

The God who Requires Fidelity

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] And so we're now going to turn to our Bible reading. And we're continuing our series in Genesis today with Willie Phillip, our senior minister, leading us through this.

And this morning we're going to be studying chapter 17, Genesis 17. So do turn that up and we're going to be reading the whole thing from verse 1 through to verse 27.

Genesis 17, beginning then at verse 1. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless, that I may give my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.

Then Abraham fell on his face and God said to him, And behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abraham, but your name shall be called Abraham.

For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

[1 : 35] And I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. And I will be their God.

And God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you.

Every meal among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your four skins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every meal throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall be circumcised.

So shall my covenant be in your flesh, an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised meal who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people.

[2 : 44] He has broken my covenant. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations. Kings of people shall come from her.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?

And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. God said, No, but Sarai, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.

I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and multiply him greatly.

[3 : 53] He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael, his son, and all those born in his house, or bought with his money, every meal among the men of Abraham's house.

And he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins, that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

And Ishmael, his son, was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day, Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised.

And all the men of his house, those born in the house, and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. Amen.

[4 : 55] This is God's words, and we'll return to it shortly. Good. Do turn to Genesis chapter 17.

Genesis 15 to 17 is the centerpiece of the whole story of Abraham, because it expands something of monumental importance for the whole story of the Bible, and that is the nature of God's covenant and its implications for the world.

The Lord binds himself in covenant with Abraham and with his seed, and thus he constitutes the beginning of the great family of faith, the church of the living God.

So Derek Kidner says that the end of chapter 17 of Genesis here is the birthday of the church of the Old Testament. Those of varied backgrounds, various ethnicities and ages are all marked out as belonging to the one household of covenant faith.

And this is the household of the God who reassures the fearful, promising them things yet unseen, pledged in his own blood, as we saw in chapter 15.

[6 : 20] He's the God who restores failures, hearing and answering their call and putting their messed up lives back together again. We saw that in chapter 16. He is the God of grace.

But he's not a God of cheap grace. The Lord who commits himself to his people in this way is also a God who commands loyalty from his people.

He's the God who requires fidelity of those he calls to his faith. And the lives that he changes by grace, he also brings under his command.

God's call changed Abraham's whole future. Go where I tell you, said God. I think we're ringing a bit here.

What is the deck? Need to be turned down a little bit, thanks. God says, go where I tell you. And here in chapter 17, we see that God's call transforms the whole identity of his people.

[7 : 23] Abraham and Sarai both receive new names. And God requires his people to be publicly marked out as belonging to him here by circumcision.

Now that is a side of grace that people are less keen on. We warm, don't we, to God's reassurance. We warm to the talk of restoration.

But we don't warm nearly as much to talk about requirements. But you see, the real God wants not just words, not just Lord, Lord, but doing the will of the covenant Lord, at least according to Jesus. He requires fidelity. It's what the Bible calls the obedience of faith. God's call upon your life changes you. It changes everything. And those who belong to his name must reflect the glory of that name. And that's what chapter 17 here spells out for us. Verses 1 to 3 are a summary, the root of what the New Testament calls the eternal gospel. That God's revelation always demands response.

[8 : 34] And verses 4 to 22 then expound that covenant revelation. It's structured around three repeated phrases. And God said to Abraham, there in verse 3 and verse 9 and verse 15.

And then finally, verses 23 to 27 give Abraham's response. So we'll look at it under three headings. First of all, verses 1 to 3, the root of the eternal gospel.

God's gospel is always the same. His commands and his promises come together, always, never one without the other. So back in chapter 12, God said, Go that I may bless you.

Well, just so here. Walk before me and be blameless that I may, verse 2, literally, that I may give you my covenant. That word is translated make in verses 5 and 6.

It's translated give in verses 8 and 16. God's command and his promise together. This is not a bargain between equals.

[9 : 39] God is the one who will give his covenant blessings. He sovereignly offers these blessings, but he also commands obedience, doesn't he?

A blameless walk. Just as Noah, remember, was blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. And God's gospel calls his people to walk in a manner worthy of the calling that they've received.

That's how Ephesians 4 puts it. No longer walking as the pagans in darkness, but rather walking as children of light to please the Lord. And that's the eternal gospel, the unchanging call of God for his people, whether it's Abraham here, whether it's Moses' first readers and hearers, or whether it's us today.

Now, Moses' people, the first readers of this, knew that very well because that word blameless occurs again and again through the Pentateuch, usually about sacrifices offered to God. They're to be unblemished, blameless.

Nothing less will do for God. And just the same for their living sacrifices. In Deuteronomy chapter 18, for example, Moses contrasts Israel to the pagan world round about, and he says, you shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

[10:57] God requires fidelity from his people. The root of the true gospel is always a call not to lip service to God, but to heart service.

And that call to fidelity is seen consistently all through the story of Abraham. Look on to chapter 18 and verse 19. God here says, he has chosen Abraham, that's his sovereign grace, his electing grace, he has chosen him that he may command his children and his whole household notice to keep the way of the Lord so that the Lord may bring to him what he's promised.

Christ. I emphasize that because sometimes it's made out as if God's covenant with Abraham was somehow very different to God's covenant with his people through Moses.

As though obeying God's law was very important under Moses, but, for example, in the New Testament, well, our gospel is very different from that. It isn't like that. It's rather like God's dealing with Abraham.

It's all about grace. It's not about obeying God's laws or his commands. Well, yes, the New Testament gospel is exactly the gospel that God preached in advance to Abraham, as Paul says in Galatians 3.

[12:18] But this was his gospel. It was grace that demanded response. A response of fidelity. The obedience of faith right here in front of us.

And, of course, since Moses was writing this for his people, he's hardly likely, is he, to be writing a very different theology of God's gospel and his covenant in Genesis to the one that he's expounding in Exodus and in Deuteronomy.

Of course he isn't. And nor does Jesus proclaim a different gospel and nor do the apostles. There is only one gospel. Paul is absolutely adamant about that.

And this is it. It's the root of a gospel that is always the same. God's revelation in his grace and his mercy always demands a response.

He requires fidelity to him as the covenant Lord. That's the watchword, isn't it, of the whole law of Moses. You shall be holy because I, your Lord, am holy.

[13:26] It's the great call of the New Testament gospel. Paul begins and ends his great exposition of the gospel in Romans with exactly this. Romans 1 verse 5, I'm an apostle, he says, to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations.

At the very end of Romans, he says, the gospel is being made known to all nations according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith.

It's the same all through the gospels. Jesus' own message was just the same. It was a command to repent, that is, to submit to the lordship of him alone. Follow me.

Whoever believes in the Son, he says, has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. To believe Christ is to obey him with the obedience of faith.

All through the Acts. It's the same. Acts 5 verse 32 says that God gives his Holy Spirit to those who obey him. And in chapter 6 verse 7 we read that many became obedient to the faith.

[14:36] Hebrews chapter 5 tells us plainly Christ is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. And all through we're warned against having unbelieving hearts.

Hearts that rebel, disobedience. It's very plain. All through the whole Bible. The root of the gospel is always the same.

It's a call. It's a command from the sovereign Lord to receive his promised blessings his way.

Through submission, through obedience to his soul lordship.

It's a command to love the Lord your God alone with your heart and your soul and all your strength.

He is a God who requires fidelity. He is the sovereign Lord.

And Abraham understood that here. Look at verse 3. He fell on his face in submission, in obedience to God. That's what worship is. And that's what God calls you and me to do as well.

[15:43] Perhaps you're feeling that your Christian experience is a little bit lacking at the moment. Maybe you feel it needs some refreshing. Perhaps you're not seeing the experience you feel God

has promised you. And it can be very tempting, can't it, when you feel like that to seek out some special experience, some special blessing.

A worship extravaganza of Lord, Lord repeated a hundred times. But Jesus says that what he wants is for you to hear his voice.

He wants a renewed commitment to walking blamelessly before him that he might give you the blessings of his covenant. read Luke chapter 8 and you'll find out the kind of people that Jesus wants to fellowship and spend his time with.

His family, he says, are those who hear the word of God and do it. And do it. The root of the true gospel is always the same.

God reveals abundant promises but he gives absolute commands. His revelation always, always, always, always, always, demands response.

[16:55] Well, look at verses 4 to 22 because this unpacks for us the revelation of the true gospel. And the pattern here is also very significant. Notice both the abundant promises and the absolute commands but also notice how the commands are hedged in by God's promises.

God's commands, God's laws always come in an envelope of grace. Look first at the abundant promises in verses 4 to 8 and again in verses 15 to 21 we see in this envelope of grace the responsibilities that God takes upon himself.

If you've got a new international version it shows the contrast very nicely between God's side and Abraham's side. Verse 4 it says, Behold, as for me, says the Lord. And in verse 9, as for you, Abraham.

You see that in verses 4 to 8 God promises to Abraham and those promises are accompanied by a change in his name to Abraham.

And then in verses 15 to 21 the promises come to Abraham with a specific inclusion of Sarah his wife and again her name also is changed to Sarah. And that's a reminder isn't it that God takes control of us that he comes to rule us.

[18:18] Not that we should be burdened of course but that we should be blessed by him. He comes not to squash our personalities or our potential but rather to liberate them to liberate us to be what he has purposed us to be.

We're so slow to believe that aren't we? Jesus says come to me that I might be your Lord and your sovereign but my yoke he says is easy and my burden is light you will find rest for your souls.

Well he says to Abraham here the same walk before me that I may give you abundant blessings of my covenant. And God's abundant blessings are repeated to Abraham here about the land and about his offspring but there's something new here if you look closely because before God had promised Abraham that he would become a great nation and that he would have an inheritance in the land.

But now notice look at verse 5 he's told he's going to become a father of a multitude of nations verse 5 and again in verse 6. And Bruce Walkie points out that we should see this probably both both in a biological sense and in a spiritual sense.

Verse 6 says kings will come from him literally from Abraham's own loins from his own body. He would have biological descendants. But he also says he'll make Abraham notice in verse 6 into nations.

[20:01] It's the same thing of Sarah in verse 16. verse 5 he says he'll be a father of a multitude of nations and that term designates a kind of spiritual relationship.

Later on in Genesis 45 we're told of Joseph that he has become a father to Pharaoh and all his house. A spiritual mentor.

And that's certainly what we see here in God's immediate command to Abraham to become the spiritual father of everyone in his household including all the foreigners in his household.

And that in itself is a foreshadowing of the multitude of nationalities of all the families of the earth that right at the beginning God had promised Abraham would be a blessing too.

You see what God reveals here. Abraham will become the spiritual father of multitudes of nations. Plural.

[21:02] That's what he's saying in 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 Abraham he says in verse 7.

Look at verse 8. He will be their God also to this myriad of spiritual offspring. God says he will do this as Abraham also becomes a physical father to one very specific seed to his own son born only by Sarah verse 16.

A son by her not verse 18 the son born by Abraham's efforts on his own. Ishmael as we saw in the last chapter. But Sarah's son to be born by a miracle of God's grace.

He will be the one through whom all this promise is fulfilled. A son born to a woman for whom it was naturally impossible for her to have a child.

Because through him and only him this son verse 19 only him would God establish his covenant forever. What an extraordinary promise that is.

[22 : 22] Here is a God who promises blessing to a multitude of nations to be God to a great multitude of offsprings of Abraham's natural line and foreigners alike all through the promise of a miraculous birth to a woman incapable of bearing a child.

except by the direct divine intervention of God himself. That's an extraordinary promise isn't it? It rings a few bells as well doesn't it?

Well no wonder Abraham was bowled over by this verse 17. He laughs out loud. LOL I suppose he would text to his friends today. And he's laughing at the sheer wonder of it all.

It's not scornful laughter. Notice verse 17. It's very clear. He's fallen on his face in worship. This is laughter of incredulity, of bewilderment, of happiness all rolled into one.

It's just like Mary all those centuries later. Do you remember when she said how can this be since it's impossible? No says the angel. Not with God it's not impossible.

[23 : 37] God isn't harsh with that kind of laughter, the laughter of faith. Yes, he is harsh with scornful laughter, with disobedient laughter, but Abraham is on his face here, worshipping God in response to God's word.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 4, verse 18. In hope, he believed against hope all that God had promised to him. It's impossible, he laughed to himself.

But nothing is impossible with this God, this El Shaddai God. You notice that in verse 1, how God reveals himself by this special name, translated here, God Almighty, El Shaddai, the all-sufficient one, the all-powerful one.

All through Genesis, God appears as El Shaddai, especially when his people are in desperate need, desperate need of reassurance and of help. And very often, it's in association with God's promises of blessings to make his people fruitful and multiply.

Perhaps the best clue comes in Romans 4, verse 17, from that verse we just quoted, where Paul says that Abraham believed the God who gives life to the dead and who calls into being things that do not exist.

[24 : 59] That's El Shaddai, the all-sufficient, almighty God. And because Abraham did become a natural father to the supernatural offspring, to Isaac, the son of joy and laughter, who's named after laughter, then so also he became a spiritual father to a multitude of nations.

But this God, El Shaddai, the all-sufficient, almighty one, will become their God also. I will be their God also, he says. As for me, says the Lord, these are my promises to you.

That's what it means for me to be God to you. And to all of those to whom you will become a spiritual father forever. It's wonderful grace, isn't it?

There's no question of it being anything other than the sovereign initiative of God, the God of promise. promise. And yet, don't miss those verses in the middle, in the midst of that envelope of grace, verses 9 to 14.

And they're full, aren't they, of absolute commands. Verse 9, as for you, verse 9, you shall keep my covenant. You see, no matter how great and free God's gracious promises are, in fact, because they are so great and free.

[26 : 27] He is a God who requires fidelity. The obedience of true faith submits to God as a sovereign Lord and does so publicly and painfully and permanently.

And that's what this sign of circumcision was all about. Verse 11, it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Not just an optional sign, notice an essential one.

Verse 10, it virtually equates the sign with the covenant itself. And that's why verse 14 is so stark.

To reject the sign is to reject the covenant, to be under God's curse.

You see, we mustn't be confused. It's not just what's deep in our hearts that matters to God. What's inside must be real enough to make changes on the outside.

God requires public fidelity to his name. Romans 10 says it's not just if you believe in your heart in the risen Jesus, but it's confessing with your mouth, publicly displaying that he is Lord that brings salvation.

[27 : 38] Apostle James says the same thing, doesn't he? He says faith without works isn't faith at all. It's just something that's dead and pretend. So God's people are to bear his mark.

And that mark speaks of a blameless walk because it speaks of those who have humbled themselves before God to be owned by God. It's a bit like the branding on a slave. It speaks about belonging to a master, submitting to being bound to his commands and his direction. Circumcision. But the very nature of this ritual also speaks volumes because it's a very humbling one.

Circumcision is a putting off and a putting away of flesh. And as such it signifies a need for cleansing, for purifying.

Jesus himself speaks about circumcision in those terms in John chapter 7 where he says that the Pharisees were happy to circumcise a child on the Sabbath day but not for Jesus to make a whole man clean and healthy.

[28 : 45] That's why in Joshua chapter 5 the new generation of Israelites who had not been circumcised in the wilderness in the rebellious times. They had to be circumcised in a ceremony that God said would roll away their reproach, their uncleanness.

Circumcision was a permanent reminder of the need for cleansing, a reminder of the unworthiness of the people. And it was a reminder that God alone would do that through his promise, through the promise of the seed, not through their own merit.

It's no accident that this sign was made upon the organ of procreation. Could have been a cut in their hair, a cut in any part of the body. But no, the very organ that related to God's promise of the seed to come.

It's as though God is saying, yes, through your seed, but not your way, Abraham. Not through Ishmael. Not one born according to the flesh.

Your way, man's way, is utterly set aside and you must submit your way and have it cut right out of the picture. And you must humbly cast all your hopes upon my covenant promise, my sovereign power, my grace and mercy.

[30 : 12] It was a public witness, it was a reminder to everyone that fellowship with the living God comes only through humble submission to his cleansing, only through the putting away of our sinful flesh, of our hard rebellious hearts and putting trust only in the promise of God's seed who would come his way in his time to bring salvation.

Circumcision was the outward mark of an inward attitude of self-humbling and of trust and of obedient faith in solely the sovereign mercy of God.

And therefore it was a permanent reminder of the fidelity that God demands. And Moses was constantly reminding Israel, wasn't he, circumcise the foreskin of your hearts, don't be stubborn any longer, walk in God's ways, love him, serve him.

In Leviticus 26, God says, if they confess their iniquity, if they humble their uncircumcised hearts, then I will remember my covenant and bless them.

There's a cry of the Hebrew prophets who were constantly accusing Israel of having uncircumcised ears and hearts. It's an amazing thing, isn't it, when this sign of circumcision, something that should have been a sign of humility, something that should be constantly reminding them and bringing them to penitence and obedience, that it became the very opposite, it became a sign of pride and presumption so often among the Israelites.

[31 : 55] We are the circumcision, we have Abraham as our father. That's what they said to Jesus even as they rejected the living God in the flesh, standing right in front of them.

That's the perversity, isn't it, of the human heart. We can turn even God's greatest signs of mercy and grace into barren and dead religiosity.

That's why the apostle Paul says, no, we are the true circumcision who worship by the spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

And you see, Abraham understood that, he knew the true gospel. Circumcision from the very beginning said, cursed is the flesh and is the way of the flesh, but we trust only, only in the promise of the grace and mercy of God.

We acknowledge our helplessness and there's nothing we can do, but we bow to your sovereign grace. And that's why in verse 12, helpless infants, eight days old, are placed into the hands of God's grace, trusting in his promises.

[33 : 14] And we're acknowledging, he says, that there's nothing worthy, nothing special in us by virtue of our blood, our family line. That's why, you notice it was all who, by God's grace, were providentially either born into the family of faith or brought in by money.

all of these foreigners, verse 12, were called to be circumcised, to belong to him and to be his. Gentiles, do you notice, belong to the household of covenant faith from its very inception. circumcision. You see, it's a gospel sign, circumcision.

It says, we are nothing, our family line is nothing, we did nothing. God, he alone has done everything and promises everything. And we're his. He is our Lord.

God. And so finally, you see, verses 23 to 27 describe Abraham's response to the true gospel. Abraham obeyed God.

[34 : 19] That very day, says verse 23, he did as God said to him. He put the mark of faith, the sign of the covenant on Ishmael, his son, and on everyone of his household, as well as of himself, in an act of commitment and response to God's gospel promise, the revelation of his grace.

And I'm sure some people today would say, well, that's extraordinarily presumptuous. How dare he force his religion on other people like that? Sometimes even Christian parents make that terrible mistake, don't they, about their children.

They say, oh, no, no, I don't want to force my faith on them. I want them to let them grow up and make up their own minds. The tragedy is that when parents think like that, they nearly always get what they ask for, that their children do grow up and go their own way and make up their own minds.

But Abraham was not like that. He listened to God and he understood that the covenant God is a God who deals with households, with families. And he said what Joshua later said, as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

And he recognized God's requirement of fidelity to his covenant. He recognized that it was a personal call on his own life, but also that it had implications for his whole family. Not just to mark them out as gods by that sign, but also to work out that cause of grace in reality.

[35 : 50] As verse 19 of chapter 18 says, as we looked at, I've chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord, so that the Lord may bring to pass what he's promised.

And that's the fidelity that the Lord requires of the people that he calls and of their households. So let me say three things just to conclude by way of implications that this has for us as believers today.

First, because there is only one gospel, at root, God's command hasn't changed, not one iota. 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. Or in Jesus' own words, you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

To follow God as made fully known to us now in Jesus Christ is in fact a far greater demand with even greater responsibilities because the privileges that we've received in these last days is even greater.

[37 : 06] Read the New Testament, you'll find it everywhere. You're called to be blameless and innocent children without blemish in the midst of a crooked and tainted generation among whom you shine like lights to the world.

Philippians 2 verse 15. He chose us, says Ephesians 1, to be holy and blameless in him.

Therefore, as Paul goes on in Ephesians 4, he says, walk in a manner worthy of the calling that you've received. Walk in the light, walk in love, not in the darkness as the pagans do.

God requires fidelity. That is the gospel command. That's why the great commission is to make disciples teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

So remember what we're called to. It's an absolute command. And we're to remember what we are calling people to as well in the gospel, not to a cheap grace or easy believism, but to a fidelity to the Lord of heaven and earth.

[38 : 19] That is the way of abundant blessings, incredible promises. Second, we're called to be a people marked out as belonging to God.

Does that mean we're to practice circumcision? Well, no. The New Testament is very clear about that. And that's because the sign of circumcision was a prophetic sign. It was a promissory sign. And that is now fulfilled.

Circumcision spoke about the need for cleansing through judgment, through the putting off of sinful flesh in death. And it called for trust in God's promised seed who would come and bring that cleansing and victory.

But that now has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross. He was the seed. He achieved that cleansing for his people through the judgment that he himself bore in his own body, in his death.

And so that sign, circumcision, like most of the Old Testament signs that pointed forward, have now been fulfilled and are finished. To cling on to that sign becomes very harmful because it denies the finality of God's action in Christ.

[39 : 37] It seems to suggest that something more is needed than faith in what Christ alone has done for us. And that's why the Apostle Paul argues so vehemently against those who want to demand circumcision on top of Christian faith.

But instead, the Lord Jesus has given us a new sign of belonging to his covenant people, his new covenant people. And that sign reminds us that Christ has now done everything for us.

That nothing else can be added to his sovereign work of grace on our behalf. It's a sign, in fact, that points back to the fulfillment of everything that circumcision pointed forward to.

The true putting off of sinful flesh, putting it to death in Christ's death on the cross. And of course, that's the sign of Christian baptism.

And in Colossians chapter 2, in a letter to Gentile Christians like us, Paul tells them explicitly they do not need circumcision. They don't need a sign that points forward to Jesus' work because they have experienced in Jesus the fulfillment that now both Jews and Gentiles can rejoice in that same cleansing through Jesus.

[40 : 52] And that is a sign, a cleansing that is witnessed to in baptism. And so Paul says, in Christ, you Gentiles were circumcised by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism.

And that's the whole New Testament message, isn't it? They're no longer Jews and Gentiles, but all are one in Christ Jesus. There's one body. There's one hope.

There's one Lord. There's one baptism. But we're still called to belong publicly and permanently to the church of Jesus Christ.

The Great Commission wasn't go and make converts, but it was go and make disciples, those who belong, those who are baptized, and therefore who live under the Lordship of Christ in obedience to his command on their life.

The gospel is a call to commitment. It's a call to belong. It's a call to confess with our mouths and in our lives that Jesus really is Lord and to stand for him publicly in fidelity to him.

[41 : 57] That's what many of our brothers and sisters will be doing this evening, professing their faith publicly in the Lord Jesus. Because remember, Jesus says in Matthew chapter 10 that whoever acknowledges him before men, he also will acknowledge before the Father in heaven.

Whoever denies him, so also he will deny before the Father. God is still a God who demands fidelity and loyalty.

But finally, and thirdly, a word to parents. And that is this, that we baptize our children for the same reason that Abraham circumcised his sons as helpless infants.

It's a response of faith to the gracious promise of God. It's an act of obedience to the command of God to see that our responsibility is not just for ourselves, but it's for our households.

And that's a particular responsibility, I may say, for those who are fathers who under God are the leaders of those households. The gospel, Paul tells us, was preached in advance to Abraham.

[43 : 08] 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. It would be very strange, wouldn't it, if the New Testament gospel in these days of fulfillment meant somehow something less for us than it meant for Abraham.

And we do it as a living reminder to us, and as our children grow up, to them, that they are not free to go their own way in life, to serve their own gods and their own goals.

We do it to remind them that they belong to the Lord alone. And they are called, they are commanded to serve him and to rejoice in him. That is why they exist in this world. So in bringing our little ones to baptism, we're reaching out in trust in just the same way as Abraham did. Trusting the gracious promise of God. The promise that Peter said on the day of Pentecost is for you and for your children and for those who are far off. both for those who in God's grace he gives that inestimable privilege of being born and raised within the household of faith, but also those whom God brings in graciously from outside, however it is that he does that.

[44 : 30] Does baptism save them? Well, according to the apostle Peter, the answer is no and yes. no, not by washing the body.

There's no magic in water, whether in small quantities or in large quantities. But yes, Peter says, it does save them as an appeal to God for a good conscience.

Notice, baptism is not an appeal we make from a good conscience, but it's an appeal that trusts God for the cleansing of our hearts by his grace and trusts the same grace alone for the cleansing of our children.

The response of faith and trust to God's cleansing grace alone, just as when someone is converted and they come to faith and they're baptized, they're publicly humbling themselves, aren't they? They're saying to the world, I had to die with Christ in order to live. It was all his doing. It was none of mine. Well, in just the same way, parents, when we hand our children to God, we're saying, Lord, we can do nothing.

[45 : 43] They need you. They need your grace and your mercy alone. That alone can save them. But we trust you. You said, suffer the little ones to come to me.

Well, here they are. They're yours. Keep them yours. Keep them yours now and forever. And help us as parents to be true to your ways, to nurture them in your ways, to show them your ways so that they will grow up knowing the nurture and the admonition of the Lord of heaven and earth from their earliest time.

you need to be able to trust the Lord Jesus, don't you, with your children. You need to be able to trust God before you would even think of bringing a child into this terrible world.

Never mind bringing them into an eternal world. How could you do that if you don't trust the Lord of heaven and earth to do right? that he's the covenant God, the God of promise.

And we can trust him. And that's why we can bring up our children in faith, not in fear, just as Abraham could, just as Jesus wants us to.

[46 : 56] I will be God to you and to your offspring after you. But you see, for all of us, for all of us who belong to the offspring of Abraham.

And that's all. All who are baptized into Jesus Christ, says Paul. We must remember that he has his mark upon us. We belong to him, not to ourselves.

And God requires fidelity. Walk before me and be blameless. That's his command.

It's his command for you and me today. You must never forget that. But we must never forget either that his command comes enveloped in these great promises.

I will be your God. That's for us too. He chose us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him, says the apostle Paul.

[48 : 01] And what this God begins, always he will finish. He's the God of covenant promise.

Let's pray. O God, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity, mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen.