

Foundations: A New Name
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September 19, 2021
Luke 3:7-18; Romans 2:28-29; Genesis 17

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 17. May God bless the reading of His holy, perfect, and faithful Word. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. 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, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner -- those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen; Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that same day. And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him."

In 2016, a poll found that 29% of Americans have a tattoo, with 47% of millennials saying they have one. That number had gone up 8% in just four years. Tattoos are everywhere you look, and they aren't limited to any one group or class of people either. While tattooing has been around for about 5,000 years, it has become a trend. Surprising people in history have had tattoos. You might not be surprised that the Prime Minister of England during World War II, Winston Churchill, had a tattoo. You might be surprised to learn that his mother did too.

A lot of tattoo artists are asked for similar things – pictures of nature, favorite sports team insignias, inspirational quotes. But most tattoo artists will also tell you that many people come in together in groups to get the same tattoo as kind of a bonding ritual. I remember seeing this kind of idea in movies about soldiers all getting the same tattoo. But now, mothers and daughters do the same thing. It's part of saying, "We're in this together." And most people who get tattoos are trying to make a personal statement about who they are. And when they want to change that statement, there's also now a huge market in laser tattoo removal.

I bring up the subject of tattoos because it's probably the closest thing we have today that we understand in the same way that we should understand today's passage. When we think about the practice of circumcision today that God commanded of Abraham and all his people after him, we might be surprised or even disturbed. We might search for logical answers why God asked His people to do this. But we also live in an era when a huge chunk of our society makes statements about themselves, who they are, who they ally with and what group they belong to, through a typically permanent mark. We're going to talk about the deeper meanings of what is going on here and how God works in similar ways through His church today, how God sets us apart for His Kingdom.

Let's take just a moment to remember where we've been. Abram was made great promises by God of a land and a people. Abram believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness. God has made the promise to Abram several times in various ways. We even saw how God cut a covenant with Abram, putting the covenant obligations on Himself, making the promise that the consequences of a broken covenant would fall on Himself – and we eventually see that in Christ, who in His sacrifice on the cross made a way for us to draw near to God despite our inability to be holy and fulfill our end of the agreement.

Yet despite Abram's faith, we also saw a huge failure in last week's passage. Sarai his wife put together a plan where Abram would marry her handmaiden Hagar and fulfill God's promise through her. This not only created huge wreckage in their family life, it showed a lack of reliance on God to carry through with His promises. God made promises to Hagar that her son Ishmael would have a people as well. But when it came to trusting God to do what He had said, Abram and Sarai had gotten impatient and failed the test.

Now we're thirteen years later. Ishmael is now almost at the age of manhood. Abram is 99; Sarai is 89. God has not spoken since the bungled plan went so disastrously. There's been plenty of time to reflect on the situation they have brought about. No doubt there is still animosity in the camp between Hagar and Sarai. And if there was any question before about the possibility of children, the additional 13 years have put those out of mind.

That's where we start this week. God once again speaks to Abram, this time not only by his unpronounceable name we call YHWH but also a new title – El Shaddai, which means God Almighty. This title is one of sovereignty and power. It's for good reason God tells us this special name at this special time, because by His name He is telling Abram that He has ultimate authority and control over the situation. The plan to be carried out, the plan for Abram and Sarai to have a child in their twilight years, will occur not by their schemes or by the normal patterns of biology but by God Almighty, the only one who could make such a thing happen. It is at our weakest, at our most impossible moments, that's God's power shines through.

Then God calls Abram to walk before Him and be blameless, and God will confirm His covenant with Abram. (We'll talk more about the "blameless" part in a minute.) God spells out specific details of the covenant that we've never heard before. In Genesis 15, God told Abram how his people would be abused in Egypt for 400 years but come out far richer and take the land of Canaan. But now we get a glimpse even further into the future – that from Abram would come kings and nations. (For comparison, the first vision God gave Abram went 600 years into the future – these new relocations are what happen over a millennia after Abram's day.) We don't have a new covenant so much as the original covenant given depth and weight.

But there's more this time. Abram is no longer to be called Abram, which means "exalted father." Now he'll be called Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." Wherever he went, whenever anyone called his name, it would be a reminder of God's promise to him and a reminder of what was coming, a reminder that God had been faithful. Meanwhile, Sarai's name would be changed to Sarah. While the meaning of her name still remains "princess," now it takes on the greater meaning "mother of nations." Not only do their new names reflect their roles in God's plans, it also removes the last vestiges of the paganism that they were raised in. No longer do their names have any reference to foreign deities. They are now God's people named by Him with names reflecting how God will bless them.

This is where the story of Abraham and Sarah and our story crosses paths in a touching way, and it's this: *God gives us new names*. No, God doesn't give everyone a completely different name than they once had. It only happens a few times in Scripture directly. But it's important to note that names meant a great deal to the ancients about who you were. How you were addressed meant something.

Consider Abraham's grandson Jacob. We'll learn about him more in our study of Genesis. He was named for being second, for pulling at the heel of his twin brother Esau. But the LORD renames him Israel, which means, "He wrestles with God." Simon, the boisterous leader of the disciples, is renamed Peter, meaning "rock." And Simon, who was always quick to speak but slow to deliver, eventually becomes the rock Jesus named Him.

But think how others are addressed. Gideon, who was so scared of Midianite oppressors that he took to threshing wheat in a winepress to hide, was addressed by the angel of the LORD as "mighty warrior." God's angel goes to Mary, a poor girl in the wrong part of Israel in a nothing place called Nazareth, and he calls her "favored one" because she will bear the Messiah. Over and over, God states something that seems untrue and makes it true.

If you are a believer in Christ, you do not have the names that you once had. Now you are addressed by new names. Loved. Accepted. Forgiven. Chosen. Child of the one true King. Redeemed. Made holy. Set apart for the Lord. In 1 Peter 2:9-10, speaking to the whole church, Peter says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

When you have flashbacks to your old life, to your old sins, to mistakes that haunt you and frustrate you, mistakes whose repercussions still affect your life now, remember that you have new adjectives about your life given to you by God. And you don't have to worry that they'll be taken away because of mistakes in your future, because these new names aren't given to you because of your righteousness. They've been given to you because of the love and grace and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on your behalf, and that will never change.

Right alongside of that, though, comes God's command, God's way for Abraham to covenant with God, through having every male in his entire household circumcised, family and foreigner alike. And this is to be a lasting covenant command for Abraham's people – anyone who refuses to practice it will be cut off from them and cut off from God's promises. This was not an unknown practice in the ancient Near East; some places made it a ritual around puberty or marriage. But none of them practiced it as a sign of being part of the community or their faith.

What's fascinating to me is that this is not what we would think of as a righteous act. This is not like feeding the poor or giving shelter to the homeless or standing up for the wronged and oppressed. None of us would have this on our checklist of good deeds for the day! When you want to prove your devotion to God, this is not an idea that just comes up!

We might wonder why God chose this practice to set apart His people. Some theologians have tried to defend God by saying it was a cleanliness issue, but doctors can tell you it's not. Since it was practiced by other people groups, it wasn't something God told Abraham to do that would make his people completely unique. And while it's more like the tattoos we talked about earlier that bring people together under a common sign, it wasn't just about having a ritual that made you Jewish. It's deeper than that.

Two things. First, as our creator, *God has the right to tell us what to do in relationship with Him*. Second, as believers, *we obey seeking understanding*. We do not require understanding to obey. When a father sees his son in the street and a car is about to hit him, when that father says “run,” he doesn't want understanding, he wants obedience – for the good of his son. There's time afterwards to say, “there was a car coming.” And sometimes, God does explain what He is doing. But when His command is clear, we obey seeking understanding.

Sometimes that is hard. If we're serious about it, it's no more easy to understand Jesus' command to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. It's no more easy to understand Jesus teaching us to turn the other cheek, to bless those who curse us, to forgive seventy times seven. We do not do these things because they make sense to us from a worldly perspective. We do them because God calls us to do so and calls us blessed when we do.

So what is the deeper meaning here? Why this ritual? There are ways circumcision ties into the rest of the story we read in Scripture. First, we are in a war against the flesh. Our sin comes from our bodily desires and impulses. We trust in ourselves rather than in God. The sin of Sarai and Abram as putting trust in the flesh, trusting in an earthly compromise to give Abram an heir, rather than trusting in the promise of God. Circumcision is a symbolic way of saying that we do not put our trust in the flesh, of literally cutting off the flesh. It's a way of saying that we'll no longer do things our own way, but follow the path God sets out before us.

The second thing about circumcision is that it continues the theme that a covenant with God requires a sacrifice of blood, representing life, to mark His people. In the Exodus, the Israelites marked their homes so the angel of death would pass over their homes. In the law given to Moses, a series of sacrifices were described that would allow the people to draw near to God and for their sins to be overlooked. Even in circumcision, God sees the mark made by the knife, made by blood, and accepts those in Abraham's line as part of the covenant promises.

Throughout the Old Testament and into the New, we see circumcision as a sign of belonging to God. However, the physical act is not enough. In Deuteronomy 10, when Moses reads the Law to those who will be entering into the Promised Land, he tells the people to circumcise their hearts, to no longer be stubborn with God. And later in Deuteronomy, there is a promise that God will in fact do the job of circumcising their hearts and the hearts of their descendants so that they may love God with all their hearts and souls.

In the New Testament era, once Jesus has become the sacrifice for us, there is no longer a need for the physical act of circumcision. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul says that Jesus has circumcised all believers spiritually, cleansing us in baptism. And baptism is now the replacement sign of being a follower of Jesus. The mark of the believer is going under the waters of baptism, which symbolizes a death to the old self and new life in Christ. That's why we baptize infants, because we believe it is a sign and seal on them just like circumcision was for Abraham's descendants. And it's why we ask that those who take communion be baptized or to have confirmed their baptism as children, because baptism is our initial act of obedience to Christ, once again stating that we intend to be His and to die to our former way of life.

Let's take a look at Abraham's response. He falls facedown. He believes. Yet he also laughs. This plan of God's is beyond understanding. It is not a laugh of doubt; it is that the situation is wildly out of his hands. He brings up Ishmael, not because he doubts God can follow through, but because he is a good father who loves his son, even though he is not ultimately the promised child. God makes clear to Abraham the promises made to Hagar – Ishmael will become a nation as well. But the great promise, the covenant, is for Isaac, which means, "he laughs." God will come through. In circumcising the whole camp, Abraham shows he believes.

Friends, we've been given new names, new adjectives, by God. He has redeemed us through Jesus and made us whole. In baptism, we have something far better than a tattoo – we are marked and sealed with a promise like the one God made to Abraham through circumcision. May we not fall back into the people we used to be, with our own plans. Let us follow Christ, even when we do not fully understand the path He has placed us upon. For His way is best, and will lead us into His eternal Kingdom.