

# Cut Off

Grace Fellowship | Corey Hughes | Genesis 17:9-14

If you have your Bibles, you can turn to Genesis 17. Genesis 17. Last week, Carlton covered the first eight verses of this chapter. And this week, we're going to cover verses 9 through 14. But Carlton's message was entitled "Expanding Promises," and in that message, He helped us to understand and see how God's covenant with Abram has expanded from chapter 12 when He first called Him out, into chapter 15 when He cuts the covenant, and now where we're at in 17 where He tells Abraham, "You're going to not just be the father of a nation, but a multitude of nations." And "I'm going to give you a name that reflects that expanding promise: Abraham, not just Abram".

And now as today's—we're going to see in our verses—is that God gives Abraham a sign of this covenant that He is making with him. An analogy has really helped me to understand this covenant, with this Abrahamic covenant as it goes 12, 15, and 17, so I'm going to give it to you—maybe this will help you—'cause there is a lot of time lapsed between 12 and 17, like 24 years. But this is all one covenant here. So here's the analogy:

When a guy asks a girl to be his girlfriend—maybe some of you would know this as "going steady," if you do, you've shown your age—he's the initiator. Then after they spend a bunch of money at restaurants and movies and talk about the future, this man goes and makes a very big investment. And he gets down on one knee and he places before her this first investment of many, amen? And he says, "Will you marry me? I want to be your husband. I want to take care of you forever".

And then sometime later, they stand at an altar kind of like this—Carlton would be really—really like if it was always this—but they stand at an altar and they make vows to one another. Now check out the parallel: In chapter 12, when God calls Abram out, He is the initiator of this relationship. In chapter 15, when God commits Himself to Abram, He split animals, makes unilateral promises to Abram. And now in 17, God is delivering to Abraham the vows that they will make with one another. God says, "I will do this, Abraham, you will do this." And the vows that God is calling Abraham to is precisely what we're going to be looking at today in our passage. So read it with me, Genesis 17:9-14:

And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: 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. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised. So shall My covenant be in your flesh

an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant".

Father, this is Your word, not ours. Help us to understand it and show us the way forward to be faithful as Your people. In Jesus' Name we pray, amen.

I've entitled this message this morning, "Cut Off". Cut Off. And before you go thinking, "Oh, Corey, you're so clever," it was actually Carlton's genius, not mine. But the reason I like the title "Cut Off" is because it gets at the—the double-sided, double way that this Abrahamic covenant is supposed to be understood.

First, the phrase "cut off" gets at the sign of the covenant that God gives Abraham. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word that is translated "circumcision" is "to cut off". This is why verse 11 sounds a bit redundant when it says, at least to us, when it says, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins". That's literally "to cut off the flesh".

At the same time, "cut off" speaks to what we read in verse 14. Look at that: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people. He has broken My covenant". So if you don't cut off the flesh, then you will be cut off from God's people. In this way, circumcision marked covenant members and depicted what happens to covenant breakers. Now if you don't remember anything else about this sermon but you remember that, you understand—you have a good grasp on this text. So thank you, Carlton, genius understanding of the text in a title, "Cut Off".

But let's return back to our first point: covenant relationship. Verse 9, God says to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep My covenant". So we just talked about how this relationship has kind of taken place over the course of several chapters, but now in verse 9, God says, "Abraham, in this relationship you have some requirements". This is the first time Abraham has been told that he must keep the covenant. The idea here is that Abraham has an ongoing responsibility. This is why the rest of the verse says, "you and your offspring after you throughout their generations".

Now when we read that Abraham is to keep God's covenant, only part of the idea comes through for us in the English. For us, the word "keep" simply means "to obey, abide by, don't break the covenant, right? Do as you're commanded". But the Hebrew word *shamar* here carries another idea that we would miss in the English translation. This word doesn't just mean "to keep" or "obey," but it also means "to guard". Guard. God is telling Abraham, "It is your responsibility to keep and to guard My covenant that I make with you".

So this defines our covenant relationship, begins to define it: we're to keep and guard what God has said to us. Do you know what this sounds reminiscent of? Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:14. In this verse, Paul writes to his disciple Timothy and he tells him, "Son, guard the good deposit that has been entrusted to you". And what is that good deposit? The

Gospel. Timothy knew he was to keep the Gospel, obey the Gospel, but now Paul is saying, "Guard the Gospel".

I was once conversing with someone and they said to me, "Well, the Gospel is very important to me, but I don't have to go around protecting it as if it's up to me to preserve it". Did you know that's not true? God calls us not just to keep His word, but to guard His word, church. That's not just me, or Aaron, or Carlton, that's all the members of His church.

Think back to Genesis 3 when the serpent speaks to Eve. What's his tactic? He wants to confuse her about God's word. "Did God *really* say? Did He really say"? Church, this is why we celebrate the Reformation every year, because of bold men and women who were willing to lose their lives in order to recover the truth of God's word, the Gospel. They gave their lives for this.

But here's what I believe: if some of them were here today, I'm afraid in our current climate of Christianity, they would have a strong rebuke for Christians who do not take the particulars of our faith seriously. They gave their lives to recover this, because not guarding the particulars is how it gets lost.

So if you're here today and you have a willful resistance against learning theology—or maybe you're just uninterested in theology because you don't think it's important—can I encourage you that Christ doesn't just call you to keep His covenant, but He calls you to guard His covenant. And you can't guard something you don't know. "As for you, you shall keep My covenant." Guard this covenant, protect this covenant, Abraham. Teach this covenant to your offspring, for this is what it means to be in a covenantal relationship with God.

Point number two: covenant sign. So after God makes it clear to Abraham what it means to be in a covenant relationship, He then gives him the sign of this covenant relationship. Look at verse 10: "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised".

Now I want you to keep staring at verse 10, because if you read that, you might think, "Well, hold on, it seems like God is saying that the covenant *is* circumcision". Look at the wording. The beginning phrase says, "This is My covenant," and then it explains what circumcision is, but then the ending says, "Every male among you shall be circumcised". "This is My covenant: circumcision".

Well, I thought circumcision was the sign of the covenant, not the substance of the covenant. What's happening here? Well, the sign of the covenant and the substance of this covenant are so closely related that they're often talked about in the scriptures as if they're the same thing. It's like shorthand. In the New Testament, in Acts 7, Stephen, right before he becomes the first Christian martyr, gives this message, and do you know what he calls this? He says, "the covenant of circumcision". That's what he calls it.

We also see a parallel in the New Covenant where Peter says in 1 Peter 3:21, "This baptism now saves you". What's going on? Why is Peter saying that? Because the substance and the sign are so closely related and never meant to be detached. Peter's words here are used by some traditions who believe that the sign of the New Covenant is actually the covenant. Meaning, they believe to be baptized is to be saved.

But scripture makes clear that our justification is by grace through faith, and our commanded identification of that justification is through baptism. The miracle of faith is followed by the obedience of the sign, and the two should never be separated. You with me? So in Genesis 17, if you are not circumcised, meaning you do not take the sign of the covenant, then you cannot walk blameless before the Lord. This is because you are disobeying the very thing that God commanded you to do. But on the flip side, to not walk blameless before the Lord yet take confidence in your circumcision is complete folly. It doesn't make any sense. You must have the sign and the substance. Sign and the substance. We need both.

But again, I want us to dig even deeper. We must ask: why are the two so closely related? Why? Well, this is because God is giving Abraham a sign that will always remind him and his offspring of the precious promises that He has given him. They're always to remind him of those promises. So check this: if you take away or distort the sign, then the precious promises become vulnerable to being lost or even confused. So in essence, the sign is a means of protecting these promises, the message of the covenant. If you keep the sign clear, the message of the covenant is preserved. Lose or distort the sign and you make the covenant vulnerable. You with me?

Okay, I know we're in deep waters here. So verse 11, God says, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant with you and Me". This leads to our third point: covenant faithfulness.

So if you've never understood the covenants, I know you may feel like you're drowning right now. All right? But try to stick with us—we're going to surface soon. Here's what we know so far, summary: understanding the covenant relationship would mean our vow, "I solemnly swear to keep—*shamar*—to keep and to guard this covenant between us, right?" We also understand that to keep and guard the covenant means to keep and guard the covenant *what?* Sign. They're both treated with the utmost of importance: the covenant and the sign.

So now in verses 12 and 13, we get some specific details about the covenant sign. If you're going to uphold the sign, you need to know details about the sign, right? Details are important, yes? Okay.

When I was a kid, my dad would often tell me to do things—I hope dads you're still telling your kids to do things. But he would tell me to take out the trash, or he'd tell me to go clean my room, or he would, you know, whatever it might be. And usually—usually—I would tell

my dad, "Okay, will do"—I was a very agreeable child. But here's my agreeableness: what I meant was, "Okay, will do whenever I'm ready," right? And my dad, if I didn't hear this phrase one time, I heard it a thousand times: "Delayed obedience is what? It's—" You—your parents said it too: "Delayed obedience is disobedience".

Look at the beginning of verse 12: "He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised". All right, now let's just imagine that Abraham has a great-grandson like me—we'll call him Corey—it's a very Jewish name. After having a child of his own, his wife reminds him, "Hey, we need to get our baby boy circumcised. It's on the eighth day. You got it on the calendar, right?" And I'm like, "Yeah, okay, will do". But then two weeks later, he still hasn't gotten around to it. Is that a big deal? It's a big deal. Delayed obedience is what? Disobedience.

But there's even more. In the delay, not doing it on the eighth day, is a loss of the very meaning of the sign. Why did God say to have male circumcised on the eighth day? Lean in. Because God created the earth in seven days, but when sin entered the world, it ruined God's good creation. Now with the Abrahamic covenant, God is in the process of redemption and bringing forth a new creation. Therefore, circumcision will be done on what day? Not 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, but the eighth day, to signify God is saying loud and clear, "This is a new work. This is a new creation people that I am forming for Myself". That's why this specific detail matters. When you don't get the timing of the sign right, you begin to lose the very meaning of the covenant. You see the importance here?

But look at the other detail we're given in verse 12. It says that, "Every male throughout your generations shall be circumcised." Every male throughout your generations. Throughout your generations. The sign of circumcision had a generational principle. A generational principle. What it is—is that means entry into the Abrahamic covenant was through physical birth or becoming adopted in as part of Abraham's household. You with me? Middle of verse 12, look at it: "Every male, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall be—what? Circumcised".

Anyone in your household is to take this sign of the covenant. This specific detail is important because this covenant is going to set up future covenants that God is going to make with His people. In the Old Testament, God covenants with Abraham's physical lineage who would become known as the nation who? Israel. This is because God is forming a nation—a physical nation—that will foreshadow or anticipate and be a type of the new creation people of the future. Do you know who those new creation people of the future are? It's us. We're those people. We're the nations that Abraham was promised. That's us.

But how do we come about? How did we get here? Who grafted us into God's people? Look at this: we are grafted in through Abraham's promised Son who goes by the Name of Jesus. All the promises of God made to Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus, Abraham's descendant.

And Jesus is a blessing not just to physical national Israel, but He is a blessing to the nations, just like we sang about. All peoples, whether you're circumcised or you're uncircumcised, you are blessed in Christ if you come to Him. Isn't this good?

Where the covenant with Abraham had a generational principle in order to bring forth a physical Son named Jesus, the covenant that Jesus then cuts in His blood has a spiritual principle in order that Jesus might be the firstborn among many brothers. That's Paul's words in Romans 8:29, and they make sense of the end of verse 13. Look at verse 13, the end of it: "So shall My covenant be in your flesh an—what? An everlasting covenant." It never ends because it finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

All who are a part of this covenant community know the Lord. All who are a part of this covenant community have their iniquity and their sin forgiven, wiped clean. If there's not anything else to get excited about today, it's about that. You are part of a community who, even though you might have sinned before you got here and you might have sinned while you've been here, Jesus washes you white as snow because you've been entered into this covenant community. Therefore the sign that Jesus gives for the New Covenant, which is baptism, is only given to those who are His disciples. Only those who are His disciples. To those who know Him, to those who He has forgiven their sin. And the reason we need to see this—the reason that this is so important, church—is so that we can keep and guard this New Covenant, this precious covenant that Jesus has given us rightly. This is why we fence the table every week with baptism language, because without the covenant sign, you are not to participate in the covenant meal.

And this leads to our final point: covenant breaking. Look at verse 14 with me. I said I was going to try not get real animated—that's a real struggle for me, I hope you know. Get very excited about things. Verse 14: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant".

Now I want to be clear about all that God is saying here. It's obvious that He's stating that not receiving circumcision means you're cut off from the people of God. But here's the thing: I've had two boys and upon their arrival into this earth, neither one of them asked me for circumcision on the eighth day. Neither one of them asked me for that—now I'm being silly—but here's what I'm getting at: to circumcise them or not to circumcise them was whose decision? Mine, right?

Thus, in Abraham's context, being faithful to this covenant meant for fathers to take their sons on the eighth day and circumcise them. Not doing so as a father would be breaking this covenant, you with me? We get this picture in Exodus 4. You may not know this story, but in Exodus 4, Moses is heading into Egypt to take on Pharaoh: "Pharaoh, Pharaoh, let God's people go". And in Exodus 4, as he's on his way in, verse 24 says, "The Lord met him and sought to put him to death".

What did he do? I'm interested. Like why in the world would God keep Moses alive when Pharaoh is killing all the baby boys who are Israelites, and yet God preserves him in a basket floating down the Nile, raises him in Pharaoh's house? He appears to him in a burning bush, and now He's commissioned him to set free God's people, and all of a sudden as Moses is going in, God is about to put him to death. Why? Answer: because Moses had not circumcised his son. Moses was a covenant breaker. And God made clear to Moses that he was not going to live another day if he didn't walk blameless before Him. This meant that his household must be marked with the sign of the covenant. Do it now.

So get this: God is telling Abraham right here in verse 14 that the covenant sign is so important that if you don't give it or you don't get it, you place yourself under—squarely under the judgment of God. Wow.

Now if you remember back to Genesis 15:6, in Genesis 15:6, God counted Abraham righteous. Why? 'Cause he had circumcision? No. Because he believed the Lord. And his believing the Lord, he was counted righteous. And don't forget, like that passage is where Paul roots our New Covenant understanding of justification by faith alone; he roots it there. This is what God did with Abraham. But now we're here in chapter 17, verse 14, standing at the aisle with God, and God is warning Abraham that not taking the covenant sign will result in being cut off. Did something change? Is justification not by faith alone?

Church, we must be careful that we do not reduce the whole of Christianity down to a slogan of "believe and you'll be saved". We must be cautious not to do that. Ignoring all of the very specific ways that believing in God will shape one's life. We can't ignore those things. So if you're struggling here with me saying that, then go read James today. The book of James in the Bible. Go home, sit down, read that book. James isn't saying anything different from Paul; he's just saying all the things.

Now let me be clear so you don't get confused: anyone who repents of sin in their heart and believes in their heart that Jesus is Lord will be saved. Amen? Like we better sing that from the rooftops. And while this is primary, it is not all the scriptures give us. All scripture is important and should be cherished. But Jesus says in Matthew 23 that not all scripture weighs the same. Did you know that? Not all scripture weighs the same. His claim is that some matters of God's word are more important and primary than others. Therefore, what must we do? We must do a good job of weighing His word. And how do we weigh His word? With His word.

So here's what I'm getting at: if your scale of importance in the scriptures has just two weights, and that's "salvific importance" and "unimportant," then I think scripture would say you need a new scale. That can't be, because of verse 14: "Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be—what? Cut off from his people". "But justification by faith!" Listen to God's word. Don't overlook God's word with your systematic theology. This is an extremely serious and weighty warning that to reject God's covenant sign is to break His covenant. Wow.

Did you know that Jesus was circumcised? What a transition, right? How you going to get to Jesus? Just talk about His circumcision. No, seriously, if you're like me, I've never thought about Jesus' circumcision very much until this week. I—mean He's a Jew so I could have put two and two together that He was circumcised. But as I was studying this, this week, I was struck with the significance of Jesus' circumcision.

Listen to this: in Luke 2:21, Jesus' circumcision is not a minor event. It marks the fulfillment of circumcision in its purpose of preserving a line of descent from Abraham to Christ and marking out the One whom all the promises reach their fulfillment. In Christ, Abraham's true seed is now here. And as such, circumcision is no longer necessary, and it will soon be abrogated. In this sense, Jesus' circumcision is the last significant covenantal circumcision recorded in the scripture. Jesus put an end to circumcision because He fulfills the covenant requirements that God made with Abraham. And now as the One, as this dot who fulfilled those requirements, He makes a New Covenant. Once again in blood, but this time, it's not your blood. It's not your blood. It's not your blood. It's Jesus' blood alone, shed on the cross for all those who would come to Him and find forgiveness. Jesus' death on the cross was true circumcision, the circumcision that the physical circumcision pointed to.

Remember the—the curse aspect? Yeah. Jesus took that. He was cut off by the Father's wrath. The covenant—the covenant curse fell on Him so the covenant blessing can fall on who? Us. In preparation for this great event where Jesus would shed His blood on the cross, a once-for-all sacrifice to be made for sinners, John the Baptist, Elijah, came preparing the way saying, "Make the way straight for the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". And when John saw Him as he's ushering in His coming with the new sign of the covenant, John sees Him and beholds Him. And what does Jesus do? He says, "Baptize Me, John, as this is fulfilling all righteousness". He takes the very sign of this New Covenant Himself, and then He calls His followers to do the same.

After Jesus' burial and resurrection, baptism makes so much sense as it precisely gives us the understanding of what the New Covenant points to. Listen to Paul in Romans 6: "Do you not know that all of us have been baptized into Christ Jesus? All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His—what? His death. We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life". Again, right there, sign and substance almost looking indistinguishable because the sign is meant to explain the—what? The substance. That's how it protects it.

Grace Fellowship, Genesis 17:9-14 has shown us how God entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham, which means Abraham has a commitment to *shamar*—keep and guard. He gives him a covenant sign and calls him to covenant faithfulness. And while Abraham and his offspring will break God's covenant, Jesus will not only keep the covenant, what—but He will be the fulfillment of all God's promises to Abraham for us. But now Jesus has made a New Covenant, church. And as His church, the ones who have

stood right here with Jesus and who will stand today, we covenant with Him to *shamar*, to guard and to keep His covenant. Amen? This is what God's called us to. Let us guard and keep, let us be faithful to this covenant, let us not break His covenant.

If you're a believer here today and you've never been baptized, you've never taken this sign of the New Covenant, then my plea to you is: don't wait a moment longer. Don't wait. Come and find me or one of the pastors after service. And if you're not a believer here today and through this word—through God's word—He's calling you to repent and believe and be baptized, then don't wait. God says today is the day of salvation. We're happy to talk to you afterwards.

Let's pray. Father, we thank You for Your kindness and Your goodness. Father, thank You for Your word that helps us understand Your unfathomable wisdom. God, Your wisdom is so great and high, it is wild that we would even try to comprehend it. But this is why You have made Yourself one with us, God. Why You have given us Your Holy Spirit in order that we might know You by knowing Your word, the Logos, the Son. And through knowledge, through believing, we might live out our destiny right here and right now of holy sons and daughters of the High King. Righteous.

So help us to do that in Jesus' Name we pray, amen. We now get to take the covenant meal, and I'm excited about taking this meal. If you've never been baptized, then we would tell you to wait. Take the covenant sign before you come and take the covenant meal. But if you're here today and you've been baptized, then come and rejoice that your sins are no more. Come and rejoice that you have a Savior who no matter what roads you go down and you've been down, He will not deny you. You might deny Him like Peter did, but He will never deny you because He cannot deny Himself. He is faithful. So we're going to come now, I'm going to open the table and I would invite you to come.