

21. The God who requires Fidelity from the Faithful (2007)

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Date: 04 May 2008

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with you, if you would, to Genesis chapter 17, which is all about the God who requires fidelity from the faithful.

Genesis 15 to 17 form the centerpiece of the whole story of Abraham because they lay out for us something of absolutely monumental importance to the story of the whole Bible.

That is Abraham's covenant relationship with God and all that that means for the whole of the world. So it shouldn't be any surprise that what is so important theologically for the Bible is emphasized by the way that Moses lays out the whole story to make these chapters the very centerpiece of everything.

We know, we've seen already that Moses is a wonderfully skillful writer and of course the structure of his writing so often is the clue to what he wants our attention to be focused on and so it is here.

And you can see on the sheet there the real parallelism that there is. Right at the heart of the story, these chapters 15 to 17. Chapters that speak of God binding himself to Abraham as the covenant God and therefore which speak in a very real way of the beginning of the covenant family of faith.

[1 : 21] The beginning of the church of God. Now Derek Kidner in his comments on this on the very last verses of chapter 17 where you see that all the men of Abraham's household, all the foreigners included, are given the mark of covenant faith.

He says this, in the sense that Pentecost was the birthday of the church, this was the birthday of the church of the Old Testament. Men of all ages, including children, all backgrounds, all ethnic groups, all different status, they're all gathered in the one household of covenant faith.

And that's been the message of the covenant gospel of God from the very, very beginning. Not just the New Testament. But what does it mean to be God's covenant people?

What does it mean to be the church of God? Well, Genesis 15 to 17 as a whole sum that up for us very clearly. It means being people of the covenant God, the God of grace.

And as we've seen in chapter 15, that means being people of the God who reassures the faithful. Things yet unseen, things yet in the future, are nevertheless pledged by God's solemn oath, promised on God's own life.

[2 : 40] And it means being people of the God who restores failures. What we saw last time in chapter 16. Even our disasters, God picks up and puts together again.

And he gives us permanent reminders of his grace and his mercy. He's the God who sees and who hears and who does restore those who call out to him. Yes, he's the Lord.

He's the God of grace. But of course, God's grace is not cheap grace. He commits himself to his people, but he also demands that his people commit themselves to him in response.

And so he's also the God who requires fidelity from those that he calls to faith. He's the sovereign Lord. And that means, of course, that he is in charge.

To know God means to be possessed by him. He's a God who changes your life. And therefore, who will control your life.

[3 : 44] He changed Abraham's whole future, didn't he, in chapter 12. Go where I tell you. And here in chapter 17, we see that he's the God who changes his whole identity.

He changes Abraham and Sarai's names. He's the God who also demands that his people bear the mark of his name. The mark of belonging to him. Here, the mark of circumcision.

Now that's the side of God's grace that people aren't nearly so keen on, isn't it? People are happy to believe in God, or in our God, in rather general terms.

But not in a God who will change my life. Especially in ways that I might find painful or restrictive. Not a God who demands control. Who demands submission from me.

Never. Not that kind of God. Not a God whose demands penetrate into the most personal areas of my life. And demands change.

[4 : 43] But you see, the God of the Bible is the covenant God. He is a God who requires fidelity from his people. Not just words. Not just Lord, Lord.

Lord, that's no use, says Jesus. But doing the will of my Father in heaven. He requires fidelity. Everywhere the Bible says that.

That's what it calls the obedience of faith. And a real relationship with the true God means that his call upon your life changes you. It changes everything.

That's why G.K. Chesterton is said to have remarked that the Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting. It's been found difficult and left untried. Because the true God requires fidelity.

Wholehearted loyalty and obedience. The people who belong to God's name must reflect the glory of God's name. And that's what this chapter spells out for us.

[5 : 42] Verses 1 to 3 you'll see are a summary. The root of what the New Testament calls the eternal gospel. That God's revelation always demands response. And then the rest of the chapter spells it out in detail.

Verses 4 to 22 are God's revelation. It's structured around those three times when it says, And God said to Abraham. Verse 3. And then again in verse 9 and verse 15.

And then of course verses 23 to 27 give Abraham's response as God had said. So let's look at then under three headings. The root and the revelation and the response of the true gospel of God.

First then verses 1 to 3 summarizes very succinctly what I'm going to call the root of the eternal gospel. God's gospel is always the same. His commands and his promises always come together.

Never one without the other. Chapter 12. Go that I will bless you. Command and a promise. So here. Walk before me. Verse 1. And be blameless that I might literally give you my covenant.

[6 : 50] God's command and his promise. Not a bargain between equals. Notice. It is God who will give his covenant blessings. He sovereignly offers his blessings.

But he also commands obedience. A blameless walk. Just as Noah, do you remember, was blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God, we're told.

And God's gospel calls people to walk always in a manner worthy of the calling that they have received. That's how Ephesians 4 puts it, as we sung.

No longer walking as the pagans do in darkness, but walking as children of light so as to please the Lord. That's the eternal gospel. The calling of God's people.

Whether it's Abraham here, or whether it's Moses and his hearers, or whether it's us today. Now Moses' first hearers and his readers knew that perfectly plainly. That's who he's speaking to after all.

[7 : 50] That word blameless recurs dozens of times in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. It's most often used about the sacrifices to God, which must be literally unblemished.

Nothing less will do for God. And so it is for the people's lives of living sacrifice. In Deuteronomy 18, he is contrasting their way of life with the life of the pagans all around them.

And he says, You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. Not like them. Not walking in darkness, but walking in light. God requires fidelity from his people.

And the root of the true gospel is always the same. It's not a call to lip service, but it's a call to heart service and life service. And that calling to fidelity is seen constantly through the story of Abraham.

If you just look on to chapter 18, verse 19, you'll see the same thing there. God says that he's chosen Abraham, that's his sovereign grace, electing grace. But he's chosen him that he may command his children and his whole household to keep the way of the Lord.

[9 : 00] So that the Lord may bring to pass what he's promised. Now I'm emphasizing that because it's sometimes made out as though God's covenant with Abraham was very different from God's covenant with Moses.

As if obeying God's law was very important for the people under Moses. But in the New Testament, for example, our gospel isn't like that. It's like God's gospel to Abraham.

It's all grace. There's no stress on obedience. Well, yes, the New Testament gospel is. God's gospel to Abraham, Galatians 3.8, tells us the same gospel.

But this was his gospel. God's grace to Abraham demanded response, a response of fidelity, the obedience of faith. It's right here in front of us, isn't it?

And of course, since Moses was writing this for his people, it's hardly likely to have a different theology in Genesis from in Exodus and Deuteronomy and so on, is he?

[10 : 02] Of course not. And nor does Jesus preach a different gospel, nor does his apostles. There's only one gospel. Paul is absolutely adamant about that, isn't he, in all his writings.

And this is it. The root of the gospel is always the same. God's revelation and grace and mercy always demands a response. He requires fidelity from his people because he is the Lord, the sovereign God.

That was Moses' watchword, wasn't it, all through his writings. You shall be holy, says the Lord, for I am holy. And it's the great call of the New Testament gospel, too, isn't it?

Paul begins his great letter to the Romans with those words. He's an apostle, he says, in chapter 1, verse 5, to bring about the obedience of faith from among all the nations. At the end of his letter, he says, The gospel is being made known to all the nations according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith.

That's how Romans ends. That's Paul's gospel. All through the gospels, Jesus himself has the same message. He commands people to repent, to obey, to submit to his lordship.

[11 : 16] Follow me. Whoever believes in the Son, he says, has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life. God's wrath remains on him. You see, for Jesus to believe is to obey him.

That's the obedience of true faith. All through the Acts of the Apostles, just the same. Acts 5 and 32, we read that God gives his Holy Spirit to those who obey him.

A few verses further on, in chapter 6, we read that many, through the preaching of the gospel, became obedient to the faith. That's why Hebrews 5 tells us that Christ is the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Hebrews 5, 9. And, of course, all the way through the book of Hebrews, we are warned against having unbelieving hearts that rebel in disobedience to God. You see, it's very, very plain, isn't it?

There's only one gospel. All the way through the Bible, the root of the gospel is the same. It's a call and it's a command from a sovereign God to receive his blessings, yes, but to receive them his way, through submission to his lordship, obedience to his soul lordship.

[12 : 32] It's a command, isn't it? To love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. He's a God who requires fidelity because he is the sovereign God.

And Abraham understood that clearly. Verse 3, he fell on his face in submission, in obedience. That's what worship is. And that's what God calls you to do as well today in 2008.

You need to know that if you're a Christian. You need to know that if you're not yet a Christian. That's God's command to you. Sometimes people find that their Christian experience is a little bit lacking.

They wonder perhaps if they need some sort of refreshing. Maybe not seeing just all the things that God seems to be promising to them. It's very tempting, isn't it, to want to seek some kind of improvement by some special experience, some kind of special blessing.

But Jesus says, a worship extravaganza, an extravaganza of Lord, Lord, means precisely nothing. What he wants is for you to hear his voice.

[13 : 45] What he wants is a renewed commitment to walk blamelessly before him. That's how God gives you the blessings of his covenant. Read Luke chapter 8 verse 19 and see the kind of people that Jesus wants to spend his time with.

Those who hear and do God's word. Those are my mother and sisters and brothers, he says. Because the root of the true gospel is always the same. God reveals abundant promises, yes.

But he also makes absolute commands. His revelation always demands a response. Well, let's look then at the revelation as it's unpacked here in verses 4 to 22, the revelation of the true gospel.

And the pattern here too is significant. I'm sure you can see. Notice both the abundant promises and the absolute commands. And notice that the commands are hedged in by the promises, aren't they?

God's command, God's laws always come to us in an envelope of grace, don't they? Look first at the abundant promises in verses 4 to 8 and verses 15 to 21.

[14 : 53] Because we see there, don't we, the responsibilities that God takes on himself. The NIV is quite helpful there in verse 4. It preserves the, and as for me, just as verse 9 has the, as for you.

See, in verses 4 to 8, God promises to Abraham. And as he promises him, he accompanies it by a change of his name.

Just as in verses 15 to 21, Sarah's name is changed as well. That's just a reminder, isn't it, that when God takes control of our lives, and he comes to rule us, it's not that we should be burdened.

It's not that we should be squashed in our personalities. It's that he might give us his promises. He might bless us richly. It's to liberate us.

It's to be what he's purposed that we should be by his grace. Yes, he takes control of us, even our name. But it's for a purpose of wonderful blessing. If only we would believe that.

[15 : 55] If only we'd really trust that when God takes control of us, it's for our good. There aren't so many of our problems because we forget that. Come to me, says Jesus.

Take my yoke upon you. My burden is light. My yoke is easy. You'll find rest for your souls. Walk before me, he says, that I might give you abundant blessings.

And God's abundant blessings are repeated here in this passage, aren't they, about the land to Abraham and about the offspring. But there's something new as well, isn't there? Because before, God had promised Abraham that he would be a great nation and have a great inheritance in the land.

But now I'm sure you notice, he's told that he'll be the father, in verse 5, of a multitude of nations. Same again in verse 6. Now, Bruce Wolke, in his commentary, says that we should take this both in a biological and a spiritual sense.

So if you look at verse 6, it says that kings will come, literally, from Abraham's own loins, that is, biological descendants. But it also says that he will make Abraham into nations.

[17 : 06] In verse 6, it says the same thing about Sarah in verse 16. And in verse 5, it says that he will be the father of a multitude of nations. Now, that term is often used in a spiritual sense.

Genesis 45, for example, Joseph says that God has made him into a father to Pharaoh and his whole household. And that's certainly what we see here in the immediate context, isn't it?

In the immediate command that God gives Abraham to be a spiritual father to all his household, including the foreigners who have come in. And that in itself is a foreshadowing, isn't it?

Of the multitudes of nationalities, of all the families of the earth to whom God had promised at the beginning, back in chapter 12, that Abraham would be a blessing to. Do you see what God reveals here?

He'll become a spiritual father, says God, of a multitude of nations, verses 5 and 6. And God will establish an everlasting covenant of grace with those generations to come throughout the nations to be God to them, as to him, says verse 7.

[18 : 15] He will be their God too, verse 8. I will be their God. to a myriad of spiritual offspring. But God will do this as Abraham also becomes a physical father to one specific seed, do you see?

To his own son, to one who will be born only to Sarah, verse 16. I will give you a son by her. not the son born by Abelan's own efforts, verse 17, not Ishmael, but Sarah's son born by a miracle of God.

A son born to a woman to whom it was naturally impossible to bear a son. Because it's with him, says God, and only him, verse 19, this son, that God will establish his covenant.

Isn't that an extraordinary promise? This is a God who will bring a blessing to a multitude of nations, to be God to a great multitude of offspring, of Abraham's natural line, and foreigners alike.

And he'll do it all through the promise of a miraculous birth to a woman otherwise totally incapable of bearing a child, except by God's direct intervention and miracle.

[19 : 44] He's got a certain way of working, this God, hasn't he? Well, no wonder Abraham was bowled over by it. He laughed out loud at the sheer wonder of it all.

Not, I think, at all in scornful laughter. Notice verse 17. He's fallen on his face again in worship, hasn't he? But incredulity, bewilderment, happiness, everything all rolled into one.

It is just like Mary all those centuries later, isn't it, in Luke chapter 1, when the angel tells her that she too will have a miraculous son. How can this be?

She says, it's impossible. But no, says the angel, not with God. Nothing's impossible with him. And God isn't harsh with that kind of laughter of faith.

Yes, he is harsh with scornful laughter, with disbelief. But Abraham was on his face in response to God. Romans 4, verse 18, puts it exactly. In hope, he believed against hope all that God had promised him.

[20 : 49] It's impossible to laughter himself. But no, I'm beginning to learn nothing is impossible with this God, the El Shaddai God. Do you notice that in verse 1, this new name of God that he revealed himself by?

Scholars argue about how best to translate it. I think almighty is probably the best. They mean the all-sufficient one, the all-powerful one. All through Genesis you find God appears as El Shaddai, especially when his people are in desperate need of reassurance, of help, all the way through Jacob's story, for example.

Actually, often, it is associated with blessings of being fruitful and multiplying. I think the best clue must come in Romans chapter 4, verse 17, that we just quoted, where Paul says that Abraham believed the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not exist.

That's El Shaddai. And because Abraham did become a natural father to the supernatural offspring, to Isaac, to the son of joy and laughter, so also he did become a spiritual father to a multitude of nations.

That this God, the El Shaddai God, the all-sufficient God, the almighty, will be their God also, our God. Verse 8, I will be their God also.

[22 : 15] As for me, says God, those are my abundant promises to you. That's what it means for me to be God to you and to all of those to whom you will be a spiritual father forever.

It's wonderful, isn't it? There's no question of it being anything other than the sovereign initiative of God, the God of promise. And yet, we can't ignore those verses in the middle, can we?

In the midst of an envelope of grace lie verses 9 to 14, the absolute commands. Look at them. As for you, says verse 9, you shall keep my covenant.

See, no matter how great and how free God's gracious promises are, in fact, because they're so great and so free, he is a God who requires fidelity. The true obedience of faith.

The faith that submits to God as sovereign Lord and does it publicly and even painfully and permanently. And that's what this sign of circumcision was all about in verse 11.

[23 : 23] It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Not an optional sign, notice, but an essential sign. Verse 10 virtually equates the sign with the covenant itself and that's surely why verse 14 is so severe, isn't it?

To reject the sign is to reject the covenant and to incur God's curse. You mustn't be confused. Not just what's deep down in our hearts that really matters to God.

That's a complete fallacy. What's inside must be real enough to change what's on the outside too. That's the true gospel, isn't it? God requires public fidelity to his name.

That's why in Romans 10, Paul says, it's not just believing in your heart in the risen Jesus. It's confessing with your mouth. It's a public display that he is Lord that saves you.

James says, faith without works isn't faith at all. It's dead. So God's people are to bear his mark. The mark that speaks of a blameless walk. Because it speaks of those who have humbled themselves before this God and been owned by him.

[24 : 33] It's like the brand of a slave speaks of belonging to a master and submitting, being bound to his commands and his direction. But the very nature of the ritual also speaks volumes, doesn't it?

It's so humbling. Circumcision is a putting off and a putting away of the flesh. And as such, it signifies a need for cleansing, for purification.

In fact, Jesus himself speaks of circumcision in exactly those terms in John chapter 7. Remember, the Pharisees are arguing with him about healing a man on the Sabbath. He says to them, you're happy to circumcise a man on the Sabbath, but you're not happy for me to make a whole man cleansed and healthy on the Sabbath.

That's why in Joshua chapter 5, a little bit later on, the new generation of the Israelites, when they enter the land, all of those who have not been circumcised during those rebellious years in the desert, they must be circumcised.

God says, so you will roll away their reproach, put that sin and reproach behind them. Circumcision was a permanent reminder of the need for cleansing, the unworthiness of the people.

[25 : 48] And it was also a reminder that God's grace would do that through his promise, and especially through his promised seed. not through their merit, but through God's promise.

No accident that the sign was made on the organ of procreation. God could have made it a sign, a cut in the hair, a cut in the skin, anything. But no, the very organ related to God's promise of a seed, as though God is saying, yes, it will be through your seed, Abraham, but not your way.

not through the one born according to the flesh and your wisdom, Ishmael. Your way, man's way, will be set aside.

And you must submit to your way being cut right out of the picture. You must humbly cast your eyes on my promise, on my sovereign power, on my grace, on my mercy.

It was a public witness that reminded everybody that fellowship with God comes only by humble submission to his cleansing. That it only comes through his putting away of our sinful flesh, our hard hearts, our rebellious hearts, and putting our trust in the promise of his seed who was to come in God's way, in God's time.

[27 : 10] Circumcision, therefore, was an outward mark of inward humbling and trust and obedient faith in the sovereign mercy of God. It's a permanent reminder of the fidelity that God requires in his covenant.

Moses constantly was reminding Israel of that, wasn't he? Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts. Be no longer stubborn and hard-hearted, he says. Walk in my ways.

Love me. Serve me. Deuteronomy chapter 10. Leviticus chapter 26. If they confess their iniquity and humble their uncircumcised hearts, then I will remember my covenant, says the Lord.

It's there in the cry of the prophets as well. Constantly accusing Israel of having uncircumcised hearts and lips. It's an amazing thing, isn't it, that among God's people, Israel, something that should have been a source of humility and a call to penitence and obedience became for them instead a source of pride and presumption.

We are the circumcision. We have Abraham as our father. That's the attitude that Jesus met, wasn't it? Led them to reject Jesus Christ himself, the promised seed.

[28 : 24] The perversity, isn't it, of the human heart that turns God's grace constantly into the works of man. No, says Paul in Philippians 3, we are the true circumcision who worship the Spirit of God and the glory in Jesus Christ and put no confidence in the flesh.

That's what circumcision was about. No confidence in the flesh but trust in the promise of God. Circumcision from the very beginning said, cursed is the way of the flesh.

We trust in God's promise and him alone humbly. We acknowledge our helplessness. There's nothing that we can do but we bow before your sovereign grace. That's why they brought helpless infants eight days old and placed them into the hands of God's grace trusting only in his promise.

It says, we acknowledge that there's nothing worthy or special in us. Nothing about us by our own background or our blood.

That's why again, it was all, all who by God's grace had been providentially brought into the household of faith who were circumcised. Those born in it by God's grace and those gathered in by whatever means.

[29 : 40] Notice that. It's very, very important. Gentiles belonged to the covenant family of faith right from the very beginning of the church. Circumcision says, we are nothing.

We did nothing. It's all God. He did everything. And we're his because he's Lord. God's grace. And so, verses 23 to 27, you see, describe Abraham's response to the true gospel.

Abraham obeyed God, it says, verse 23, that very day, just as God had said to him. He put the mark of faith, the sign of the covenant, on Ishmael, his son, and on everyone in his household as well as himself in an act of commitment and response to God, to God's grace.

I guess today we think that's very presumptuous, don't we? People would say that, wouldn't they? How dare he force his religion on all these others just like that? I've even known Christian parents sometimes say things like that about their children.

We'll wait to let them make up their own minds. Alas, those who think like that almost always are rewarded with children who do make up their own minds and go their own way.

[30 : 58] But Abraham listened to God and he understood that the covenant God is a God who deals with families. And so he said just what Joshua said later on, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

He recognized that God requires fidelity to his covenant. He recognized it was a personal call upon his life, but also that it had implications for his whole family. Not just to mark them out of course by God's sign, but to work out that call of grace in reality as we read in chapter 18 verse 19.

I've chosen him that he might command his children and household after him to keep the way of the Lord so that I may bring to pass the blessings that I've promised.

And that's the fidelity that the Lord requires. of the people he calls and of their households. Especially a word to men, but a word to all of us who have influence on others.

Let me say three things to conclude by way of the implications that all of these things have for us as believers today. Firstly, because there is only one gospel, at root, God's command has not changed one iota.

[32 : 18] The gospel of God is still a command and a promise. Walk before me and be blameless that I may bless you abundantly. That's the gospel.

In Jesus' own words, you therefore must be perfect even as your heavenly Father also is perfect. To follow God as he is now made fully known to us in Jesus Christ is in fact a far greater demand.

brings us far greater responsibilities even than Abraham because our privileges are so much greater, aren't they? Our promises are greater. Just read the New Testament.

It's everywhere on every page. You're called to be, says Paul to the Philippians, blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a twisted generation among whom you shine like stars, like lights in the world.

Ephesians 1 and 4 says he has chosen us to be blameless in him. And therefore, he goes on in Ephesians 4 as we sang earlier, to say walk in a manner worthy of the calling you've received.

- [33 : 24] Walk in the light, walk in love, walk not as the pagans do. God requires fidelity. That's the gospel command. That's why the Great Commission says go and make disciples, teaching them to obey all that I've commanded.

So friends, we need to remember, don't we, as Christians, what we're called to. An absolute command of God to faithfulness, to loyalty. We also need to remember what we're calling people to in evangelism, don't we?

No cheap grace, no easy believism, but submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. But it is the way of abundant promise, isn't it?

Abundant blessing. Second, we too are called to be a people publicly marked out as belonging to God. Well, are we to practice circumcision?

Well, no, the New Testament is very clear about that, isn't it? That's because the sign of circumcision was a prophetic sign and a promising sign, and now that has been fulfilled. It spoke of the need for cleansing through judgment, through a putting off of sinful flesh in death.

- [34 : 38] It called for trust in God's promised seed who was to come and bring victory, but of course that has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and his work. He was the seed. He achieved forever the cleansing of his people through the judgment he bore himself in his own death.

So that sign, like most of the Old Testament promissory signs, it's fulfilled. Therefore, it's finished, it's set aside. In fact, to cling on to it can become very harmful.

It can seem like we're denying the finality of God's action in Christ. It seems to suggest that something more is needed than just faith in the Christ who has died for us.

That's why the New Testament is so full of warnings against circumcision for the Jews. But instead, of course, Christ has given us a new sign of belonging to his covenant people, to his new covenant people.

A sign that reminds us that Christ has done everything for us and that nothing else can be added to his saving work of grace on our behalf. A sign that in fact points back to the fulfillment of what circumcision pointed forward to.

- [35 : 45] The true putting off of our sinful flesh and putting it to death in Christ's death on the cross. And of course, that sign is baptism. In Colossians chapter 2, Paul writes to Gentile Christians just like most of us and he says you don't need circumcision.

You don't need that sign that was given to the Jews to point forward to Jesus' work because you have experienced, he says, in Jesus you've experienced the fulfillment. And now both Jews and Gentiles together receive the same cleansing and rejoice in the same cleansing through Jesus.

A cleansing that is witnessed to by baptism. In Christ, he says to these Gentiles in Colossians 2, in Christ you were circumcised by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism.

baptism. And that's the whole New Testament message. No longer is it Jew and Gentile, but we're all one in Christ Jesus. One body, one hope, one Lord, one baptism.

But we're still called publicly to belong, aren't we? To belong publicly and permanently to the church of Jesus Christ. That's why the Great Commission did not say, go and make believers, but go and make disciples.

- [37 : 07] baptizing them and teaching them to obey God's commands. Showing fidelity. Because the gospel is a call to commitment, to belong, to confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and to stand for him publicly.

So if we profess to be Christians, we need to ask, have we done that? Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 10, whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.

whoever denies me before men, I will also deny. He's still a God who demands obedience, fidelity, public witness. But finally, a word to parents.

We baptize our children for the same reason that Abraham circumcised his son as helpless infants. obedience. We do it as a response of faith to the gracious promises of God, as an act of obedience to the command of God, to see our responsibility not just for ourselves but for our households.

And again I say it's especially important for fathers among us. The gospel was preached beforehand to Abraham, says Paul, and that gospel commanded him to command his children to keep the way of the Lord, that God might bless them and bless through them.

[38 : 31] Extraordinary, wouldn't it, if the same gospel meant any less for us? And we do it as a living reminder to us, and as they grow up, also to them, that they are not free to go their own way and serve their own gods as they like, but a reminder that they belong to God and to him alone, and they are to serve him, and they are to rejoice in him.

And in bringing our little ones to God in baptism, we reach out in trust, as Abraham did, trusting in the gracious promises of God. The promise that Peter tells us in the day of Pentecost is to you and to your children and all who are afar off.

For those who in his grace God gives the inestimable privilege of being born and raised within the household of faith, yes, and those that he graciously brings in from outside, however he does it, through hearing the gospel.

Does baptism save them? Well, according to the Apostle Peter, the answer to that question is both no and yes, isn't it, in 1 Peter 3.

No, not by washing the body. Of course, there's no magic. But yes, he says, it does save them as an appeal to God for a good conscience.

[39 : 51] Notice, baptism is not an appeal from a good conscience, but for a good conscience. Trusting God for the cleansing of our own hearts and also our children. There's no other way for anyone to be cleansed.

It's a response of faith and trust in God's cleansing grace alone. Just as when somebody is converted and becomes a Christian and is baptized. They're publicly humbling themselves, aren't they?

They're saying to the world, I had to die with Christ that I might live. It was all his doing. It was none of mine. And just so, as parents, we bring our children to God and we say, Lord, they need you, but we trust you.

You said, Lord, suffer the little children to come to me. Well, here they are. They're yours. Keep them yours, now and forever. Only you can do that.

And help us, as parents, to nurture them in your ways always, that they will grow naturally in your grace and in your love. See, if you're a parent or if you're a prospective parent, you need to be able to trust the Lord Jesus for your children, don't you?

[41 : 06] Otherwise, you couldn't bring a child into this world, let alone into eternity, could you? But he's the covenant God and you can trust him.

And that's why you can. And we must bring up our children in faith and not fear, as Abraham could, as Jesus wants us to. I will be God to you and to your offspring after you.

But for all of us, all of us who belong to the offspring of Abraham, and that's all who are baptized into Christ, says Paul in Galatians 3, remember you have his mark upon you.

You belong to him. And God requires fidelity from us. Walk before me and be blameless, he says. That's his command. Never forget it.

It's for you. It's for me. We must obey. But never forget either that his command comes to us in an envelope of grace.

[42 : 10] I will be your God, he says. He chose us, says Paul to the Ephesians, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him.

And the Bible everywhere tells us, doesn't it, that he's the covenant God. And that means that what this God begins and finishes.

So let's rejoice in Abraham's God and ours. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the God of grace, whose grace envelops us, so that even your command is a delight to our hearts.

Help us to love you, we pray, that your commands to us and to our children, to our whole households, may be a source of joy and delight and the cause of salvation and faithful service until the day when you come and your kingdom is consummated forever in the wonder and the glory of your presence.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.