

“Then Jesus answered and said to them,... ‘You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;

And These Are They Which Testify of Me

Sermons on Genesis
Keeping The Covenant
Genesis 16,17

With Study Questions

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Keeping The Covenant

Genesis 16,17

Preview:

If you recall, Abram had fear that his heir would not be his own son, but one of his house. God assures Abram that his heir would come from his own body. God continually repeats His covenant promise to Abram, that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed and actually performs a covenant sacrament. Abram believed God and it was accounted to Him for righteousness.

What we will see in chapters sixteen and seventeen will be Sarai's idea for Abram to have a child with Hagar. There will be dissension between Sarai and Hagar, after which Hagar will flee.

The Angel of the Lord will find Hagar, exhort her to return to Sarai and gives her some information about the child she will have. Ishmael is then born.

Thirteen years will pass then God will appear to Abram. He will challenge Abram to walk before Him and be blameless.

God will then repeat His covenant promise to Abram and change Abram's name to Abraham.

God will then commission Abraham to keep His covenant and explains what it means for Abraham, and his descendants, to be covenant keepers—something that will involve circumcision, which we see for the first time in the Scriptures.

Abraham is informed that Sarai's name will be changed to Sarah. That it will not be Ishmael, but the son of Sarah who will be the child of promise.

God assures blessings for Ishmael, even though he is not the covenant child.

Chapter seventeen ends with everybody being circumcised.

I. Points of Emphasis

Since there aren't any major points of difficulty in these chapters, let us start by examine some of the points of emphasis we see highlighted in these two chapters.

Sarai's Plan

“Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. ³ Then

Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan" (Genesis 16:1-3).

What Do We Expect?

Let's start with a question. What are you expecting to happen as a result of your "Christian experience" and when are you expecting it to happen? What am I waiting to happen in my church, family, life? What is it supposed to look like and when is it supposed to happen?

Helping God

Sarai decides it will be a good idea for Abram to have a child with her maidservant, Hagar. It had been ten years since God's promise to Abraham (verse 3) and yet, He had granted no child. There's no indication that Sarai was merely pining away for a baby. She could have gotten a baby by some other, less intimate, means. Let us point out, by the way, Sarai's plan is not a practice approved of by God.

What is more likely is that this was Sarai's plan for fulfilling God's covenant. God makes promises, but surely He doesn't ask us to do nothing at all! We're not to just sit in a closet and hope our wives get pregnant! Yet at the same time, we must be careful not to take God's matters into our own hands. How do we know the difference? Surely Sarai shouldn't have done nothing at all. But she shouldn't have done this either. She should have been with her husband.

Success?

There is possibility of great danger in the church, and in our own personal lives, when we determine success (if this be the best word) by means observable results, rather than obedience, e.g., having a good crowd or apparent enthusiasm can easily be interpreted as the movement of the Holy Spirit. But a good crowd is not the command of God, nor is enthusiasm necessarily good (Romans 10:2). Faith in the cross of Christ and obedience to the law of God are the earmarks of biblical success.

Problems at Home!

"So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong *be* upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge

between you and me.”⁶ So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid *is* in your hand; do to her as you please.” And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence” (Genesis 16:4-6).

The Fruit of Man’s Efforts

We see the fruit of Sarai’s plan—versus God’s plan—quite quickly. God is a God of peace. Faith in Him and obedience to Him will result in peace with Him, and peace among His children. The moment we supplant the wisdom of God with the schemes of men, we plants seeds of division.

Bitter Women

Hagar may have been content to be a maidservant. But now a wife and, soon-to-be mother, it seems she despised Sarai and her own subservient role. Sarai was now competition. Similar to Hannah (1 Samuel 1:2-8) there can be great bitterness between women, especially within the family context. It seems that Abram, the father of the faithful, had problems on the home-front.

Abram the Shirker

Sarai approaches Abram with her complaint. The wording is difficult here but she seems to be trying to place blame (without insufficient reason) on Abram. Abram shirks his responsibility. He offers no wisdom or advice. “Do to her as you please” is his only response. Sarai, deals harshly with her. Sarai, and otherwise honorable woman, was capable of being quite caustic. She was mean enough to drive Hagar into the wilderness. This is a warning to all of us. Don’t underestimate how much of a jerk you can be given the proper (or improper) circumstances.

The Angel of the Lord

“Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.⁸ And He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.”⁹ The Angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.”¹⁰ Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.”¹¹ And the Angel of the LORD said to her: “Behold, you *are* with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has heard your affliction.¹² He shall be a wild

man; His hand *shall be* against every man, And every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”¹³ Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?”¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, *it is* between Kadesh and Bered.¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Genesis 16:7-15).

Found by God

Hagar, similar to how her son would be, would rather plunge herself into the desert than submit to Sarai. She doesn't seek after God, but the Angel of the Lord (perhaps a theophany—a visual manifestation of God Himself, or at least one who speaks for God) seeks after her.

Submission Made Easy

He exhorts her to return and submit to Sarai. It is amazing how much more secure we can be in submitting to questionable leadership when we understand the sovereignty of God. Especially when it comes to husbands. But it can be bosses or elders also. Return to work. Return to your husband/wife.

Blessing of Ishmael

The comments regarding Ishmael are to be understood primarily dealing with his progeny. God comforts Hagar that Ishmael will not be disregarded, at least by Him. Ishmael means “God hears”. What we see in these comments regarding Ishmael's progeny is limited favor. Ishmael will not be the child of promise. The Arabs are descendants of Ishmael. Israel and, eventually, Jesus would come from Isaac. Nevertheless, we should not look at this as a curse, but a comfort—realizing that many of Ishmael's descendants would, like the descendants of Japheth, dwell in the tents of Shem (become Christians).

Hagar's eyes are opened to see God. The well is therefore named “the well of the living one seeing me.” She goes back and Ishmael is born.

The Covenant

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I *am* Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. ² “And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: ⁴ “As for Me,

behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. ⁵ **“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.** ⁶ **“I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.** ⁷ **“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.** ⁸ **“Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (Genesis 17:1-8).**

Thirteen years go by. A total of almost twenty-five years since the promise was first given (Genesis 12:1-4). Ishmael is entering manhood. A trial is brewing for Abram, who apparently had great affection for Ishmael.

A Cavalier Attitude

God calls Abram to righteous living. Almost a hundred years old and yet there is still the exhortation to righteous living. You'd think he'd be doing pretty well by then. It's easy to start feeling pretty comfortable in our relationship with God. We begin to think and things are pretty well worked out, and maybe they are. But developing a cavalier attitude in our relationship to God is not a sign of growth—it is a sign of foolishness. God is about to repeat His covenant promise to Abram. Abram listens with his face on the ground. This implies respect for the word of God.

When I first became a Christian I was nervous about going to church. God is there! As years went by I realized that most the people there were just as dim as I. I developed a very casual attitude about it all. I started to forget that in a very special and consecrated way, God was there. Church became like a concert. Only I am never late for a concert. Abram has his face on the ground. I can't imagine him coming to church to hear the word of God and participate in His sacraments fifteen minutes late, courting a grande mocha.

The Covenant Restated

His name is changed to Abraham (the father of a great multitude). He will be exceedingly fruitful. Nations and kings will come from him. This covenant will be to his descendants, an everlasting covenant. He mentions Canaan (a land which they would possess). We must, however, realize that Canaan has greater significance than a mere region in the middle east. It would come to typify deliverance from the slavery of sin. Since we have discussed this in great detail elsewhere, I'll not pursue this here.

The sign of the covenant is then presented in verses nine through fourteen. We will address this momentarily. For now we'll jump ahead.

Sarai to Sarah

“Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶ “And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a *mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall be from her.” ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a *child* be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a *child*?” (Genesis 17:15-17).

Miraculous Births—By God Alone

Sarai's name will now be changed to “a princess”. It is God's plan to fulfill His covenant, over and against Sarah's plan. It will not be Ishmael, but Isaac who will be the child of promise. His birth, will be one of many miraculous births leading to the ultimate miraculous birth. All this demonstrating that it is in no way the power of man that accomplishes the reconciliation between a sinful world and a holy God. Abraham's laughter, since he is not chastised for it the way Sarah will be later, probably should not be taken as mockery or doubt, but either joy or surprise.

What About Ishmael?

“And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!” ¹⁹ Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, *and* with his descendants after him. ²⁰ “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ “But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” ²² Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham” (Genesis 17:18-22).

Benevolent Within His Character

Abraham, who is no doubt emotionally tied to Ishmael by now, pleads for Ishmael. To what extent we do not know. Perhaps he wants God to fulfill His covenant through Ishmael or just that God would be gracious to Ishmael. God

would be gracious to Ishmael, as discussed earlier, but His covenant would be through Isaac. God is gracious to men the way a good father is gracious to his children. But the benevolence of a good father must never violate the boundaries of his own righteous character. God's goodness toward man will not be overturned by man.

Circumcising Everybody

“So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. ²⁴ Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵ And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶ That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; ²⁷ and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him” (Genesis 17:23-27).

Abraham must have had quite a relationship with the members of his household to be able to do this. There doesn't seem to be any mention of rebellion or uprising. The heads of many households today have a hard time accomplishing this, even with something as painless as baptism.

II. Primary Emphasis

Keeping the Covenant

“And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ “This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; ¹¹ “and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² “He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. ¹³ “He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall

be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Genesis 17:9-14)

How To Keep the Covenant

God tells Abraham that Abraham will keep His covenant, as will his descendants. So how does one go about keeping God’s covenant? Often people understand this as a works salvation. God explains the keeping of the covenant as circumcision. Covenants were often engraved in stone. This covenant would be engraved in the flesh. So Abraham, and his descendants, would be keepers of the covenant by performing the sacrament of circumcision. For twenty-first century westerners, this seems as bizarre as can be. But it must be pretty important, so let’s see if we can get to the bottom of this.

A Sign

Circumcision is a sign, a sacrament. What is it a sign of? 1) Similar to baptism, it is a sign of inclusion among the people of God (Exodus 12:48; Matthew 28:19). 2) Similar to baptism, it denotes the need for purification from sin (Exodus 6:30; Colossians 2:13;). 3) Similar to baptism, it points to the need for remission of sin (Jeremiah 4:4; Acts 2:38). 4) Similar to baptism, it is a sign of justification by faith

“And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still uncircumcised*,...” (Romans 4:11).

“There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

And, as we see from the text before us (Genesis 17:12,13), circumcision, like baptism, is performed on entire households (Acts 10:48; 16:15; 1 Corinthians 1:16).

It’s Not How Good We Are

All this I bring before us that we might know that circumcision has nothing to do with works righteousness. Abraham’s keeping the covenant had nothing to do with his ability to save himself. Abraham’s descendants, keeping the covenant, has nothing to do with how good their performance in holiness happens to be. Our keeping the covenant, as new covenant Christians—as descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:29)—has nothing to do with the excellence

of our behavior (even though in light of God's covenant, Abraham is called to walk blameless, as are we).

Keeping the Sign/Message=Keeping the Covenant

Where is all this headed? The keeping of the covenant, seems to be the keeping of the sacrament, and arguably the message and words surrounding the sacrament. In other words, when a church fails to bring forth the sacraments and preach and proclaim justification by faith—which is the message of the sacrament—they become covenant breakers.

It really makes all the sense in the world. If we decide, as a church, that our message is going to revolve around us being better people, rather than us being a people who, by faith, trust not in ourselves for salvation, but in Christ alone, then we have taken the first step away from being the covenant people of God. We have not kept the covenant, but have discarded it. What does the Apostle mean in Romans 10?

“But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down *from above*) ⁷ or, “ ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 10:6-11).

Arena of Works or Faith?

In short, the righteousness of faith does not ask, “Am I good enough to make it to heaven or so bad I'll end up in hell.” It doesn't operate in that arena whatsoever. It operates on faith (once again, a faith which will produce goodness). But it is not him who works (that is for salvation—Romans 4:4) but him who believes (in Jesus—the covenant promise) who will be saved. The arena the church must operate within, is the arena of justification or salvation by faith. When it leaves that arena, it has broken the covenant.

Let us be covenant keepers—participating in the sacraments and believing in what they stand for. Trusting not in ourselves, but in the Son of God who has met all the covenant demands—who has fulfilled all righteousness for the sake of His bride, the church.

Questions for Study

1. What are you expecting out of your “Christian experience” and how will you know when you’ve attained it (page 3)?
2. What was Sarai seeking to accomplish with her idea involving Hagar (page 3)?
3. How do you know when you’ve taken matters into your own hands (page 3)?
4. What are the earmarks of biblical “success” (page 3)?
5. What was the first fruit of Sarai’s plan (page 4)?
6. Did Hagar seek God or vice-versa (page 5)?
7. What did the angel exhort Hagar to do (page 5)? Discuss submission.
8. What kind of blessings would come to Ishmael (page 5)?
9. What was Abram’s response when the word of God came to him (page 6)?
10. Why do you suppose we become so cavalier regarding church (page 6)?
11. When it comes to births, how do we see God’s covenant fulfilled by Him alone (page 7)?
12. What do you see as the primary emphasis of these chapters?
13. Of what is circumcision a sign (page 9)? How does it resemble baptism (page 9)?
14. Does keeping the covenant mean we’re good enough to go to heaven?
15. What does it mean for the church to “keep the covenant” (page 10)?
16. Why is it important for Christians, the church, to keep the covenant?