

## Scripture

### Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be Abram,[exalted ancestor] but your name shall be Abraham;[ancestor of a multitude] for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

15 God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

### Romans 4:13–25

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 23 Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

## NUMEROUS AS THE STARS

Last week we talked about God’s covenant with Noah. This was the covenant in which God limited himself and his responses to our actions. ‘I won’t flood you out,’ he said. ‘No matter how bad things get, no matter how bad *you* get, I won’t wipe humanity off the face of the earth.’

God relinquished his right to retaliation, hung up his war bow, and declared peace, or at least a truce, with humanity.

The takeaway from that sermon was that we also ought to hang up our weapons and stop trying to destroy those who have offended us. We can and should declare peace with our neighbours and with God.

Ten generations later, God made another covenant with a man called Abram. God said 'Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home, and go to a land that I am going to show you. I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

I will curse those who curse you.

And through you I will bless all the nations.'

Again, God said to Abram 'I will shield you from danger and give you a great reward. Look at the sky and try to count the stars; you will have as many descendants as that.'

And a third time to Abram God said 'The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants forever, and I will be their God. I will keep my promise to you and to your descendants in future generations as an everlasting covenant.'

This covenant with Abram was quite generous; God promised to make Abram, an old man with no children, into - not one - but many mighty nations.

This speaks to a very deep human need - the need to be larger than we are. Throughout the ages, human beings have constructed pyramids, statues, dynasties, mansions, corporations, secret societies, endowment funds - all in an effort to leave a legacy.

We need to feel as though our lives mean something; we want to be remembered. Something within us rails against the futility of the flesh - the temporal nature of our existence under the sun. We are made in the image of God for the purposes of God - deep down we know there is more to life than what we see. God is transcendent, and so we too yearn for transcendence.

So, when God offered to Abram the promise of nations arising from him and Sarai, this fulfilled Abram's wildest dreams of legacy, and indeed this is the closest thing to immortality that Abram would have been able to imagine.

God's covenant with Abram meant that Abram mattered. His life meant something. When he died there would be something left - and more than just something. What Abram left would be greater than Abram himself. Abram was important; he mattered, and he would be remembered.

When we look at these two covenants we discover two movements of God. In the covenant with Noah God committed to refrain *from* certain actions. 'I won't do.'

In the covenant with Abram God committed *to* certain actions. 'I will do.'

I won't destroy. I will build up.

If our response to the first 'I won't' covenant is to not destroy or seek revenge, what then are we to do in response to the second covenant? The 'I will' covenant? What *will* we do?

Suddenly we find ourselves on theologically contested ground. We are sure that there are things required of us, and yet, we also know that we can't earn God's favour through our own efforts.

This was an important issue during the Reformation period and some of you may be thinking of the five *Solae*.

*Sola* means, of course, alone. Out of the reformations there were five principles that emerged regarding salvation. Salvation can be had: *Sola scriptura* (through scripture alone), *sola fide* (through faith alone), *sola gratia* (through grace alone), *sola Christo* (through Christ alone), and *sola Deo Gloria* (glory belongs to God alone)

These five *solae* put our salvation firmly in the hands of God. Personally, I feel much better about that because I know what a mess I make of things despite my best efforts. Especially when it comes down to my status before God; I don't want that to depend chiefly upon my actions.

Recognizing that the God who created us is the same God who holds us is the core principle of reformed Christianity, and indeed is the one thing that separates us from all other religions out there.

Every other religion or faith system that I have studied places a high value on human agency. What I mean by that, is that at their core each of these beliefs has a reciprocal relationship.

If I do this, then god has to repay me by doing that. In return for my sacrifice, my offering, my giving, my labour - god must perform some act for me.

When we really consider this line of reasoning we find that it is ridiculous. Can we really play *quid pro quo* with God? Can we put God into our debt?

Can we really say to God, 'Hey, remember that thing I did for you? You owe me!' Utter foolishness. We have nothing to offer God. What can we give God? Gold? Silver? Chickens? To the one who created everything, these gifts have little value.

Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, through Christ alone, and glory to God alone. Nowhere in there is *sola labora*, through our labour and efforts alone. The only thing we get through the sweat of our brow is to wrest food from the ground that we have poisoned. We don't get to boss God around.

This is reinforced by what is missing from the covenants. If you remember, last week I noted that God asked nothing of Noah when he made his covenant. God only placed conditions upon himself.

When God first spoke with Abram and created a covenant with him he also required nothing of his human covenant partner. God said to Abram 'All that land over there – it's yours. That is for you; that is for your children.'

The second time, God said to Abram 'Abram, I am going to make you many. Through you and your children my blessings will flood over all the face of the earth.'

The third time God spoke to Abram he finally asked for something in return. Circumcision. That was to be the mark that Abram's family carried in their flesh to identify them as God's chosen people.

What this pattern reveals is that covenant, that is, grace, precedes the law. God's promises stand on their own independent of anything from us. God didn't ask either Noah or Abram for sacrifices or offerings; he didn't give them any rules for living. These things came afterwards, when things deteriorated even further and these rules became necessary for a time to show us how far off the mark we are living most of the time.

I notice two things about the Genesis scripture that Kyoungsoo read to us this morning.

1. God required Abram to circumcise himself and his sons.
2. God gave Abram and Sarai new names.

Both of these things concern identity. The circumcision marked Abram's descendants as belonging to God, as do the new names given to that old couple that we trace our faith lineage back to.

It would seem then, that salvation depends not upon what we do, but upon who we are. This is a point that is frequently misunderstood. We are not Christians because of what we do; we do the things we do because we are Christian.

Just as God gave Abram and Sarai new names to reflect their new identities as the ancestors to nations, we also receive new identities.

Have you ever noticed that during a baptism we use only first names? When we are welcomed into God's family we don't use our surnames – there are no familial or tribal distinctions in this rite because through this sacrament we gain a new family name – that of Christian.

A new identity. A new standing and status before God. This is the grace of the covenant that comes before the law. We don't expect new Christians to act in the same way that more experienced Christians act – at least, we shouldn't expect this.

Unfortunately I did have someone tell me last week that people should fix their sins before coming to the church, and this made me quite sad. If we could fix ourselves, then obviously we don't need Jesus or the church.

The path that God has laid out before us is quite different. He calls us as sinners, knowing full well what we are. If Kyoungsoo had read a few verses further you would have gotten to hear about Abraham falling on his face laughing at God's pronouncement, saying 'I'm just about dead and my wife's womb is all dried up. Are you telling me it's baby time for us?' Abraham was far from perfect – disrespectful and doubting – and yet God's grace extended to him.

God's grace extends to all of us as he gives us identities as people who are loved and cherished by him. In response, we practice faithful obedience. If the faithful obedience had to come first, this would be a woefully empty church.

Our role as a church is to provide a space in which people can find join-up with God. Jesus told us to proclaim the kingdom and baptize in his name. Baptism, as we have seen, is the conferring of identity. Our job is to let people know who they are. We invite people off the street and tell them 'Do you know who you are? You are a beloved child of God.'

The church only provides a context that encourages join-up with God, and we let the Spirit do the rest. Come as you are, but for heaven's sake don't stay as you were.

Grace comes before the law; it was always thus. Who we are has more eternal significance than what we do. Our identity guides our activity, not the other way around. Know who you are.

You bear the name Christian; you are a beloved child of God. The gift at the heart of Genesis 17 is its reminder that at the centre of your being rests blessing and promise, naming and covenant.