

God's Covenant With Abram (2)

Genesis 17 and 18

Covenant Renewal

The covenant now in discussion is essentially the same as that of Genesis 15, made about 16 years earlier. God does not change the once-given promise. He also does not give a bare repetition. But He does give additional light. Questions which had remained unanswered for Abram, questions concerning the whys and the whens, have not reached their solution.

Meanwhile, Abram had reached the age of 99. And this was the first time since the revelation of Genesis 15 that God appeared to him, in a way unknown to us.

This time He made Himself known as God Almighty, so that Abram might realize from the very first that He is that God for Whom nothing is too miraculous, now that he was going to hear miraculous things. He also commanded Abram to walk perfectly before Him, which means here: to live out of the covenant promise (which had not been the case when Abram begot Ishmael). And then the LORD announced the renewing of His covenant with the assurance that He would make him exceedingly fruitful. Thereby the thought that God might change the covenant to Abram's disadvantage was prevented right from the start. This then was the necessary preparation for the LORD's subsequent revelation. When Abram heard it he threw himself down on his face in reverent submission.

The first word that the LORD then speaks is the renewed promise: "Behold, My covenant is with you . . .," in other words: behold, *I* give you My

promise. The Hebrew has no word to indicate the promise of God, the covenant promise, but the Greek does have one, in the New Testament. In the Old Testament we find expressions such as: My covenant with you, and similar statements (Numbers 25:12, 13; Isaiah 59:21; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 16:60; etc.). The word “My” indicates: “(the covenant) on My part.” In other words, “on *My* part, I give you my promise.” This promise consists of four parts:

1. Abram will become “the father of a multitude of nations,” and in connection therewith his name is changed from Abram (meaning: my father is exalted) to Abraham (meaning: father of a multitude). Here, for the first time, the name “father” is used. And God will make him exceedingly fruitful, he will make nations of him, even kings shall come forth from him. Naturally this refers primarily to Israel, but also to all other nations. By the light of the New Testament it is clear that there is a deeper meaning. As far as Israel is concerned the promise is to that nation, but it also applies to the heathens (Acts 2:37-39; Romans 4:11, 12, 16, 17a; also John 8:39, 44; Romans 9:6, 7). There are two kinds of seed; the true seed are only those who are of the true faith. The others are those who are disobedient and unfaithful.

2. The promise applies even to the most remote descendants, who are included in the covenant. It is an everlasting covenant. In the promise made to Abraham, God binds Himself also the descendants of Abraham throughout their generations, making it eternally valid.

3. Furthermore, God promises him all of Canaan for an everlasting possession. Although this also applies first of all to Israel, it has again a deeper significance (Hebrews 11:13-15; compare Hebrews 4:1-3a, 9).

4. Finally God promises to be their God. He gives Himself to them.

To this four-part promise God also adds a requirement: that of *circumcision* as a sign of the covenant: “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, throughout their generations. This is my covenant . . . every male among you shall be circumcised.” Here God’s covenant is the requirement, the commandment which has to be kept (see

Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 11, 15; 29:9; 1 Kings 8:21, etc. regarding the covenant as command). “He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.” And then once again it is emphasized: “both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” It is worthy of note that:

1. Circumcision must be performed on the eighth day after birth. The choice of this day probably is related to the law which was given later, and in which this clause is also included. According to the Levitical law the mother was completely unclean, as with her menstruation, and therefore the child was also unclean by contact. For the following 33 days this uncleanness was still in effect, but to a lesser extent: she was not allowed to touch any sacred object. On the eighth day the child had to be circumcised, which took place at home. God wished to demonstrate the fact of original sin to Israel by this matter of uncleanness (Leviticus 12:2, 3; compare Leviticus 15:19). Does circumcision still apply? We know it has been replaced by baptism, but that also is called “circumcision” in Scripture (Colossians 2:11, 12) where it is referred to as the circumcision of Christ, or, freely translated, Christian circumcision, namely, baptism. The external symbol has changed, but the meaning has remained identical. As with the bloody sacrament sin is symbolically cut away, so it is washed away in baptism.

2. Not only those who were born in the house (the household) were to be circumcised, but also those who were made members of the household by purchase (slaves). We should not forget, however, that circumcision was not given as simply as, for instance, an identity card or another mark of identity is given. Abraham instructed his house (18:19; as we also know concerning Eliezer and Hagar) and we may assume that some instruction will have been given before this time, compare Matthew 28:19; Acts 8:36-38.

3. “An everlasting covenant.” By the sign of circumcision the covenant is made public and this will always remain so. It applies also to baptism

in the New Testament. We can undoubtedly also learn from this that it is of eternal significance for everyone, namely, in the blessing *and* in the curse. Those who refused the sign of the covenant had to be destroyed, removed from their place among their countrymen; fathers who refused the sign for their sons were to be punished in the same way (Exodus 4:24-26).

The Promise of a Son Out of Sarah

The LORD also changes Sarai's name; she is now called Sarah. The meaning, Princess, remains the same, but the old name had become old-fashioned. Sarah was a more modern name, younger; and so it attracted more attention. This rejuvenation of her name is probably related to the rejuvenation of Sarah. For although the natural possibility of bearing a child had disappeared, Sarah would nevertheless give Abraham a son. Out of her also nations would come forth, but here it refers to natural descendants only. She does not become a "mother of believers" and her name does not refer to her office. God made His covenant with Abraham, not with her as well. She was included in her husband. Compare Hebrews 11:11, 12, where we do not read "from one woman," but "from one man."

Abraham's reaction was that once again he threw himself to the ground and laughed with joy. He expressed his astonishment by saying to himself: "Shall a child be born to one who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" Almost unbelievable, and yet true! We cannot accept that Abraham's laughing was a result of unbelief, for then it would have been a great sin, and the name given to the child would have been a lasting shame. The expression "he laughed" in Hebrew is: *yitschaak*—and God takes this word as a name, Isaac—meaning: a child that causes one to laugh with holy joy. Moreover, Paul writes that the promise was given . . . in the presence of God in whom he believed. That is, God spoke to Abraham when he was before His face; He Who gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist (Romans 4:17-20). It is true, Abraham does now fear the rejection of Ishmael, for whom he also asks the covenant blessing, but God refuses, although He will give him the blessing of a numerous posterity. On the other hand, God will establish His covenant with Isaac as an everlasting

covenant. After God leaves him, Abraham shows his acceptance of the covenant by circumcising everyone, on that same day.

The Last Announcement of Isaac's Birth

Later that summer, when Abraham was again seated in the door of his tent, in the heat of the day, he suddenly became aware of three men approaching.

He did not know them, but, being a hospitable person, he went out to them and politely invited them to sit down in the shade of the trees while he served them with water to rinse off their dusty feet, and with food to strengthen them before they travelled on.

They accepted his invitation, so he quickly went to Sarah's part of the tent, urging her hastily to prepare some cakes of bread while he went to a nearby herd of cattle for a calf, tender and good, which he gave to a servant to prepare. He himself prepared the meal, supplemented with milk and butter, and while the men ate, he remained on his feet like a servant to wait on his guests.

After the meal they asked where Sarah was, and when Abraham replied that she was in the tent behind them, He spoke: "I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." We may assume that Abraham, remembering the promise, will at this time have begun to realize that it was the LORD Who spoke. This was a new appearance of God, accompanied by two angels, as is shown by what happens. Now He appeared in the form of a man. Perhaps in a temporary body, in any case not in an illusionary body, for they did eat and drink.

Sarah, standing in the entrance to her tent, heard it too. Because they spoke aloud, we do not have to think that she was secretly listening in. Although she will undoubtedly have heard of God's previous conversations with her husband, she laughed to herself, thinking it impossible because of their great age.

However, the LORD knew it, and asked why Sarah laughed, and spoke thus in herself. "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" He asked, and

once again the promise was emphatically repeated. By now she too must have become aware of the fact that it was the LORD, and being afraid, she denied it, but He spoke: “No, but you did laugh.”

Sarah was made to see the sinfulness of her unbelief, and the sinful foolishness of trying to deceive God. At the same time she was being prepared for the fact that the child would not come of itself; and that she indeed accepted the promise in faith follows from the fact that she became pregnant, receiving the power thereto (Hebrews 11:11). God’s promises are being fulfilled in the way of faith.

Abraham’s Plea for Sodom

When his three guests departed, going towards Sodom, Abraham accompanied them. How far? We don’t know. Tradition indicates a place to the east of Hebron, from where one can see a part of the Dead Sea between the mountains, but we can’t be sure. Neither are we informed about everything they talked about while they were walking the distance, which probably lasted a few hours. But the fact that Abraham was even allowed to walk with God is already very significant. It reminds us of a time, much later, when the Lord Jesus walked the dusty roads of Canaan with His disciples. It also reminds us of the way friends are together. And has Abraham not been called a friend of God (Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23)? We do know that towards the end of the journey God revealed to Abraham His intentions regarding Sodom: He would go down to the plain to see, as Judge, whether the reports which had reached Him were true; sin calls for punishment.

But first came God’s reflection to tell Abraham what He was going to do. This reflection has been revealed, of course, otherwise we would not know about it. God’s first motive for telling Abraham was this: Abraham was to become a great nation, so he was destined to teach his children as a good father, and transmit, either by word of mouth or by writing, and also by his example, to his descendants the house-rule of the covenant: the covenant blessing, but also the covenant curse. God’s second motive was that because of Abraham’s office as father, he needed to know what would happen to Sodom, and why.

After the two angels have been sent away to fulfill their task, Abraham remains in God's presence.

Beautiful and moving is his intercession for the "righteous" and with them for the whole city, in case there should be 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, or even 10 righteous people in it.

Up to this point God has listened to Abraham. He will spare a country or a place if His people are there, but there is a limit. We shall see how there was no hope for that rotten place on earth, where not even five righteous people could be found.

This can teach us two things: the value of the prayers of the church for the continued existence and temporary welfare of the world, and the importance of the church and its believing members for the prolonging of the life-span of this godless earth.

While God's wrath is kindled against sin, He will listen to the prayers for mercy of the church which bases its pleas upon His long suffering.

Then the Lord went on His way, and Abraham returned to his tents.

Questions

1. Why is there no covenant *act* in this chapter, as in Genesis 15?
2. Why did God first give the promise here, while in Genesis 2 the demand comes first and the promise is not even specifically mentioned; Adam was only able to deduce it from, for instance, the meaning of the tree of life?
3. What is the purpose of mentioning even kings in 17:6?
4. What was the sense, the purpose, and the meaning of circumcision?
5. Why was the Lord Jesus also circumcised?
6. Does Christian circumcision (baptism) mean the same?

7. How does 17:14 relate to not being baptized?
8. Does 17:12 also apply to adopted children?
9. What did God mean with His “return” in 18:10?
10. How do we know that Abraham hastened to do as God commanded?
11. Did Jesus also appear in a temporary body after His resurrection (Luke 24:30, 31, 42, 43)?
12. How do we solve the seeming paradox between Abraham’s intercession and John 17:9?