Genesis 17:2–14 — The Seven I Wills, the Covenant, and Circumcision

Bible Study · Genesis 17

I Will Set My Covenant — Not Cut, Not Make

Genesis 17:2 in JND's translation reads: I will set my covenant between me and thee. That word is worth pausing over. In Genesis 15:18, where God made a covenant with Abram, JND's marginal note identifies the word as the regular idiom for cutting a covenant. Here in chapter 17 the word is different: not cut, not make, but give or set. JND specifically called attention to this distinction in his notes and comments. God is not here using the language of two parties entering into a mutual agreement. He is saying: I give this covenant. I set it. It is mine.

The theologians who build systems of conditional covenant around the idea of cutting stress the bilateral nature of a formal agreement. But here God uses a word that more plainly says: this comes from one side only. Abraham is the object and recipient; God is the giver. It is my covenant between me and thee. Not our covenant. My covenant. And since only one party is making it, only one party has to keep it — and that party is God.

The distinction is critical. The Mosaic covenant was genuinely bilateral: if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure. Two parties, two conditions, two possible outcomes. That covenant fell because one party — man — failed. This covenant cannot fall for the same reason. There is only one party, and that party is El Shaddai. The law which came 430 years after the promises cannot annul those promises, as Galatians 3 insists. The performance covenant cannot reach back and undo the gift covenant.

The Seven I Wills — God's Sovereign Declarations

Five of the seven I wills in chapter 17 are addressed to Abraham, two more in connection with Sarah. They are: I will make my covenant between me and thee; I will multiply thee exceedingly; I will make thee exceeding fruitful; I will make nations of thee; I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee; I will give unto thee and thy seed after thee the land of Canaan; and I will be their God. These are unconditional. There is no if attached. God is speaking from His own side exclusively, stating what He will sovereignly bring to pass.

In Jeremiah 24, in the midst of ruin and judgment, God gave seven I wills of His own, ending with: I will give them a heart to know me that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. The same form, the same character: sovereign divine purpose declared in the first person. In Ezekiel 20, before God restores the scattered of Israel, He says: I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. He does not invite; He acts. He implants faith, He implants a new nature, He brings about His purpose. And in our chapter, preeminent among all the I wills, the one that takes precedence over even the land promise: I will be their God. That is the great benefit. Real estate, however important in the arrangement of God's purposes, cannot compete with that.

> *I will be their God — the great benefit of the covenant, taking precedence over all else. — Genesis 17:8*

Abraham and the Changed Names — Purposes of God Written in a Person

Both Abram and Sarai have their names changed in this chapter. Abram becomes Abraham — father of a multitude — and Sarai becomes Sarah — princess. Every time anyone would call Abraham by name from that day on, they would be speaking a promise: father of a multitude. The name itself was the covenant made

visible in a word, a daily reminder of what God had declared. The new name expresses God's purpose for the person. There is something analogous in Revelation 2:17 — a new name given to the overcomer, which no man knows but he that receives it. That is a deeply personal relationship, not absorption into vague infinity.

The announcement of the name change is also connected with the revelation of the son. It was not given when Ishmael was born. It was given now, in the context of the promised seed who was coming. This change of names gives character to what God is doing and points to the fact that natural identity must give way to what God has declared.

Circumcision — The Mark of Death on the First Man

The introduction of circumcision in verses 9–14 is deeply connected with what has been going on throughout Genesis. God has been consistently setting aside the first man — Cain set aside and Seth brought in; Noah's son Ham set aside; the builders of Babel scattered. Here, in the context of the promised seed and the covenant, God marks the first man with the sign of death — and He does it precisely where the first man propagates himself. Circumcision is God's judgment on the flesh, on the principle of the first man.

The eighth day is equally significant. He that is eight days old shall be circumcised. Eight is the number that follows the completed week — it points to what is beyond the old creation, to something new. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus was on the first day of the new week, which is simultaneously the eighth day. In Colossians 2:11, we read that we have been circumcised with His circumcision in resurrection — not with hands, but the circumcision of Christ. We are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit and have no confidence in the flesh.

The child of eight days had no say in the matter. He could not consent to or refuse the mark placed upon him. That was precisely the point. Parents who valued God's promise highly enough would impose this mark on a child who had not chosen it and could not understand it, because the promise of God was worth more to them than the child's future opinion. Esau despised his birthright; Jacob valued it, despite his many failures in other directions. Circumcision was the mark of the household that valued the promise of God above every natural consideration.

Many in Christendom have substituted dedication services for this, drawn from Hannah's bringing of Samuel to Eli. But the dedication service lacks the mark of death. It is not circumcision. It is not the judgment written on the flesh of the first man. The mark of death on the first man was always the form in which Old Testament saints came before God: through the slain sacrifice, through circumcision. The cross of Christ is the antitype to which all these pointed — the judgment of God upon the flesh of the first man, settled once for all in Christ.

Promises and Covenants — A Distinction in Romans 9

Romans 9:4 lists among the privileges of Israel: the covenants and the giving of the law and the service and the promises. Covenants and promises are listed separately. That distinction is real. Promise begins with Abraham. God did not make a promise to Adam; he spoke to the serpent, and Adam and Eve could overhear, but it was not a promise addressed to them. The promises and covenants are connected with the call of Abraham out of separation — that background of separation is their context. Before chapter 17, what Abraham had were promises. Chapter 17 is the first time the word covenant is used in connection with Abraham, and those promises are now given the form of a covenant.

Gentiles are strangers from the covenants of promise, as Ephesians 2 says. We are outside those covenants. But because Christ is the great seed of Abraham, and we are one with Him, we possess everything: whatever promises of God there are, they are all yea and amen in Him. The all of 2 Corinthians 1:20 is absolute. Can you think of a promise? It is yours in Christ. Think of another. That one too. All because we are one with the great seed of Abraham, and He is the father of us all — not Adam as the father of us all, but Abraham, into whose position we come by faith and by being one with His seed.

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