

# SERMON GUIDE

## Genesis: To Be Set Apart

### Genesis 17:1-14



3.24.2024

#### SERMON NOTES:

My guess is that you did not expect to come to church and talk about circumcision. Yet here we are devoting an entire sermon to the topic. In case you're wondering...yes, circumcision is exactly what you think it is. The Bible is not being allegorical here. This isn't symbolic. To be considered a part of the Abrahamic covenant, and, therefore, in right standing with God, men had to be physically circumcised. For women, you had to be under the headship of a circumcised man—either your father or husband.

I will be the first to admit, this seems very odd. That God would require circumcision at all is weird. But to make it the sign of the covenant is even stranger.

So, the question we're going to ask this morning is: Why did God require circumcision and what is He trying to teach us through it? Log that away in the back of your mind. We'll come back to that question later.

Last week, we went through the drama of Abram and Sarai. Because of their impatience and distrust, the chosen couple took matters into their own hands and tried to produce an heir through Hagar.

We saw how that turned out. Not only did their choices result in immediate family conflict, through Ishmael there would be problems for centuries to come that still exist today. To make matters worse, Hagar's surrogacy didn't even work. Ishmael is not the son of promise. That descendant must still come from the womb of Sarah by Abraham's seed.

There's a clear connection between the last verse of chapter 16 and verse 1 of our passage. Notice 16:16 says, "**Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.**" And 17:1 says, "**When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram.**" The connection is so clear one writer said, "*Moses intends that the reader understand that for some thirteen years now a cloud of domestic gloom and growing darkness about the promise had hung over the tents of Abram.*"

In our passage God is going to break through that cloud of failure by renewing His promises to Abram and calling him to holiness.

There are two parts to our passage.

1. The Lord Renews His Covenant with Abram (V.1-8).
2. The Lord Institutes Covenant Conditions (V.9-14)

**Point #1-The Lord Renews His Covenant with Abram (V.1-8)**

## **The Lord's Appearance (V.1-2)**

***1 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 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."***

At this point, Abram is 99 years old. That makes Sarah 89 and Ishmael 13. It's been 24 years since God first appeared to Abram. You can see why he might lose hope that God's promises would be fulfilled. The Lord doesn't do anything fast.

That's why God's name is so important. He said to Abram, "I am God Almighty." In Hebrew, El Shaddai. This name captures the power and sovereignty of God. God revealed this name more than 30 times to comfort Job in his affliction, and He uses it repeatedly with Abraham and His descendants to remind them of one thing—I am a God who always keeps His promises because my plans cannot be thwarted.

Christians, your God is El Shaddai—the omnipotent Sovereign who rules the world. Let this truth comfort you in your afflictions and strengthen you in your weakness.

As I said, God is renewing His covenant with Abram. In this covenant renewal, the Lord makes three promises—descendants, relationship, and land.

## **Promise #1-The LORD Will Multiply Abram's Descendants (V.3-6)**

***3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you."***

Abraham's response to God's appearance is worship, and God reminds him of His promises. The first promise is that God would make Abraham into a multitude of nations. This goes beyond the boundaries of Israel. Abram's descendants will populate the world.

Remember this has an immediate fulfillment and a new covenant fulfillment. For Abraham, his physical descendants would literally fill the earth. But the true sons of Abraham are those who have faith in Jesus (Galatians 3:7). Through the great commission and spread of the Christian gospel, the world is populated with the spiritual sons of Abraham called Christians.

We've discussed this before, but there are also some new elements introduced here.

For example, God changes Abram's name to Abraham. In the ancient world a name wasn't merely what you were called. A name conveyed the essence of who you are.

When I was at the airport in Israel, I was pulled aside by security and asked to give my name and country. Then they asked me what my name meant. I was like a deer in the headlights. I have no idea. Still don't. To them, your name is more than an ID. It's who you are.

For Abram to now be called Abraham means his identity changes. Abraham means the father of a multitude. So, his new name is connected to God's promise.

Another new aspect of this covenant is not only will Abraham father many nations, but kings will also come his line. 1,000 years from this event, Abraham's descendant David would sit upon Israel's throne, as would his descendants after him. Ultimately, this points to the true offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So, God promises descendants.

### **Promise #2-The LORD will be their God (V.7)**

***7 And 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.***

This promise has been implied, but now it is explicitly stated. The LORD is promising to be the God of Abraham and his descendants. They will not only believe God exists. Abraham and his offspring will know God personally. He will be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is a promise of salvation. To know God is eternal life.

Notice, the Lord says this is an everlasting covenant. It's eternal. The Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled by the new covenant ratified by the blood of Jesus. Through Christ, we inherit the Abrahamic promise that God is not just our God but father through Jesus. Christians know God personally just as Abraham.

### **Promise #3-I will give you the Promised Land (V.8)**

***8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."***

This is the land promise. Abraham and his descendants were given the land of Canaan as their possession. Moses led God's people out of Egypt, and Joshua took them into the promised land to live.

But like the previous promise, notice this is also an eternal promise. The Lord promises, "I will give to you...the land...for an everlasting possession." Here's my question, how exactly will they inherit this land eternally? This is where Christians disagree, and I can't get into this debate. But here's what I will say: who are the sons of Abraham? Galatians 3:7 says, "*It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*"

So, who does the land belong to? Christians, and we will inherit this land when our king returns to establish His eternal reign.

First the Lord renews His covenant. Next, He attaches conditions.

### **Point #2-The Lord Institutes Covenant Conditions (V.9-14)**

Notice, the Abrahamic is not a temporary covenant like the law of Moses. It is eternal. The Lord has already said this is an everlasting covenant two times (V.7-8). What's fascinating is that he also says this about circumcision, and this is where we will begin to see why this seemingly crass ritual is still important for us today.

***9 And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 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 throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."***

I am not going to get into every detail in this section, but I do want to point out a few things. One, when God calls every male to circumcised, this is not symbolic. It's exactly what you think it is. Every male must cut away the flesh of their foreskin. What this means is that Abraham and every man in his household whether his servants or family, they all had to be circumcised. After that, all male children must be circumcised 8 days after birth. If you aren't circumcised, you are cut off from the covenant community and you do not belong to God.

### **Why Did God Require Circumcision?**

1. **A sign of the Old Covenant (v.10-11).** Circumcision was the sign that you belonged to the people of God. God's people have always been marked off and circumcision identified them. It functioned like a wedding ring. It symbolizes a greater reality. In the new covenant, though not exactly parallel, baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Just as the Lord's Supper has replaced the feast of the Passover.
2. **Salvation comes by blood and pain.** The cutting away of the foreskin was a bloody and painful experience. When Moses' son was circumcised, his wife said you have made me a bridegroom of blood. Israel had a picture of the future sufferings of Christ in this personal illustration.

3. **Sin and filth are cut away.** Circumcision has medical benefits. It can prevent disease not only in the men but their wives. It was a reminder that they had been redeemed and cleansed of their sins.
4. **God would fulfill His promise.** Last week we saw how Abram and Sarah tried to fulfill God's promise of a descendant in their own power. Abram took Hagar to be his surrogate wife. But Abram's true descendant would not come until after he was circumcised. By marking the reproductive instrument of Jewish men, God was reminding His people that the promise of descendants who would bless the world and take possession of the land would come through His power.
5. **God's people will be set apart.** It was very unusual for infants to be circumcised in the ancient world, and circumcision was never performed in connection with a religious ceremony. Which meant the Israelites were unique, and that's the point. Circumcision set them apart from the nations. It sanctified them. That's the point of cutting away the foreskin. God's people were to be cut away from the rest of the world.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, the Lord said the covenant of circumcision will last forever. Look back at the end of verse 13, *"So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant."* The question is: in what way is the covenant of circumcision an everlasting covenant? Because when we get to the New Testament, the apostles make it very clear, Christians do not have to be circumcised to be a part of the new covenant in Christ. The first church council in Jerusalem determined this, and Paul in Romans and Galatians makes this emphatically clear. In fact, in Galatians 5:2-4, Paul said, **2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace."**

So how do we reconcile the Lord's words here that circumcision is an everlasting covenant with the New Testament's teaching we should not be circumcised?

### **Biblical Theology of Circumcision**

The answer is found when you trace the theme of circumcision throughout the Bible.

**Deuteronomy 10:14-16 -- 14 Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. 15 Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. 16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.**

Circumcision is designed to communicate more than a physical sign. This is about the heart. Not the organ pumping blood inside your chest. The heart is your inner being—the mind, will and affections. You are to be set apart by having a heart that is inclined to obey the Lord, not to be stubborn like the world.

How will God's people get this new heart?

**Deuteronomy 30:5-6 -- 5 And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. 6 And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.**

God says I will circumcise your heart! I will spiritually renew you so that you don't love your sin but love the Lord your God. This is a work of God.

How essential is this new heart?

**Jeremiah 4:4 -- "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds."**

Circumcision of the heart is central to our salvation. Without this renewal, God's wrath will come upon us!

The new heart is what marks us off as the true people of God.

**Romans 2:28-29 -- 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.**

You're not a Jew just because you're Abraham's physical descendants and have been circumcised. A true Jew (a true believer) is one who has been changed inwardly; whose heart has been circumcised.

Remember when John the Baptist was confronted by the religious leaders. He said, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? To which they would have thought, "We won't receive wrath. We're Abraham's descendants. We've been circumcised." John said, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."

And that's exactly what God would do.

**Colossians 2:11-12 -- 11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.**

What should we conclude from these teachings? Well, it's obvious that the Lord never intended for circumcision to be an end in itself. It was a sign pointing to a greater reality; namely, God's people are to be set apart as holy by the renewal of their hearts.

To say it another way, what makes God's people holy (distinct from the world) is that we have been given a transformed nature by the power of God in the gospel.

This is what makes Christianity unique among world religions. Man-made religion is all about externals. They're all about how you look on the outside and the deeds you perform. Christianity is about change from within.

I learned this truth about 17 years ago. I didn't become a Christian until I was 21 years old, but I did go to church when I was a kid. It was a very traditional presbyterian church full of mostly elderly people. We had pews and an organ with big pipes going up the wall. The people were always very serious and dressed appropriately. I thought Christians were people who don't smoke, drink, cuss, or watch bad movies. In my mind, you go to church. Be a good person. Read your Bible and pray. Stay away from the wrong people and that's what it meant to be a Christian.

The problem for me is that kind religious system had no power to change my sinful desires. By the age of 13, I loved my sin. You could have dressed me up with all the religion you wanted, but nothing could change my heart's passion for sin.

This is why Jesus told the Pharisees, you are like whitewashed tombs. You're beautiful on the outside, but inside you are full of dead man's bones. That's what religion was like for me. I could look the part on Sunday, but inside I was wicked.

And no amount of exterior religion could restrain my flesh. Eventually, my love for sin overpowered any religious constraints, and my life spiraled out of control. I was arrested 12 times before I turned 21. I was incarcerated in 5 different county jails. From the age of 16-21 I was a full-blown alcoholic and drug addict. My life hit rock bottom.

But then I came to Mt. Juliet, TN in April 2007. By God's grace, I got sober, found employment, and started attending recovery meetings. And then one day, I heard about a little church that was meeting in an elementary school. Which was odd to me. I thought churches only met in gothic cathedrals. This church also had a weird name. I always went to First Presbyterian or Trinity Lutheran. This church was called The Journey.

I had never been to church like this in my life. I didn't know such churches existed. There was a rock band. Stage lights. And a young preacher who wore torn jeans and affliction t-shirts. He sat down on a stool when he preached, and his messages actually made sense.

The people were also different. They weren't overly religious. They were genuine followers of Jesus. To them, God was real and wanted us to know Him personally.

Through the ministry of TJC, and all that God was doing in my life, I broke free from the chains of addiction when God gave me a new life in Christ. In an instant, my thinking and my desires were changed. I no longer wanted my sin. Instead, I wanted to know and obey God. Soon after, I confessed Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and I was baptized by Pastor Erik. My life has never been the same.

Here's why I share all of that with you. This is exactly what God meant to teach us with circumcision. The Lord is calling men and women out of darkness and marking them off as His holy people, not by physical signs, but by giving them new lives.

The Bible calls this the new birth or regeneration. It is a work of the Holy Spirit by which He sovereignly makes your heart new, opens your eyes and ears and inclines your desires to trust in Jesus and repent of your sins. He grants you faith. He cleanses your heart of sin. The Spirit transforms your life.

You are a new creation. The New birth is not an improvement of the old nature but a creation of the new. You are still you but forgiven and set free. Sin's power has been broken in your life.

This is essential for salvation. Jesus said, you must be born again. If you're not born again, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This is not optional or just for the spiritually elite. To be born again is what it means to be a Christian.

The Bible describes our condition before coming to Christ as completely hopeless. We are born spiritually dead and slaves to sin. Apart from Christ, our lives are dominated by the powers of darkness. We are incapable of discerning spiritual truth. We are blind, deaf, and completely opposed to the things of God. We are hostile children of wrath.

Our only hope is if God sovereignly intervenes to open our blind eyes, awaken our dead hearts, and open our deaf ears. He does this by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

Have you been born again?

If you're in Christ, you are a new creation. The old is passed. The new has come. You are a new creation. Like Abraham, God has given you a new and a new life.

But if you're still lost, and you know you have not been born again...the Bible tells you to call upon the name of the Lord to be saved. Cry out to God for mercy and ask Him to circumcise your heart.

**LOOK BACK**



- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you GROW in obedience to Christ over the last week?
- Where did you GO to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?

## BUILD UP

- **REVIEW:**

- Read **Genesis 17:1-14** and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different version.
- What big takeaways did you have from the teaching?
- Additional Scripture:
  - Galatians 3:7
  - Galatians 3:29
  - Romans 4:16-17
  - 2 Peter 3:13
  - Revelation 21:1-4
  - John 17:3
  - Revelation 3:20
  - Romans 8:16-17
  - Hebrews 9:15
  - Matthew 26:28
  - Psalm 105:8-11
  - 1 Peter 1:3-5
  - 2 Corinthians 5:17
  - Galatians 2:20
  - Isaiah 62:2
  - Jeremiah 4:4
  - Galatians 5:2-6
  - Romans 4:11
  - Philippians 3:3

- **REFLECT:**

- Discuss the three promises God makes to Abraham:
  - The LORD will multiply his descendants.
  - The LORD will be their God.
  - The LORD Will give them a promised land.
- Why did God change Abram's name to Abraham? Why is that important?
- Why did God require circumcision?
- Is circumcision still required today to be saved?

- **RESPOND:**

- Has your heart been circumcised through faith? How do you know? Do they delight in the Lord (Psalm 37:4-5)? Do they seek the kingdom of God first (Matthew 6:33)? Do they put off the old self and put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24)? Are they being transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:1-2)? Are they more dependent on God (Isaiah 40:31, 1 Peter 5:7)?

- **MEDITATE:**

- Genesis 17:1-2 -- *1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty;[a] walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."*

- **MEMORIZE:**

- Galatians 3:7 -- *Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*

**SEND OUT**

- **GROW:** How will you abide in Christ this week and grow in your love and understanding of Him?

- **GO:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story or the gospel?

- **PRAYER:**

- Pray over any request from your group members.
- Discipleship & Mobilization Ministry Assistant - **Kendall Cox**
- Ministry - **For the Nations**
- **Pray for our long-term units on the field:**
  - The Wilsons
  - The Grays
  - The Starks
- **Pray for our mid-term sent ones on the field:**
  - Kaesi
  - Ethan & Dustin (May 16 - June 30)
- **Pray for our short-term teams:**
  - Asian Pacific Rim Team departing on April 27
  - London Team departing June 30
  - Southeast Asia Team #2 departing on June 15
  - Central Asia Team #2 departing on September 27
- **Pray for the lost - Unreached People Group (UPG):** Bobo Madare in Burkina Faso



- **Population in country:** 283,000
- **Global population:** 283,000
- **Christian Adherent:** 0.02%
- **Evangelical:** 0.01%
- **Primary Religion:** Islam
- **Primary Language:** Bobo Madare, Southern
- **Summary:** The primary occupation of the Bobo Madare is farming. They raise millet, sorghum, peanuts, tomatoes, a small number of chickens, goats and other livestock. Women and men join in the daily agricultural chores. Women are also responsible for all cooking, washing, childcare and obtaining water. Children are expected to help with chores at a very early age. Education remains a privilege for only a few children and school enrollment creates a financial strain on families.
- **Prayer Focus:** Pray for the Lord to thrust out workers among this people and for persons of peace to welcome them. Pray that the Lord would raise up a church planting and discipleship training movement among this needy people group that will grow and bring glory to the savior, the Lord Jesus.
- Want to keep up with other Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>