

Genesis 17:1-27

by John Calvin

John Calvin's sermon on Genesis 17 explores God's covenant with Abraham, highlighting the promises and responsibilities involved in this divine relationship.

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-7, Genesis 17:9, Genesis 17:14-15

Topics: "Covenant Theology", "Faith Obedience"

Description

John Calvin preaches about the obedience and faith of Abraham in response to God's covenant, highlighting Abraham's prompt and unwavering obedience despite the difficulties and doubts he may have faced. The covenant between God and Abraham is emphasized as a sign of God's grace and promise of eternal salvation, with circumcision serving as a visible confirmation of this covenant. The importance of faith, obedience, and trust in God's promises is underscored through Abraham's actions and reactions to God's words, showcasing a model of faithful living and reliance on God's faithfulness.

Transcript

1. And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.
1. Et fuit Abram nonaginta et novem annorum: et visus est Jehova Abram, dixitque ad eum, Ego Deus Omnipotens, ambula coram me, et esto perfectus.
2. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.
2. Et ponam pactum meum inter me et to, et multiplicabo to vehementissime.
3. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,
3. Tunc prostravit se Abram super faciem suam, et loquutus est cum eo Deus, dicendo,
4. As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.
4. Ego, ecce pactum meum tecum, et eris in patrem multitudinis gentium.
5. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

5. Et non vocabitur ultra nomen tuum Abram, sed erit nomen tuum Abraham: quia patrem multitudinis gentium posui to.

6. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

6. Et multiplicabo to valde, et ponam to in gentes, et reges ex to egredientur.

7. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

7. Et statuam foedus meum inter me et to, et inter semen tuum post to in generationes suas, in foedus perpetuum, ut sim tibi in Deum et semini tuo post to.

8. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

8. Daboque tibi et semini tuo post to terram peregrinationum tuarum, omnem terram Chanaan in possessionem perpetuam, et ero eis in Deum.

9. And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

9. Praeterea dixit Deus ad Abraham, et tu pactum meum custodies, tu et semen tuum post to in generationibus suis.

10. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.

10. Hoc pactum meum quod custodietis inter me et vos, et inter semen tuum post to, ut circumcidatur in vobis omnis masculus:

11. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

11. Et circumcidetis carnem praeputii vestri: et erit in signum foederis inter me et vos.

12. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed.

12. Et filius octo dierum circumcidetur in vobis: omnis masculus in generationes vestras, verna, et emptus argento ab omni filio alienigenae, qui non est de semine tuo.

13. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

13. Circumcidendo circumcidetur verna tuus, et emptus argento tuo: et erit pactum meum in carne vestra in pactum perpetuum.

14. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

14. Et praeputatus masculus, cui non circumcisa fuerit carno praeputii sui, exterminabitur anima ipsa de populis suis, quia pactum meum irritum fecit.

15. And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be

15. Et dixit Deus ad Abraham, Sarai uxoris tuae non vocabis nomen Sarai, sed Sarah est nomen ejus.

16. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.

16. Et benedicam ei, atque etiam dabo ex ea tibi filium, cui benedicam, et erit in gentes: reges populorum ex ea erunt.

17. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?

17. Et prostravit se Abraham in faciem suam, et risit, dixitque in corde suo, Numquid viro centum annorum nascetur proles? Et an Sarah mulier nonaginta annorum pariet?

18. And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!

18. Et dixit Abraham ad Deum, Utinam Ismael vivat coram to.

19. And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

19. Et dixit Deus, Vere Sarah uxor tua pariet tibi filium, et vocabis nomen ejus Isaac: et statuam pactum meum cum eo in pactum perpetuum, et cum semine ejus post eum.

20. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.

20. Et pro Ismael audiui te: ecce, benedixi ei, et crescere faciam eum, et multiplicare faciam eum supra modum: duodecim principes generabit, et ponam eum in gentem magnam.

21. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.

21. Et pactum meum statuam cum Isaac, quem pariet tibi Sarah in tempore hoc, anno altero.

22. And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

22. Et finivit loqui cum eo, et ascendit Deus ab Abraham.

23. And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him.

23. Tunc Abraham tulit Ismael filium suum, et omnes vernas domus suae, et omnem acquisitum argento suo: omnis masculi in viris domus suae circumcidit carnem praeputii eorum in ipsomet die, sicut loquutus

fuerat cum eo Deus.

24. And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

24. Abraham autem erat vir nonaginta et novem annorum, quando circumcisa fuit carno praeputii ipsius.

25. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

25. Et Ismael filius ejus erat tredecim annorum, quando circumcisis est ipse in carne praeputii sui,

26. In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son.

26. In ipsomet die circumcisis est Abraham et Ismael filius ejus.

27. And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him.

27. Et omnes viri domus ejus, verna domus, et emptus argento a filio alienigenae, circumcisi sunt cum ipso.

1. And when Abram was ninety years old and nine Moses passes over thirteen years of Abram's life, not because nothing worthy of remembrance had in the meantime occurred; but because the Spirit of God, according to his own will, selects those things which are most necessary to be known. He purposely points out the length of time which had elapsed from the birth of Ishmael to the period when Isaac was promised, for the purpose of teaching us that he long remained satisfied with that son who should, at length, be rejected, and that he was as one deluded by a fallacious appearance. Meanwhile, we see in what a circuitous course the Lord led him. It was even possible that he brought this delay upon himself by his own fault, in having precipitately entered into second nuptials; yet as Moses declares no such thing, I leave it undetermined. Let it suffice to accept what is certain; namely, that Abram being contented with his only son, ceased to desire any other seed. The want of offspring had previously excited him to constant prayers and sighings; for the promise of God was so fixed in his mind, that he was ardently carried forward to seek its fulfillment. And now, falsely supposing that he had obtained his wish, he is led away by the presence of his son according to the flesh, from the expectation of a spiritual seed. Again the wonderful goodness of God shows itself, in that Abram himself is raised, beyond his own expectation and desire, to a new hope, and he suddenly hears, that what it never came into his mind to ask, is granted unto him. If he had been daily offering up importunate prayers for this blessing, we should not so plainly have seen that it was conferred upon him by the free gift of God, as when it is given to him without his either thinking of it or desiring it. Before however we speak of Isaac, it will repay our labor, to notice the order and connection of the words.

First, Moses says that the Lord appeared unto him, in order that we may know that the oracle was not pronounced by secret revelation, but that a vision at the same time was added to it. Besides the vision was not speechless, but had the word annexed, from which word the faith of Abram might receive profit. Now that word summarily contains this declaration, that God enters into covenant with Abram: it then unfolds the nature of the covenant itself, and finally puts to it the seal, with the accompanying attestations.

I am the Almighty God 400 The Hebrew noun El , which is derived from power, is here put for God. The same remark applies to the accompanying word ■■■■ (shaddai ,) as if God would declare, that he had sufficient power for Abram's protection: because our faith can only stand firmly, while we are certainly

persuaded that the defense of God is alone sufficient for use and can sincerely despise everything in the world which is opposed to our salvation. God, therefore, does not boast of that power which lies concealed within himself; but of that which he manifests towards his children; and he does so, in order that Abram might hence derive materials for confidence. Thus, in these words, a promise is included.

Walk before me The force of this expression we have elsewhere explained. In making the covenant, God stipulates for obedience, on the part of his servant. Yet He does not in vain prefix the declaration that he is 'the Almighty God,' and is furnished with power to help his own people: because it was necessary that Abram should be recalled from all other means of help, 401 that he might entirely devote himself to God alone. For no one will ever retake himself to God, but he who keeps created things in their proper place, and looks up to God alone. Where, indeed, the power of God has been once acknowledged, it ought so to transport us with admiration, and our minds ought so to be filled with reverence for him, that nothing should hinder us from worshipping him. Moreover, because the eyes of God look for faith and truth in the heart, Abram is commanded to aim at integrity. For the Hebrews call him a man of perfections, who is not of a deceitful or double mind, but sincerely cultivates rectitude. In short, the integrity here mentioned is opposed, to hypocrisy. And surely, when we have to deal with God, no place for dissimulation remains. Now, from these words, we learn for what end God gathers together for himself a church; namely, that they whom he has called, may be holy. The foundation, indeed, of the divine calling, is a gratuitous promise; but it follows immediately after, that they whom he has chosen as a peculiar people to himself, should devote themselves to the righteousness of God. 402 For on this condition, he adopts children as his own, that he may, in return, obtain the place and the honor of a Father. And as he himself cannot lie, so he rightly demands mutual fidelity from his own children. Wherefore, let us know, that God manifests himself to the faithful, in order that they may live as in his sight; and may make him the arbiter not only of their works, but of their thoughts. Whence also we infer, that there is no other method of living piously and justly than that of depending upon God.

2. And I will make my covenant He now begins more fully and abundantly to explain what he had before alluded to briefly. We have said that the covenant of God with Abram had two parts. The first was a declaration of gratuitous love; to which was annexed the promise of a happy life. But the other was an exhortation to the sincere endeavor to cultivate uprightness, since God had given, in a single word only, a slight taste of his grace; and then immediately had descended to the design of miscalling; namely, that Abram should be upright. He now subjoins a more ample declaration of his grace, in order that Abram may endeavor more willingly to form his mind and his life, both to reverence towards God, and to the cultivation of uprightness; as if God had said 'See how kindly I indulge thee: for I do not require integrity from thee simply on account of my authority, which I might justly do; but whereas I owe thee nothing, I condescend graciously to engage in a mutual covenant.' He does not, however, speak of this as of a new thing: but he recalls the memory of the covenant which he had before made, and now fully confirms and establishes its certainty. For God is not wont to utter new oracles, which may destroy the credit, or obscure the light, or weaken the efficacy of those which preceded; but he continues, as in one perpetual tenor, those promises which he has once given. Wherefore, by these words, he intends nothing else than that the covenant, of which Abram had heard before should be established and ratified: but he expressly introduces that principal point, concerning the multiplication of seed, which he afterwards frequently repeats.

3. And Abram fell on his face We know that this was the ancient rite of adoration. Moreover, Abram testifies, first, that he acknowledges God, in whose presence all flesh ought to keep silence, and to be humbled; and, secondly that he reverently receives and cordially embraces whatever God is about to

403 speak. If, however, this was intended as a confession of faith, we must observe, that the faith which relies upon the grace of God cannot be disjoined from a pure conscience. God, in offering his grace to Abram, requires of him a sincere disposition to live justly and homily. Abram, in prostrating himself, declares that he obediently receives both. 403 Let us therefore remember, that in one and the same bond of faith, the gratuitous adoption in which our salvation is placed, is to be combined with newness of life. And although Abram utters not a word, he declares more fully by his silence, than if he had spoken with a loud and sounding voice, that he yields obedience to the word of God.

4. As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee 404 They who translate the passage, 'Behold, I make a covenant with thee,' or, 'Behold, I and my covenant with thee;' do not seem to me faithfully to represent the meaning of Moses. For, first, God declares that he is the speaker, in order that absolute authority may appear in his words. For since our faith can rest on no other foundation than his eternal veracity, it becomes, above all things, necessary for us to be informed that what is proposed to us, has proceeded from his sacred mouth. Therefore, the pronoun I, is to be read separately as a preface to the rest; in order that Abram might have a composed mind, and might engage, without hesitation, in the proposed covenant. Whence a useful doctrine is deduced, that faith necessarily has reference to God: because, although all angels and men should speak to us, never would their authority appear sufficiently great to confirm our minds. And it cannot but be, that we should at times waver, until that voice sounds from heaven, 'I am.' Whence also it appears what kind of religion is that of the Papacy: where, instead of the word of God, the fictions of men are alone the subject of boast. And they are justly exposed to continual fluctuation, who, depending upon the word of men, act unjustly towards God, by ascribing to them more than is right. But let us have no other foundation of our faith than this word 'I', not as spoken indifferently by any mouth whatever, but by the mouth of God alone. If, however, myriads of men set themselves in opposition, and proudly exclaim, 'We, we,' let this single word of God suffice to dissipate the empty sound of multitudes.

And thou shalt be a father of many nations 405 It is asked what is this multitude of nations? It obviously appears, that different nations had their origin from the holy Patriarch: for Ishmael grew to a great people: the Idumeans, from another branch were spread far and wide; large families also sprung from other sons, whom he had by Keturah. But Moses looked still further, because, indeed, the Gentiles were to be, by faith, inserted into the stock of Abram, although not descended from him according to the flesh: of which fact Paul is to us a faithful interpreter and witness. For he does not gather together the Arabians, Idumeans, and others, for the purpose of making Abram the father of many nations; but he so extends the name of father, as to make it applicable to the whole world, in order that the Gentiles, in other respects strangers, and separated from each other, might, from all sides combine in one family of Abram. I grant, indeed, that, for a time, the twelve tribes were as so many nations; but only in order to form a prelude to that immense multitude, which, at length, is collected together as the one family of Abram. And that Moses speaks of those sons, who, being regenerate by faith, acquire the name, and pass over into the stock of Abram, is sufficiently proved by this one consideration. For the carnal race of Abram could not be divided into different nations, without causing those who had departed from the unity, to be immediately accounted strangers. Thus the Church rejected the Ishmaelites, the Idumeans, and others, and regarded them as foreigners. Abram therefore was not called the father of many nations, because his seed was to be divided into many nations; but rather, because many nations were to be gathered together unto him. A change also of his name is added as a token. For he begins to be called Abraham, in order that the name itself may teach him, that he should not be the father of one family only; but that a progeny should rise up to him from an immense multitude, beyond the common course of nature. For this reason, the Lord so

often renews this promise; because the very repetition of it shows that no common blessing was promised.

7. And thy seed after thee There is no doubt that the Lord distinguishes the race of Abraham from the rest of the world. We must now see what people he intends. Now they are deceived who think that his elect alone are here pointed out; and that all the faithful are indiscriminately comprehended, from whatever people, according to the flesh, they are descended. For, on the contrary, the Scripture declares that the race of Abraham, by lineal descent, had been peculiarly accepted by God.

And it is the evident doctrine of Paul concerning the natural descendants of Abraham, that they are holy branches which have proceeded from a holy root, (Ro 11:16.) And lest any one should restrict this assertion to the shadows of the law, or should evade it by allegory, he elsewhere expressly declares, that Christ came to be a minister of the circumcision, (Ro 15:8.) Wherefore, nothing is more certain, than that God made his covenant with those sons of Abraham who were naturally to be born of him.

If any one object, that this opinion by no means agrees with the former, in which we said that they are reckoned the children of Abraham, who being by faith ingrafted into his body, form one family; the difference is easily reconciled, by laying down certain distinct degrees of adoption, which may be collected from various passages of Scripture. In the beginning, antecedently to this covenant, the condition of the whole world was one and the same. But as soon as it was said, 'I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee,' the Church was separated from other nations; just as in the creation of the world, the light emerged out of the darkness.

Then the people of Israel was received, as the flock of God, into their own fold: the other nations wandered, like wild beasts, through mountains, woods, and deserts. Since this dignity, in which the sons of Abraham excelled other nations, depended on the word of God alone, the gratuitous adoption of God belongs to them all in common. For if Paul deprives the Gentiles of God and of eternal life, on the ground of their being aliens from the covenant, (Eph 4:18,) it follows that all Israelites were of the household of the Church, and sons of God, and heirs of eternal life.

And although it was by the grace of God, and not by nature, that they excelled the Gentiles; and although the inheritance at the kingdom of God came to them by promise, and not by carnal descent; yet they are sometimes said to differ by nature from the rest of the world. In the Epistle to the Galatians, (Ga 2:15), and elsewhere, Paul calls them saints 'by nature,' because God was willing that his grace should descend, 406 by a continual succession, to the whole seed. In this sense, they who were unbelievers among the Jews, are yet called the children of the celestial kingdom by Christ. (Mt 8:12.)

Nor does what St Paul says contradict this; namely, that not all who are from Abraham are to be esteemed legitimate children; because they are not the children of the promise, but only of the flesh. (Ro 9:8.) For there, the promise is not taken generally for that outward word, by which God conferred his favor as well upon the reprobate as upon the elect; but must be restricted to that efficacious calling, which he inwardly seals by his Spirit. And that this is the case, is proved without difficulty; for the promise by which the Lord had adopted them all as children, was common to all: and in that promise, it cannot be denied, that eternal salvation was offered to all.

What, therefore, can be the meaning of Paul, when he denies that certain persons have any right to be reckoned among children, except that he is no longer reasoning about the externally offered grace, but about that of which only the elect effectually partake? Here, then, a twofold class of sons presents itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one

and the same voice, all without exception, are in this respects accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all: but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith.

And although this difference flows from the fountain of gratuitous election, whence also faith itself springs; yet, since the counsel of God is in itself hidden from us, we therefore distinguish the true from the spurious children, by the respective marks of faith and of unbelief. This method and dispensation continued even to the promulgation of the gospel; but then the middle wall was broken down, (Eph 2:14,) and God made the Gentiles equal to the natural descendants of Abraham.

That was the renovation of the world, by which they, who had before been strangers, began to be called sons. Yet whenever a comparison is made between Jews and Gentiles, the inheritance of life is assigned to the former, as lawfully belonging to them; but to the latter, it is said to be adventitious. Meanwhile, the oracle was fulfilled in which God promises that Abraham should be the father of many nations. For whereas previously, the natural sons of Abraham were succeeded by their descendants in continual succession, and the benediction, which began with him, flowed down to his children; the coming of Christ, by inverting the original order, introduced into his family those who before were separated from his seed: at length the Jews were cast out, (except that a hidden seed of the election remained among them,) in order that the rest might be saved. It was necessary that these things concerning the seed of Abraham should once be stated, that they may open to us an easy introduction to what follows.

In their generations This succession of generations clearly proves that the posterity of Abraham were taken into the Church, in such a manner that sons might be born to them, who should be heirs of the same grace. In this way the covenant is called perpetual, as lasting until the renovation of the world; which took place at the advent of Christ. I grant, indeed, that the covenant was without end, and may with propriety be called eternal, as far as the whole Church is concerned; it must, however always remain as a settled point, that the regular succession of ages was partly broken, and partly changed, by the coming of Christ, because the middle wall being broken down, and the sons by nature being, at length, disinherited, Abraham began to have a race associated with himself from all regions of the world.

To be a God unto thee In this single word we are plainly taught that this was a spiritual covenant, not confirmed in reference to the present life only; but one from which Abraham might conceive the hope of eternal salvations so that being raised even to heaven, he might lay hold of solid and perfect bliss. For those whom God adopts to himself, from among a people -- seeing that he makes them partakers of his righteousness and of all good things -- he also constitutes heirs of celestial life. Let us then mark this as the principal part of the covenant, that He who is the God of the living, not of the dead, promises to be a God to the children of Abraham. It follows afterwards, in the way of augmentation of the grant, that he promised to give them the land. I confess, indeed, that something greater and more excellent than itself was shadowed forth by the land of Canaan; yet this is not at variance with the statement, that the promise now made was an accession to that primary one, 'I will be thy God.' Now, although God again affirms, as before, that He will give the land to Abraham himself, we nevertheless know, that Abraham never possessed dominion over it; but the holy man was contented with his title to it alone, although the possession of it was not granted him; and, therefore, he calmly passed from his earthly pilgrimage into heaven. God again repeats that He will be a God to the posterity of Abraham, in order that they may not settle upon earth, but may regard themselves as trained for higher things.

9. Thou shalt keep my covenant As formerly, covenants were not only committed to public records, but were also wont to be engraven in brass, or sculptured on stones, in order that the memory of them might be more fully recorded, and more highly celebrated; so in the present instance, God inscribes his covenant in the flesh of Abraham. For circumcision was as a solemn memorial of that adoption, by which the family of Abraham had been elected to be the peculiar people of God. The pious had previously possessed other ceremonies which confirmed to them the certainty of the grace of God; but now the Lord attests the new covenant with a new kind of symbol.

But the reason why He suffered the human race to be without this testimony of his grace, during so many ages, is concealed from us; except that we see it was instituted at the time when he chose a certain nation to himself; which thing itself depends on his secret counsel. Moreover, although it would, perhaps, be more suitable for the purpose of instruction, were we to give a summary of those things which are to be said concerning circumcision; I will yet follow the order of the text, which I think more appropriate to the office of an interpreter.

In the first place; since circumcision is called by Moses, the covenant of God, we thence infer that the promise of grace was included in it. For had it been only a mark or token of external profession among men, the name of covenant would be by no means suitable, for a covenant is not otherwise confirmed, than as faith answers to it. And it is common to all sacraments to have the word of God annexed to them, by which he testifies that he is propitious to us, and calls us to the hope of salvation; yea, a sacrament is nothing else than a visible word, or sculpture and image of that grace of God, which the word more fully illustrates.

If, then, there is a mutual relation between the word and faith; it follows, that the proposed end and use of sacraments is to help, promote and confirm faith. But they who deny that sacraments are supports to faith, or that they aid the word in strengthening faith, must of necessity expunge the name of covenant; because, either God there offers himself as a Promiser, in mockery and falsely, or else, faith there finds that on which it may support itself, and from which it may confirm its own assurance.

And although we must maintain the distinction between the word and the sign; yet let us know, that as soon as the sign itself meets our eyes, the word ought to sound in our ears. Therefore, while, in this place, Abraham is commanded to keep the covenant, God does not enjoin upon him the bare use of the ceremony, but chiefly designs that he should regard the end; and certainly, since the promise is the very soul of the sign, whenever it is torn away from the sign, nothing remains but a lifeless and vain phantom.

This is the reason why we say, that sacraments are abolished by the Papists; because, the voice of God having become extinct, nothing remains with them, except the residuum of mute figures. Truly frivolous is their boasts that their magical exorcisms stand in the place of the word. For nothing can be called a covenants but what is perceived by us to be clearly revealed, so that it may edify our faith; these actors, who by gesture alone, or by a confused murmuring, play as on pipes, have nothing like this.

We now consider how the covenant is rightly kept; namely, when the word precedes, and we embrace the sign as a testimony and pledge of grace; for as God binds himself to keep the promise given to us; so the consent of faith and of obedience is demanded from us. What follows further on this subject is worthy of notice.

Between me and you 407 Whereby we are taught that a sacrament has not respect only to the external confession, but is an intervening pledge between God and the conscience of man. And, therefore,

whosoever is not directed to God through the sacraments, profanes their use. But by the figure metonymy, the name of covenant is transferred to circumcision which is so conjoined with the word, that it could not be separated from it.

10. Every man-child among you shall be circumcised Although God promised alike to males and females, what he afterwards sanctioned by circumcision, he nevertheless consecrated, in one sex, the whole people to himself. For whereas, by this symbol, the promise which was given, indiscriminately, to males and females, is confirmed, and it is certain that females as well as males had need of confirmation, it is hence evident, that the symbol was ordained for the sake of both sexes. Nor is it of any force in opposition to this reasoning to say that each individual is commanded to communicate in the sacraments, if he would derive any benefit from them, on the ground that no profit is received by those who neglect their use. For the covenant of God was graven on the bodies of the males, with this condition annexed, that the females also should as their associates be partakers of the same sign.

11. Ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin Very strange and unaccountable would this command at first sight appear. The subject treated of, is the sacred covenant, in which righteousness, salvation, and happiness are promised; whereby the seed of Abraham is distinguished from other nations, in order that it may be holy and blessed; and who can say that it is reasonable for the sign of so great a mystery to consist in circumcision? 408 But as it was necessary for Abraham to become a fool, in order to prove himself obedient to God; so whosoever is wise, will both soberly and reverently receive what God seems to us foolishly to have commanded. And yet we must inquire, whether any analogy is here apparent between the visible sign, and the thing signified. For the signs which God has appointed to assist our infirmity, should be accommodated to the measure of our capacity, or they would be unprofitable. Moreover, it is probable that the Lord commanded circumcision for two reasons; first, to show that whatever is born of man is polluted; then, that salvation would proceed from the blessed seed of Abraham. In the first place, therefore, whatever men have peculiar to themselves, by generation, God has condemned, in the appointment of circumcision; in order that the corruption of nature being manifest, he might induce them to mortify their flesh. Whence also it follows, that circumcision was a sign of repentance. Yet, at the same time, the blessing which was promised in the seed of Abraham, was thereby marked and attested. If then it seem absurd to any one, that the token of a favor so excellent and so singular, was given in that part of the body, let him become ashamed of own salvation, which flowed from the loins of Abraham; but it has pleased God thus to confound the wisdom of the world, that he may the more completely abase the pride of the flesh. And hence we now learn, in the second place, how the reconciliation between God and men, which was exhibited in Christ, was testified by this sign. For which reason it is styled by Paul a seal of the righteousness of faith. (Ro 4:11.) Let it suffice thus briefly to have touched upon the analogy between the thing signified and the sign.

12. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised 409 God now prescribes the eighth day for circumcision; whence it appears that this was a part of that discipline, under which he intended to keep his ancient people; for greater liberty is at this day, permitted in the administration of baptism. Some, however maintain that we must not contend earnestly about the number of days, because the Lord spared the children on account of their tenderness, since it was not without danger to inflict a wound upon those who were newly born. For although he might have provided that circumcision should produce no harm or injury; yet there would be no absurdity in saying, that He has respect to their tender age, in order to prove to the Jews his paternal love towards their children. To others this seems to be too frigid; therefore they seek a spiritual mystery in the number of days. They think that the present life is allegorically signified by the

seven days; that God commanded infants to be circumcised on the eighth day, in order to show that though we must give attention to the mortification of the flesh during the whole course of our life, it will not be completed till the end. Augustine also thinks that it had reference to the resurrection of Christ; whereby external circumcision was abolished and the truth of the figure was set forth. It is probable and consonant with reason, that the number seven designated the course of the present life. Therefore the eighth day might seem to be fixed upon by the Lord, to prefigure the beginning of a new life. But because such a reason is never given in Scripture, I dare affirm nothing. Wherefore, let it suffice to maintain what is certain and solid; namely, that God, in this symbol, has so represented the destruction of the old man, as yet to show that he restores men to life.

He that is born in the house, or bought with money When God commands Abraham to circumcise all whom he has under his power, his special love towards holy Abraham is conspicuous in this, that He embraces his whole family in His grace. We know that formerly slaves were scarcely reckoned among the number of men. But God, out of regard to his servant Abraham, adopts them as his own sons: to this mercy nothing whatever can be added. The pride also of the flesh is cast down; because God, without respect of persons, gathers together both freemen and slaves. But in the person of Abraham, he has prescribed it as a law to all his servants, that they should endeavor to bring all who are subject to them, into the same society of faith with themselves. For every family of the pious ought to be a church. Therefore, if we desire to prove our piety, we must labor that every one of us may have his house ordered in obedience to God. And Abraham is not only commanded to dedicate and to offer unto God those born in his house, but whomsoever he might afterwards obtain.

13. For an everlasting covenant The meaning of this expression may be twofold: either that God promises that his grace, of which circumcision was a sign and pledge, should be eternal; or that he intended the sign itself to be perpetually observed. Indeed, I have no doubt that this perpetuity ought to be referred to the visible sign. But they who hence infer, that the use of it ought to flourish among the Jews even of the present time, are (in my opinion) deceived. For they swerve from that axiom which we ought to regard as fixed; that since Christ is the end of the law, the perpetuity which is ascribed to the ceremonies of the law, was terminated as soon as Christ appeared. The temple was the perpetual habitation of God, according to that declaration,

"This is my rest forever, here will I dwell," (Ps 132:14.)

The Sabbath indicated not a temporal but a perpetual sanctification of the people. Nevertheless, it is not to be denied, that Christ brought them both to an end. In the same way must we also think of circumcision. If the Jews object, that in this manner, the law was violated by Christ; the answer is easy; that the external use of the law was so abrogated, as to establish its truth. For, at length, by the coming of Christ, circumcision was substantially confirmed, so that it should endure forever, and that the covenant which God had before made, should be ratified. Moreover, lest the changing of the visible sign should perplex any one, let that renovation of the world, of which I have spoken, be kept in mind; which renovation -- notwithstanding some interposed variety -- has perpetuated those things which would otherwise have been fading. Therefore, although the use of circumcision has ceased; yet it does not cease to be an everlasting, or perpetual covenant, if only Christ be regarded as the Mediator; who, though the sign be changed, has confirmed the truth. And that, by the coming of Christ, external circumcision ceased, is plain from the words of Paul; who not only teaches that we are circumcised by the death of Christy spiritually, and not through the carnal sign: but who expressly substitutes baptism for circumcision; (Col 2:11;) and truly baptism could not succeed circumcision, without taking it away. Therefore in the next chapter he

denies that there is any difference between circumcision and uncircumcision; because, at that time, the thing was indifferent, and of no importance. Whence we refute the error of those, who think that circumcision is still in force among the Jews, as if it were a peculiar symbol of the nation, which never ought to be abrogated. I acknowledge, indeed, that it was permitted to them for a time, until the liberty obtained by Christ should be better known; but though permitted, it by no means retained its original force. For it would be absurd to be initiated into the Church by two different signs; of which the one should testify and affirm that Christ was come, and the other should shadow him forth as absent.

14. And the uncircumcised man-child In order that circumcision might be the more attended to, God denounces a severe punishment on any one who should neglect it. And as this shows God's great care for the salvation of men; so, on the other hand, it rebukes their negligence. For since God thus benignantly offers a pledge of his love, and of eternal life, for what purpose does he add threatening but to rouse the sluggishness of those whose duty it is to run with diligence? Therefore, this denunciation of punishment virtually charges men with foul ingratitude, because they either reject or despise the grace of God.

The passage however teaches, that such contempt shall not pass unpunished. And since God threatens punishment only to despisers, we infer that the uncircumcision of children would do them no harm, if they died before the eighth day. For the bare promise of God was effectual to their salvation. He did not so attest this salvation by external signs, as to restrict his own effectual working to those signs. Moses, indeed, sets aside all controversy on this subject, by adducing as a reason, that they would make void the covenant of God: for we know, that the covenant was not violated, when the power of keeping it was taken away.

Let us then consider, that the salvation of the race of Abraham was included in that expression, 'I will be a God to thy seed.' And although circumcision was added as a confirmation, it nevertheless did not deprive the word of its force and efficacy. But because it is not in the power of man to sever what God has joined together; no one could despise or neglect the sign, without both rejecting the word itself; and depriving himself of the benefit therein offered. And therefore the Lord punished bare neglect with such severity.

But if any infants were deprived by death of the tokens of salvation, he spared them, because they had done nothing derogatory to the covenant of God. The same reasoning is at this day in force respecting baptism. Whoever, having neglected baptism, feigns himself to be contented with the bare promise, tramples, as much as in him lies, upon the blood of Christ, or at least does not suffer it to flow for the washing of his own children. Therefore, just punishment follows the contempt of the sign, in the privation of grace; because, by an impious severance of the sign and the word, or rather by a laceration of them, the covenant of God is violated.

To consign to destruction those infants, whom a sudden death has not allowed to be presented for baptism, before any neglect of parents could intervene, is a cruelty originating in superstition. But that the promise belongs to such children, is not in the least doubtful. For what can be more absurd than that the symbol, which is added for the sake of confirming the promise, should really enervate its force? Wherefore, the common opinion, by which baptism is supposed to be necessary to salvation, ought to be so moderated, that it should not bind the grace of Gods or the power of the Spirit, to external symbols, and bring against God a charge of falsehood.

He hath broken my covenant For the covenant of God is ratified, when by faith we embrace what he promises. Should any one object, that infants were guiltless of this fault, because they hitherto were

destitute of reason: I answer, we ought not to press this divine declaration too closely, as if God held the infants as chargeable with a fault of their own: but we must observe the antithesis, that as God adopts the infant son in the person of his father, so when the father repudiates such a benefit, the infant is said to cut himself off from the Church. For the meaning of the expression is this, 'He shall be blotted out from the people whom God had chosen to himself'. The explanation of some, that they who remained in uncircumcision would not be Jews, and would have no place in the census of that people, is too frigid. We must go farther, and say, that God, indeed, will not acknowledge those as among his people, who will not bear the mark and token of adoption.

15. As for Sarai thy wife God now promises to Abraham a legitimate seed by Sarai. She had been (as I have said) too precipitate, when she substituted, without any command from God, her handmaid in her own place: Abraham also had been too pliant in following his wife, who foolishly and rashly wished to anticipate the design of God; nevertheless, their united fault did not prevent God from making it known to them that he was about to give them that seed, from the expectation of which, they had, in a manner, cut themselves off. Whence the gratuitous kindness of God shines the more clearly, because, although men impede the course of it by obstacles of their own, it nevertheless comes to them. Moreover, God changes the name of Sarai, in order that he may extend her preeminence far and wide, which in her former name had been more restricted. For the letter **ס** (yod) has the force among the Hebrews of the possessive pronoun: this being now taken away, God designs that Sarah should every where, and without exception, be celebrated as a sovereign and princess. 410 And this is expressed in the context, when God promises that he will give her a son, from whom at length nations and kings should be born. And although at first sight this benediction appears most ample, it is still far richer than it seems to be, in the words here used, as we shall see in a little time.

17. And Abraham fell upon his face This was in token, not only of his reverence, but also of his faith. For Abraham not only adores God, but in giving him thanks, testifies that he receives and embraces what was promised concerning a son. Hence also we infer that he laughed, not because he either despised, or regarded as fabulous, or rejected, the promise of God; but, as is commonly wont to happen in things which are least expected, partly exulting with joy, and partly being carried beyond himself in admiration, he breaks forth into laughter. For I do not assent to the opinion of those who suppose, that this laughter flowed solely from joy; but I rather think that Abraham was as one astonished; which his next interrogation also confirms, shall a child be born to him that an hundred years old? For although he does not reject as vain what had been said by the angel, he yet shows that he was no otherwise affected, than as if he had received some incredible tidings. The novelty of the thing so strikes him, that for a short time he is confounded; yet he humbles himself before God, and with confused mind, prostrating himself on the earth, he, by faith, adores the power of God. For, that this was not the language of one who doubts, Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, is a witness, (Ro 4:19,) who denies that Abraham considered his body now dead, or the barren womb of Sarah, or that he staggered through unbelief; but declares that he believed in hope against hope. And that which Moses relates, that Abraham said in his heart, I do not so explain as if he had distinctly conceived this in his mind: but as many things steal upon us contrary to our purpose, the perplexing thought suddenly rushed upon his mind, 'What a strange thing is this, that a son should be born to one a hundred years old!' This, however, seems to some, to be a kind of contest between carnal reason and faith; for although Abraham, reverently prostrating himself before God, submits his own mind to the divine word, he is still disturbed by the novelty of the affair. I answer, that this admiration, which did not obstruct the course of God's power, was not contrary to faith; nay, the strength of faith shone the more brightly, in having surmounted an obstacle so arduous. And therefore he is not reprehended for laughing,

as Sarah is in the next chapter Ge 18:1

18. And Abraham said unto God Abraham does not now wonder silently within himself, but pours forth his wish and prayer. His language, however, is that of a mind still perturbed and vacillating, O that (or I wish that) Ishmael might live! For, as if he did not dare to hope for all that God promises, he fixes his mind upon the son already born; not because he would reject the promise of fresh offspring, but because he was contented with the favor already received, provided the liberality of God should not extend further. He does not, then, reject what the Lord offers; but while he is prepared to embrace it, the expression, O that Ishmael! yet flows from him through the weakness of his flesh. Some think that Abraham spoke thus, because he was afraid for his firstborn. But there is no reason why we should suppose that Abraham was smitten with any such fear, as that God, in giving him another son, would take away the former, or as if the latter favor should absorb that which had preceded. The answer of God, which follows shortly after, refutes this interpretation. What I have said is more certain; namely, that Abraham prayed that the grace of God, in which he acquiesced, might be ratified and confirmed to him. Moreover, without reflection, he breaks forth into this wish, when, for very joy, he could scarcely believe what he had heard from the mouth of God. 'To live before Jehovah' is as much as, to be preserved in safety under his protection, or to be blessed by Him. Abraham therefore desires of the Lord, that he will preserve the life which he has given to Ishmael.

19. Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed Some take the adverb אבאל (abal ,) to mean 'Truly.' Others, however, more rightly suppose it to be used for increasing the force of the expression. For God rouses the slumbering mind of his servant; as if he would say, 'The sight of one favor prevents thee from raising thyself higher; and thus it happens that thou dost confine thy thoughts within too narrow limits. Now, therefore, enlarge thy mind, to receive also what I promise concerning Sarah. For the door of hope ought to be sufficiently open to admit the word in its full magnitude.'

And I will establish my covenant with him He confines the spiritual covenant to one family, in order that Abraham may hence learn to hope for the blessing before promised; for since he had framed for himself a false hope, not founded on the word of God, it was necessary that this false hope should first be dislodged from his heart, in order that he might now the more fully rely upon the heavenly oracles, and might fix the anchor of his faith, which before had wavered in a fallacious imagination, on the firm truth of God. He calls the covenant everlasting, in the sense which we have previously explained. He then declares that it shall not be bound to one person only, but shall be common to his whole race, that it may, by continual succession, descend to his posterity. Yet it may seem absurd, that God should command Ishmael, whom he deprives of his grace, to be circumcised. I answer; although the Lord constitutes Isaac the firstborn and the head, from whom he intends the covenant of salvation to flow, he still does not entirely exclude Ishmael, but rather, in adopting the whole family of Abraham, joins Ishmael to his brother Isaac as an inferior member, until Ishmael cut himself off from his father's house, and his brother's society. Therefore his circumcision was not useless, until he apostatized from the covenant: for although it was not deposited with him, he might, nevertheless, participate in it, with his brother Isaac. In short, the Lord intends nothing else, by these words, than that Isaac should be the legitimate heir of the promised benediction.

20. And as for Ishmael. He here more clearly discriminates between the two sons of Abraham. For in promising to the one wealth, dignity, and other things pertaining to the present life, he proves him to be a son according to the flesh. But he makes a special covenant with Isaac, which rises above the world and this frail life: not for the sake of cutting Ishmael off from the hope of eternal life, but in order to teach him that salvation is to be sought from the race of Isaac, where it really dwells. We infer however, from this

passage, that the holy fathers were by no means kept down to earth, by the promises of God, but rather were borne upwards to heaven. For God liberally and profusely promises to Ishmael whatever is desirable with respect to this earthly life: and yet He accounts as nothing all the gifts He confers on him, in comparison with the covenant which was to be established in Isaac. It therefore follow, that neither wealth, nor power, nor any other temporal gift, is promised to the sons of the Spirit, but an eternal blessing, which is possessed only by hope, in this world. Therefore, however we may now abound in delights, and in all good things, our happiness is still transient, unless by faith we penetrate into the celestial kingdom of God, where a greater and higher blessing is laid up for us.

It is however asked, whether Abraham had respect only to this earthly life when he prayed for his son? For this the Lord seems to intimate, when he declares that he had granted what Abraham asked, and yet only mentions the things we have recorded. But it was not God's design to fulfill the whole wish of Abraham on this point; only he makes it plain that he would have some respect to Ishmael, for whom Abraham had entreated; so as to show that the fathers prayer had not been in vain. For he meant to testify that he embraced Abraham with such love, that, for his sake, he had respect to his whole race, and dignified it with peculiar benefits.

22. God went up from Abraham This expression contains a profitable doctrine, namely, that Abraham certainly knew this vision to be from God; for the ascent here spoken implies as much. And it is necessary for the pious to be fully assured that what they hear proceeds from God, in order that they may not be carried hither and thither but may depend alone upon heaven. And whereas God now, when he has spoken to us, does not openly ascend to heaven before our eyes; this ought to diminish nothing from the certainty of our faith; because a full manifestation of Him has been made in Christ, with which it is right that we should be satisfied. Besides, although God does not daily ascend upwards in a visible form, yet, in this his majesty is not less resplendent, that he raises us upwards by transforming us into his own image. Further, he gives sufficient authority to his word, when he seals it upon our hearts by his spirit.

23. And Abraham took Ishmael Moses now commends the obedience of Abraham because he circumcised the whole of his family as he had been commanded. For he must, of necessity, have been entirely devoted to God, since he did not hesitate to inflict upon himself a wound attended with acute pain, and not without danger of life. To this may be added the circumstance of the time; namely, that he does not defer the work to another day, but immediately obeys the Divine mandate. There is, however, no doubt, that he had to contend with various perplexing thoughts. Not to mention innumerable others, this might come into his mind, 'As for me, who have been so long harassed with many adverse affairs, and tossed about in different exiles, and yet have never swerved from the word of God; if, by this symbol, he would consecrate me to himself as a servant, why has he put me off to extreme old age? What does this mean, that I cannot be saved unless I, with one foot almost in the grave, thus mutilate myself?' But this was an illustrious proof of obedience, that having overcome all difficulties, he quickly, and without delay, followed where God called him. And he gave, in so doing, an example of faith not less excellent; because, unless he had certainly embraced the promises of God, he would by no means have become so prompt to obey. Hence, therefore, arose his great alacrity, because he set the word of God in opposition to the various temptations which might disturb his mind, and draw him in contrary directions.

Two things also here are worthy of observation. First, that Abraham was not deterred by the difficulty of the work from yielding to God the duty which he owed him. We know that he had a great multitude in his house, nearly equal to a people. It was scarcely credible that so many men would have suffered themselves to be wounded apparently to be made a laughingstock. Therefore it was justly to be feared,

that he would excite a great tumult in his tranquil family; yea, that, by a common impulses the major part of his servants would rise up against him; nevertheless, relying upon the word of God, he strenuously attempts what seemed impossible.

We next see, how faithfully his family was instructed; because not only his home-born slaves, but foreigners, and men bought with money, meekly receive the wounds which was both troublesome, and the occasion of shame to carnal sense. It appears then that Abraham diligently took care to have them prepared for due obedience. And since he held them under holy discipline, he received the reward of his own diligences in finding them so tractable in a most arduous affair. So, at this day, God seems to enjoin a thing impossible to be done, when he requires his gospel to be preached every where in the whole world, for the purpose of restoring it from death to life. For we see how great is the obstinacy of nearly all men, and what numerous and powerful methods of resistance Satan employs; so that, in short, all the ways of access to these principles are obstructed. Yet it behoves individuals to do their duty, and not to yield to impediments; and, finally our endeavors and our labors shall by no means fail of that success which is not yet apparent.

Footnotes

400

■ ■ ■ ■ ■, (El Shaddai ,) a title of Jehovah, apparently of plural form, Gesenius calls it the plural of majesty. It seems chiefly intended to convey the notion of Omnipotence. Some render the words, 'God all sufficient; 'but the original root of ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ conveys the notion, rather of overwhelming, than of sustaining power. The word is therefore better rendered, as in our version, Almighty. It corresponds with the Greek παντοκρ■τωρ, and with the Latin Omnipotens. -- Ed

401

"Ab aliis omnibus." "De tous autres moyens." "From all other means." -- French Tr

402

" Yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." Ro 6:13. -- Ed

403

That is, both the promise of grace, and the command to yield obedience. -- Ed.

404

"Ego, ecce pactum meum tecum." "I, behold, my covenant is with thee."

405

"Multitudinis gentium." "Of a multitude of nations."

406

"Quia continua serie prosequi nolebat Deus, gratiam suam ergo totum semen." So it is, both in the Amsterdam edition, and in that of Hengstenberg; but the word nolebat (was unwilling) seems so contrary

to the writer's line of argument, that the French version is followed in the translation, which is, "Pource que Dieu vouloit poursuyure," etc. -- Ed

407

'Inter me et to' But in the chapter itself it stands, 'Inter me et vos;' as in the English version. -- Ed.

408

"Tanti mysterii insigne statui in pudendis partibus."

409

"Et filius octo dierum circumcidetur." -- "And a son of eight days shall be circumcised."

410

Sarah shall her name be. Heb., שָׂרָה, Sarah . Sarai properly signifies "my princess," as if sustaining that relation to a single individual or to a family. The restriction implied in the possessive "my" is now to be done away: her limited pre-eminence is to be unspeakably enlarged. Thus, instead of "my princess," she is henceforth to bear an appellation importing "princess of a multitude," and corresponding with the magnificent promise made to her, ver. 16. -- Bush, Notes on Genesis

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