

**Genesis 17:1-27**  
**A Sermon**

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As most of you are well aware, for a number of years Lisa and I lived in Melbourne, Australia, engaging in the work of church planting and with the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The PCA-Australia, like the PCA here, is a conservative, reformed denomination - although it has not always been that way. And it is also a very traditional denomination. One of the indicators of the strong traditional flavor of the PCA-Australia is that a number of the pastors there will still wear a *clerical collar* - which the majority of non-collar wearing pastors refer to, somewhat pejoratively, as “a dog collar”.

When I first began pastoring in that denomination, I did not wear a collar, but I did *have* one. It was not a *proper* collar, mind you, but was actually made out of the plastic from an old ice cream container that I had cut to the right size and shape - and which you could not distinguish from the ridiculously priced collars you had to buy from a specialty store that sold those sorts of things.

And the reason I had this collar, and would occasionally use it, was because someone had told me that it was sometimes a useful tool to get past the gate keepers at some of the hospitals. Melbourne, being a very modern city of about 3.5 million people, had a number of very large, busy hospitals and getting in to see people - especially if they were in some sort of Critical Care Unit - could be a challenge sometimes. So, I got a clerical black shirt, and made myself a collar.

I remember the first time I ever used it. It was when one of our elders and one of my best friends there became quite ill with viral pneumonia and was in very serious condition at a local hospital. As a result, I went to the hospital to spend some time with him. And, in case there were some tough gate keepers, I decided to wear my collar, knowing also that Ken would probably get a good laugh out of the whole thing.

Therefore, I put on my collar and walked down to the train station about a mile from our house - public transport was *very* good in Melbourne - and settled in for the 45 minute ride into the city. And it was one of the strangest experiences of my life. Because as I walked down the street and as I passed all sorts of people and boarded the train, I became acutely *self-aware*. I noticed that people were behaving and responding to me *very* differently - all because of this collar I was wearing. Some people moved away from me. Other people were drawn to me, calling me “Father.” Some would even come and just sit down next to me and start talking - like I was their parish priest.

The effect of the collar was fascinating to me. It made me a *marked man*. It set people up with all sorts of assumptions and expectations - good, bad, and otherwise. And, as I said before, I became *extremely* self-conscious. I knew that I had unwittingly drawn attention to myself. My Christian faith - which I bore somewhat anonymously before - was now on display for all to see - for better or worse. And as the train bumped along the tracks, I thought a lot that day about what the Scriptures had to say about God's people being distinctive like salt, or standing out - like stars against the night sky.

In the passage before us this morning, we are looking at what, in effect, is the second part of God's formal establishment of the covenant with Abraham. We saw the first part of it in chapter 15, where the focus was on God's role in the covenant and, in particular, on how *God alone* took upon himself the ultimate responsibility for its fulfillment.

In chapter 17, through these events that happened a number of years later - and for reasons which we will see in a moment - we see the other side of the deal. We see here what God's expectations were for Abram and his descendants now that they had been graciously set apart to be the recipients of God's promise. In this chapter we will see how God's desire for Abram and his descendants is that they too would be a "marked people", that they too would stand out distinctively among all the peoples of the world - by the sign that they bore, and by the way that they lived. That will be one things that we will focus on this morning. Before we look into that, let's pray together.

Father in Heaven, please be gracious to us now - as you have been countless times before, to make your Word clear, so that it impacts our hearts and minds in a powerful way, with the result that we come to know you better, and love you more, and so naturally and sensibly live in ways which honor you. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

(Read Genesis 17:1-8)

As we have seen happen on a number of occasions now, a long silence and time of waiting for Abram and Sarai is interrupted by the sudden and un-expected arrival of God, who proceeds to re-issue affirmations of his promises which he has already committed himself to, and with which we are already pretty familiar, by now. However, there are a couple of differences to note.

Firstly, as we have already seen, a lot more time has come and gone. The last time Abram heard from God on this issue was *thirteen* years earlier, when Hagar was pregnant with Ishmael. Now, at the beginning of chapter 17, Ishmael is a teenager, or close enough. And if you count back to the time in chapter 12 when Abram was *first* called out by God - a total of at least 23 years have now passed. That is almost a quarter of a century!

Secondly, there is this "angle" on the covenant that comes into view here. Up to this point, God's expectations of Abram have been very specific and very limited. Leave this place. Go to another one. Now what we are seeing is something different, something

more like a *general rule of life* - “walk before me and be blameless” - calling Abram to a certain standard of obedience.

And the reason we are getting this *here* and not in chapter 15 where the formalization of the covenant was initiated has to do, I believe, with the fact that God wanted to first make clear the sovereign and gracious nature of the covenant - that it was something that He was initiating and that He was going to accomplish. The *subsequent* establishment of a covenant sign and the call to a life of obedience, coming a number of years *after* God’s promise to Abram, serves to underline the fact that the call to “walk blamelessly” was not a call to merit the blessing of God. It was, instead, a call to live a life that was fitting for those who belonged to the family of God.

Following this *general* call to a life of faithfulness and obedience, there comes in verses 9-14 a command to submit to a very *specific* demonstration of that obedience, namely, to undergo the ritual of *circumcision*. (Read verses 9-14 [here](#))

By the very specific and strong nature of the language used here, we see that Abram’s obedience on this one point is very important to God. In fact, Abram’s response to this will be regarded by God as an indicator of Abram’s general response to this call to “walk blamelessly”.

Now this is the first time that *circumcision* makes an appearance in the Bible. However, it is not the first time that the ritual of circumcision was practiced within the human race. Other records of life in this era, and even before it, show that there were other cultures that did incorporate this practice into their way of life. Thus, in instituting this ritual for His people, God was not bringing into existence a new thing but was simply making use of an already existing reality. God did the very same sort of thing with Noah, taking the rainbow and using it as a sign for His people, investing it on that occasion with a particular significance. The same thing is happening here.

As for *why* he chose this *particular* cultural symbol, we cannot say for sure, but it may be that God chose a sign that involved the reproductive organs of the male because, at their very core, the promises to God were about a promise of *descendants* and, ultimately, about a promised *seed* who would eventually fulfill the words prophetically spoken to Eve in Genesis 3. And so that idea may have been there, along with the idea of the taking away of flesh - which represented the taking away of the *fleshly* - that is, the *sinful*, nature.

However, more important than those sorts of speculations is what this sign pointed TO: God’s covenant faithfulness. Let me say that again: *It pointed to GOD’S covenant faithfulness*. In other words, it is not a sign that had in view the recipient as much as it had in view *God himself*. It is not a sign that was a reward to people because of their faithfulness, it was a sign that they received *before they were faithful* and purely because of *God’s sovereign choice to set apart a people for himself*. As such, it was to be applied to both the adults and their children since they were included in the promises. Indeed, eight (8) day old infants received the sign - obviously long before they

could reason, or think or even remotely respond to God in any sort of way, and before anyone could make any assessment of their life or its relative worthiness.

Well, after all of this, God then turns his comments to *Sarai*. He does not talk to her directly, but talks about her to Abram. And here we also receive some new information and a further strengthening of God's promise to them.

(read, vs. 15-22)

Well, there are a lot of interesting things about these words concerning Sarai, but one of the most interesting, it seems to me, is how through this process we are made to realize that, apparently, Abram's understanding of things had shifted - or at least was in danger of shifting. It would seem from what happens here that Abram may have resigned himself to the fact, or at least *begun* to resign himself to the fact that all the things God had promised he was going to do would *still* be done, but not necessarily through a child of he and Sarah's - rather it would happen through Ishmael.

And the thing that convinces me that Abraham was at least entertaining the possibility of this is the two-fold reaction we see from *Abraham* - an outburst of laughter followed by this offering of Ishmael as the one through whom the promise might be fulfilled.

Now you might look like at Abraham's response here and wonder, "What's going on?" Upon hearing the explicit statement that Sarah will have a son, Abraham, it seems, could not help himself and burst out laughing at the very thought of a ninety year old woman having a child. Now, you might think, what is he laughing for? How could he respond in that sort of way? Well, when you think about the way that God's revelation has come to him thus far, you can see how Abraham *could* have come to some alternative conclusions about things:

Chapter 12 - Abram is told that God will make a great nation of him. That is a promise of many descendants, to be sure, but it is not an explicit statement that Abram and Sarai will naturally parent a child. That seems to be the most natural *understanding* of what God has said - but the point is, it is not *explicitly* said....

Chapter 13 - God reaffirms that Abram's offspring will be "as the dust of the earth" but this, again, is still not an explicit statement that Sarai will mother a child.

Chapter 15 - Abram is told that Eliezer will not be his heir but that *his very own son* shall be his heir. Now, again, and in hindsight of course, when you and I are looking back on all these statements we know that God meant through all of this that he was going to give Abram a son through Sarai. And it is likely that Abram himself would have understood God in this same sense. But still, there is not yet the explicit statement that *Sarai* will have a son.

Chapter 16 - As we saw last week, ten years have passed and still there is no

son through Sarai. All that they have to go on are these promises which have been spoken and affirmed in various ways - but in the end they are still unfilled. And what you have to keep in mind here is that, so far, none of these things that have been told to Abram have been written down anywhere. There are no Bibles yet. And so, whenever Abram is recalling what God has said to him, He's going on sheer memory, total recall. And Abram is now 86 years old, and his wife is 77.

I mean, it just makes you wonder if perhaps *Abram* had begun to question whether he had heard God correctly or if he had *remembered or understood* God correctly. You wonder if *Abram* began to think back through what God had said. And, if he did, and if he had *perfect* recall, he very easily could have concluded what we have already seen - that while it *seems* that God was saying that he and Sarai would have a son of their own, perhaps that is not exactly what God meant. After all, there really was no EXPLICIT statement to that effect. Up to this point, God has never actually said that *Sarai* will have a son.

Now, all of this is just thinking out loud about how things might have happened. However, none of this sort of thinking, if it took place at all would have excused Abram from his doubting God and abandoning the *obvious* interpretation of what God said for a less obvious one.

Abram should have trusted God and the obvious implications of God's words for he and Sarai. But I just say all these things to simply show how a window of doubt might have been created within Abram's mind. And it seems that the more time has gone by, the more Abram seems inclined to doubt the obvious intent of God's words. All of which then brings us to chapter 17.

By the time we get to the events of chapter 17, *more time has passed*. Ishmael is now 13 years old. He is a legitimate son of Abram, a legitimate heir. And any tendency Abram might have had to lean toward an alternative interpretation of God's words - like the one we have been talking about - would surely have been strengthened by this passage of time. And so along God comes, affirming once again this promise to bring many and great nations from him. And, so far, there is still no clear statement regarding Sarai.

Which is why, when we finally get to verse 16, the explicit announcement of this very thing pretty much catches Abram completely off guard. It seems to me that by this point he has gotten used to the idea - or at least the *possibility* - that perhaps Ishmael IS who God intended all along. And so his response of laughter is as much shock as anything else. Shock, disbelief, happiness, bewilderment - all of these things are surely present as he falls on his face, laughing.

And as he is in that position, he says 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? After 23 years, it seems almost too much to believe. And so, probably without even thinking, he spurts out, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" In other words, he seems to be asking the

question, "Why not just use Ishmael, Lord?"

Well, God's immediate response to all of this is not anger or frustration or anything like that. If He is put out with Abram at all, it is not apparent anywhere in the text. God simply, patiently, and immediately puts an end to any further speculation, or any other possible alternative and faulty understanding of his intentions. He says very plainly that Sarai is going to have a son. His name is going to be Isaac. And he, and NOT Ishmael, will be the one through whom the promises are realized. What has been implicit all along has finally been *explicitly* said.

However, while God has made it clear that he will give them a child through Sarah, and thus does not take Abram's suggestion regarding Ishmael, he does, compassionately, it seems to me, assure Abram that Ishmael will *also* experience His blessing in certain ways. "I have heard you" says God - "and I am going to bless Ishmael. He too will become a great nation. Kings will also come from him. But he is not going to be the one through whom the blessings will be fully realized. Then, immediately upon hearing these things, verses 23-27 describe Abram's obedient response, instituting the ritual of circumcision among his people and seeing to it that every male member of his family/tribe received the sign of the covenant, including Ishmael.

As we think about how the writing down and preserving of this story would have been important for the people of God under Moses - who would have been the first ones to receive these things - but as we think about that, several things come to mind.

For one thing, as we have already seen, this account, coupled with the account of chapter 15, rounds out the understanding of the covenant a little more explicitly. If you remember from our study of chapter 15, we saw that in a very important sense, the covenant that exists between Abram and God is *unilateral* - which just means that the obligations for seeing to it that the covenant is kept and fulfilled fall completely upon *one party* ultimately - and that would be God. He was the only one that walked between the pieces of the sacrificed animals in chapter 15.

But as we see here, the unilateral nature of the covenant - with regard to its guarantee - does not mean that living *within* that covenant was also unilateral - i.e., it did not mean that there was nothing required of Abram. To put that another way, it is not as if God has just stepped into the scene and sort of said, "I just came to tell you what I'm going to do, what all my plans are. But that is all you need to know. I just want you to have that *information*. So, just carry on. Go about your business. Just keep on doing whatever it was you were doing before I showed up." It's not like that at all. We see here that God's desire is to have a people that are unique and set apart unto himself - and not set apart only in name but set apart in terms of their *identity* and life and character, their hearts, their speech, their thoughts, their actions. God does not want people who only share the family *name*, he wants a people who bear the family *resemblance*.

Moses' people would certainly benefit from seeing these things. This reminder that God's choosing and setting them apart had real-life moral and ethical implications would

have been helpful in a pre-emptive sort of way. Because once they DID finally enter into the promised land they would be faced with all sorts of temptations. They would be tempted by the material things that they found there and they would be tempted by the customs and practices of the peoples they found there. And in the face of all that, they needed to know that their response to these things mattered to God, and that, by implication, consequences would follow from their responses.

And all of this would have underscored for them the significance of this sign that they actually bore upon their own bodies - a sign they would have all received in their own infancy, and which, by that point in the history of God's people was as natural as breathing. But they needed to remember that as normal and commonplace as the *ritual* was, there was nothing common about its *meaning*. It was a ritual that set them apart as "marked men" and, collectively, as a *special and peculiar people* who had a responsibility to walk before their promise-making God blamelessly.

Well, as co-inheritors of these same covenant blessings, as legitimate "sons and daughters of Abraham", through Christ, we too can benefit from these verses in ways similar to our brothers and sisters in the Sinai wilderness. Like them, we are reminded of obligations that fall to us by virtue of our own membership in this covenant. God's word to us, as it was to them, is "walk before me and be blameless." Or, as expressed in the NT letter of Titus,

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Now, we understand, do we not, that our position before God does not a *consequence* of these things, but rather it is *proven* by these things? Right? We are evangelical Presbyterians so we are all about grace, right? Yes, of course we are.

But I have to tell you - we live in this environment, and breathe this *air* - where the Gospel is so strongly taught and the doctrine of justification by faith is so firmly believed that sometimes I worry that we are in danger of creating this entire movement of Christianity that shies away from ever telling people about their *obligations* to God for fear of being accused of promoting works salvation or legalism or pharasaism or putting people in bondage to the law.

And certainly, we do not want to do any of these things but CAN I JUST ASK: Can we try to not be more theologically correct than Jesus or Paul? Look at their example. Listen to their words. Jesus went about preaching the kingdom and performing the kingdom, challenging them not only in the area of their *faith* but also in their *practice*. Paul, who certainly understood the gospel of grace better than either you or I will ever understand it, - this same Paul did not hesitate to say some very clear and direct things

about “walking before God blamelessly” - as the reading from Titus we just heard illustrates. And there are many others places where he talks about this. Listen to another example from Paul’s words to the Philippians, chapter 2,

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Paul did not hesitate to call the congregations he pastored to walk before the Lord blamelessly, to pursue godliness, holiness, good works. Indeed, Paul wanted them to *distinguish* themselves by such things, to stick out, in the same way that the stars stand out against the blackness of the night sky. Paul did not hesitate to call his people to this sort of living. And neither should we hesitate to call and encourage one another to this same thing.

And this language of being a marked out or set apart people points to another way that these verses are significant. Living as we do on the *other side of the Cross*, we understand that the covenant sign of circumcision has been replaced by the NT covenant sign of baptism. We know this, firstly, from the way that Paul makes it clear that circumcision for people in his day was a purely *optional* thing. It was no longer the required, necessary sign it once had been.

At the same time, we see the institution of the sign of baptism among the disciples. Even Jesus submitted to baptism. And then in Paul’s letter to the Colossians we see where it is made clear to the Colossians, who would NOT have been circumcised as Gentiles, that they did not *need* to be circumcised because in coming to Jesus they had already undergone a “circumcision without hands” - referring to the role of the Spirit in their conversion, and the taking away of their fleshly, that is, *sinful*, nature. What these same Colossians HAD received when they became believers was not physical circumcision but baptism and Paul makes it clear that this was *enough*.

Those verses, along with the general manner in which baptism was administered at various times and places in the early church make it clear that baptism has become the replacement ritual which identifies God’s covenant people as his own - and appropriately so. Because of what Christ has accomplished, we *needed* a new sign that would more appropriately symbolize what had happened in Christ and how God’s continuing covenant would be administered from now on by virtue of that. The bloody sign is gone because the shedding of blood is over and done with. A sign associated with the whole idea of reproduction and the coming of the promised seed - which circumcision was - such a sign no longer had any currency once Christ had come. We do not look forward to that any more. We needed a new sign. That new sign was baptism.

Therefore, we apply the sign in the same way, and for the exact same reasons as the old sign was applied. It is not a sign that is some sort of declaration about what we have done - either believing in Jesus or repenting or anything like that - it is a sign that points us to what God has done and is still doing. Baptism isn't about us or what we feel or think or do - it's about what God has done. And so we apply it to all who legitimately belong to the household of God and to whom God's promises pertain - for believers and their children.

But even more important than the justification for our practice of baptism is, as we have already seen, what it signifies and how the sign functions *in our lives*. Baptism is the sign that - like circumcision - has set us apart as marked people, as HIS people. And it is the sign that, if we're wise, we continually point ourselves, and others, and in particular, our children back to, and which says, "Do you see this? Do you know what this means? It means from the beginning of your life, you have been set apart as one of God's people, to live in the world and as part of a community of believers. And this setting apart in baptism is to be reflected in your life - which is to be a *set-apart life*, a life of faithfulness and obedience, abounding in good works and lived with the intention of honoring God - not to earn his love, but to prove your baptism, to respond appropriately to this thing that God has done and completed and settled long before you ever had your first conscious thought." That is the call that our baptism places upon us, and which we are to remind one another of - the call to live a set-apart life.

But here is the thing: We can't live blamelessly. Abraham could not do it. Neither could his sons, or any of their descendants. Indeed, the same God who commands this blameless lifestyle will, once the nation is established, give them a *sacrificial* system which, among other things is an open acknowledgment by God Himself that He knows his people have no hope of being able to pull this thing off perfectly. God knew that, for us at least, walking blamelessly would never mean *absolutely blamelessly*. And yet God still makes this statement, issues this command, has this expectation. Why does he do that? Because God has a view that none of us have.

Because when he issues this command He has his eye not on Abraham but on a descendant of Abraham who ACTUALLY WOULD walk before him blamelessly, who WOULD fully honor the covenant, who WOULD fully take upon himself the covenant obligations - on both sides. God had his eye on this one who had not yet come, and who wouldn't be coming for quite some time.

Until then, the sacrificial system would serve a function. It would be a kind of covering - sort of like a down payment - but it would never be enough on its own to fully deal with human sin. The Scriptures say that very plainly - the blood of bulls and lambs cannot take away sin. That would only come with the Lord Jesus Christ - who not only would fulfill the call to walk blamelessly but would take upon himself the consequences for not doing so - and he would do both of these things in the place of his people for whom he was acting as their representative.

And so it is that we, as those who have placed our trust and confidence in this working -

in this living and dying of Jesus - we take upon ourselves the covenant obligations in the light of that truth. Since our righteousness was accomplished by Jesus, our obedience does not serve that purpose. It is not for the purpose of earning a right standing with God but is, rather, an imitation of him who has earned it for us. It is not so much an act of duty - although there is duty involved - but is rather an act of devotion. It is an act of gratitude. It is an act of love.

So, let me challenge you, in the light of that knowledge, to walk before your God, *blamelessly*, this day, to live a life of faithful obedience, knowing that even as you fall short in that pursuit, you have a covering in the Lord Jesus so that you are not proud when you succeed and you are not paralyzed when you fail. But you are freed and liberated to continue in your pursuit of this God who loved you even before you knew Him.

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