

"The Sign of the Covenant"
Sermon Series on
A Faithful God for a Fallen People #4
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(Gen. 17:1-27)

Introduction.

Friendship is a special bond. There are feelings we have and commitments we make that are unique to relationships with people we call our friends. Sometimes we've known a friend for a lifetime, and on other occasions our friends are people we've just met.

I think of my friend Jim Singleton. I met Jim in 1985 at a conference in Kansas City for young pastors. We made an instant connection, so much so that each of us thought we had met each another somewhere before. But we were mistaken. It turns out that our paths almost crossed on three different occasions, and we had heard about each other before, but we had never actually met. But we made up for lost time since then, and other than Lorie he's my dearest and closest friend in the world.

This morning we read of someone else who also had a significant friendship. His name is Abraham. But Abraham's friendship wasn't with someone he met at a conference. Rather, his friend was the King of heaven, and in the passage we've read this morning Abraham is called "the friend of God."

Take all the emotions and the power of the whole notion of friendship and apply it to one's relationship with God, and you'll find something very special there. Think of a close friend you have. Think about all your feelings for that person, and your commitment to that individual. Now, stop and ponder the fact that Abraham was called "the friend of God" in the Bible. It's rather amazing, don't you think?

What we'll see in this passage is the truth that with friendship comes obligation and commitment. Abraham and God weren't simply casual friends. Rather, they entered into a *covenant of friendship* which was marked in a special way, and that is the subject of my message this morning. As we consider Genesis 17 today, I want you to notice three things in particular: the promise of the covenant; the sign of the covenant; and being marked for God.

I. The Promise of the Covenant.

The last few weeks we've been studying the way in which God made a promise to Abraham that he would be given a child who would be an heir. When Abraham was 75 years old, God told him to go outside and count the stars in the sky. And

the Lord said to the patriarch, "So shall your offspring be." But Abraham and Sarah waited and waited on God to fulfill His promise, but still no child.

Eleven years later Sarah came up with an idea of her own, and she suggested that Abraham sleep with her servant, Hagar, with the notion that at least he would have a child of his own flesh and blood to be an heir. In effect Sarah was saying to God, "Let me help you out. If you're not going to come through for us, I'll give you a hand." However, tragically, the idea ended badly with envy and the mistreatment of Hagar and her son after Ishmael's birth. The problems our world is facing all around the globe today between Arabs and Jews can be traced back to this one awful decision.

And now another 12 years have passed in silence. No new message from God, no new event recorded in the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis... until. Here in Genesis 17 comes a surprising revelation. The covenant was renewed with an astonishing prediction and sealed with a sacramental rite. The divine side of the friendship consisted of promises so incredible as to become a test of faith, and on the human side of the friendship it involved trust, sacrifice and obedience.

God said, *"I am God Almighty [El Shaddai]... You will be the father of many nations,...and kings will come from you....The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien [a refugee], I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you, and I will be their God" (17:1,3,6,8).*

Abraham laughed at the thought of an heir, and he wondered how in the world a son could be born to him at such an old age and to a wife who was barren. But God is in the business of miracles, and He is able to turn our mourning into laughter and our sorrow into joy. He can do the impossible, and He is able to bring something out of nothing. Amazingly, Abraham took God at His word, and he believed that what the Lord said would come true. His human reason gave way to faith, and he gave glory to God being fully assured that what God had promised He was going to do (Rm. 4:21).

When Abraham bowed down in reverence, he received a new name. He was no longer to be known as Abram, which means "exalted father," but now as Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." Sarah's name was to be changed, too, from Sarai to Sarah. Both names mean "princess, but now the Lord also stressed that she was to be the mother of nations and kings. In changing their names, they were living out in faith that God would somehow work a miracle and give them a son. If God failed to bring it about, they would be the laughing stock of the neighborhood – an old man without a direct heir by his wife being called "father of a multitude." How ridiculous is that?!

As I've reflected on these things, I have thought about a time when I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in India on a short-term mission trip. During that trip I had the privilege of watching a baptism service for people who had just

come to faith in Jesus Christ in a very remote village called Sevrappoli. They were coming out of Hinduism and Islam to a new and living faith in Jesus Christ, and the service was a public one as a testimony to the people of the village as well as to the members of the church.

Each of the people who were baptized were given a new name by the pastor after they came up out of the water. They were given a biblical name which signified a break with the past and their new life in Christ. For example, the pastor would say, "You are now Mary, a believer in Jesus Christ. May you be as the mother of our Lord who was willing to be the handmaiden of God." Or, "You are now Stephen. May you be like the deacon in the early church who had a servant's heart and was willing to sacrifice everything for Jesus."

A change of person's name was a significant event in Scripture, and it marked a new chapter in the individual's life as they took hold of God's promises in a new way. That was true for Abraham and Sarah here in Genesis 17, and it's still true today for people in India who embrace Christianity for the first time.

II. The Sign of the Covenant.

"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised..." (17:10-12).

A couple of weeks ago, I shared with you a conversation that I imagined Abraham might have had with God when the Lord told him about circumcision and how it was to be the sign of their covenant relationship. I suggested that Abraham might have said, "Noah got a rainbow. Can't we come up with something like that? How about we establish a secret handshake, or maybe we can make up special code of some kind? How about that, Lord?"

Circumcision is not a subject that we talk about easily in the church, especially in mixed company or with kids present. It involves a knife ritual and the male reproductive organ. I'm not going to take time now to explain it in detail, but if you'd like to know more, you can come up after the service, and I'm sure that the Rev. Petey Crowder will be happy give a full explanation of what exactly is involved. Or you can ask one of the pediatricians in our church!

However, the theological concepts here are very important. So, despite the delicate nature of the subject, I want to take some time to discuss them. Why did God require this unusual ritual to be the sign of His covenant of friendship with Abraham and his descendants after him? It wasn't for reasons of health or to ensure good hygiene that God commanded it. Rather, it was through circumcision

that Abraham and his descendants were to be *marked* as a people separated unto the Lord.

In circumcision God wanted to carve in the flesh of His people an unmistakable symbol of the holy relationship into which they were entering with Almighty God. It was to serve as a constant reminder that they were to be different from all the people around them in the land of Canaan, and their relationship with the Lord was to cut to the heart of everything they were and everything they stood for. It was a bloody sacrifice that marked the individual.

Several years ago I heard a pastor named Jack Hayford speak on the subject of circumcision, and he pointed out three ways in which circumcision was a call to be God's person. He talked about the ways in which it cuts to the heart of our relationship with God.

First, he said that circumcision cuts to the heart of our **identity – who we are**. Whenever a baby is born, the doctor uses one means of identifying whether the baby is a boy or a girl. One look and immediately you know. Circumcision cuts to the heart of our identity – how we are known. Who we are, and our sense of place and purpose in the world should all be marked by God. And if we ever draw our sense of identity in a primary way by anything else, then we diminish the importance of our identity in Christ.

Second, Jack Hayford said that circumcision cuts to the heart of **what we do**. The mark of circumcision was performed on the male sexual organ of reproduction, so in a sense it represents all that a man can produce or accomplish. Our achievements, our work, our labor, even our children, are all to be marked by God and His covenant love for us. All that we do, all that we accomplish, and all we try to achieve is supposed to be set apart unto the Lord.

Finally, Hayford said that circumcision cuts to the heart of the **way we live our lives when no one is watching**. Circumcision was performed on the private parts of a man. It's a part of the body that isn't seen, that's hidden away. This speaks to the way in which the private and unseen areas of our lives should also be marked by our covenant with God. When no one else is looking, when no one else is around, the believer's life should be marked by holiness and faithfulness to his or her friendship with the Lord.

I think these are powerful insights. Who we are, what we do, and the way we live our lives in secret should all be marked by God and our relationship with Him. That's what circumcision is all about, and this symbol of covenant friendship was carved into the flesh of the people of Israel.

Now, in the New Testament baptism replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant relationship between God and His people. But the principles still hold true for us as Christians even though the mark of the covenant has changed. The apostle Paul picks up on this in many of his letters when he talks about having

a “circumcision of the heart.” He rejected the notion that some Jewish believers were espousing in his day, namely that to really be accepted by God you had to not only believe in Jesus but also be circumcised physically. Instead of that whole idea, Paul called his fellow Christians to a spiritual “circumcision of the heart.”

Listen to what Paul writes in the book of Romans. *"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Rm. 2:29,30).* Again Paul writes in Colossians, *"In [Christ] you were circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Col. 2:11,12).*

Do you see what Paul is saying here? It's only as we understand the spiritual meaning of circumcision that we can truly enter into the fullness of what it means to be a friend of God. We've got to come to the point where we're willing to pray, "O God, take the knife in Your hand and even though it may cost me, cut away from my life all that isn't pleasing to You in order that I may be marked in my heart by Your covenant love and live in a manner that is different from my neighbors who don't know Your Son."

One additional observation. As Presbyterians we believe that the sign of the covenant continues to be offered to children, just like it was in the Old Testament. Even as infants were included as a part of the covenant community and infant boys were circumcised, so children are included in the covenant community of the church in the New Testament. And now little girls can also receive the sign of God's covenant love in baptism. God allows everyone to participate, and He invites everyone to be included.

III. Marked for God.

Do you love Jesus enough to be marked as belonging to Him? I'm told that's why some Christian young people nowadays are interested in getting tattoos. They want to be physically marked for Jesus with a symbol like a cross, or a fish, or verse of Scripture. That's never been appealing to me, but I understand the logic, and in some ways I admire the devotion.

However, I have to confess that I still hope my kids and grandkids don't get tattoos. In some ways that's too easy. The real question is: Are you willing to be different from the world around you? Not necessarily physically different with a tattoo or something carved in your flesh, but in your heart, in the secret places when no one is watching? Are you willing to be distinctive for Christ and to bear

the mark of God's covenant love in all that you do and say, even if no one else around you is willing to go that way?

How distinctive are you for Christ? In what ways are you different from the people around you who don't know Jesus in your neighborhood, at work, or at school? Are you just like everyone else, or is there something that sets you apart for Christ? And what would circumcision of the heart look like for you today?

I think back to the baptism service in India I attended. The service involved a procession through the streets of the village and out to the rice fields where the new believers were baptized. In one sense it was humiliating for them, because the people in the village thought it was absurd. Some of them even laughed and giggled at how ridiculous they thought these Christians were. The baptism of these new converts told the non-believing world around them that they belonged to Christ, and they were willing to be different from the rest of the people of the village regardless of the cost. I really admire that.

Conclusion.

When I was a boy growing up, I remember hearing about some kids who became what they called "blood brothers." It involved cutting their hands and joining them together so that their blood mixed. It was a symbol of how deep their friendship was. They were willing to endure pain and sacrifice with a knife ritual and the shedding of blood in order to symbolize just how much they were committed to each other. If I had met Jim Singleton back when we were kids, I might have done that with him. He is that dear a friend to me.

In the sign of the covenant with circumcision, and then again in the death of Jesus on the cross we see this same idea expressed. You see, on the cross of Calvary Jesus became our ultimate "blood brother" because He gave everything He had to demonstrate just how much He loved us and how committed He is to us. What an amazing covenant friend Jesus is to you and me.

Have you become a friend of God in the covenant sense of the word? Have you been cut to the heart? Are you marked by Christ? I encourage you today, be distinctive for Jesus in the coming week by how you live, especially when no one is watching, and be marked by a circumcision of the heart, which really is the best sign of a covenant of love. Amen.