

WALK BEFORE ME

GENESIS 17

INTRODUCTION

We're going to look at things in a different order from the passage. Key verses at the beginning that we're going to skip over for now and return to later.

Quick overview – covenants of the Old Testament

THE TERMS OF THE COVENANT

- Most contracts have sections covering the commitments of each party. E.g. Landlord, tenant. Same here.
- **As for me: (God)**
 - You will be the father of many nations – new name
 - NB – identity is God's to give and to reveal. Abram given by man, Abraham given by God.
 - You will be fruitful – nations and kings
 - Everlasting covenant to be your God and you my people
 - You will be a source of blessing to endless generations
 - The whole land of Canaan is given to you and your descendants
- **As for you: (Abram)**
 - You need to be circumcised

IS THAT ALL?

- First of all, note this covenant doesn't mention words like "salvation". It's a covenant of blessing and faithfulness.
 - But remember – all of humanity is in rebellion against God. Everyone stands outside his kingdom by default. This is a promise to adopt us, for us to be his people – in other words, for us to be saved from our rebellious state and brought into right relationship with God.
 - This is the same thing in different language. We tend to think of salvation in terms of rescue; here it's expressed in terms of adoption.
- Doesn't God tell Abram to "walk before me and be blameless; then I will make my covenant with you"?
- WALK BEFORE ME AND BE BLAMELESS – not a precondition, despite "then", because it's immediately followed by the covenant promises. Rather a situation needed for the covenant to be effective.
- Let's illustrate this by looking at marriage covenant. This isn't a random choice – God makes it clear throughout Scripture that marriage between a man and woman **was always intended to be** an illustration of God's dealings with his people.
- When I proposed, what was I saying?
 - Not, "stay with me and be faithful to me your whole life, and I'll agree to be married to you"
 - Not, "be perfect in all aspects of your relationship to me, or I'm walking away from this marriage"
 - Rather, "stay with me and be faithful to me, so I can show you all the commitment, care and love that I'm promising you today"
- If I walk out on Caroline and go and live with another woman, leaving her to raise our children, I'm still bound to my marriage covenant, but neither of us gets to live in the good of it. It's the same here – if Abraham agrees to the covenant and then despises God, the covenant still stands because God is faithful, but Abraham won't get to live in the good of it.
 - So what this is saying is, "this covenant will only be of use to you if you walk with me and are blameless"

SIGNS AND CONDITIONS

- To properly get to the bottom of God's generosity, let's go a step further – is circumcision even a condition?
- Circumcision isn't so much a condition as a sign of the covenant:
 - Think of it like the wedding ring. My ring doesn't even come off. If I refuse to wear my wedding ring, I'm making a statement about the marriage covenant between us. In the same way, if anyone refused to be circumcised, that would be a clear statement that they despised what God was offering in this covenant.
 - And if I *do* wear it, but act as though I'm not married, the ring doesn't count for anything. Similarly, if people *were* circumcised, but disregarded God, the circumcision wasn't of any value to them.
 - This is what Paul highlights in Romans. Rom 2:25 – "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised." (also, those who live as though circumcised will judge you!) **and furthermore** Rom 9:6-7 – "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."
 - The covenant has always come by faith. Circumcision was simply the outward sign.
 - This means that there will have been people in OT times who were not circumcised, and yet lived as though they were – honouring the one true God and trusting in him – and have been adopted into his family tree.

HOW THEN SHOULD WE LIVE?

- Let's go back to how we should live in order to benefit from the covenant.
- Primary call – walk before me and be blameless.
 - Verb highlights ongoing nature. "Go on walking before me". Also used of Enoch.

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: 'He could not be found, because God had taken him away.' For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Hebrews 11:5-6

- It's easier to get an impression of what it means to "walk before God" than it is to explain it – but what we see in both Abraham and Enoch's life is an active, living relationship with God. Not a one-off decision, not an ongoing choice to follow a set of rules; but a commitment to seek him, honour him, obey him, believe the best of him, aim to please him.
- Abraham's response is to fall facedown. This is part of walking before him! There is a call to *ongoing* living relationship with him, but in the moment the right response is radical humility.
 - It's really good for this to involve our bodies. It's a loss to us that we don't have a practice of kneeling to pray. Not because we *have* to – "hands together eyes closed" etc. – but because our bodies are a part of us.
 - True for worship also. Let's make use of our bodies in moments of humility, praise, joy.
- NB blameless – used of Noah too – not necessarily the same as "100% without sin". Just as we say "perfect" about something that is really, really good as well as about something that is actually flawless.
 - Of course, God's intent for us is that we are truly blameless in the sense of "100% without sin"
 - Only one man has ever done that – Jesus Christ. More on that shortly.
- Walk before ME – not subject to the judgment of others (or at least, that's not what matters)
 - But covenant is intended to bless nations, and therefore can't be lived out in isolation.
 - Not subject to the judgment of others, but called to live in close community with others.
- REALLY IMPORTANT!
 - Our lives are lived to please our Lord – here the Lord Almighty, now also revealed through Jesus Christ.
 - But our lives are incomplete if we live them out as "me + God" and neglect our spiritual family, the Church.

THE BETTER DEAL

- I mentioned that Jesus Christ is the only man to have totally fulfilled that call to walk before God and be completely blameless. This is why it's also important to know that he was circumcised, as recorded in Luke's gospel. As fully God and fully man, he utterly fulfilled this covenant, as well as the later covenant made with Moses. Having done so, he was uniquely positioned to usher in a new covenant, which was prophesied years before by Jeremiah.

'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the Lord.

'This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time,' declares the Lord.

'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the Lord.

'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'

- Jeremiah 31:31-34

HOW IS THIS NEW COVENANT BETTER?

- Made in perfect flesh (Jesus's, not ours)
- Comes with the giving of the Holy Spirit in abundance (see also Joel, Ezekiel)
- The Law written in our hearts