



THE COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION

Part 15 of Genesis

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Genesis 17 | January 16, 2005

Thank you for coming to the late service. Anybody else got that stomach flu? Wow, mommy. I've never missed a service in the history of Mars Hill due to illness or anything else, and, praise God, I think I'll get through this one, but just in case, here's how it's gonna go. This is the deal. I got a bucket over to my right. If I go for the bucket, I'm done. That's my day. I'm going home.

So, if you see me going for the bucket, the sound guy is gonna kill the mike, and I'm gonna go home. That's what we're doing 'cause nobody wants to hear me on this system. My kids have been really sick this last week with something that I have titled the "vomipult," which is the ability to throw vomit miles. My son, Zac, kinda is like that kid that won the blueberry-pie-eating contest in that movie, "Stand By Me." It was just one of those weeks, and all my kids were sick. I didn't get sick.

I was actually sleeping in the kids' playroom on a futon so I wouldn't get sick. I didn't sleep with my wife or kids. Didn't go near 'em. Wow, what a good night's sleep that is on a futon. Praise the Lord for that. I bought that so when people came over, they wouldn't stay very long. That thing is just brutal. And then, I ended up getting sick 'cause Friday night, my one-year-old daughter was sick, and I stayed up with her all night 'cause my wife was sick, and my daughter kept wanting to kiss me, so I kept kissing her, and she gave me the flu. So, it hit me last night at 1:00 in the morning.

I've been throwing up since 1:00 in the morning. I threw up all night. I threw up all day. I threw up between services. At least I'm talking about circumcision, which is exactly what I wanna talk about with the stomach flu: A 99-year-old guy dropping his drawers for the cause. That's what I wanna talk about. It's like Hebrew "Fear Factor." That's what I get on the stomach flu.

So, I'm gonna pray 'cause you know my mouth and my personality and my sense of humor, and this text is just fraught with danger. So, we gotta pray our way through it. Hopefully, I'll get through it. I got through the other ones, not so bad, a little tired, not feeling so good, but really appreciate you guys coming out 'cause I love you and wanna do my job. So, hopefully, I'll do a good job for ya. If not, give me a little grace. I'll give you what I got.

Father God, we love you. We thank you for a chance to study Scripture together tonight. God, as we've studied Genesis, we've learned a lot about you and we've learned a lot about ourselves. God, it's my prayer tonight that you would just give me the strength to finish well so that these people who have taken the time to come to church would be well served. God, you love them and so do I, and, God, I just wanna be able to serve them as best as I possibly can.

God, it's my prayer as we study that you would build faith in us like Abraham. That for those of us who need life transformation, that you would change our life. God, you're a really wonderful, glorious, and good God. We see that real clearly today. I pray it would just touch our hearts and capture our imaginations for the kind of life that you intend for us. Jesus, we give this time to you, and we give ourselves to you. Amen.

As we jump in, gonna do Genesis 17 and just launch right in. Gonna talk about Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. It says, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old," – okay, Abram is a man that we looked at beginning in chapter 11. He was born in a place called Babylon, a godless town, to a non-Christian daddy named Terah. God spoke to him in Genesis 12, and he obeyed God. God gave him a promise in Genesis 12 and also in Genesis 15:4 that he was gonna have a son. His wife was barren. They'd had no kids. Desperately wanted to be parents.

Maybe some of you can identify with that. You either long for the day when you get to be a parent or maybe you're someone who is already married, and you're struggling with infertility and such issues. In Genesis 12, when God originally promised the son, he was 75, so he's been waiting 24 years. Twenty-four years. In Genesis 16, he and his wife kinda took matters into their own hands and conceived a child through adultery, and that was some 13 years prior, so this guy's been waiting for a long time.

But the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty. Walk before me, and be blameless." What God is asking Abram to do is to devote himself wholeheartedly and fully to the Lord. It's the same thing that he would ask of you and ask of me. What we're gonna deal with here is a covenant. He says, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you, and I will greatly increase your numbers. You're gonna have a son, he's gonna have sons, you're gonna be a nation of people." And what we're dealing with in this section is the concept of covenant.

In some ways, it's kinda hard to overstate the importance of this concept of covenant in Scripture. Covenant is the word that God uses for how he devotes himself to us, how he loves us with an unending, unbreakable love and unshakeable affection. How he is so committed to loving us and being good to us and blessing and caring for us with patience and grace and mercy and love and kindness. That's what is meant by this concept of covenant.

It's a special word because it's a special relationship. I've told you before, twice in the Old Testament that I can recall, marriage is called a covenant. It's where a man and a woman give themselves, pledge themselves wholeheartedly and so devotedly to one another that they become like one person, the Bible teaches. For those of you that are in a good godly marriage covenant where you and your spouse just adore each other and you care for each other and you're committed to each other, and you're not gonna leave each other, you're not gonna forsake each other, you have little glimpse of how devoted God is to us as his people.

How much he loves us with an undying, unending, and unyielding love. But this covenant relationship is predicated upon God's ability to make good on his promises. He will give Abram a land. He will give Abram a lineage. Ultimately, he will give himself, the Lord, to Abram. But what he's requiring of Abram is human responsibility within the covenant. Just like any relationship, both parties need to do their part. We know in Scripture that God initiates and that we are to respond. That God speaks, and we are to listen. That God commands, and we are to obey.

And as we do, these are literally like two pedals on a bike, and that's how our relationship, our covenant relationship with God makes forward progress, is through God initiating, us trusting him and responding. That's what he's telling Abram here. "I'm gonna give you a son. I'm gonna bless you. I'm gonna change your whole life. But you really need to walk with me." Some of you will see God controlling here, saying, "Oh, God's just wanting to restrict Abram's freedom." Truly and indeed, he's not.

I've got four kids that I just absolutely adore, and when I take 'em to the store or when we're walking through a parking lot, for example, to go to a restaurant, I always tell them the same thing, which is, "Stick close to your daddy," especially if there's a crowd. "Stay close to Daddy. Don't wander off. Don't go with anybody else. Don't get distracted. Don't run off. Stay close to Daddy. Walk with me. You'll be okay. I love ya. We're gonna go have fun. I have great things in store for you. Just walk close to me. You don't need to understand everything, but you do need to work really hard at staying close to your dad."

That's exactly what God is telling Abram here. "Stick close to me, Abram. Walk with me. Just like a child that trusts a parent and sticks right on their hip so they don't get into harm's way and trouble, stick close to me." And this is, for you and I, this is the human element of the covenant. God is good and loving and gracious and kind and wonderful and trustworthy. He knows the future. He has good things in store for us. It's our duty – it's actually not just our duty, it's our delight to come alongside of God as a friend and to trust him and to walk with him.

It was Adam who walked with God before sin entered the world. It was Enoch in Genesis 5 who walked with God and was taken up into heaven. It was Noah who walked with God. And here, we are told that Abram is given the opportunity, as you and I are given the opportunity, to walk with God. The condition by which that is to be accomplished – he uses the word "blameless." This doesn't mean that Abram is without sin; we've already seen him in sin. He gave away his wife, disobeyed God, committed adultery. This man has sinned.

But blameless means this – it's the same language used of Job a little bit later in your Bible, and that is not that someone is sinless and perfect but that their heart's desire is to stop sinning, and they're striving and working toward making spiritual progress to where the sin in their life gets put to death, and the obedience comes to life. What that means as well is when we do sin, we confess our sins. We bring it to God. We deal with it very, very quickly so that we can be back in loving relationship with God.

So, God comes to him, he says, "Abram, I'm good for my promises. I'm gonna make do with all the promises that I've made to you. You're gonna get your son. Everything's gonna be great. But you really need to walk with me, and you need to keep a close eye on your sin because your sin will get you far away from me, into trouble and harm's way." The same is true for you and I. Here's how Abram responds. Worship is our responding, and here he responds to God's initiation. It says that Abram fell facedown. This is an act of devotion and worship. This is utter humility and subjugation. And it's interesting because you and I, when we worship God, we should do so in ways that are demonstrable and that are bodily in nature.

I can still remember, as a new Christian, going to church for the first time. People were raising their hands and clapping and cheering, and it kinda freaked me out. I thought, "These people are all emotional. They're all into Jesus a little freakishly." And then it dawned on me: I do the same thing when I go to a good game, you know? I stand up and yell at the Mariners' bullpen and I cheer on the Sonics back court and I raise my hands and I respond bodily. If we respond for the bands we love, if we respond for the sports teams we love – my wife usually lets a shout out and raises a hand when she gets something right on "Wheel of Fortune." I mean if "Wheel of Fortune" gets adoration and devotion, it seems like God should get a little bit of love, too – only seems reasonable. So, I learned, when we respond to God, sometimes it's gonna be on our knees, just broken. Sometimes it's gonna be in our seat with our head in our hands, thinking through and dealing with things. Sometimes it'll be just raising our hands in gladness and adoration.

The Bible talks about all these kind of postures, and it's important 'cause I was thinking about it, too – everything to me makes sense through the eyes of my kids, but when I get home, my kids, they physically respond to me. They run to me, they're yelling, their hands are in the air. It's a big race. The one-year-old is usually bringing up the rear, and they're, "Daddy's home! Daddy's home! Daddy's home!" And they all want hugs and kisses, and I'm glad. I mean if they were like so many theologians, and I came home, and they just gave intellectual assent and like a really deep nod, I'd be totally bitter. I'd be frustrated, like I'm their dad, man, I want a little love, I want a little action. So, they run to me, and I usually navigate through 'em and say, you know, "Mommy first, Mommy first, Mommy first." I kiss Mommy first, and about a half hour later, I go back and see how the kids are doing after I've made out with their mother, and – that's how we got all these kids. I like it. I like it when I come home and my one-year-old daughter, "Dad!" She throws her hands in the air. I love that.

You know, God's a father, and when we're in worship, and we respond to him, and we love him, and he can see that we're excited about him as he's excited about us, that he wants to be with us, and we want to be with him. That he delights in us. That we delight in him. That's what Abram does here.

It just shows. He's not trying to put on a show, but it does show nonetheless. Abram fell facedown, and God said to him – I'll say this, too. If you wanna raise your hands when you're worshipping tonight or – we always do time in Scripture, we allow you to respond through singing and celebration and such – if you wanna raise your hands, if you wanna put your face in your seat and pray or just put your head in your hands, it's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's all good. And God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations." Not only gonna have a boy, you're gonna have whole nations that descend from you. These are physical and spiritual nations, nations by birth and new birth. You and I who love Jesus, we are part of the descendancy of Father Abram.

"No longer will you be called Abram. Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful," – that's children. Children are always a blessing in the Bible – "I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." What he says is this: "Abram, I'm gonna change your whole life. It's gonna be so profound and deep that I need to change your name." Some of you have experienced this beautifully in your life to where you were in such sin and in such trouble that when God saved you, he changed you to such a degree that the person that you were is not the person that you are. Paul says that we become – he tells the Corinthians, new creations in Christ, that who we were goes away and who we are comes into play.

It's amazing because we live in this day where everybody wants everything to change, so we get extreme makeovers and extreme home makeovers, and we pimp our ride and all these things, and what really we're looking for is we wanna be different. We want things to be different. But we don't know how to deal with the internal self. We don't know how to deal with the eternal self. We don't know how to sort of hit Ctrl+Alt+Delete on our life and get forgiven, get a new identity, a new heart, a new center, and work out of a new identity. Only God can give that.

Some of you have had such profound changes in your life – they used to have one name, and I know some people have actually changed their name. Some people used to go by a nickname, and they've changed that nickname. They don't go by that anymore. They've taken on a new name. Jesus does this, where he changes the name of Simon to Peter. He changes the name of Saul to Paul. And here, God is gonna change the name of Abram to Abraham.

Abram means exalted father. It's probably in reference to his daddy, Terah, that he had a dad who was successful and noteworthy, and now he says, "Not only are you gonna be a man who's known by who your daddy was, you're gonna be a man who himself will be a daddy." And this is – for you men, I pray you men experience this in your life. It's a great honor and a privilege to make that transition from being a son to being a father. And it's amazing to see life transformation to such a degree, that you're such a different person that you need a new name, 'cause the old one just doesn't fit anymore.

I'll tell you guys a story. In December, I was doing some work down in northern California for some friends, and I got to go out to lunch with a pastor who had come to our pastors' conference here in November. His name's Scotty. He picked me up, and I wanted to hear his story. Picked me up – we're kind of in a rural farming community, picks me up in this big church van with flames painted down the side. So, I knew we were going to another kind of church now. Never seen flames on the church van, but it looked pretty good.

So, I had lunch with this guy, and he'd started a church in The Grange, and he's running about 200 people or something like that. It's going very, very well. Just a really nice guy. I got to meet his wife – delightfully sweet wife. Very sweet. He's got a little girl. Man, she is so cute – just adorable. She loves her daddy, hugs and kisses, and he's a good dad, good husband. Just a really dear guy. I said, "Well, tell me your story. How'd you get saved and how'd you end up doing ministry?"

He said, "Well, I was raised third" – I can't remember, third or fourth – "generation Ku Klux Klan, and I was an avid racist. In high school, I started a white supremacist group, and I recruited 500 kids to join my group. We'd go out and beat people up and vandalize businesses and create all kinds of mayhem. Then, later on in California, I got thrown into prison for some things that I had done." And he said, "And then, I started another Ku Klux Klan white supremacist group in the prison, and I recruited all the white guys to be on my side, and I had over 1,000 men that looked to me as their leader and their king in the prison." And so, he said, "I came up with an idea that we'd declare war on all the Hispanics, and so, we did, and we instigated the biggest prison riot in the history of the United States of America." "Oh."

And he showed me the newspaper articles and his photo. It didn't even look like the same guy. Literally, it didn't even look like the same guy. Hardened face, completely different features, completely different disposition and demeanor. A different guy – a totally different guy. And I said, "Well, what in the world happened?" He said, "Well, I was in prison, and Jesus came to me, and he talked to me, and he changed my heart. He changed my life." And he said, "Then, I got out on a technicality" – which sorta troubled me – I know God's Sovereign, but guys like this shouldn't just get out.

So, he said, "I got out, and then I moved here, and I just started talking about Jesus. Next thing I know, there's people getting saved, and we started recovery centers, and now they've made me a chaplain for the local prison." He loves his wife and love his daughter and loves Jesus, and between his prison ministry and his church, he has people of all kinds of races and ethnicities. He said, "I read the Bible, learned that God loves all the nations of the world and all the people in the world and that I should, too. God gave me his heart, and I'm just not that guy anymore."

That's the beauty of what God does. Just changes you so much that sometimes you need to just get a new name 'cause you're a new person. That's exactly what happens for Abram. It's exactly what happens for Abram, and he's the pattern of faith for us all. So he says, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant," – unbroken, unbreakable. God's gonna love his people. God's gonna forgive his people. God is gonna adore and embrace and pursue his people, no matter what.

That's where God's so faithful that our faith can be in the faithful God. It makes it much easier for us to be people of faith. Say, "Well, why do you trust?" You say, "Well, you gotta know him. Once you know him, how can you not trust him? He does everything he says and he's good for his Word,

and no one can thwart his plans.” He’s in control over all, and when he makes an everlasting covenant, it’s as good as done. May take some time because he’s patient in working out the details, but it will come to pass.

“And your descendants after you for the generations to come.” It’s not just about Abram; it’s about his sons and his grandsons, his daughters and his granddaughters. For you and I, we need to know that God cares very much about our children and our children’s children. I know many of you are unmarried and you don’t have children yet. It’s really important, though, to start to get some sort of a legacy in your mind. That the things that I do and don’t do have an implication on my children and my grandchildren. That it’s not just about me, but I want there to be descendants. I want there to be people whose lives are blessed because I love Jesus.

You know, it’s interesting ‘cause some of you are like Abram. You don’t come from godly families or cities. You’re the first – you’re like Sarai or Abraham. You’re the matriarch or patriarch, and things start with you. That’s what he’s saying. “I’m gonna start here, and then generations are gonna be changed because you and I are in love with each other in a covenant, and that’s gonna change everything.”

Here’s the heart of the covenant: “To be your God and the God of your descendants.” The heart of covenant relationship with God, friends, is this: that God gives himself to us, which is just gloriously good news.

I had a conversation recently with a number of other religious leaders who have different gods and religions, and they were all talking about their traditions and their morality and all the things they do for God. It saddened me because no one talked about what God had done for them, because in their understanding, they don’t understand things as the Bible teaches them. The Bible teaches it’s not about what we do for God; it’s about what God has done for us. And it’s not about what we do to please God; it’s that God is pleased with himself, and he’s free to just love and give to us, who are undeserving. And it’s not that we do things to merit God’s love; it’s that God gives it just because he’s loving, and that makes us lovely and lovable. They just didn’t get that.

The heart of the covenant is this: God says, “I’m giving myself to you.” Again, the closest thing I’ve got to this in my life is marriage where my wife has given herself to me, and I have given myself to her, and we belong to one another, and I do my very best to only bring her good, not harm, like Proverbs says, and she does likewise, seeking to bring me good and not harm. That’s the essence of a loving covenant.

God says, “I’m gonna go first. I’m gonna give myself to you. I’m gonna love you. I’m gonna be there for you. I’m gonna devote myself to you,” and then you respond to that. “You can trust me. I’ll change your life. You need to go with me because I’m the only one who can really help you.” God is so gracious in that fashion. He’s so kind and patient and merciful, and ultimately, we know that he’s given himself to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. God comes down. Gives his life. Gives his death. Gives his resurrection. Gives his righteousness and his forgiveness to us. Just gives himself away. God is the most humble, selfless, and giving being that there is in all of creation, and God gives himself to us. That’s the heart of the covenant.

Goes on to talk – and here, what you’re gonna find is that the covenant has a promise of lineage, has a promise of land, and also the promise of the Lord, and each of those is an element of this promise. The Lord is the primary promise; that we get relationship with the loving, living God. In addition, he’s gonna get a chunk of real estate and a son. “The whole land of Canaan,” – this is explaining the Promised Land that people are still fighting over in the Middle East – “where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

So, the land belongs to God, and he’s gonna give it to the descendants of Abraham who worship the God of Abraham. So, this is not just people that are biologically his descendants; these are people who are spiritually his descendants. I believe he’s talking here about Christians and people from all nations, including Jews who worship the God of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you must keep my covenant, and your descendants after you for the generations to come.’” Again, reiterating, “Abram, I’m gonna give you a son and grandsons, but if you don’t walk with me, you’re gonna make a mess of their life. I’m gonna give you real estate, but if you don’t walk with me, you’re gonna make a mess of all the possessions that I give to you.”

It’s interesting because so oftentimes, we want God to bless us, but we don’t want to obey him. And God is a God who’s willing to bless, but if we’re not willing to obey, then he is reticent to bless because if he does, we would just use the blessing that he affords us to do evil and terrible things. God doesn’t want Abram just to sire a son; he wants him to raise a believer. He doesn’t want him to just have a lot of real estate; he wants it to be used as a nation of people who would live in loving adoration relationship with him.

When you think about it, so oftentimes, we’re focused on gifts and not giver, and we want God to give to us, and God’s saying, “But are you gonna walk with me faithfully? Because if I give you something and you don’t walk with me faithfully, you’re gonna hurt yourself. I don’t want that to be the case.” So, he’s restating for Abram, “Not just you; your kids, too. Don’t just have a lot of kids, but raise those kids so that these are godly kids.”

And then he’s gonna get the sign of the covenant. Let me set this up. I know I’m moving fast – I apologize. I’m really struggling, to be honest with ya, just to stay upright.

My wife and I are in a covenant, and we have a sign of our covenant, and that’s our wedding ring. So, we wear this, showing that we’re in covenant, so now there’s a sign pointing back to the affection. Likewise, in the days of Noah, do you remember the covenant sign that was given in the days of Noah? A rainbow. I’m sure Abram wished he had that one. His sign is gonna be circumcision. There’s certain things, if I was a topical preacher, that I wouldn’t do a series on. This is one of ‘em. But we’ll talk about it ‘cause it’s right here in your Bible.

We’re going right through the Bible, so, we’re gonna talk about circumcision. “Every male among you,” he says, “will be circumcised.” There’s a lot in those words, aren’t there, gentlemen? There’s a – how many – you know, this was done with a flint knife. Think about that. Most men, all men, really

care about this particular piece of their anatomy. Of all the places on the earth that they most treasure, this is it. A flint knife.

Now, can you imagine if God came to you and said, "If you wanna go to heaven, you gotta take a flint knife to yourself, or you're gonna go to hell." You're like, "I'm fine with that. The risks are just too great. Hell's fine." Be circumcised. And it's interesting to me that God chose this part of the male anatomy because it seems to me, when this part of the male anatomy is devoted to the Lord, the whole man is devoted to the Lord. Right, ladies? Yeah. And it's interesting 'cause it's with this part of the anatomy – and this is where I need to be real careful – I'm not feeling good and it's been a long day.

It's with this part of the male anatomy that men do the greatest good and the greatest evil. The greatest evil: fornication, adultery, out-of-wedlock births, all kinds of perversion – there's an unconfirmed report, I'm digging down the statistics on it, says that more money is spent every year in this nation on pornography than pro baseball, basketball, and football combined. We live in a very perverse society that Paul says, in his day, that people had their stomach as their god. Our day, it's dropped a little bit, and that's where the new god lives.

It seems like when God says, "You're gonna belong to me, and we're gonna start the covenant by getting the men in order, getting the men in line, I'm gonna brand them so that when they look at themselves, they know who they belong to. They belong to me." But out of their sin, also from this part of the male anatomy, comes some of the greatest blessings: marriage, intimacy with a wife, the two become one flesh, to echo the great poem of Genesis 2. In addition, Hebrews says that we should keep the marriage bed pure.

There's a possibility for that and that – as Malachi 2 says, that there can then be godly offspring. That a man can love his wife and that they can enjoy one another fully in a sacred and holy way, and that there is the opportunity for children to be born out of that sacred covenant. So men, the thing is this: When God wants to do a work, he often starts with the men, the men being wholeheartedly devoted to him, and oftentimes, it comes down to issues of sex and marriage and children where he needs to brand them because that is where their greatest folly and sin is most prone to appear.

I know many of you men are single, and if I could just encourage you toward anything, it's that all of you belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ or none of you belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. That you're either devoted to the Lord with the totality of who you are, your whole body and your whole identity, including your sexuality, or you're not. God makes this point abundantly clear with the covenant of circumcision. So, he says, "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you." So, all of God's men will be demarcated by a branding showing that 'I do belong to the Lord wholeheartedly and undividedly.'

Goes on then. "For the generations to come, every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, those who are born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant." So, the Jews to this day circumcise their sons on the eighth day. That's the day that Abram's son, Isaac born of Sarai, that is forthcoming soon, is going to be circumcised. Some of you were circumcised on the eighth day.

Let me state the obvious to you because I've said it all day, but in a church of 3,000-plus people, there's always somebody who's not gonna get this. Don't circumcise yourself, and don't circumcise anyone else, okay? Do we have a deal? And I say that 'cause I was reading a story in the Associated Press news wire in the Seattle Times where some guy – I'm guessing in a very rural area – was reading the Bible all by himself, perhaps without the finest of educational opportunity, and read the part on circumcision (maybe this part), called in his teenage son and circumcised him with a hunting knife.

Yeah, the women gasped and the men couldn't. They were just like – like a dog who heard a high-pitched whistle – they couldn't even get air in their lungs. Don't do that. I just state that because what I don't want people to – you know, it's amazing – when you preach a sermon, people will actually walk out, and sometimes they don't get the point. That's not the point. The point is not, "Note to self: Me and a steak knife for the Lord." That's not the point.

The point is to walk wholeheartedly with the Lord in devotion. We'll deal with that in the end. But it's the whole household, so everybody in the household, a large number of men are going to be circumcised on the eighth day. It's interesting 'cause the sign of the covenant is the shedding of male blood, obviously foreshadowing the Lord Jesus who is the Son of God comes down and sheds his blood, far more blood than this, so that we might be in loving covenant relationship with God; that's how he takes away our sin. A little play on words here, a little interesting twist: "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." I won't say what I was gonna, but it was funny.

So, what he's saying is this: "If you're not wholeheartedly devoted to me, and your family and your children and your sexuality are not devoted to me, then I'm gonna cut you off. You're not gonna get land, lineage, or the Lord. You're gonna be out of the covenant and out of the blessings." What this is basically saying is, God's saying, "You can't try and pretend that you love me and then disobey me and expect me to bless you. That doesn't work that way. If you obey me, I'll bless you so that you don't make a wreck of your life and my reputation, but if you're just determined to get all the blessings without any of the relationship, that's not acceptable to me."

"God also said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai but her name will be Sarah.'" There's a debate here because the first spelling of her name, some think it means princess; others think it means contentious. The second spelling of her name definitely means princess. I don't know what the disagreement is 'cause most women who think they're a princess are also very – contentious, yeah. So, if you see any women with a shirt that says "Princess" – should just say "Contentious" – that's what I'm saying. We'll move on 'cause the ladies are offended. It gets worse. Verse 16: "I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her."

So, Sarai's life's gonna change, too. Up to this point, she's not appeared to be a real godly woman. She went along with a plan to be given away to another man – didn't put up a fight – and also, when it came time to trust the Lord for the birth of a child, she concocted an adulterous relationship

between Hagar and her husband, and now God's coming to her, saying, "You know what, Sarai? I love you. I forgive you. I'll embrace you. I know you're kind of a dirty, confused, controlling, manipulative woman, but you know what? I'm gonna give you a new life and new name. I'm still gonna bless you. I have good things in store for you."

Maybe some of you ladies can identify with her. Maybe God would forgive you. Maybe God would embrace you. Maybe God would give you a new name and get you a fresh start, so who you were and who you are are incongruent, and that there would be a new beginning in the middle for you. Says, "I will bless her" – that's gonna be children – "and will give you a son by her." A son. "I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations and kings of peoples will come from her." She's gonna have a boy. They're gonna have boys. There's gonna be nations that proceed from those sons.

This happens in Genesis, and ultimately "kings will come from her." Ultimately, this goes through Genesis 49:10 where it says that "the scepter will not" – that's the king's staff – "will not depart from Judah until it is possessed by he to whom it rightly belongs." He is the king of kings. He is the ruler of the nations of the earth. He is ultimately the seed of Abraham. His name? Jesus. The promise here is that Jesus – she's gonna have a son who will have sons who will have nations and kings, all leading to Jesus, who is king over the nations.

See how good God is? This is a disbelieving woman who concocted an adulterous relationship in unbelief. God's still gonna be this good to her. I want you to see how good God is; how bad we are, but how good God is. Our hope is in this goodness, and he was good to Mother Sarai. Most certainly.

"Abraham fell facedown" – again – and "he laughed" – we don't know – we don't know, was he laughing in unbelief (like "Come on, I've heard this before. You've been talking about this for 24 years.")? Or is he laughing in faith (like "God, thank you. Finally, my son's on the way. This is good news.")? We don't know. We don't know.

Give you a story, though. How many of you men – and I don't denigrate my daughters at all. I've got two daughters that I absolutely adore, but I've also got two sons. How many of you men are looking forward to having a son? Having a boy. Wrestle with him, play with him, take him to the dump, eat hot dogs, fight, pee in the yard – all the things you wanna do with a son. That's what we do at the Driscoll house. And I was so excited to have my firstborn son. Abram's 99. Been waiting for his boy. God says, "I haven't forgotten. Your boy's on the way."

I still remember the first time I held Zac. I think I've told you this story before. He's my oldest son. It was a big spiritual moment for me. We were in the hospital. It was the summertime. I said, "Lord God, you're my Father. I'm your son. Now I'm a father. You're giving me a son. Please use this son to teach me what it's like to be a father, to be a son. Please use this opportunity between me and my boy to teach me about my relationship with you as your son."

I held him up to pray for him; he crapped on my foot. I was wearing open-toed sandals 'cause it was the summertime, and the first shot is like roofing tar out of a kid, if you didn't know that, and I just – I laughed, I laughed hysterically. I just – I laughed like Abram laughed. I just said, "Well, amen, Lord. There's a lesson." Apparently, that's the kind of son I am, right there. So, he laughed, I laughed – it's a good thing when a boy comes.

He said, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old?" – "I'm a little old, a little old for that" – "Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" How many of you ladies – if God said, "I'm gonna give you a baby," and you said, "Okay," then 24 years later, you're 90 years old, he says, "You ready now?" – how many of you ladies would be like, "No, you can keep him. I'm in a diaper, he's in a diaper, that just seems like a lot. We can share soft food and diapers, and that just seems like a lot." But Sarah's up for the task – 90-year-old lady, you know, gonna chase this kid around. "And Abraham said to God, 'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'" Now, there's a tinge of sadness here.

But what had happened was, in Genesis 12, God told Abram to leave his family and to go down to the Promised Land. He did. There was a famine there. In unbelief, he then went to Egypt looking for food. God didn't tell him to go there. He was in sin. When he got there, he gave away his wife. That was a sin, too. God graciously gave his wife back. And as he left Egypt, he brought with him some wealth and also some servants. Among those servants was an Egyptian woman named Hagar. Now, he wasn't supposed to be in Egypt, and he wasn't supposed to take Hagar. She factors into the equation in Genesis 16 where Sarai says, "God's never gonna give me a baby. Abram, you have sex with Hagar. Through this adulterous relationship, that's how we'll get a son." It was a sin, but they did it.

God didn't stop them; sometimes he lets us sin, and he lets the implications come into being. And then a son is born named Ishmael. That was 13 years prior. Ishmael is now 13 years of age, and he's growing up in a very messed up home – maybe a home that's not unlike yours. He's got his dad and his mom and his dad's wife. It's a very messed up, dysfunctional family. But Abram loved this boy, Ishmael, raised him and cared for him, and what he says is this: "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing. Can't we just skip my son through Sarah? Can't we just substitute Ishmael, my son through Hagar? Can't we just make a swap?"

I'll tell you this: Some people say, "If God will forgive me for all of my sins, no matter what I do," – which, if you are a believer, that is indeed true – "then why would I stop sinning or why would I seek to stop sinning? I'll give you a couple reasons. One, because you love God. If you're truly a believer, you don't want to continue in sin, but two, God will forgive you of sin, but the implications tend to linger. He wasn't supposed to go to Egypt. He wasn't supposed to pick up Hagar. He wasn't supposed to commit adultery. And now he's got a 13-year-old son, and his family is kind of a mess, and now the implications of his sin are a besetting problem.

Some of you have found this. You sin, God forgives you, but you still have the problem to deal with. You were an alcoholic, you got saved, and now you gotta go through rehab. You're a drug addict, you got saved, but you still need to get clean. You were having sex outside of marriage and you got birth to a child, you get saved, God forgives you, but you still gotta raise the child. You blew all your money and got saved, but you still gotta climb outta debt. You were having sex, and you got a disease, and God forgives you, but you still have to deal with the implications of that decision that was

wicked. And that's what happens here.

We're seeing that our sin doesn't just affect us; it affects others, and it affects others in a very negative way, and it's gonna cause grief and difficulty for the life of this boy, Ishmael, who at this point is 13 years of age. "Then God said, 'Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son,'" – back to Genesis 15:4 ("You're gonna get a boy; I told you you're gonna get a boy through your wife. No substitutes."). If you wanna get a mind bend on this, you read Romans 9 where it says that God has the freedom to sovereignly elect whom he will work with and through, and he chose Isaac, not Ishmael, and he has the jurisdiction to do that. That's what he's saying here. "Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac." What's "Isaac" mean? Laughter. God always gets the last laugh. God's got a good sense of comedic timing.

What he's saying is this: "You're gonna have a son, and you're gonna name that son Isaac." So, God is completely in control of the future, working everything out on his plan through his hand of providence, and he lets them in on the plan that he has. "I will establish my covenant with him" – so, the covenant line will come through Isaac, not Ishmael – "as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." And that would include you and I, if we love Jesus. "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation."

What he says is this: "I will love Isaac and Ishmael. I will bless Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac will be the son of the promise, and he will love me. Ishmael is not the son of the promise, and he doesn't love me. But I'm still gonna be good to Ishmael. He's gonna have 12 sons who become nations." Genesis 25:12-26 lays out these nations.

What we see here is that even for people who don't love God, people who don't obey God, that God occasionally still is very gracious to them, and he blesses them. Their lives go good. This doesn't mean that they get to go to heaven and all their sins are forgiven. What it does mean is that God is loving and gracious and good, sometimes even to his enemies and people who don't deserve it. Some of you may get frustrated because you'll know people, you say, "Well, God blesses them and not me, and their life's going better than mine, and they don't even love God, and they're sinning."

Don't get jealous because their heaven is here on earth, and that's all they have. But God is a good God, and he will bring justice and judgment in the end, and rather than being jealous of those who are blessed, celebrate that the goodness of God is being shown even to the undeserved. Say, "You know what? God is looking great here. They don't see it, but I do. Maybe God is just showing me how great he is. Even if they don't give him praise, I do. I know it's from his hand that their life is going well."

And so, Ishmael will get blessed as well. "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." So, the boy is on the way. Boy, what a great word that is. You know, you're gonna be a daddy, and it's like the doctor saying, "It's a boy, and here's the date of birth." "Ah, yes – thank you, God. This is such a great, wonderful gift." "When he had finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him." So, God said all he has to say. "On that very day" – you see the urgency? "On that very day." See, when the spirit of God convicts you and me, when we read something in the Scripture, when we learn something from the Lord, if we are people of faith, there should be a sense of urgency, like "I need to do this right now. I need to get on this today."

Now, if there's ever been a guy who has a good reason why he should take his time, it's a 99-year-old man with a case of the shakes who's supposed to circumcise himself. I could see him saying, "You know, I'm gonna put that on my list. I'm just real busy, and I'm gonna get to that. Maybe." You know? But he doesn't. He doesn't say, "Well, God, this doesn't sound good. I don't know about" – what he says is, "You said it. I'll do it. Right now." That's obedience. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey me." And that's what he's doing. "God said it; I'll do it." We need to have this same sense of urgency.

So many people read the Bible, but they don't respond. They don't do anything with what they learn. So, they deceive themselves, that's what James says. Do not merely listen to God's Words and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Have this sense of urgency, where "God spoke to me, oftentimes through Scripture, and I need to be urgent about replying to him with faith and obedience and good works."

So, immediately, "Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and he circumcised them, just as God said." Okay? Just as God said. And you know that wasn't an easy day. How many men, if your boss came to you, you're sitting in your cubicle tomorrow, hypothetically. Your boss comes up and says, "God spoke to me. We need to go in the break room. I'm gonna circumcise ya." "Actually, you're not. I promise you you're not gonna do that. Of all the things you're not gonna do today, that's the big one, right there."

But, apparently, Abraham is such a man of faith that his workers and the people in his household trust, and "Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen." You know, that's a junior high kid. Junior high kids are not very obedient. Must've been a pretty good dad – or he tricked him – but – 'cause, you know, you can't even get a junior high kid to take out the trash, let alone give up their foreskin, you know, I mean it's just – I won't say any more. I really don't feel good. I'm sorry.

This'll come up again in Genesis 34. This issue plays a big issue in Genesis. Ishmael was 13. To this day, Jews circumcise their sons on the eighth day, and Arabs circumcise their sons when they're 13. Aren't you glad you're American? Wow. Praise the Lord. "Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised on the same day. Every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, were circumcised with him." So the shedding of male blood becomes the sign of the covenant.

Okay, here's what I'm gonna do. I am done. I appreciate you guys' kindness and patience. I know I'm throwing not a lot of strikes tonight, but there's just three questions that I wanna close with that sorta come out of this whole issue of circumcision, and I wanna answer 'em and actually get these. First

is: Do you need to be circumcised to go to heaven? Do ya? No. Guys are like, "No, no, not at all. No. I don't know a lot of theology, but that one, I figured out. That was one of the first things I straightened out. One God, and you don't need to be circumcised. Good. Okay, good." No, you don't need to be circumcised.

There was a debate in Acts 15 where non-Jews were getting saved and they said, "Well, do they need to get circumcised?" and they said, "No, they love Jesus; that's what matters." I'll give you a couple verses. 1 Corinthians 7:18: "Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised." I was thinking about it. How do you do that? That's a tough deal, right there. "Well, you're circumcised. That's okay – we'll reverse it." Okay. I don't even know how you'd do that. "Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised."

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing – I wanna stress that. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Okay? Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." And Galatians 6:15: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." That's what matters. Okay?

So, let me summarize, then I'll answer the final two questions. There is a sign, which is the outward symbol or designator pointing to the relationship with God, the covenant relationship of love and faith. What he's saying is this: If you're gonna get hung up on the sign and miss the relationship, you've missed the point. The sign doesn't mean anything unless there's faith.

This is the difference between routine and ritual. Routine is people who have all the signs but not the faith. Ritual is people who have the signs and the faith, like this: Is it good to be baptized? It's wonderful to be baptized, if you love Jesus. If you don't, it doesn't do any good for you. Is it good to take communion, which is an outward sign of the new covenant? Yes, but it doesn't matter to your wellbeing, it doesn't do anything, unless you love Jesus. In the same way, it's not just about having a wedding ring but a marriage. The wedding ring symbolizes the marriage, but there's a lot of guys walking around with wedding rings on that don't love their wife and have a relationship.

And for some of us as well, perhaps even a sign to the world that we are God's children is that we are people of Scripture, and we carry a Bible, and we love the Bible, but if we don't read it, it doesn't matter. If we don't believe it, it doesn't matter. If we don't obey it – doesn't matter. We could have all the signs in the world. We could wear crosses around our necks and carry a Bible in our hand, and we can go to our baptismal service and partake of communion, but if we don't love Jesus, the sign doesn't count. That's what he's saying. It doesn't matter.

It's good to have faith and the sign of faith, but if you had to pick between the two, go for the faith, not the sign. There's still people all over the world today who think, "Well, I'm circumcised. I get to go to heaven." Not if you don't love Jesus. So, circumcision isn't the issue. So, the second then becomes: Why does God put circumcision in the Bible? Why does he make such a big deal out of this? It's because it's a type and a shadow, and it's pointing to Jesus, and ultimately, it's about circumcision of the heart, not just circumcision of the flesh. Circumcision of the flesh is an indication that you have a circumcised heart, and the heart is the seat and sum and center of who we are. It's where our will and our decisions and our identity comes from. Who we are is our heart.

Deuteronomy 10:16 says, "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." Stiff-necked is where we're stubborn in the bad ways. We're not gonna stop sinning. We're not gonna repent. We're not gonna obey God. We're stiff-necked. What he's saying is, you can have a circumcised body, but if your heart's uncircumcised, you're stiff-necked and sinful, it's not gonna benefit you anything to be circumcised, unless your heart is. Deuteronomy 30:6: "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and all your soul, and live." And Jeremiah 4:4: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts." So, circumcision, in the old covenant, was to point us forward to the Lord Jesus, who fulfills the covenant, and now we, like Abram, undergo circumcision but it's circumcision of the heart. But faith comes first.

Abram had faith, and then he got circumcised. We have faith, and then we get baptized. We get faith, and then we partake of communion. The symbols point back to the reality of faith, but the symbols, apart from the reality of faith, they're just meaningless superstition. So, the third question is then: How do we circumcise our hearts? How do we do that? 'Cause there gets to be callous and rebellion and hard-heartedness and stiff-neck rebellion, and we are people who can blame others for our sin and justify ourselves and vindicate ourselves, and we can want God's blessing but not obey him. We want God to make our life good, but we don't wanna walk step by step in relationship with him.

Romans 2 says, beginning in verse 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. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code."

What he's saying is this: What the flint knife did for the body of Abraham is what the Spirit does for the soul of you and I. Then we get hard-hearted. We get calloused. We get indifferent. We say, "God, I'm obeying you here but not here, so, that's okay." Or, "God, it's not my fault. Somebody else made me bitter, made me angry. Somebody else led me into sin." We blame, justify, reason our way out. Eventually, we get hard-hearted and stiff-necked. We get calloused. And God comes along and says, "I'm gonna send my Spirit to convict you of sin, so that you might repent, and we're gonna do this cleansing, shaving work where we take off that callous and rebellion and foolishness and disobedience, so that you can be tender-hearted toward me. So when I speak, you'll listen. When I request, you'll obey. When I walk, you keep in step with me, and you stick close to me because you trust me and love me."

I know I've said a lot. If I could leave you with one thing, it would be this: If you'd be so kind as just to circumcise your hearts. Just get some time

where you are to deal with your sin. Have God, the Holy Spirit, convict you of sin. Carve out that rebellion and folly and excuse-making and blame. That is what's keeping God from really enjoying you and you really enjoying him, is the sin. God wants to cut that out. He often does that with Scripture. The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than a double-edged sword. Sharper than a flint knife. Scripture is how God speaks to us, and the Spirit of God works through the Word of God to convict us of sin, so that we might confess that sin and get it taken away. Then we become tender-hearted people. We can love God. We can love others. We can love even our enemies. We can love people. And we can be loving and good, as God is loving and good.

You get a chance to do that, and when you're done getting your heart circumcised by God tonight, it's important that you walk out of here as people of faith. That you trust in the God of Abraham, and his name is the Lord Jesus Christ. That he is the one who can give us a new identity and a new name. That he's the one who comes and speaks to us. It's not about what we do; it's about what he's done. He's loving and patient and merciful and gracious and good. If you can identify with Sarai, if you can identify with Hagar, if you can identify with Ishmael, if you can identify with Abraham, God was good to them all, and God will be good to you as well. He's calling you to trust him by faith and to circumcise your heart, so you can stick close to him and not continue in sin and get in all kinds of trouble.

When you've done that, we're gonna respond with signs of our faith. Gonna give our tithes and offerings. We're going to partake of communion, remembering Jesus' body and blood, and then we're gonna worship as Abram did, bodily. We'll sing and celebrate. I know it's late. I know it's been a long day. I appreciate you guys coming out, and I just think it'd be so good for us to finish with you getting some time to talk to Jesus and walking outta here with faith and a new heart and having some time to thank him and celebrate with a great band. Thanks for your patience. It's been a hard day, but we made it through, so, thank you.

Lord God, we pray to you now, thanking you that you hear prayer. As Abram prayed for Ishmael and you heard, we pray to you, and you still hear. God, some of us have hard hearts and stiff necks. Please send your Holy Spirit to circumcise our hearts, to soften our hearts, so that we can love you and love each other – even love our enemies. God, thank you that you're good to everybody in this story. You're good to Sarah, you're good to Abraham, you're good to Ishmael, good to Hagar – you're good to everybody. God, not everybody's good to you. Not everybody loves you. Not everybody repents of sin. Not everybody gets saved. Not everybody lives happily ever after. But thank you that you were willing to be good. God, may we respond with faith. May we embrace your goodness. May we walk with you faithfully and blamelessly.

God, I thank you for those that have come. It's late. They have other places they could be. They have other things that they could be doing. God, I know my words weren't great tonight. I'm really hurting. I pray you'll take my words, though, feeble as they were, and then would use them to encourage these people, to draw them near to you. That you would be their joy and delight in covenant relationship with love. So, God, we pray for our time together. We pray that we would not just partake of signs and symbols like worship and communion, but that we would also have new hearts and new identities. We thank you for giving that. In Jesus' good name. Amen.