

**“MARKED FOR GOD”**

At the heart of this passage is the notion of the covenant. It is a theme that we have seen before in the book of Genesis, even in the account of Abraham. In chapter 15, God’s promises to Abraham were described in terms of the covenant that he had established with him. This tells us that God’s covenant with Abraham is not being established for the first time in this chapter, but is being ratified or confirmed. And it is ratified with a covenant sign, the sign of circumcision, a sign that serves as a pledge and reminder of both the privileges and obligations of the covenant. The Lord gave Abraham this sign in order to make a distinction between him and the people of the world. It was a mark of inclusion in the covenant community. In this sense, as one commentator puts it, Genesis 17 can be understood as the birthday of the Old Testament church. This is not to say that the church did not exist before the sign of circumcision was given, but it was through the giving of this sign that the covenant people were visibly marked out as God’s peculiar people. This is the main point conveyed in this passage: God ratified his covenant with Abraham with the outward sign of circumcision, a sign in which the privileges and obligations of the covenant were represented and sealed.

The passage begins by calling attention to the fact that thirteen years had passed since the birth of Ishmael. Thirteen more years of barrenness for Sarah. Thirteen more years of waiting for God’s promise to be fulfilled. And we have every reason to believe that at this point Abraham assumed that God’s promise was going to be fulfilled through Ishmael. This helps us to understand why God identified himself to Abraham as “God

Almighty” or, in the Hebrew, El Shaddai, in this passage. While scholars differ over the precise meaning of this name, in the book of Genesis it is typically used in passages where God promises offspring to his people. By identifying himself as the Almighty one, God emphasizes his ability to bring about the fulfillment of what he has promised.

After identifying himself, God commands Abraham to walk before him and be blameless. While the covenant is founded upon God’s grace, there are also covenant responsibilities for God’s people to keep. We can see both of these elements in this passage. God’s grace is seen in the fact that what was previously commanded to Adam and Noah, the command to be fruitful and multiply, is now stated as a promise. God will make Abraham into a multitude. God will make him fruitful. He will do it. At the same time, Abraham is required to walk before God, to be blameless, to keep the covenant, and to circumcise all of the males in his household. This passage is a good example of the fact that the relationship between God and his people involves both divine grace and human responsibility. This is one of the great truths in all of Scripture. And it is a truth that is very easy to distort in one direction or the other. It is easy to emphasize grace to an extent that our responsibility is removed. And it is just as easy to emphasize our responsibility to an extent that salvation becomes something that we obtain by our own efforts. It is not a matter of either/or, but a matter of both/and. God is the one who graciously saves us from our sins and brings us into communion with himself. And at the same time, this God also calls his people to walk before him and be blameless. Another way of saying this is that the covenant contains both promises and stipulations. There is

a sense in which God's covenant promises are unconditional. There is nothing that we can ever do to earn what is freely offered to us in the gospel. However, there is also a sense in which the covenant promises are conditional. This is evident from the Bible's clear teaching that the only people who will receive what is promised in the gospel are those who meet the condition of faith. And biblical faith is defined as faith that perseveres through life's many trials and temptations. It is a faith that is made evident by the fruit of good works. It is true that this faith, along with all of its fruits, is itself a gift from God. No one would be able to believe the gospel were it not for the fact that the Spirit of God works faith in the hearts of the elect. We are all dead in our sin, and apart from the power of the Spirit to make us alive and unite us to Christ by faith, none of us would believe the gospel. Nevertheless, the Bible does not allow this truth to overshadow the requirement for God's people to live before him in faith. God calls his people to walk before him and be blameless. The person who claims to believe in Jesus but lives a completely ungodly and unrepentant life, a life with no remorse over his sin and no thirst for righteousness, that person will not receive what is promised in the gospel. The Scriptures are very clear on this: the promises of the covenant can only be received by those who have a living faith. It is true that Abraham did not live a perfect life. He was a sinner just like you and me. His faith was weak. But he persevered in faith. He walked before God. He was counted righteous by faith. And the Lord requires nothing less of us.

God also emphasizes that his covenant is not just with Abraham, but with his offspring as well. He says, “[I will] be God to you and to your offspring after you.” This is the doctrine of covenant succession, the principle that says that God makes his covenant with believers and their children. Circumcision, as we will see in a few moments, was one of the sacraments of the Old Testament. As such, it was a not merely a sign of membership in ethnic Israel, but a spiritual sign, the sign of the covenant. It was the sign of faith. And God commanded Abraham, and Israel after him, to place this sign of faith upon his children when they were eight days old, even though they were unable to make a personal profession of faith. Children were included in the covenant community in the Old Testament, and nowhere is this principle overturned in the New Testament. In fact, it is reaffirmed, especially in passages such as Acts 2:38-39, where Peter says,

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

The promise that Peter mentions is the covenant of grace. It is the same promise of salvation that God had made to Abraham and his descendants. The reason why Peter includes children as recipients of the promise is because children were included as

recipients of the promise when it was given to Abraham. The Lord promised to be God to Abraham and to his offspring after him.

In this passage, God's promise is confirmed by a physical sign, the sign of circumcision. Circumcision was not something that was unique to the people of Israel. In fact, it was practiced by many of the people in the Ancient Near East. But usually, it served as a rite of passage into adulthood, being applied to young men when they were ready to enter into their full tribal rights. This stands in sharp contrast to God's instruction to circumcise infant males when they were only eight days old. In using circumcision as the sign of covenant membership, God was taking an existing practice and investing it with new meaning. We see Jesus doing the same kind of thing in his institution of the Lord's Supper, where he takes the Passover meal and invests it with new meaning.

It is not very difficult to understand the meaning of this covenant sign. By cutting off the foreskin, the male reproductive organ was consecrated to God. And this was an important part of its symbolism. Israelite females, though not personally given the sign of covenant membership, were represented in the circumcision of the Israelite males with whom they would bear children. And the sign of circumcision taught the people that, while sexual intercourse itself is not inherently impure, the products of sexual intercourse, new human beings, are impure. Circumcision reminded the people of Israel of their need for cleansing from their sins. Only by God's provision for cleansing could

they receive the blessings of the covenant and live in communion with God. In the words of Geerhardus Vos,

“Circumcision teaches that physical descent from Abraham is not sufficient to make true Israelites. The uncleanness and disqualification of nature must be taken away. Dogmatically speaking therefore, circumcision stands for justification and regeneration, plus sanctification.” [*Biblical Theology*, 90]

This is why, in Colossians 2:11-13, the apostle Paul speaks of Christ’s death on the cross as a kind of circumcision. He writes:

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

Circumcision, like its New Testament equivalent of baptism, teaches us of our need for cleansing from sin, the cleansing made possible by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

You will notice that in verse 10 God actually refers to circumcision itself as the covenant. He says, "This is my covenant...Every male among you shall be circumcised." The promises and obligations of the covenant were contained in the sign of the covenant. This is why we refer to circumcision as a "sacrament." It is true that the term "sacrament" does not appear in the Bible. But it is a word, like the word "Trinity," that we use to describe a biblical concept. A sacrament is an outward sign that testifies to God's grace and to the obligations that belong to those who receive that grace. The content of the biblical sacraments is the same as the content of the message of the gospel: Jesus Christ and his saving benefits. As John Calvin explains,

"a sacrament is nothing else than a visible word, or sculpture and image of the grace of God, which the word more fully illustrates...as soon as the sign itself meets our eyes, the word ought to sound in our ears."

In other words, sacraments embody the truth of the gospel in a physical manner. God uses sacraments to convey the grace of the gospel to our senses of sight, taste, touch, and smell. The sacraments are a great help to our faith because they awaken our outward senses to the spiritual realities of the gospel. The Word leads us to Christ by the ear, but the sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye.

God's covenant with Abraham, and with the people of Israel, was summed up in the sacrament of circumcision. It was the sign by which they were marked out as belonging to God. In the New Testament era and beyond, circumcision has been replaced by baptism as the sign of membership in the covenant community. For us, it is baptism that marks us out as belonging to God. Because of this, we can rightly say that a person's baptism is the most important event in his life. Of course, such a statement does need to be qualified. It is possible to separate a sacrament from what it represents, to value it as an end in itself. It is possible for people to think that there is some special power inherent in the sacraments themselves. When that happens, sacraments are of no value to us, because we are missing the point for which they were given. Treating the sacraments as ends in themselves is like a woman who loves to gaze at the diamond ring on her finger and but completely ignores the man who gave it to her. When a sign is severed from what it represents, it is no longer significant. It is no longer functioning as a sign.

However, when sacraments are rightly used, when we remember that baptism is a God-given sign, when we see it as a pledge and reminder of God's covenant promises and our covenant obligations, then we really can say that the day of our baptism is the most important day of our lives. For on that day, you were marked out as someone who belongs to the living God. On that day, God promised to cleanse you of your sins and to cause you to be born again. On that day, God summoned you to a life of faith and godliness. As one writer puts it,

“Baptism [is]...a sign given at the beginning of the Christian life of what happens to us through the whole of the Christian life. As long as we live here on this earth we are living out our baptism as we more and more die unto sin and live unto God.” [Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*, 175]

The rest of your life is lived under the shadow of the day of your baptism, the day when God put a physical mark on you, a mark that sets you apart from all the other peoples of this world. And because of what is signified by that mark, the Lord calls you, just as he called Abraham, to walk before him and be blameless for all of your days.