THE COVENANT

(God's Agreement with Abraham)

Genesis 17:1-27
7/5/98

Introduction:

Observe two key elements in the Abrahamic Covenant

I. GOD'S PROMISE (V.1-8; 15-22)

(God makes an unconditional promise to Abraham and His descendants)

A. The <u>God</u> of the Promise ("EL SHADDAI") (V.1)

B. The <u>Promise</u> of God (v.2-8; 15-22)

God promised Abraham that he would be….

1. The patriarch of <u>many nations</u> (v.2-6)

2. The recipient of God's <u>grace and presence</u> (v.7)

3. The owner of the <u>land of Canaan</u> (v.8)

4. The father of <u>a son through Sarah</u> (v.15-22)

II. MAN'S <u>RESPONSE</u> (V.9-14; 23-27)

(Abraham and His descendants are expected to remember God's covenant by practicing circumcision)

A. God <u>commands</u> Abraham (v.9-14)

B. Abraham <u>obeys</u> God (v.23-27)

Conclusion:

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Introduction:

Hymn: "Standing on the Promises"

It is wonderful to have promises we can stand on.

In Gen. 17, God makes a promise or covenant with Abraham.

The Bible describes many "covenants."

1) The Noaic Covenant – No more flood

2) The Abrahamic Covenant – Land, seed, blessing

3) The Mosaic Covenant – Obey & be blessed; Disobey & be cursed

4) The Davidic Covenant – I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (via Christ) (II Sam. 7)

5) The New Covenant – Salvation and a new heart provided by Christ

Throughout chapter 17, God now for the third time (cp. Gen. 12 and 15) reiterates His promises to Abraham.

Notice all of the first person singular pronouns and the "I will's" of chapter 17.

> "I am (v. 1) . . . I will (v. 2) . . . I made thee (v. 5) . . . I will . . . I will (v. 6) . . . I will (v. 7) . . . I will . . . I will (v. 8) . . . I will (v. 16) . . . I will (v. 19) . . . I have blessed . . . I will (v. 20) . . . will I (v. 21)."

This covenant involved two key elements:

1. God's Promise (v. 1-8; 15-22)
   ("I will")

2. Man's Response (v. 9-14; 23-27)
   ("circumcise")

Observe two key elements in the Abrahamic Covenant

I. GOD'S PROMISE (V.1-8; 15-22)

(God makes an unconditional promise to Abraham and His descendants)

A. The God of the Promise ("EL SHADDAI") (V.1)

Before God gives His promise to Abraham, He identifies Himself. A promise is only as good as the one making the promise. (if I promised someone a billion dollars, that promise would be nothing but "empty hot air," because I do not have the wherewithal to fulfill it. However, when **"the Almighty God"** makes a promise of such magnitude, He does have the resources to carry it out).

Etymologically, the name ***El Shadday*** incorporates **El** (the powerful God) and **Shad** (which could mean "mountain" or "breast").

If "mountain" is what is meant, the name shows God as the exalted, solid, stable One who is omnipotent.

If "breast" is meant, the term would mean "the many breasted One," showing God as the all-sufficient God who can completely meet Abraham's and Sarah's needs.

In either case, power or might is clearly implied in the term. Hence, seeing God as the powerful, all-sufficient One who can do miracles is in view.

"Walk before Me" – i.e. conduct your life with the awareness of my presence. Live with the day by day consciousness that I am the Almighty – "El Shaddai" – and as such I know all about you; I see you at all times; I can give you power to be what you ought to be.

Do you "practice the presence of God"?

If we would throughout each day think, act, and react with the awareness that our lives are an open book before God, it would have a radical impact on how well we live.

"And be thou perfect" – This imperative sequentially follows the imperative to "walk before me" and is the result of the first.

What God is saying is "walk before Me in order that you may be perfect." Practice the presence of El Shaddai and you will be perfect, or "without fault, complete or mature."

The degree to which we live a holy and godly life is determined by the degree to which we conduct our lives with a conscious awareness of God's presence in our lives. If you walk with Him, you will be holy.

B. The Promise of God (v.2-8; 15-22)

God promised Abraham that he would be….

1. The patriarch of many nations (v.2-6)

v. 3

"Abram fell on his face" – This is always the result when mortal man enters the visible and audible presence of God.

v. 4

"Father of many nations" – Included would be the 12 tribes of Israel, the descendants of Ishmael's 12 sons, as well as the descendents of Keturah (Gen. 25:1-4).

v. 5

For God to change the names . . .
Abram to Abraham (v. 5)
Sarai to Sarah (v. 15)
Shows:

1) His sovereignty over them
(to give a name to someone or something (EX: Adam naming the animals) demonstrates control, dominion, or authority over that which is named. Parents have a right to name their children because they are the authority over the children. Nebuchadnezzar the king exercised his lordship over his captives by renaming them. Daniel, Hannaniah, Azariah, Mishael were all renamed – common practice expressing suzerainty or lordship. Jesus gave the name "Cephas" to Simon Peter, which showed His Lordship over Simon Peter.)

2) His insight regarding them
(God, knowing the changes that would come into Abraham's and Sarah's lives gave them names which accurately reflected what God was about to do for them.)

"Abram" meant exalted father ("Ab" = father; "Ram" = exalted)

"Abraham" means father of a multitude or father of many nations.

The recipient of God's grace and presence (v.7)

The owner of the land of Canaan (v.8)

The father of a son through Sarah (v.15-22)

In vv. 15-22, we see that God plans to fulfill His promises in ways that seem impossible (Ross, p. 334).

v. 15
"Sarai" = my princess (implied: She was Abraham's own princess)

"Sarah" = princess or queen, since she would be the destined mother of kings (Dods, cited by Ross, p. 332).

v. 17
Abraham **"laughed"** (a laugh of amazement).

v. 19
"Isaac" = His name means "He laughs" (*Yishaq*). A play on words with v. 17 when Abraham laughed (*wayyishaq*).

Man may laugh at the miracle-working power of God, but God always gets the last laugh.

II. MAN'S RESPONSE (V.9-14; 23-27)

(Abraham and His descendants are expected to remember God's covenant by practicing circumcision)

A. God commands Abraham (v.9-14)

v. 9

"Thou shalt keep my covenant" – Now the emphasis moves from God to Abraham and His descendents.

What part would Abraham have in keeping the covenant?

1) he would believe the covenant and
2) he would have a "token" or a sign to be done continually throughout all generations to be a perpetual reminder of the covenant.

v. 9-11

Many assert that circumcision existed before Abraham. Whether it did or didn't is not the point. Just as unleavened bread and wine took on new significance by Jesus at the Last Supper, so circumcision would take on a new meaning beginning with Abraham (cp. Ross, p. 333).

v. 11

Circumcision would come to symbolize:

1) Progenity – a reminder of God's sovereign control over reproduction ("Children are an inheritance of the Lord"; He opens and closes the womb).

2) Purity - Sex only within the bounds of marriage (as Abraham & Sarah) should produce a Godly seed (Mal. 2:10-17).

3) Unity – The physical cohesiveness of the Jewish race is brought about by a common sign upon all males in the nation. All participants would be identified with father Abraham by this external sign.

4) Distinctiveness – Circumcision would set the descendents of Abraham (via Isaac) apart from all the pagan Gentile nations. Separation from sin unto God has always been God's plan for His people.

"A token of the covenant" - Circumcision was not done for hygienic reasons (although many believe that it does have health benefits, claiming that circumcision prevents the build up of smegma, which is said to be cancer-causing), but it was done for spiritual or religious reasons. It was a sign or symbol reminding the Jew of God's covenant. It also separated God's people from their heathen neighbors.

"A token" – a sign

Circumcision was not a sacrament, nor a means of grace or salvation. No spiritual blessing was conveyed to the baby by the act.

To prove that circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham's salvation, Paul notes that Abraham believed and was justified before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:9-12; cp. Gen. 15:6). Circumcision was not a means of salvation, but a mark of separation (Wiersbe, p. 69).

Physical circumcision would remind the Jew of the miracle of his nation (that God gave a seed to Abraham).

However, the spiritual circumcision of the heart, which would be done by God, should remind us of the miracle of the new heart that God gives (Deut. 30:6 - And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. Cp. Rom. 2:28-29).

"Like all covenantal signs, circumcision could easily become an empty ritual" (Ross, p. 333). Without an understanding of what it symbolized, all of the emphasis would be placed on the external ritual and the internal reality would be forgotten. Rather than being a reminder of God's covenant, it would become a rule for salvation (cp. Rom. 2:28-29).

v. 12

"Eight days old" – (cp. Lev. 12:3) Why on the eighth day? Prior to the eighth day, the male infant would not have a sufficient Vitamin K built up in his system to prevent hemorrhaging; if the surgery did not clot, the child might bleed to death. However, after eight days, the surgery would be very painful. So medically, the eighth day was ideal.

Also, after giving birth to a male child, the mother would be considered ceremonially unclean for 7 days (Lev. 12:2); due to the bodily secretions and bleeding that would accompany a birth, the mother would be considered "Unclean" and would be allowed to rest in isolation from the family routine. On the eighth day, she would be clean and the child would be circumcised.

NOTE: Many reformers of the Covenant Theology persuasion, in an attempt to justify infant baptism, say that baptism replaced circumcision after the Cross. They argue: Just as children were circumcised as a sign that they belonged to the Abrahamic Covenant, so now, children are baptized to show that they (via their parents) are part of the New Covenant.

This position is erroneous on several counts:

1) The Bible nowhere makes this connection between circumcision and baptism.
2) In circumcision, only the males participated; to be consistent, it would follow that only the males should be baptized.

3) All of the New Testament examples of baptisms involved <u>believers</u> (never infants)
4) The sign of the New Covenant is the Lord's Supper, not baptism (we remember Him in the Lord's Supper; we <u>identify</u> with Him in baptism).
5) In circumcision, the child was <u>passive</u> (being acted upon) whereas in baptism, the believer is <u>active</u> (making a volitional choice).

B. Abraham <u>obeys</u> God (v.23-27)

Faith will always obey.

Although the surgical procedure would be painful, Abraham obeyed God's command.

Do we do what God tells us to do?

Conclusion

In most covenants or contracts that men make with men, the exchange would be even. Most contracts are even trades. You give me this, and I promise to give you that. However, in this agreement, God promises Abraham heirs, property, political power, and wealth, and Abraham in return gives God the token of circumcision. Not quite an even trade. When we become part of God's covenant family, the blessings we receive far outweigh the obedience we render in return. He gives us far more than we ever give Him. What we give up is nothing compared to what He gave up for us.

What has God promised us as New Testament believers?

God's promises:

1. Eternal life
2. Forgiveness of sin and freedom from its consequences
3. Adoption into His family
4. His presence, protection and direction

What is our response to His grace?

The believer's response:

1. Faith (trust)
2. Love (gratitude)
3. Obedience (action)