. So God's going through each of the parties to the covenant, as it were. But before God does that, he begins his speech with a declaration in verse 1, saying, 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. This declaration forms the basis for everything that will follow.

Everything God does will hang off these two things. Who God is. And secondly, how Abraham is to relate to God. And who God is, is revealed in God's name.

He declares to Abraham that I am God Almighty. El Shaddai is the Hebrew word. The mighty, all-powerful one. Meaning nothing is impossible for him.

Not even Abraham's and Sarah's ages. No, this covenant is underpinned by God's nature and his power. But because God is El Shaddai, Abraham is to relate rightly with him.

[5 : 15] He is to walk before him faithfully and be blameless. Now we've already seen over the last few weeks that Abraham is far from blameless. He's not perfect. Two weeks ago, we saw, however, that how Abraham is to be right before God is to live by faith.

Faith which God credits as righteousness. And so to walk before God faithfully and blamelessly is to walk by faith, humbly and independent on God.

And with that, God now turns to the covenant and spells out what it means for each party. God begins with himself. And here he makes two commitments.

The first is in verse 4. As for me, he says, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations. No longer will we call Abraham. Your name will be Abraham.

For I have made you the father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations of you and kings will come from you. In changing his name, God commits to make Abraham a father of many nations.

[6 : 21] So up to now, the promise has been to give Abraham many descendants. But now we see that these descendants will become nations. Nations big enough to have their own kings.

So where God's name in verse 1 revealed God's character, here Abraham's new name reveals his new status. He's to be the father of many nations.

So every time God calls Abraham, every time Abraham introduces himself, every time he says, my name is Abraham, Abraham, Abraham, what he's doing, he's reminding himself of his new status before God.

He's saying, father of many nations, father of many nations. Every time he calls his name, that's what he's reminded of. And names are powerful, aren't they? For good or for bad. You know, at school when bullies create names to tease others, or maybe just siblings, I don't know, they often highlight an embarrassing trait of that person, like dirty slob, or freckle face.

And they, sorry, I haven't mentioned anyone. And every time they love to repeat those names constantly. Why? Why do they do that?

[7 : 37] Because every time they repeat it, it draws attention, doesn't it? To that particular embarrassing feature. Well, the same happens here, except with the opposite effect. Because every time God calls Abraham, he's drawing attention to the promise, reminding Abraham of his new status.

As for the second thing, God commits to establish his covenant, not just with Abraham, but his descendants also. So look with me in verse 7, I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you, and your descendants after you for 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.

Now, at one level, nothing changes, right? There's not, the blessings stay the same, there's not new blessings. Abraham's descendants were going to possess the land forever anyway. But at another level, this is a significant promise, because God now has a direct relationship with Abraham's descendants.

God's not just Abraham's God, he's going to be the God of Abraham's descendants as well. Now, those of you who understand a bit about law and legal principles will know the importance of being named on a contract to be the contracting party.

[9 : 03] Yeah? Why? Because if you're a party to the contract, you can actually enforce your rights under that contract. So, for example, if you're still living at home with your parents, and the contents insurance policy is only between your parents and the insurance company, and if a thief broke in and stole your entire DVD collection, even though the collection belongs to you and the loss is covered under the policy, it's only your parents that can make the claim.

If you're called up and they'll ask you, if you're not on the policy, you can't make the claim. So, the same occurs here in a sort of analogous way.

By unilaterally extending the covenant, Abraham's children now have direct access, as it were, to the covenant. The blessings are still the same, but now God will be their God and they will relate to God on the same terms as Abraham does.

And what's more, God says it's going to be an everlasting covenant from generation to generation to generation. In return, Abraham is asked to keep the covenant, he and his descendants to come. And as a sign of that blessing, verse 10, every male among you shall be circumcised. And verse 11, it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. And so, this will not just include Abraham's household, but everyone else as well, those bought by money from foreigners as well.

[10 : 30] And if a boy is born into the household, then he will be done when he's eight days old. Otherwise, verse 14, the uncircumcised male will be cut off from his people, excluded from the community of blessing.

So, in a sense, it's either you cut off the foreskin so that you will be included in the covenant or you yourself will be cut off from the blessing. Now, here it's important to see the distinction that circumcision was the external sign showing that they were keeping the covenant.

But the keeping of the covenant actually required an internal reality. That is for them to walk faithfully before God. That's in verse 1. Without that, the external sign, the circumcision, the keeping of that bit of the covenant was useless.

So, it's just like my wedding ring. There's more to being faithful to my wife than just wearing this ring, right? But I put on the ring to show my commitment, to assure her of my wedding vows.

I wouldn't tell you that I actually lost my original wedding ring, but anyway, this is a replacement. But she knew I left her, right? Because it wasn't the ring.

[11 : 45] It was what I wanted to keep the vows. Anyway, that's what I tell her. So, circumcision is actually the same way as the ring. It's a physical reminder to Abraham of the fact that he was going to keep the covenant internally, walking by faith.

And for Abraham, it was also a painful and humbling one because to put it quickly, the cut was made very close to where it matters. Yeah? Since it was the very body part that was needed to produce the offspring.

But now let's turn to Sarah and Ishmael. Each is significant because each was a possible means for God to fulfill his covenant. But even though Ishmael was already there and so in one sense the easier option for God to use, God now reveals that he's chosen Sarai instead.

Sarai will bear a son or Sarah will bear a son, Isaac, with whom God will establish his covenant. Ishmael will still be blessed but the covenant will not be established with him.

So in verse 15, God said to Abraham, as for Sarah, your wife, her name will be Sarah which means princess. That is, she will be the mother of kings and nations. Yes, Sarah will be a mother.

[13 : 04] God, almighty El Shaddai, he will do it. Now in hearing this, verse 16, Abraham falls face down. I think that's an act of worship like it was in verse 3.

But he also laughs to himself saying, will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90? And then adds, if only Ishmael might live under your blessing. Now if you look into the next chapter, you'll know that Sarah laughs as well over the same promise. But whereas God rebukes Sarah in the next chapter, he doesn't seem to do it here with Abraham. Why this difference, we're not really told, perhaps in part because Sarah also lied about her laughing.

But when we read Romans 4, which was the reading, the second reading from last week, we have to conclude it wasn't due to Abraham's lack of faith. There Paul says that Abraham didn't weaken in his faith or waver in unbelief.

So if you're still wondering about Sandra's question from last week, I think this chapter 17 is the incident that Paul has in mind in Romans 4, not so much chapter 16. Because in Romans 4, if you go back there later, he specifically mentions that Abraham is about 100 years old.

[14:21] And the incident last week was when Abraham was about 86. So I do think that in last week's chapter, Abraham did lack faith in some way because he listened to Sarah, but not here.

So I wonder whether Abraham's laughter was due more to his surprise, that God would still persist with him. As if to say, God, are you sure you want to use a 100-year-old like me and a 90-year-old like Sarah?

I'm sure you can do it. But you know, I already have a son in Ishmael. Why don't you bless him instead? Much easier. But God's answer to Abraham is quite categoric.

Verse 19, Yes, yes, that is, I will bless Ishmael, but he'll not be the offspring promised under the covenant. Instead, your wife will bear you a son and you will call him Isaac.

I will give you Isaac because Ishmael was born in the ordinary way, but Isaac will be born as a result of a promise. And if you look at Galatians chapter 4 verse 22, that's what exactly Paul says.

[15:29] He says, For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, that is, in the ordinary way, but his son by the free woman was born as a result of a divine promise.

And so, sometimes we wonder why God makes us wait. Why didn't he act for Abraham until the very last minute? Why wait until all hope seems to be lost? What is he trying to prove with that? It was the same with Jesus, wasn't it? If you remember when Lazarus fell sick, his sisters Mary and Martha sent for Jesus, but Jesus waited another two days, I think it was, so that Lazarus died before he got there.

And remember what Jesus said to the disciples in John chapter 11 verse 14. He said, Lazarus is dead and for your sake, I am glad that I was not there. I did it on purpose, so that you may believe, believe that I'm able to raise him from the dead and believe it when I say I'm indeed the resurrection and the life.

So, I think it's the same here with Abraham. God waited so that Abraham could believe, so that he would realize that the covenant was all God's work, that only God could create life from death, from bodies as good as dead, both his and Sarah's.

[16:57] And again, if we go to Romans 14, that's what Paul says, without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

God waits so that it's clear that Isaac cannot be anything but from God, a gift, an act of grace on God's part. Whereas Ishmael was achieved by human effort, Isaac is going to be clearly the work of God.

And waiting allowed God to strengthen Abraham's faith. For Paul then says in Romans that because he did not waver in unbelief, God strengthened his faith and Abraham gave glory to God. You see the sequence of events? How God builds our faith so that we can give him glory? And that's the same with us. At the end of the day, we need to realize that our faith too is a gift from God.

That our salvation is a gift from God. And nothing we do will save us. Not our human effort, not our goodness, only in God through Christ Jesus.

[18:03] It has to be the work of God. So God didn't use Ishmael because he was the fruit of human achievement. Isaac, however, was God's achievement.

And that's the same with us. Now, none of this, of course, was Ishmael's fault. He didn't ask to be born like that, which is why God now promises to bless him also, especially as Abraham loved him. So the text says that God heard Abraham and in verse 20 he promises, as for Ishmael, I will surely bless Ishmael. I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of 12 rulers and I will make him into a great nation.

I want you to notice how similar the language actually is. Make him fruitful, greatly increase his numbers, father not of many nations but of 12 rulers, that's pretty good.

Make him into a great nation. These are the same promises to Abraham, same wording. It shows God's generosity to Ishmael, doesn't it?

[19:08] This is a true blessing for Ishmael. But nevertheless, in verse 21, God then adds, my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.

And there's a sort of certain finality about this because after God pronounces this, God goes up, he leaves, goes up from Abraham. And so, we are to conclude that while Ishmael is blessed, he'll not be the one to fulfill the covenant.

God will be the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and later of Jacob, but he will not be the God of Ishmael. It's through Isaac's offspring, and not Ishmael, that all the peoples of this world will be blessed.

But I want to notice, however, in the final verses that Abraham immediately circumcises everyone, but as he does that, so too is Ishmael circumcised. In other words, he's not cut off from Abraham's house, nor from God's blessing and covenant.

It's just that God will not use him to bring about those blessings. So the agent of God's blessing, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, must come from Isaac, but the recipients of God's blessings, well, they can come from any line.

[20 : 28] All they need to do is come under the covenant, just like Ishmael, walk before God, and confirm externally with the sign of circumcision. Which brings us to the last heading, as for us, now we're not mentioned in the text, I hope you picked that up.

So where do we stand? Well, unless you're Jewish by descent, I mean, you two are a bit like Ishmael, but just like Ishmael, we two don't need to be cut off from God's blessing.

How are we to be blessed? Do we need to be circumcised too? Well, the answer is found in Colossians 2, our second reading, the New Testament reading for tonight. For there it says in verse 11, and I put my literal translation on the screen, that in Christ we were also circumcised, with the circumcision done without hands, but by the removal of the body of flesh, that is, the circumcision of Christ.

That's the literal words in the Greek, circumcision of Christ. Paul's words are actually quite terse in Colossians, but he's saying that Christ circumcised us by his death.

He's the one that's cut off, circumcised as it were, from the land of the living. And when we trust in him, we appropriate the act of circumcision for ourselves.

[21 : 53] We too are buried with him, Paul says. And our circumcision is an external, thankfully, but internal by faith in Jesus, by the work of the Spirit.

Does that make sense? The cutting off is that of Christ into death, and we appropriate that circumcision, that death, by having faith in Jesus.

Now, just as an aside, some of you will probably be wondering, some Christians argue that baptism in the New Testament is the equivalent of circumcision in the Old. I'm not sure it's strictly analogous.

The baptism that Paul refers to in Colossians, I think it's primarily a spiritual one, identifying with Christ's death. And while water baptism is an external sign of an internal reality, and so it's good to be baptized as a Christian, I'm not sure that it's the same thing as circumcision.

So while it's good and everyone should do it, declare outwardly your faith in Jesus, I'm not sure that we need to then apply that back into Genesis. 17 by saying we need to be baptized for that reason.

[23 : 04] After all, if you think about it, coming to receive the Lord's Supper each month as we do, that's the same thing. We declare externally with a sign an internal reality, our faith in Jesus.

And we don't normally identify the Lord's Supper with circumcision. So at best, I think it's an indirect link, and the real link really is, as I've said before, the big circumcision by Christ, what He's done on the cross for us.

And if we think more about it, I think it makes perfect sense because it's only Jesus that kept the covenant perfectly. Abraham didn't. He didn't keep Genesis 17 perfectly, and neither do we.

But Jesus did. Jesus is the one that fulfills Genesis 17 fully and completely. for He was the only one that walked before God faithfully and without blame.

He's the offspring that God had in mind when He spoke of an everlasting covenant with Abraham's descendants, and He was the one that was physically cut off for all of us.

[24 : 10] What we ask to do is to be in Christ, as Colossians says, to put our faith in Him, not to waver in unbelief, even if things look as good as dead. Because the fact is, we were dead, Colossians 2 verse 13, we were uncircumcised in our flesh or sinful nature, but God made us alive with Christ, cancelling our debt, forgiving our sins.

So in one sense, we're like Abraham, we're as good as dead, and yet God gave us life through Christ. So let's do as God commands in Genesis 17.

