

Introduction

The first verse of our passage this morning states that Abram was 99 years old when God appeared to him again. This means that 13 years had passed since the events of Hagar and the birth of Ishmael in the last chapter. One of the reasons these time-markers are in place is so that we can better understand the contours of the story.

Time is a fascinating thing. Different times have different qualities. Boredom, anticipation, fear, high-stake situations all have a different quality of time. Sometimes time feels like it is flying by (like on summer vacation). Other times, time feels like it crawls along (like on the car drive home from summer vacation).

God has promised Abram the land and yet he lives as a sojourner. God has promised Abram offspring and yet his wife Sarai is barren. But it isn't as though Abram lives in these circumstances for just a few years. It has been many years since God has given Abram these promises and by this time Abram believes that God is going to fulfill His promises through Ishmael.

Abram had to deal with the times that God placed him in and so do we. But this account and others in the Bible remind us that God alone is the Lord of time, and he brings about His purposes in the earth in his perfect timing!

Our passage breaks into two parts:

1. In verses 1-8 we see God's plan for the nations
2. In verses 9-14 we see God's covenant of circumcision with Abraham.

God's Plan for the Nations (vv. 1-8)

I have mentioned before in this series on Abram's life that there is an interesting thing that takes place between [Genesis 11](#) and [Genesis 12](#). The first 11 chapters of Genesis regularly put the whole creation in view. But then, in chapter 12, things focus in on this one man, Abram, and his family.

Have things taken a step backwards? No, rather, what becomes apparent, is that God is going to accomplish his plan to bring salvation to the whole world *through* this one man, Abram.

In chapter 17 this fact comes into even sharper relief. God has the nations in view as he walks with Abram.

The first section begins with God appearing to Abram and telling him to “**walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.**”

This language harkens back to the figures of Enoch and Noah in the earlier parts of Genesis who were said to “walk with God.” I’ve mentioned before in a sermon last fall that the Bible teaches that we live out our lives *coram Deo*, that is “before the face of God.”

As God comes to Abram with great promises and moves toward Abram to initiate a covenant rite with him, Abram is reminded that he is to walk out his days before God. Walking before the face of God should have an impact of the kind of life you lead. Just as Abram was called to walk before God and be blameless, so too are you called to a similar pattern of life.

Do not hear this as some form of “works righteousness” or “legalism”. God is the one initiating this interaction with Abram and God is the one who initiates relationship with His people. But God always calls His people to walk before Him in righteousness. Jesus tells Disciples that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and that they must be perfect as their Father in heaven is perfect. This isn’t legalism, it is faith in God’s word.

In verse 3 Abram gives the proper response to God. He “**fell on his face**” in a posture confessing His own dependence upon God and submission to God. In verse 4 God confirms that His covenant is with Abram and then God tells Abram “**you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.**”

God is here confirming and expanding on His covenant promises to Abram. He has already promised to multiply Abram but here things are expanded. God has already told Abram that He would bless the nations through his offspring, but

now He is telling Abram that he will not just have many offspring, but that entire nations and kings shall come from him. The name Abram means “exalted father” or “father of many” and the name Abraham means “father of a multitude.”

In our culture, names serve as little more than a signifier. A name simply identifies a person. He’s John and she’s Jane. But in the Bible, names express a person’s character and destiny as their parents perceive it. God, like a father, comes to Abram here and names him. And in so doing, He is confirming upon Abraham a new character and destiny.

This is so important to understand because this relates to reality of your baptism. In [Matthew 28:18-19](#) Jesus tells His disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

You are baptized into the name of the triune God. At your baptism you are given a new character, a new name, a new family, and a new destiny. [Galatians 3:27](#) states, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

There is something ridiculous about the scenario in [Genesis 17](#). Abraham is 99 years old and he has one child who is 13 years old and God names him “Father of multitudes”. He already had to walk around for decades childless with the name “exalted father”. But as a man of faith, Abraham believes what God says about him more than he believes his own sight.

You must do the same thing. You must believe who you are more than your own eyes. You are God’s child. Jesus is your older brother, captain, king and friend. And by the Holy Spirit, you and all the saints of God are being purified as the bride of Christ. It may not look like it, but you must believe it. God is your father and you are God’s child. God loves you and has given you a new name.

This opening section closes with an eye to the next. Abraham will have many offspring and God assures him in verses 7-8 that God’s covenant promises will extend to them. They will receive the promises of Abraham because God’s covenant extends to them through Abraham. Moreover, Abraham will receive God’s promise through them because God will keep His promise by giving Abraham’s descendants, the fulfillment of these promises.

The Covenant of Circumcision (vv. 9-14)

In this second section Abraham is given the sign of the covenant from God. In verse 10 God tells Abraham, “**Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.**”

To understand what all is happening here with circumcision you must understand the world of biblical symbolism.

The problem is that we live in a culture that is largely illiterate when it comes to symbol and symbolism. Symbols are extremely powerful things and the fact that we are ignorant of them does not mean they lose their power. The opposite is actually true. In our ignorance, we are largely helpless to resist the powerful symbolism employed against us by marketers and politicians.

In the Bible, the human body and human relationships are symbolic. What this means is that they point beyond themselves to greater realities. Moreover, they participate in those greater realities that they point to.

An easy example is what the Bible says about marriage. In [Ephesians 5](#) Paul cites [Genesis 2](#) and states, ““Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

Marriage of a man and a woman is a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the church. There is a deeper symbolism to this when you read through the Song of Solomon and see that every aspect of the female anatomy is also symbolic along these same lines.

Going back to circumcision we should understand that the cutting off of the flesh in circumcision is a symbolic act that points to many things all at once.

First, circumcision renders the organ functional. Up to this point, Abraham has not been able to produce the heir that God has promised. But the circumcision of his male member will render it functional in this regard. But this is by no means the only example in the Bible. The Bible speaks of uncircumcised lips, ears, and hearts. These parts of the body aren't functional until they have been “circumcised”.

The symbolism of circumcision points to God overcoming the impotence of man. Unless God renders us functional by cutting off whatever is in the way, we have no hope.

When we understand this we can better understand what Paul is saying when he tells the Colossians, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” ([Col 2:11-12](#))

Apart from Jesus, humanity was impotent to inherit the promises of God. But Paul speaks of the “circumcision of Christ”. Jesus was cut off on the cross. He was able to be cutoff because he took on our fleshly nature in the Incarnation. And as a man, Jesus was able to take God’s judgement against the flesh.

This is another aspect of what circumcision symbolizes. It symbolizes God’s judgement. But it is a judgement in part, not in whole. One member is judged, so that the rest of the body can be passed over. And this makes sense of why circumcision is done on the 8th day. In the Bible the 8th day represents resurrection after death. It is the first day of a new week. It is the day of resurrection. The 8th day is Sunday. Circumcised on the 8th day means that there is a new creation on the other side of the old creation.

Jesus suffered the judgement of God in the flesh so that you could received a circumcision made without hands in your baptism where you were buried and raised with him by the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.

The Bible tells us that Abraham believed all of God’s promised to him and that he looked for a better and enduring city. Abraham believed that God would one day cut away all that stood in humanity’s way from inheriting the promise of God. God fulfilled the covenant of circumcision for us in Christ, when Christ was cutoff so that we might live.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.