



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Ignite Your Faith: Genesis 12-25 wk. 2

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Message Title: Faith and Obedience pt. 2

Release Date: Friday, 8/09/19

There's a lot of people that heard a presentation of the Gospel and they'd rather go to heaven than to hell. So, they said, yes, I believe, and that's all there is to it. It's like they've obtained a marriage license, but they've never really entered into the covenant relationship with God. Have you ever noticed that nowhere in the Bible does it present the Gospel in the neat little summary nutshell that we like to present?

Well maybe it's because of exactly what he's talking about here in Genesis chapter 17 because God wants people to enter into a dating relationship and then an engagement so that when they stand at that altar of faith and they say I do they understand what they're committing to. This isn't just a ticket to heaven. This is entering into a lifelong covenant, love relationship with God. And because he is God Almighty, then we walk before him in obedience.

Well, that's what God is establishing in verse one, *"I am El Shaddai, walk before me and be blameless and I will establish my covenant between me, and you and I will multiply you exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face and God talked with him saying, as for me, behold my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be called Abraham. For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations and I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you and I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your descendants after you and I will give to you and your descendants after you the land of your sojourning's, and all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."* This is not God establishing a new covenant. This is simply God reaffirming the covenant of Genesis 15.

Well, the text goes on verse nine it talks about the sign of the covenant. *"God said further to Abraham, now, as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your descendants after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you and every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations. A servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who was bought with your money shall surely be circumcised, thus shall my covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant, but an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant."*

God said the sign of the covenant would be circumcision. It's very important to understand. Again, what He's NOT saying is that if you do this, then somehow you earn or merit the covenant. He's not saying that that is a condition for me to keep my promise. What He is saying is that I made this promise and when you entered into it by faith, I want there to be an external sign that gives evidence to the commitment by faith that you made in your heart. Very similar to what we would understand baptism, or communion to be their external symbols of something that we have affirmed and believed in our heart.

But still we wrestle with the question, what's up with this circumcision thing? I've often thought about people who really aren't familiar with the Bible and they start reading through the New Testament and they see all this language about circumcision, and they must really wonder, man, what? What is up with all of that? Maybe you've wondered that yourself. Well, there's a lot of symbolism in this sign. Circumcision is the removal of the flesh or the foreskin from the male reproductive organ. Now think about what was the heartbeat of the promise. The heartbeat of the promise was a promised seed, and through that seed, the families of the earth would be blessed. And so, it focuses on that organ that would transmit that seed, but there's more to it than that.

Think of the imagery of really a cutting of a blood covenant in order to remove that flesh, and there's this picture that the flesh is being removed, which is a way of saying we are now understanding that because Abram and Sarai are this old, there is no fleshly way to fulfill the promise. In other words, there's nothing they can do in their own power, in their own flesh to have a son. That's why God made them wait until both Abram and Sarai were as good as dead physically in their ability to have a child because up until that point, they could do that in their own strength and their own power. And God wanted everybody to know that this is a miracle. This cannot be done in human flesh. It must come from God. And that's the symbolism of the removal of the flesh from that organ. It's saying, we now understand that we're removing any fleshly ability to fulfill that promise. And we're discarding that and saying, the only hope now is for God to do a miracle. The seed of promise must come from Him.

New Testament writers pick up that same imagery when they talk about this covenant and they say that we have to understand, we have no ability within our flesh to in any way enter into that covenant relationship with God. So, we discard any attempt by the flesh to enter into that covenant. It has to be totally by faith in Jesus Christ. So, the imagery actually goes right through the New Testament. But that's the whole point then of circumcision. It would be an outward sign that we believe this is all of God, nothing we can do to earn it. And this is the imagery of the discarding of the flesh, trusting God for the promised seed.

Well he goes on verse 15, *"Then God said to Abraham, as for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name and I will bless her and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations. Kings of people shall come from her."* The name Sarai means princess. And when you change it to Sarah, it means princess, it doesn't really change. So, you do get into some questions. What's the point of the name change?

Well there are a lot of Hebrew scholars that believe that part of the name change of both Abraham and Sarah has to do with the insertion of the very breath of God into the name. The Hebrew word for breath and the Hebrew word for spirit are exactly the same word. And so, it came to mean that breath was symbolic, breath was synonymous with the very spirit of God. And so, you have Hebrew names like Elohim where you have this breathy sound and you have the Hebrew name Yahweh, which has a strong breathy sound to it. And it was believed that that was inserting the very spirit of God into the name. So,

all of a sudden then you have this insertion into Abraham, Sarah, and it was believed that that is inserting the very breath of God into their names. And I think that's very likely what was going on here.

Verse 17, "Then Abraham fell on his face and he laughed, and he said, in his heart, will a child be born to a man, 100 years old? And will Sarah, who is 90 years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee, but God said, no, but Sarah, your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. And I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you, behold I will bless him and I will make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly. He shall become a father of 12 princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant, I will establish with Isaac whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

Abraham's response to God's announcements is that he falls on the ground laughing. Now there's no rebuke of Abraham, so maybe it was just kind of a, a laughter of celebration of trying to come to grips with all of this, but he does turn around and he says, you know this, this really seems impossible. I'll be 100 and Sarah will be 90. I mean, can't we use Ishmael? Won't he do? It's interesting, the name Ishmael means God hears and that's exactly what God says. He says, I hear you. I know that's your son, and I'm going to bless him and I'm going to take care of him, but I'm going to bring the seed through Sarah and his name will be called laughter. Isaac, laughter because it is laughable. It's a miracle and He's very clear that it's through Isaac, that the son of promise will come.

Now, the thing that we've been wrestling with through this whole chapter is how was Abraham going to respond to the name change to this promise that in a year they'll have a child to this whole covenant of circumcision? He's waited 23 years, nothing's happened and nothing's changed. It's just a reiteration of the same promise. How will he respond?

Verse 22, "And when he finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael, his son and all their servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day as God had said to him. Now, Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin and Ishmael, his son was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin and in the very same day, Abraham was circumcised and Ishmael, his son. And all the men of his household who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner were circumcised with him." If I was to summarize those verses, it would simply be that Abraham obeyed. Abraham obeyed. That was his way of saying, God, I believe you. I trust you. I believe you tell the truth, and he followed that with obedience.

Can you imagine what that would have been like to have gathered together all of the men after he announced I'm changing my name, and to have said, men, this is what we're going to do. And this is why we're going to do it. Now you're not talking about a little group of men. A couple of chapters ago when he mustered an army, he mustered 318 fighting men. You're talking about hundreds of men that would have gathered together and Abraham would have said, this is what we're going to do. I think it is very significant that all of those men were willing to enter into the covenant. It says something about Abraham and how he was respected and how he had taught them about his faith in God. And they all said, we believe this can happen and they entered into the covenant, obedience.

It was just about 21 years ago when I proposed marriage to Patti. And I remember on that day when I handed her that ring and I asked her to marry me, the thing that was in the forefront of my mind was what I've always wanted is a marriage license. That's what I've always wanted ever since I was a kid. And I remember when I was standing at that altar and I said, I do, what was at the forefront of my mind is what I've always wanted is a marriage license. And finally, I'm going to have it. I remember as soon as that ceremony was over, I dashed to the pastor's office and I couldn't wait to see that marriage license and then sign it. And I thought, man, this is the most exciting moment of my life. And we gathered up that marriage license and we headed on our honeymoon. We headed on our honeymoon and that first night in that hotel, Patti was in the bathroom and I said, Patti, come out here. Let's go find an all-night Walmart and let's get this license framed and matted and get dressed and let's go. So, we headed out and we found a Walmart and we framed that bad boy and we matted it. And our entire honeymoon, we walked around with that marriage license and we said, man, look at what we have. This is really something. And I'd have to say over the last 20 years, that has been the most exciting part of it all - daily, I rush home from work, and I look at the marriage license on the wall.

Now, obviously you aren't buying any of this. Because it's absolutely ridiculous. It's ridiculous! When I stood there that day at the altar, I didn't even know there was going to be a marriage license. I could've cared less. I'm not sure I've ever seen it. I couldn't tell you today where it is. And frankly I don't care. What I was committing to that day was a lifelong covenant love relationship. And for the last 20 years that has been the joy of the journey.

There's a lot of people who heard the Little Gospel summary and they thought to themselves, I'd rather go to heaven than hell, so okay, I'm buying it, and that's as far as it's ever gone. And when somebody asks them, are you a Christian? Yeah, I have the marriage license, but that's, that's all it's ever been. They've never understood that really, that isn't the point at all. It's entering into this lifelong covenant love relationship with God. We're going to understand now, I'm going to learn who He is and I'm going to respond to that with my obedience and we're going to enter into this magnificent relationship both now and forever.

That's what God wants from us. He doesn't just want us to see our salvation as a ticket to heaven and maybe we clean up our act a little bit and come to church now and then, that's completely missing the point. But rather it is to enter into this most beautiful, meaningful love covenant relationship with Him and it affects the way I live the rest of my life. I live my life as an expression of my love and relationship with Him by walking blamelessly before Him, seeking to obey Him seeking to be everything He's called me to be.

We can never be a people of faith if we don't understand the relationship between faith and obedience. Every time I disobey, it's because I've said to God, I just don't believe you. I just don't believe you. And so we do our own thing. But the more we learn to be a people of faith and the more we say, God, I believe you tell the truth. The more it's evidenced by the way that we live as we walk in obedience in this beautiful covenant relationship with him, faith and obedience.

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Arnie: Bryan, your teaching today explained a lot of things that too many people just don't make sense of, including me. One of them is this thing - being circumcised. Can you give us a quick review of what circumcision represents in the Bible?

Bryan: So, it is confusing. And part of the confusion is the fact that it's a sign that isn't visible. And that's probably the most common question I hear. But if you think about what we just talked about, in chapter 16 Hagar represents the attempt of the flesh, which is what Paul in Galatians says of the old covenant. It's the attempt of the flesh to fulfill the promise. So, the promise is a promised seed. So, the seed travels through the male organ and it would be the promised Savior. So, the removal of the flesh and the foreskin is saying this cannot be done in the flesh. The flesh is removed, and it will require a miracle from God. So, the whole idea of circumcision is God will do this. We can't go to plan B; we can't do it through Hagar. So, you have to remember chapter 16 to make sense of 17 - they tried it in the flesh. That was a disaster. Remove the flesh, God will have to do this. That's, I think, the best way to understand circumcision.

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Cara: I think it's amazing how Abraham's men followed his leading then to be circumcised.

Bryan: I think it's amazing too. I'm not sure we in a contemporary culture understand what that meant to grown men in an ancient culture, but it was asking a lot and they willingly obeyed, which I think says a lot about Abraham and his character and his influence in their life.

Arnie: Yeah, but how does that relate to me today?

Bryan: Yeah, so obviously actual circumcision has no real spiritual implications to us today. But the point that's made in the New Testament is that it's by faith not by works. So, the idea of removing of the flesh isn't literal circumcision. It's like a shadow that we're saved, not by works, but by faith, God fulfilling his promise. It's something only God can do. So, by grace through faith, not works. But the other place I find this super helpful is the New Testament often refers to the flesh. So sometimes it refers to just skin and bones flesh. But most of the time it's metaphoric. And that's a real hard term to define. And the best way I know to define it in the New Testament is to take my cue from Genesis 17 - the flesh is what I can accomplish in my own power and my own strength. So, it can be really good stuff. All religion is done in the flesh, but it's what I can do myself? And the difference is then salvation by grace through faith is what only God can do in the fulfillment of the promise.

Cara: So once again, we come then to that relationship between faith and obedience. What does God really want from us then in our obedience?

Bryan: I think in the New Testament what God asked in return for what He's done for us is that we believe He tells the truth and we believe it to such a degree; we actually live like it. So, Ephesians 1:6 says, "to the praise of the glory of His grace." So, I believe He's made me a trophy of His grace. And I believe it does such a degree. I live like it. The more I live like it; the more praise goes to the glory of His grace. So, I think that's actually what He wants from us. It's very different from just choosing conformity to the culture, even within churches. So, you think how many people in our churches just kind of conform to the culture -these are the rules, this is what's expected of me - but they don't really understand the truth that defines their behavior. So, there has to be this element of understanding. And then I believe it and I believe it so much; I live like it. So, our behavior is flowing out of that, not just some sort of an external conformity to the rules.

Cara: Do you think everybody sitting in church, God is asking them to do something, so He's not just hand-picking certain people. He's looking if you say, I want to be obedient, He's going to give you a job?

Bryan: Yes, 100%. [okay]. I think everybody has a high and holy calling. It's to the marketplace. It's to be a homemaker, it's to be a pastor, it's to be a construction worker. I think in God's eyes it's all equally of value and I think if we choose to disobey, then it's, it's disobedience. You can't say it's a high and holy calling and then turn right around and say, but if you don't do it, it doesn't matter. It's either one or the other and I think we're all called to something that will matter forever.

Cara: Bryan, you reminded us today then that the Gospel is more than just a one, two, three process that results in a ticket to heaven, rather an invitation into a covenant love relationship with God. Knowing this, how should this affect how we represent the Gospel to others?

Bryan: Yeah, so that's a great question because I do think it matters. So, as we've talked about before, more of a conversation than just the presentation. It's not always just one, two, three and here's your ticket. It needs to be more of a conversation than that. I think the Gospel needs to focus on a person, not a place. The point of the Gospel is not getting to heaven. The point of the Gospel is having a relationship with Jesus and heaven is heaven because Jesus lives there. I mean, that's, that's the whole point. It's not just a ticket to get on a plane. I mean, think about if the Gospel was just to get a ticket to heaven, what is the point of the rest of the New Testament? The point of the rest of the New Testament is that we might live out this newfound relationship with God, this covenant relationship in a way that He's called us to. So, it's much more like marriage. It comes with certain expectations that ultimately deliver joy. We don't get married just to possess a marriage license. We get married to enter into a lifelong covenant love relationship. And so, it is with Jesus.