

Grace Applied and Confirmed
Genesis 17

The Golden Gate Bridge, stretching over the San Francisco Bay, was constructed in the early 1930s. And at that time, it was expected that for every 1 million dollars spent on a major bridge construction, there would be one construction worker fatality.

The Golden Gate was a 35 million dollar project, and so worker safety was a great concern. However, thanks to an innovative safety net set up beneath the workers, 19 lives were saved when workers fell while laboring. And though it was expensive, historians note that the net *“gave workers the confidence to work more quickly.”*

Their minds were put at ease and their fears were calmed by the presence of the net. Even with high-speed winds swirling around and strong water currents beneath, they trusted the net and worked with effort and enthusiasm, uninhibited by the dread of death.

Of course, without the net, a worker who fell would have had no hope of survival.

The Scriptures describe the natural state of mankind in a somewhat similar manner. Sinners are separated from God, without hope in the world. In Romans 5, the apostle Paul recounts when Adam fell into sin in the beginning, writing, *“Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”*

Sin produced not only physical but also spiritual death and incurred God’s judgment. All of us fell into sin with them, and as sinners we justly deserve God’s wrath towards sin. We have earned His judgment toward our unrighteousness.

And yet prompted by His own mercy and love, God sent Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners, to absorb the wrath against in the place of His people. Rather than dealing to us the penalty we have merited or earned, God extends unmerited favor - He extends grace - toward His people. His grace is not the result of good works; this is why no one may boast. And this grace of God is persistent; it is continual.

In fact, later in Romans 5, Paul says that where sin increased, grace increased all the more. Those who know and trust in Christ should rest and rejoice in God’s continual grace. Though we have fallen into sin and continue to fall, God’s grace is the net that catches us.

And yet resting and rejoicing in His grace can be difficult for us. We are like a Golden Gate Bridge worker who fears that the net will not save us when we fall, or that perhaps the net will be removed before the project is complete. God’s grace can seem too good to be true.

But it is true, and God is intent on helping us rest and rejoice in it. So we should take advantage of what God does to help us rest and rejoice in His grace.

But what does He do? Genesis 17 teaches us something about this. You can find an outline on pages 6-7 in the WG. What does God do to help us rest and rejoice in His grace? God applies His grace by establishing a people set apart to know and live for Him by faith, and He confirms His grace by establishing a sign to strengthen the faith of those set apart to know and live for Him. Now let's look at this passage of Scripture together.

As we look closely at chapter 17, a pattern emerges. In verses 1-8, we learn what God will do. Then in 9-14, we learn what Abraham must do. Then in 15-21, again, we see what God will do. And again in 22-27, what Abraham must do. That's why I'll explain 1-8 and 15-21 together, and then 9-14 and 22-27. Dividing the passage this way, we see the divine sovereignty of God and human responsibility going hand in hand.

God has plans and performs deeds, but still what we do matters. Of course, God is directing. He is not simply reactive in history; He is proactive. He is fulfilling His good purposes, working out His plan of salvation.

We read in Genesis 16 last Sunday that Abram and Sarai acted foolishly, walking not by faith but by sight, attempting to bring about God's promise of a child by their own methods. The result was strife, division, a polygamous union, and a child born outside of their marriage.

And yet God is not done with this family. In Genesis 12 God expressed His covenant promises, in Genesis 15 He certified those promises, and here, God remains true to His Word and goes even further to strengthen their faith in His promises. It is, without a doubt, a covenant of grace that God has made with Abram. God remains faithful.

Now, when chapter 17 begins, 13 years have passed since the birth of Ishmael, Abram's child with their servant Hagar. It appears that everyone's assumption, or at least their hope, is that Ishmael is the promised child.

As you can imagine, the relationships were strained because of their sin, because of what they had done.

But here God appears once again to Abram. Notice verse 1, He *"said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, [2] that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.'*" God keeps propelling Abram to live Him by faith! And once again, Abram humbles himself.

Multiplication is the theme of verses 1-8 and 15-21. God says that He will multiply Abram, verse [4] *"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. [5] No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham."* "Abram" meant *"exalted father."* This likely referred to Abram's father. But "Abraham" means *"father of a multitude."*

Now, scan these next verses. You see the words fruitful, nations, kings, offspring, generations, offspring, offspring, and God assures Abraham that He will be “their God.”

Yahweh will establish the descendants of Abraham as a people set apart to know and live for Him by faith. This is the application or the administration of God’s grace.

Their establishment is the delivering or actual outworking and demonstration of God’s grace toward Abraham and His descendants. God would found this covenant community where the people would learn His ways and be blessed.

And they would be a blessing to the world because God would be there with them. Though the world seemed to be hopelessly fallen into sin, there the holy God would manifest Himself and make Himself unquestionably known.

Now skip ahead with me to the parallel section, 15-21. God assures the newly renamed Abraham that Sarai, his elderly and barren first wife, actually his only true wife, would be the mother of the covenant child. Her name is changed also, although not really a change in meaning. But this signifies that God’s plan involves Abraham and Sarah. God will give her a son, verse 16 says, “*she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.*” Again, God says He will multiply this couple.

Now I want to point out that verse [17] states that “*Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”*” Scholars interpret this laugh to be a demonstration of his mixed emotions. Joy, disbelief, and confusion all at the same time.

Notice his response to God in verse [18] “*Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”*” This seemed more certain. A bird in the hand, so to speak. Couldn’t God just make Ishmael the covenant child? But God says no, it must be Sarah’s child.

However, we do see the words offspring, fruitful, multiply here in reference to Ishmael. What does this mean? He is not the covenant child. What should we make of this?

Well, while the covenant promises would not be fulfilled to and through Ishmael’s line, he would still have many descendants. It seems that God tells Abraham about of Ishmael’s future prosperity and descendants specifically to emphasize that even though Ishmael would multiply, his descendants would not be the covenant people.

Look at verse 19. God gives Abraham the name of the covenant son, Isaac. From here on, Isaac and Ishmael will serve as emblems of faith vs. sight, God’s way vs. man’s way. The covenant community would be a community of faith. Abraham must understand that humans cannot generate such a place in our own power. Such a place can only be established by God’s grace.

What people naturally produce is something man-centered, something we can bring about by sight, by our own efforts, by our own methods and means. What we find as we follow the development of the people that God established is that in every age, the natural tendency is to gravitate from faith to sight, from relying on Him to relying on self, from following His ways to following man's ways, from living for Him to living for ourselves.

To know and follow God by faith, He must set us apart. And to set us apart, God must apply His grace.

You may notice when I preach that I normally follow a pattern. I explain verses, then I attempt to illustrate the point of those verses, and then I direct you toward applying the truth. I may ask questions to help you apply your new knowledge about God putting to work what God is teaching you.

The establishment of the church in the world is the result of God applying His grace. The God-centered community of believers is evidence of God's grace toward us, and it helps us rest and rejoice in His grace.

Now these other two sections of Genesis 17 deal with what Abraham must do. This is the introduction of circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Circumcision is the theme of verses 9-14 and 22-27. Verse 11 calls it the "sign." Abraham was to receive this sign upon his own body, as was every male in his household, his male children and servants, everyone treated as belonging to the house.

It's a somewhat curious sign. What did it mean? Why did God command Abraham to do this?

Well, clearly the promise was that God would multiply Abraham's household and descendants. This sign is obviously related to Abraham's mode of multiplication or reproduction. It was a reminder that God must supernaturally cause the multiplication.

Notice verse 10, God says, *"This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."* The sign of the covenant and the covenant itself are so closely related that to administer the sign was to keep the covenant, and verse 14 makes it clear that to not administer the sign was to not keep the covenant.

To not administer the sign was to not recognize what God had promised to do and what only God could do.

And in verses 22-27, Abraham obeys God, notice verse [24] *"Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. [25] And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. [26] That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. [27] And all the men of his house, those born in the house*

and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him." Adults and children received the sign. Isaac would receive it shortly after his birth.

What is the value of the sign? It was a visible representation of an invisible reality. Always with signs of God's covenant, they are connected to some truth of God. God's Word and His sign are connected. The sign is related to some promise of God.

Like the New Covenant sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, circumcision was an Old Covenant sacrament. We later learn in the OT that the sign also represented a circumcision of the heart that God must do, cutting away sin in order to receive sinners to Himself, a salvation which we can only receive by grace through faith. This becomes more and more apparent as redemptive history unfolds.

God understood that Abraham and the others needed something to strengthen their faith as they waited on God. They had His Word, but the sign was God's gracious confirmation of His Word. You see, to believe the Word was to administer the sign. They were so closely associated.

John Calvin makes a good point about the relationship between Word and sign. He writes, *"Although we must maintain the distinction between the word and the sign; yet let us know, that as soon as the sign itself meets our eyes, the word ought to sound in our ears."*

This was the purpose of the covenant sign, to remember that God must work supernaturally to bring a son, a family, a nations, and many nations from this elderly man and woman who were thought to be long past able to reproduce. By God's grace, they would do so. The sign was proof that God is able to do the impossible.

The sign was to be administered in perpetuity, forever, until the Lord Jesus Christ changed the sign to baptism. I've said before, the New Covenant is the Old Covenant in a new form. God continues to apply His grace by establishing a people set apart to know and live for Him by faith, and He continues to confirm His grace with a sign to strengthen the faith of those set apart to know and live for Him.

Like circumcision, we apply baptism to all who join what Galatians calls *"the household of faith"* and Ephesians calls *"the household of God."* The church is the ultimate fulfillment of God's "people" promise to Abraham. In Galatians 3, Paul writes, *"if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."*

At the start of the sermon I referenced the building of the Golden Gate Bridge, and I told you that 19 workers survived a fall to their death because of the safety net. These workers were actually given a nickname on the jobsite. They were called "the Halfway to Hell Club."

The net was expensive to produce and install, roughly 130,000 dollars, and I'm sure those in charge of the project could outline the value of the net in terms of dollars. But to the members of the Halfway to Hell Club, what was the value of that net?

It was their lives. For them, no net would've meant no hope, no future.

As we go to the Lord's table this morning, we see a sign confirming that God has spread wide the net to save His people from sin and death. We were halfway to hell, until the Lord saved us, through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you have the salvation that is found only in Jesus?

Have you admitted your sinfulness to God and placed faith in Christ to save you?

Not in Christ plus your good works - but in the works of Jesus alone? All covenant signs tell us the same things - that "salvation is of the Lord."

Let's pray together.