

God's plan for the world

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, when we come to read the Bible, whether it's here in church or at home, one of the most important things we need to understand is that the Bible is not about you.
- It's not about you. The Bible is about God. The Bible is not a list of principles to make your life better. The Bible is not a book of interesting philosophical ideas or a spiritual how-to guide.
- No, it is a book about the God who made all of this and what he plans to do with it. You can ignore it if you want, as many people do.
- But if you do, there is no other way to know why you are here and where you are going. And so while the Bible is not about you, you need to know what it says about God and his plans for the world if you're going to live this life properly at all.
- And you need to know what to do in light of what it says about God and his plans for this world. And that is why we do what we do this morning. We're not here just to read some spiritual principles or to get a boost for the week.
- [1 : 1 2] We are here to learn more about God who made this and who made us and who we're accountable to. And we're here to learn about what he plans to do in this world, what he's done so far and what he's still doing so that we can actually be part of it.
- And that's what this chapter in Genesis 17 is all about. Basically, what to do in light of what God is doing. That's what chapter 17 in Genesis is about.
- So a man called Abram, as you would have known if you've been with us so far, and his wife Sarai. And what we've been reading in Genesis so far is that God has been revealing to Abraham and to his household his plans for the world.
- God's plans for the world. And this story in Genesis 17 is what they must now do about it, which is something that up until now they were quite confused about.
- So if you were here last week, remember Genesis 16? Sarai knew God's plans included giving Abraham a child, but it turns out that she couldn't have children.
- [2 : 1 7] So she reckons, well, if God's plan is going to happen, what she's got to do is come up with a way to make it happen. And she tried, and that led to all kinds of problems. She got Abram to marry her handmaiden, Hagar, and had Ishmael.
- But there was a whole lot of problems with that, as you'll remember from last week. And so it becomes obvious by the end of Genesis 16, that's not what God wanted them to do. That's not how he wanted them to respond to his revelation to them.
- And so the question is, well, exactly what does he want them to do? You know, what is their part to play in God's plans? They were probably thinking, God, you know, we tried, and that didn't work, so what do you want us to do?
- And you might be wondering the same thing. You come to church, and you learn about God, and you learn about this world, and why it is like it is, and what God is doing, and what his plans for this world are.
- And you go, well, what must I do about it? How do I respond to that? What part do I play? And that's why this chapter in Genesis is here, in your Bibles.

[3 : 32] And that's why it's important, because it's one where God starts to tell Abram and Sarai what he expects them to do if they're going to play a role in his covenant, in his plans for this world.

And he starts, have a look down at verse 1, by setting the bar quite high. He says to Abram, you've got to walk before me faithfully and be blameless, then I will make my covenant between me and you.

So he's basically saying, okay, Abram, you want to know what you need to do to be part of my covenant and my plans? Well, you've got to be blameless. Wow. Abram's probably thinking, you know what, I liked Sarai's plan better.

All I needed to do was sleep with Hagar. That was easy. But be blameless. That's quite a tough call. So God says, if you want to be part of my plans for this world, you've got to be blameless.

Basically, you can't be part of the plan if you're a sinner. Which sounds quite shocking, but if you think about it, it does make sense. Because if God's plan for this world, as the Bible reveals to us, is a new creation, a restored creation, without fallenness and curse and sin and all the things that sin leads to, death and suffering and poverty and all that and crime, well, if that's God's plan for this world, if that's the end result, well, then it makes sense that he won't allow sinners to live in that world, right?

[5 : 03] Otherwise, it would just be this world again. Otherwise, there would just be more crime and sin and sickness and death in that world. And so it makes sense that God's requirement to be part of his future plan for this world is to be blameless.

But, of course, that's a problem. Because Abram is already a sinner. He's a descendant of Adam, who was fallen. And he's inherited, like we all have, that original sin.

And he knew it, which is why the very next thing he does, look at your Bibles, what does he do? He falls flat on his face. Now, that's a way of saying, I'm not worthy.

I'm not worthy even to talk to you or to see you, let alone to be part of your plans. He knows his unworthiness, does Abram. And so here in chapter 17 of Genesis, we are actually reading about the next problem that threatens the covenant.

Remember, as we've been on this journey from chapter 12, we've been reading about one problem after another that threatened God's plan from being fulfilled.

[6 : 11] Famine, lack of faith, Sarai's infertility. And so the problem now that we come across in this chapter is, well, how is it that Abram, or in fact any human being, can be made into a person fit to be part of God's plan for this world?

I mean, that should be a question that we should be asking, right? The Bible reveals to us God and his plans for the world, but how can we be part of it? We know ourselves, right?

We know that we should be falling flat on our face and going, we don't deserve to be part of these plans that you have for this world. And that is what this chapter goes on to answer.

How it is that human beings who are sinful can be made fit to be part of God's plans. And so look what we discover as we read on.

It's very interesting. So follow with me from verse 4. This is what God says to Abram. As for me, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations.

[7 : 15] 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.

Okay, now God does an amazing thing. He gives Abram a new name. And that's not just because he didn't like the old name. It's because he is giving Abram a new identity.

A name in ancient Near Eastern culture was very significant. It basically summarized your identity. And so by giving someone a new name in the Bible, it is a big thing.

God is giving Abram a new identity which confirms his future. Because in his name is bound up his future. He will be the father of a multitude.

[8 : 16] That's what the name Abraham means. And then God tells him everything that God is going to do for him. I will, I will, I will. But notice, he does this before Abraham even has a chance to do what God said he must do and be blameless.

That's the interesting thing here. It seems like God is making these promises a little bit too early. Before, you know, he's given Abraham a chance to show whether he's worthy of these promises.

Have you ever made a promise too early? Before you can be sure that you can keep it. Promising to have a bri before you've checked the weather report, for example.

Or promising to make a long distance Skype call with a family member before you've checked the load shedding schedule. You see, there's many ways I think we can make promises too early.

Before we can actually be sure that they will happen. Well, in this story, it seems like God is committing himself too early. Making these promises about Abram's role in his plans. Before he can be sure whether Abram fits the bill.

[9 : 25] To be part of them. Except, that's not what's happening. Because there's another option of what's going on here. What if it's not up to Abram to make himself fit for God's covenant?

And to make himself blameless? What if it's up to God? What if God, not Abram, is going to make him the kind of person who is worthy to be part of God's plans?

Because that's actually what's happening in the story. And that's why God gives him a new name. God is saying, I am going to make you. In fact, that's exactly what he said.

Verse 6. I will make you. I have made you a father of many nations. Verse 5. I'm going to make you into the person you need to be.

Not you. You're not going to make you into the person you need to be. To be part of my plans. I'm going to make you into that person. That's what's going on here. Do you see that?

[10 : 24] And so God is going to make Abram fit to be part of his plans. But, Abram. Now, this is the interesting thing that we see as we carry on reading. Abram still has a role to play. He can't just sit back and be passive.

He still has to do something. And so we start to get to answer the question. Well, if God's going to do everything. And if God's got a plan. And he makes people into people who are fit for that plan.

Then what must I do? What must I actually do in response to that? Well, that's what we read. Because what Abram must do with this promise that God gives him.

Is to do two things. He's to believe it. And then he's to receive the covenant sign that seals it to him. Which is what happens next.

God commanding the sign of circumcision. To seal and confirm Abram's new identity. Now, I admit. That's a pretty weird sign.

[11 : 25] Right? I'm pretty sure even Abram would have done a double take. You want me to cut off what? You know? And us reading it today. We have the same reaction.

You know, what's up with circumcision? Oh, and children. If you don't know what circumcision is. Go ask your parents at home. After the service. But it seems very strange to us.

And yet it's obvious in this passage that God takes it very seriously. Look at verse 14. Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. So that's pretty serious stuff. What's going on here with circumcision? Whatever it is, God takes it very seriously. And so we need to understand this morning why circumcision is so important.

And the reason it is, just like we've learned in the past few weeks and months about baptism, remember, and the Lord's Supper. We've been learning about the significance of those signs.

[12 : 28] Well, the reason circumcision is so important is because it, like those, is also a covenant sign and seal. A covenant sign. And now, if you haven't been with us, what a covenant sign is, is that whenever God makes a promise, it seems that he accompanies that promise with something physical.

A physical sign to seal and confirm his promise to those that he is making that promise to, those who are part of that covenant. It's like a contract. When you write a contract with someone, you sign it at the end, right?

If it's not signed, it's not in force. It's not in effect. You don't, you can't rely on it. But when the contract, all the words are given and it's actually signed by the person who's making that promise, then you know it's the real thing.

Well, it's the same with God's promises. He gives us words. He makes these promises. But he also signs his promises with these visible signs that he's allocated for that purpose.

Or like a wedding ring. A wedding ring is a physical sign of a promise that you make. It's something that you can look at and know that those promises are in effect.

[13 : 40] And so in these covenant signs, God gives physical indicators of who is part of his plans for this world. And what's more, when we read about these covenant signs that he gives throughout scripture, we discover that those physical signs are almost always chosen to symbolize something.

An invisible reality that accompanies the sign. And this is true of circumcision too. As we read later in the Bible, we actually discover the symbolism behind this circumcision, this medical procedure that has to happen to males.

So, for example, what is the point of it? What's the symbolism? Well, Deuteronomy 10.16, in the context of God, much, much later in the history of Israel, God is rebuking the nation of Israel for, at this time, kind of slipping into the idolatry of the nations around them.

And he says this, verse 16, And then later in Jeremiah, similar situation, God is calling Israel out of the worldly sinful habits that they've been absorbed into in the nations around them.

These sinful ways of life that they've slipped into. And he says this to them, Jeremiah 4, 3 and 4. He says, Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns.

[15 : 02] You know, do not get involved with the fallen, wicked, sinful ways of the nations around you. And then he says, verse 4, Circumcise yourselves to the Lord. Circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Okay, so just from verses like this, we understand what's in the back of God's mind when he commands the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17. What it represents, what physical circumcision represents is an invisible circumcision of the heart, which means cutting off worldly things and sinful practices and patterns of life.

That's what circumcision represents. And so that's what God is saying about Abram and his children in this covenant sign. Not only is he giving Abram a new identity, but he is also calling Abram out of the world, separating Abram from the patterns of this world and his children in the sign itself, because the sign is deliberately done on the part of Abram that's going to bear children.

And so this sign, in it, God is separating Abram and his descendants from the rest of the world and making them holy, setting them apart for his purposes and making them fit to be a part of his plans going forward.

That's what's happening here in this sign. And Abram's job was to believe it and receive that sign of circumcision. And there's something amazing about this sign as well, almost beautiful, which is a weird description for circumcision.

[16 : 44] But the amazing thing is that God commands it to be done to babies that are only eight days old. In other words, before these children could do anything to deserve it, they were already made part of God's people.

God is actually demonstrating and showing off his grace and the fact that being part of his people is totally undeserved in commanding it to be done to babies who couldn't do anything except cry and soil their nappies.

So that's what's great about the sign, is that before these children could do anything to deserve it, they were already made part of God's people. There were no circumcision altar calls, you know, or church camps where teenagers were called forward for circumcision if they wanted to commit their lives to Yahweh.

I imagine that wouldn't go down well at youth camps anyway. But you see, it's not as if they got to choose their identity. That's the whole point of Israelites being circumcised.

They didn't get to choose to be Israelites. God gave them that identity. And that is how God works. That's how he always works with his covenant people.

[17 : 57] In fact, he doesn't wait for us to decide who we are and then to inform him. Oh God, by the way, I've decided I want to be a Christian. I've decided I believe this.

No, God gives us an identity. He even gives us the faith that is required. Just like with Abram. You know, just like with Abram, he doesn't expect us to live a certain way first before he gives us an identity as his people.

It's the other way around. He gives us an identity first and then he calls us to live out that identity. Do you see the difference? It's a huge difference. It's what marks Christianity or from the rest of every other religion in the world, which is all about trying to earn your identity, trying to earn your righteousness by doing religious things.

In what God reveals in the Bible, he reveals, he deals with humans the other way around. He doesn't wait for us to earn a place in his plans. He gives it to us and calls us to live in light of who we are, who he's made us.

But what's important to see in this passage is that we've still got a role to play. We've got to receive the covenant signs and seals that identify us with the identity God has given us.

[19 : 19] Which for us is not circumcision, men you'll be very relieved to know. But it's baptism, as we've already seen. Baptism is the sign of initiation into the new covenant today.

Which in fact represents the same thing that circumcision did. The putting off of sin, the washing away of sin. But baptism actually represents something even more. It's an upgraded version of circumcision.

Because what we realize in the rest of the Old Testament is while God's people were still outwardly set apart by circumcision, what happened is that their hearts actually didn't end up living in line with the identity God gave them.

They drifted away and they drifted back to the pagan and sinful practices of the nations around them. And so what we discover later on in the prophets, in Ezekiel and others, is that God's people, those who were going to form part of his plans for the future of this world, needed one more thing to stay in the covenant, to stay in the identity that he gave them.

Because it's one thing to become part of God's people by nothing you do. But what you do can actually disqualify you from being part of God's people.

[20 : 38] Because if you don't take God's promises on board and you don't have faith in them and you just live your own way, then you can lose those privileges. That's what happened to Israel. That's what we read about in the Old Testament.

It's a sad story. And so what we discover is they needed one more thing to stay in the covenant. And that was the Holy Spirit of God living in them, giving them those desires, changing them from the inside out.

And the sign that accompanied the coming of the Spirit in Ezekiel was the pouring out of clean water on God's people. The pouring out of his Spirit, which is what is symbolized in baptism.

And so this is why Paul tells the Colossians this in Colossians 2, the passage that Gene read for us earlier. He says this, He's talking to Christians now who have been baptized, who have believed.

And he says, So what he's saying to Christians who have not been physically circumcised because we're Gentiles, most of us, were Gentiles, most of us, were Gentiles before we entered into God's people.

[22 : 02] He's saying, But through the Spirit you were actually circumcised inwardly, your hearts. That's what the Spirit does. He cuts off those sinful patterns of life and those sinful desires.

And he transforms you slowly but surely from the inside out if you are a member of God's covenant. That is the privilege we have of being in the covenant is that we have the Holy Spirit working with us to prepare us and to make us into the people who are fit for God's future plans for this world.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that an amazing gift that God has given us so that we won't make the same mistakes as the Israelites did in the Old Testament? And what Paul says here when he says, Having been buried with him in baptism, what he's saying is that baptism is the very sign that connects us to the death of Christ, that confirms that his death that happened 2,000 years ago actually counts as ours in God's sight and his death has really paid for our sins.

And when we believe what that sign signifies, then we receive his Holy Spirit and we are made fit to be part of God's people and part of God's plans for the future restoration of this world.

Isn't that amazing? And so you see, just as circumcision was a seal of belonging to God's covenant then, baptism is the new improved seal of the new covenant today.

[23 : 30] It's like when you update a contract, you've got to sign it again, right? The old signature doesn't count anymore if you've put new terms in the contract.

Well, that's what God has done with the new covenant. He has upgraded, updated the contract so that we can actually keep it, our side of it, through the Holy Spirit. And to prove that to us, he's given us a new signature, a new sign, baptism, that comes along with this new covenant.

And so if you have that signature on you, if you have God's signature on you, Christian, and you've received the seal of this new identity that God has given you, all you actually need to do now is to believe that.

That's it. You just need to believe who God has made you to be and believe those promises that he's attached to his covenant sign. In fact, in history, hundreds of years ago, when you were baptized into the church, you would actually get a new name, a Christian name.

That's why it's called a Christian name. Just like Abraham got a new name at the time of his circumcision. It's actually a tradition that's kind of fallen away, which is a pity because it actually is a great way of showing what's happening as you enter God's covenant.

[24 : 45] You are given a new identity in God's sight. And so the point of this all is that a Christian isn't someone who earns their way into God's people. A Christian is someone who God has already given a place in his people through nothing that they did and who just believes that.

Now, you might be thinking, ah, come on. Surely we've got to do more than just believe that. We've got to change the way we live.

We've got to do good and all that, which, yes, is true. That does come with being a member of God's covenant. But what you'll find is that a Christian who really believes and knows their identity in Christ automatically starts living that way because it's who they are.

They're just living out the identity that they have, which is what we naturally do. We live according to who we think we are. So here's an example, silly example, but I think it will make the point.

I'm convinced that my dog thinks he's an 11-year-old boy. He's never lived with another dog, so he doesn't actually know any better.

[25 : 54] And I'm pretty sure he believes he's one of us. I mean, he plays rugby in the garden. He sleeps on Alex's bed. In fact, he gets quite put out when you chase him off the human's bed.

He doesn't realize that he's not supposed to be there. And he sits on the couch and watches TV. So his behavior, it seems, is based on his identity, who he thinks he is.

Now, of course, he's wrong. He's got no actual reason to believe he's really a human being. But we as Christians have every reason to believe that we are God's people and our sins are atoned for and our eternal life is secure because God has given us the covenant signs and his Holy Spirit to seal and sign those things to all who receive them in faith.

And when we know that, when we truly take that on board in our lives and realize who we are in God's sight, then our behavior will adapt automatically to who we believe ourselves to be.

And the Holy Spirit will make sure of it. And so, Christian, instead of trying to be who you think you need to be and failing and failing and being despondent about it, realize in God's sight you already are who you need to be.

[27 : 18] Just like Abram had to realize he was Abraham in God's eyes already. He was already the father of a multitude in God's eyes. And just like Sarai, too, had to believe now she was Sarah.

God had given her a new identity, too. So you, if you're a Christian, if you've been baptized into God's covenant people, you need to realize that you are no longer who you see in the mirror.

That struggling sinner who never manages to quite be what you want him or her to be. No, you are one of God's people and a citizen of his kingdom and his new creation to come and his family separated out of this world and called to an eternal future, an eternal life.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross has completely atoned for your sins and made you holy and blameless in God's sight. And the Holy Spirit is in you and you've been caught up in God's great plan for the restoration of this world.

And you have been made fit to be part of that forever, already, through what Jesus did on the cross. And all you've got to do is believe that.

[28 : 33] But there's one more thing I need to say before I finish. And that is, if you are not baptized, I have some good news for you. You can be.

Because unlike circumcision, which was limited to a certain group of people, God has actually made it possible in the new covenant for anyone, no matter what their background or what their culture or what their upbringing, anyone can enter into and become a member of his eternal covenant and a part of his plans for eternity.

That is the blessing of the nations that God promised to Abraham back in Genesis 12. And so whoever you are and wherever you come from and whatever your background, whatever you've done wrong, whatever that hidden shame is that you don't tell anyone about, it doesn't matter if you are a member of God's covenant because Jesus died for those sins to be forgiven.

And if you repent and you are baptized for the forgiveness of your sins, you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is a guarantee.

And you too will be made part of God's people and caught up in his amazing plans for the eternal future of this world that he has revealed to us in his word.

[29 : 52] And who wouldn't want to be part of that? Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you that the Bible is a book about you and not primarily about us.

We always look for things that somehow will improve our lives or help us to make ourselves better people in magazines and internet articles.

But Lord, you've graciously revealed everything we need to know about you and what you are doing in this world. And thank you, Lord, that you call people from every nation to be part of that, to enter into your covenant, to receive eternal life and to receive forgiveness of sins.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have done everything and gone through all that needs to happen for those sins to be atoned for. Lord, we pray as Christians that you will help us to realize who we are, that we are called out of the world and help us to live out that identity.

And Lord, I pray for anyone here who is not baptized and who is not a Christian, if they feel that you are calling them, Lord, and we pray that you would today be calling them to enter into your covenant.

[31 : 05] Lord, help them to do that. Help them to realize that you have done everything and all they need to do is believe and repent and be baptized. Lord, we do pray that you would cause them to move, to do something about that.

And so, Lord, we thank you for your word this morning and we pray that it will go with us into this new week. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.