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Sermon Notes

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The Covenant Sign: Circumcision

Genesis 17:1-27

I. The Covenant-Making God Calls for Holiness (vs. 1)

vs. 1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.

A. Thirteen Years of Silence

A.W. Pink: God says nothing

B. Context: The Limitations of Human Flesh Exposed

1. The Attempt with Hagar: Fleshly Efforts to Fulfill God's Plan

2. God Waits

a. to chastise

b. to train

c. to make one thing perfectly clear:

Zechariah 4:6 "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."

i) human flesh has its own ways

ii) human pride wants the glory and credit

iii) God waits to put human strength and schemes at an end

Romans 4:19 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.

Hebrews 11:12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Example: Psalm 107

Vs. 10-12 Men sitting in prison, in chains and doing hard labor...AT THE END OF THEIR ROPE

Psalm 107:13-16 THEN they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. 14 He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains. 15 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, 16 for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.

Vs. 17-18 Sinners sick through their rebellion, drew near the gates of death...AT THE END OF THEIR ROPE

Psalm 107:19-21 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. 20 He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave. 21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.

Vs. 23-27 Sailors on the open sea, in a devastating tempest...AT THE END OF THEIR ROPE

vs. 26-27 in their peril their courage melted away. 27 They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end.

Psalm 107:28-32 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. 29 He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. 30 They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. 31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. 32 Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.

Lesson: To exalt His own miracle-working power and His great love and compassion, God waits until all fleshly resources have been exhausted, and there is no other hope of salvation... then faith cries out to God, to God Almighty, to the only God who can answer and do great things

To God alone faith cries, when the arm of human strength is paralyzed... when the clever thoughts of human ingenuity and creativity are completely silenced, and no other recourse can be found

Then God can move out, and display His power

God waited until Abram was one hundred years old, and Sarah was ninety... then He moves out and does what only He can do!!!

C. God Appears to Abram

1. God's Grace

- a. God is glorified by using sinners to advance His eternal plans
- b. God doesn't cast Abram off despite his sin

c. God waits... but then appears to Abram with even more showers of blessings

2. God's Appearance

a. some kind of manifestation of God's personal glory

b. visual, hence called "appeared"

c. BUT incomplete

NASB Exodus 33:20 But He said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"

John 1:18 No one has ever seen God

d. perfect vision of God awaits the time when God will reveal Himself to His church in eternity

ESV 1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Revelation 22:4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

3. God's Name: "El Shaddai"

"I am God Almighty

a. God uses His name to remind Abram of His great power

b. only by God's power will things promised to Abram ever come about

4. Abram's reaction: total submission, awe, fear, worship

vs. 3 Abram fell facedown

The more holy the men were, the more they feared God

BUT God has ways of making all human beings fear!!!

D. God's Call: Personal Daily Holiness

walk before me and be blameless.

1. "Walk before me" = live your daily life constantly by faith, understanding I see you at every moment

2. "Be blameless" = "Be holy as I am holy"... be entirely mine, live only for me, live as my possession and I will be your possession as well

3. Subtle rebuke for his sinful digression in taking Hagar as a rival wife and trying to fulfill God's promise that way
4. God is gracious, but God's covenants are always fulfilled by holy means

Romans 5:21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

A.W. Pink on "Walking before, behind, next to and in God"

II. The Covenant Repeated, With New Tokens (vs. 2-8)

vs. 2-8 I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." 3 Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. 8 The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

A. Why God Repeated the Covenant

vs. 2 I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

1. People are forgetful
2. Faith is a living thing, and like all living things, it needs food
3. The food of faith is the Word of God... regular diet keeps faith strong

Note: translation MAY run this way: "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless SO THAT I may confirm my covenant..."

In other words, Abraham's continued faith and obedience are essential to the fulfillment of the Promise

If Abraham became faithless, or if he refused to believe the promise, he would stop obeying... he wouldn't, for example, have marital relations with his wife and the promise could never be fulfilled

Genesis 18:18-19 Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. 19 For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

B. Abraham's Name-Change

1. Names significant in the Old Covenant
 - a. signifying character
 - b. perhaps also a prophecy
2. Naming significant as well: a sign of authority and prophetic insight
3. Many times in Scripture

Isaiah 62:2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

Revelation 2:17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

4. What was the change?
 - a. Abram = exalted father
 - b. Abraham = father of many nations

C. Past Tense: God Calls Things That Are Not as Though They Were

vs. 5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.

1. Notice that God uses past tense here
2. God speaks, THEN it is

Genesis 1:3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

3. So God is able to call things that are not as though they were

Romans 4:17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

Though Abram was at that moment only the father of one thirteen-year-old boy, and though Sarah's womb was still barren, and though Abraham's body was as good as dead, God called him "The Father of Many Nations"

So also God calls people believers when as yet they are spiritually dead and have no faith at all, and lo and behold they are ALIVE

So also God will call your body from the grave on Resurrection Day... He gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were

He calls nations up out of the dust, and then calls them to conquer the earth

God speaks again and those same empires weaken and return to the dust from which they came

God does ALL these things!!!

III. The Covenant Sign Given: Circumcision (vs. 9-14)

A. First Covenant Requirement: Circumcision

vs. 10-11 Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. 10 This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

1. Up to this point, the covenant has been one-way: "I will do this for you..."
2. Now God makes a covenant requirement of Abraham: circumcision

B. The Sign of the Covenant

vs. 11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

1. vs. 11: Circumcision merely called a "sign" of the covenant which already exists
 - a. covenant was established before the sign was given
 - b. "sign" means outward, visible symbol of invisible reality

Used of the Rainbow

Genesis 9:12-15 And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant

Used also of the miracles Moses performed before the Israelites and before Pharaoh

Used especially of the blood of the Passover Lamb

Exodus 12:13 The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

So, circumcision was merely an outward sign of the spiritual covenant God already made by faith with Abraham

2. YET vs. 13: it is called a covenant unto itself

vs. 13 *Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.*

3. Paul makes it clear... the true covenant was the covenant of righteousness by faith

Romans 4:9-12 Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. 10 Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 12 And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

C. The Extent of the Covenant Sign

vs. 12-13 *For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner-- those who are not your offspring. 13 Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.*

1. Every male among you

2. Eight days old

3. For generations to come

D. The Penalty for Disobedience

vs. 14 *Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."*

1. Obedience to the covenant of circumcision was the OUTWARD MARK of being a Jew

2. To refuse meant one was cut off from his people... no longer a descendant of Abraham; no longer a Jew

E. Was Circumcision an "Everlasting Covenant"?

1. Word used of God Himself and His Word

Psalm 29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.

Isaiah 40:8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

2. BUT word also used of temporary aspects of the Old Covenant

a. becoming a permanent servant of a family

Deuteronomy 15:17 then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever.

b. Aaronic priesthood

Exodus 29:9 and you shall gird Aaron and his sons with sashes and bind caps on them. And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute forever. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.

c. dietary rules

Leviticus 3:17 It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, in all your dwelling places, that you eat neither fat nor blood." ESV

d. atonement sacrifices

Leviticus 16:34 And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins." And Moses did as the LORD commanded him. ESV

These Old Covenant regulations were all called "eternal" or "everlasting", but were superceded by the New Covenant

3. Word also used of past times... "times of antiquity", "times of old"

Isaiah 46:9 Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.

Isaiah 42:14 "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.

4. Basic meaning is a long duration of time, sometimes "eternity" but sometimes not

5. This covenant was NOT meant to be eternal, everlasting, for God revoked it in the New Covenant

IV. The Covenant Child Designated: Sarah's Son Isaac (vs. 15-22)

God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah.

16 I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

18 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

19 Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.

21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."

22 When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him.

A. God Exalts Marriage: It is Through Sarah The Seed Will Come

B. Sarai's Name Change: Meaning = Princess

Fitting for a mother of Kings

Previous name meaning unclear

In effect, a new start, a reason for hope and faith

C. Promise: God's Blessing for Fruitfulness

vs. 16 I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

1. Only with God's blessing will a 90-year old woman, barren all her life, finally conceive

2. Birth: a SON!!!! The promised child at last

3. "Mother of nations"

4. Kings of peoples: orderly, regal people... not some rabble hoard

5. Ultimately, the "King of Kings" would come from her

D. Abraham's Joy and Concern

vs. 17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

1. Abraham falls facedown again... wonder, awe, and worship

2. Laughter of joy and faith... not of unbelief

Romans 4:19-21 *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. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*

Luke 6:21 *Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

3. BUT also a prayer of concern

vs. 18 *And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"*

like Job, who offered sacrifices for his children

Abraham the father plays the fatherly role of PRAYING for his child, Ishmael

He doesn't want Ishmael left behind, left out of God's blessing

V. The Covenant Obeyed: Abraham's Faith in Action (vs. 23-27)

A. Immediate Obedience: To Delay is to Disobey

vs. 23 *On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him.*

B. Costly Obedience: Humiliation and Pain

vs. 24 *Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, 25 and his son Ishmael was thirteen; 26 Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day.*

1. Abraham was 99 years old

2. Willing to pay the price for following God's word completely

3. Cost: humiliation (before the members of his household) and pain

C. Total Obedience

vs. 27 *And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.*

D. True Faith Always Results in Obedience

VI. The Promise and Purpose of Circumcision: Fulfilled in Christ

Two Key Questions

- 1) Why Did God Command Circumcision for the Jews?
- 2) Why Doesn't God Command Circumcision for Christians?

A. Circumcision WAS Required for Jews

Exodus 4:24-26 At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. 25 But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. 26 So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)

B. Circumcision Not Required for Christians

1. Acts 15 dispute

Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ...4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. 5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Council of Jerusalem refused to require Gentiles to become circumcised

Acts 15:28-29 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

2. Romans

- a. Paul's whole point: Abraham was justified in Genesis 15, many years before he was circumcised

- b. therefore uncircumcised, justified Abram is a picture of the uncircumcised Gentiles who are also justified by faith apart from the law

3. Galatians

- a. whole focus of the letter: freedom from circumcision and the Law of Moses
- b. justification by faith alone

Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

4. New Definition of “circumcision”

Romans 2:28-29 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

Philippians 3:3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh

Galatians 6:15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

Colossians 2:11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,

Back to our two key questions:

1) Why Did God Command Circumcision for the Jews?

Some answer it was for hygiene purposes... Jay Wile refers to this in his work, *Reasonable Faith: The Scientific Case For Christianity*

Dr. Wile shows how the rules regarding circumcision are based on medical knowledge that has only been uncovered within the last 30 years... showing that Jewish women show an amazingly lower clinical occurrence of cervical cancer than do non-Jewish women;

Problem: if there is such a health benefit to circumcision, and if God wanted to bless His people with that benefit, why did He no longer require it from Gentile believers in Christ???

Galatians 3:19 What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

Ceremonial law identified Jews as a particular people, a holy people, unique to the Lord, distinct from other nations... the food laws, and circumcision laws set Jews apart from all Gentile nations

This guaranteed that the Christ would be born into a Jewish setting, for

John 4:22 ... salvation is from the Jews.

Christ was born under the Law, but from the moment He was born into a clearly recognizable Jewish nation, Abraham's seed had been identified and the law of circumcision was forever fulfilled

Galatians 4:4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law

Note that the Old Covenant sign of the covenant was tied to physical procreation... thus it was intimately tied to the promise:

Genesis 22:18 and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed

2) Why Doesn't God Command Circumcision for Christians?

Once the Christ was born physically, the need for the physical markers delineating the Jews from Gentiles was removed

Jesus was born a Jew, under the Jewish laws

But God has made a new man, neither Jew nor Gentile, but simply new creation in Christ

Ephesians 2:14-16 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Circumcision played a vital role in keeping the Jews together as a people, identified from the Gentiles by their peculiar laws

This was so that Jesus could be born as a Jew, clearly fulfilling the Promise to Abraham

Once Jesus was born, the need for the ceremonial law of Moses (including circumcision) was gone forever

VII. Application

- 1) Marvel at God's ways
- 2) Understand the purpose and limitation of circumcision
- 3) Trust in God's greater promises in Christ
- 4) Walk in the footsteps of faith of our father Abraham

footsteps of holiness, in the fear of the Lord

footsteps of immediate, costly, and total obedience