

## Genesis 17 – God Almighty and his covenant with Abraham

Perhaps this morning you are saying to yourself: I thought that we had already studied the chapter on God's covenant with Abram. And, yes, you are right. In chapter 15 we saw the covenant that God makes with Abram. We studied it a few weeks ago. And we saw that basically it was a covenant of grace. It was a promise from God to bless a man he had chosen to save. God entered into the Covenant. Abram, we read, believed in the Lord, who counted him as righteousness.

What we see in this chapter 17 is not a new covenant. It is the same covenant, still a covenant of grace, but in more detail and for the first time, a sign given by God to those who were part of the Covenant community. This chapter is a key chapter in our understanding of how God relates towards humanity. This chapter is to shape our understanding of God and our relationship with him.

### **The promises of the Covenant**

There are 3 fundamental promises in this covenant between God and Abram. These promises of blessing are both temporal and spiritual, earthly and heavenly, external and internal. This is the nature of the Covenant of God.

The promise of descendants (V 4-7 and 15-22).

God again addresses Abram's primary concern. He and Sarai have no children. God had already told Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and the dust, that his descendants would be "a great nation" (12.2). And in the Hebrew people, we see the fulfillment of this promise. And for the first time, God explains to Abraham that it will be Sarai, the mother of his covenant descendants. "I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations" (V16). For the first time, we will see the name of the child with whom God is going to establish his covenant: "You will call him Isaac. I will establish my alliance as a perpetual alliance with him and his descendants after him." Here is a temporal blessing. But in verses 4, 5, and 6 God says that a multitude of nations would come from Abram. "You will become the father of a multitude of Nations". This promise shows us that this covenant is not just an covenant for an ethnic people, the Jewish people. This promise is reflected in the new name that God gives to Abram. Abram meant "Exalted Father" but look at verse 5: "Your name will be Abraham, for I make you the father of many nations." A multitude of nations will come from him. And it is true that as the Father of Ishmael, Abraham would be the father of another great people, the Arab people. But we must also see here a promise of spiritual blessing. The apostle Paul helps us see this in Galatians 3:29: "And if you are Christ's, then you are the descendants of Abraham, heirs according to the promise." "If you are Christ's" By faith in Christ, the Christian is a descendant of Abraham. The Christian is heir to the promises of the Covenant. Christians of all nations can say, "I am the heir to the promises made in the Covenant with Abraham." We are included in it.

The promise of a relationship with God. (V7 & 8)

There are lots of important phrases in this chapter but perhaps the most important is in verse 7 and then again in verse 8: "I will be your God and of your descendants after you" In v8, speaking of the descendants of Abraham: "I will be their God". This is the announcement of a promise of a relationship with God, of reconciliation and close fellowship with God. It is the proclamation of the gospel, of salvation. By nature, in sin, Abram was far from God, an enemy of God. This is true of us too. But God invites sinners, people far from him, He invites them to draw near to Him, to enter into relationship with him. Abram deserves God's wrath against his sin. His descendants deserve the wrath of God. We deserve it. But the covenant gospel promise is this, "I will be your God. This is the heart of the Covenant of Grace. God will act to make it possible to enter into a relationship of love, grace and blessing with a people who deserve his anger and judgment. Here is the heart of the good news from the first book of the Bible to the last book. The promise made to Abraham, "I will be your God" is the same promise made to all of us. This is what God wants to tell you this morning: "It is possible for you to have me (God) as your God."

The promise of a country. (V8)

"I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession," And throughout the Old Testament we see the importance of a country for the people of God. But it would be a mistake to say that an earthly land for the people of God is the only thing promised here. Abraham understood an even larger and more glorious promise and reality. He understood that the ultimate accomplishment would be a heavenly land with God. The epistle to the Hebrews helps us understand that. We read in Hebrews 11:10 that Abraham: "awaited the city which has solid foundations, that of which God is the architect and the builder." V16: "they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

### **The sign of the Covenant**

Verses 10 to 14. The sign given by God as a sign of the Covenant was circumcision. God gives Abram a command to circumcise every male in his house. It gives an outward sign of inner realities, a corporal sign of spiritual realities.

Circumcision was not given just to identify an ethnic people because many other people at the time were already doing the same thing. You have to understand that it was a physical sign of spiritual realities. This is what the apostle Paul points out in Romans 4:11, the spiritual character of this sign. Speaking of Abraham and saying, "He received the sign of circumcision, as a seal of the righteousness which he had obtained by faith when he was uncircumcised."

But why circumcision? Why not pierce an ear? Why not wear a ring? Why this sign?

First, circumcision symbolized the need for purification. It was necessary to cut a part of the body which was considered impure, dirty. And that meant that in the relationship with God, there had to be a purification, that all that was impure was removed. It was necessary to remove sin. You had to be cleansed from sin. Circumcision symbolized this purification. Just as the foreskin is cut, so God had to cut the sin from the heart. This is why elsewhere in the Bible God tells his people that their hearts must be circumcised. Circumcision of the foreskin directed the people of God to the need for circumcision of the heart. An external, physical intervention symbolized a spiritual intervention in the human heart.

Then, since it is an intimate part of the body, a hidden part, it shows us that God's intervention to take away sin is not something superficial. It is a radical intervention, in the most intimate parts of the human being. No part is out of bounds when God begins to cut. Every part of the believer's life is affected by repentance, especially the parts that we hide from the sight of others.

And it also needed a sign with blood. The circumcision reminded the people that for the forgiveness of sin, to be able to return to communion with God, sin covered, a sacrifice of blood was necessary. For the forgiveness of sin, it required bloodshed. This bloody sign reminded of this need. And the fact that the sexual organ was marked with this sign, served as a permanent reminder that even children, the fruit of sexual union, they needed grace and forgiveness. They inherited the sinful nature of their parents. Circumcision left a permanent mark in the flesh of man to remind him of his need for the grace of God, the forgiveness of his sin. Circumcision was a reminder of the need for a savior, the need for a blood sacrifice to take away sin.

And God gives a very clear command to say to whom the sign was to be administered: Verses 10 to 14 and 24 to 27. It is a sign reserved for males, and it is a sign given for entire households, adults, children and babies. The sign is given to adults to show what God had already done in their hearts and to children, to babies to show what God had to do to bring children to salvation. To give this sign to the children was not to symbolize what had already taken place in their hearts. It was to show their need for grace, their need for repentance, their need for faith. It was to show them that the promises of the Covenant of God were for them too: "I will be their God" says God in verse 8.

But these days, God no longer asks us to circumcise neither adults nor infants. But he gave us a sign for those who are partakers in the Covenant of Grace and that sign is baptism. Like circumcision, it is a sign that signifies the need to be purified, to be washed, to have a renewed heart. It is a sign that speaks to us of the work of regeneration on the part of God in the human heart.

Baptism tells us about the work of God's grace for us in Jesus Christ. The parallels between the two signs are clear. Certainly there are differences. There is no more blood in the sign of the Covenant because the blood of Jesus Christ has been shed once and for all. And just as the Covenant of Grace is richer, wider, more complete, the sign also of this new Covenant is richer, wider and more complete. Perhaps the most important change is that it is no longer just for men and baby boys but it is for the whole community of the people of God. And if the first sign was for adults and children, we must also say that the new sign of the Covenant must always be given to both adults and children of believers. It hasn't changed. An adult who converts is baptized to show the work that God has done in his heart. An infant is baptized to show the need for a work of God's grace in his heart. An infant is baptized to show what God promises to do in the lives of those who come to Him in faith and repentance.

And we who have been baptized, whether as an adult or as a child, must often meditate on the meaning of our baptism, God's work to cleanse us, God's invitation to enjoy the many blessings of his Covenant. Baptism is not given to announce what we have done in coming to God. It is given to announce what God has done or will do for us, in us. The reformer Martin Luther is said to have displayed a plaque with the words: "Remember your baptism". It is said that he often repeated the words: "I am baptized, I am baptized"

### **The God of the Covenant**

The Covenant promises are glorious, are they not? Communion with God, numerous descendants, possession of a land. But these promises have no value in themselves. Anyone can promise anything, but the true value of a promise depends entirely on the one who gives it. I could promise you a life of good health, success in your career, wealth. These would be great promises. The problem is that I will be unable to fulfill my promises. And in this chapter, God gives extraordinary promises. A host of nations as descendants for an old couple without children? But is it just beautiful words or is God able to fulfill them? The opening words of the chapter highlight the human obstacles that need to be overcome. Look at verse 1: "When Abram was 99 years old,". He is an old man, considered too old to have children. He is married to a sterile woman. God promises them a multitude of nations as descendants. Will God be able to keep a promise? If he is not able, this chapter is meaningless. If he isn't able. Abram and Sarai will end their days without children, without a country, without

blessing, without hope. Everything promised in this chapter, for them, for us, depends on God's ability to fulfill His promises.

And this is why the chapter begins with the words of verse 1. What is the first thing that God said to Abram? "The Lord said to him, I am the God Almighty."

When God chooses to reveal Himself again to Abram, how does He choose to do so? "I am the God Almighty ". It's as if God said to Abram, "13 years ago Abram, you took Hagar as a surrogate mother, you lacked faith in my power, my ability to act. You didn't see me as God almighty. You saw me as the powerless God but it is you and Sarai who are powerless and I, all-powerful."

And that name of God in Hebrew is "EL Shaddai", it is found 48 times in the Old Testament and 31 of the 48 times it is in the book of Job. Job is a man whose faith has been shaken, a man whose faith has been tested by suffering. And the truth about God that Job needed most to hear was that God was all-powerful. God reveals himself as the Almighty to those who suffer, to those who have doubts, to those who are sinking into despair. Dear friends, has the reality of God Almighty taken hold of you? When you think of God, is it the God whose power has no limits? When you pray, do you pray to this God? I fear that our God is too small, a little God who is not very powerful. We limit his power. It's as if we don't dare to believe in an Almighty God. We have not grasped all the implications of his power. Is it because of this that our prayer life is so poor? We don't know our God. We doubt his ability to really save our family members, to save people in the neighborhood around the church, to give us victory over a sin. Yes, we ask him to do it. You have to ask him but often we doubt him. God comes in a situation of human helplessness and reveals Himself as Almighty God. How we need to be gripped by this reality.

And when God says he is the Almighty God, he is not promising that he will do whatever we want him to do. El Shaddai is not a large vending machine that distributes everything we ask of it. No. When he reveals himself as God Almighty, it is to tell us that he is capable of fulfilling all his promises. He is able to provide everything we need to glorify him. He is capable of doing for us what would be for our good and for his glory, according to his will and according to his kindness and grace.

To the person who worries about the future. God Almighty reassures you. God Almighty sees your need. God Almighty knows what you need. God Almighty is powerful to supply all your needs.

To the person who has struggled for years against temptation, against a particular sin, your God is God Almighty. He can deliver you. He can give you the grace you need.

To the person who has been praying for years for the conversion of loved ones, you pray because you believe in the God Almighty. He can save. He can save the person furthest from Him. God Almighty can change the most hardened heart. He is Almighty.

God does what is impossible for us. The fact that you are a Christian today is proof of that. God saved you when you were helpless. God circumcised your heart when you were helpless. God washed you when you were helpless, dead. He is the God Almighty.

The Promises of the Covenant, the Sign of the Covenant and the God of the Covenant. This is how God chooses to relate to his people.

### **The response to the Covenant.**

So far we have seen what God does, what God promises. What does he ask of Abraham? What does he ask of us? The first necessary element in our relationship with God is faith. We saw it in chapter 15: "Abram believed God" And even if faith is not mentioned in this chapter 17, it is clearly seen in Abraham's reaction. And many times in the New Testament we read: "Abraham believed God." Without a response of faith, there is no relationship, there is no country, no spiritual blessing. God gives his promises but we have to believe.

Circumcision counted for nothing without faith. Baptism does not save any child. Every baptized child must have faith. Parents' faith does not save any child. You, the children who listen to me, your parents' faith will not save you. Growing up in a Christian family will not save you. Your baptism will not save you. You must believe. You have to believe in the promises of God, the promises of salvation in Christ, forgiveness in Christ, eternal life in Christ. You must receive these promises by faith.

So the first response to the Covenant of God is faith. The second answer is found in verses 1, 3 and 23. It is a response of humility and obedience, of total consecration to God. What does God ask of Abram in verse 1?

"Walk before my face and be blameless." Walk in communion with me. Be upright in heart, beyond reproach.

May your life be a life of righteousness, a godly life, a life of obedience to the Word of God. And in verse 23, this is what we see. God gives command to Abraham to circumcise every male in his house. Not easy to do.

Painful. Abram, does he need a little time to think, to prepare, to decide if God was worthy of his trust? What do we read at the end of verse 23: "he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him" A response of faith, submission and obedience. This is what God asks of those whom He invites to enter into this relationship of the Covenant. It's what he requires of you.

In Acts 2, the apostle Peter preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. I end with the exhortation that we read at the end of his speech: "Repent, and let each of you see be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children and for all those who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself".