

Genesis 17:9-27

The Sign of the Covenant

Most modern evangelical Christian churches are not distinguished by either their architecture or decor. They often are not set apart on “holy ground” but rather occupy the same space as a mall or movie theatre. If the signage were removed, they could easily be mistaken for a recreation center or a charter school. The interior is designed to function as a multi-use facility, capable of meeting the needs of the Sunday service, Awana games, youth concerts, and informal gatherings. When one enters on a Sunday morning, there is no sense that one has moved from the secular world into sacred space.

Like our churches, our faith is equally unencumbered with many rites and rituals. There is no special dress required for church attendance, in fact, it is more likely that people put more thought into their dress for the workplace than for their Sunday worship service. The service itself is generally routine, but without too much formal structure. That is, people know what to expect and in what order, but there are few moving parts. Worship, announcements, and preaching are the three pillars of the typical evangelical service. There is no formal reading of Scripture, no recitation from the congregation of the creed or other such statement of faith, and no required physical movements on the part of the congregation (except perhaps standing during a song or two to prepare for the meet and greet). Even participation during singing is hardly compulsory. In other words, our Sunday services can be rather passive events for the congregant. While we are there to worship, in fact we mostly listen.

To be sure there is communion, usually done once every month. But again, this is received by the person in the seat, he or she does not go forward. And it is not obligatory. Those who profess Jesus Christ and are walking in faith *should* take communion, but they do not *have* to. And while outside of church service there is the ordinance of baptism, it is performed in the swimming pools and spas of local homes so families can gather to appreciate the moment. So, while this is an act of obedience and faith, it is not really a *church* event.

It is not my intent to suggest that any of this is unbiblical, or inappropriate, or in any way other than it should be. My point simply is that these realities make it more difficult for us to fully understand the gravity of the rites and rituals that defined the Jewish faith in the Old Testament. While no doubt there were many disobedient Jews who ignored or did not take seriously the demands of their faith, just as there are many Christians today who ignore the biblical commands of prayer, Bible reading, and corporate worship, for those who did take their faith seriously, the commands of the Law were many and rigorous. The simple fact is that, living as we do in an age of grace, we can struggle to appreciate the importance of obedience to, and participation in, the disciplines of the faith.

The Sign of the Covenant

For the fourth time in twenty-four years, God had appeared to Abraham. God had reaffirmed the covenant and confirmed its importance by changing Abram’s name to Abraham. Then, God continued His dialogue with Abram, begun earlier that day. “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations” (v. 9). “Now as for you” directed the attention to Abraham. No longer was God simply stating “I will. . . .” God had not yet specified exactly what

Abraham was to do, other than to “walk before me and be blameless” (Genesis 17:2), but clearly the focus of the narrative turned to Abraham. Now, Abraham was given specifics. He was told that his role would be to “keep My covenant” and to pass on the importance of keeping that covenant to future generations. This was not to be a covenant for Abraham only, or even for Abraham and Ishmael. This covenant was to be eternal.

And God informed Abraham specifically that keeping the covenant entailed obedience not by him alone, but by his progeny. “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised” (v. 10). The covenant, while still unilateral, related itself to future generations. Not only was Abram commanded to obey, but so were his descendants. And importantly, the keeping of this eternal covenant was to be marked by a procedure that was as permanent as the covenant itself.

To make certain there was no misunderstanding of what was expected of Abraham and his descendants, God further specified, “you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (v. 11). While this may strike the modern reader as a very curious way to signify the commencement of a covenant, the rite of circumcision was actually not unique to Israel. Evidence from bronze statuettes found at Tell el-Judeideh in what is today northern Syria show evidence of circumcision, and these date to about 2800 BC, several hundred years before Abraham. Also Scripture refers to Egypt, Edom, Ammon, and Moab as practicing circumcision (Jeremiah 9:25-26). On the other hand, the Philistines are mentioned as being the uncircumcised (Judges 15:18), and we have no historical evidence that circumcision was practised in either Babylon or Assyria.

Yet God did select circumcision as the sign to mark His covenant. It was point of entry into the life of Israel. Eventually, any outsider who wished to marry an Israelite would be forced to undergo the procedure (Genesis 34:14-16). That particular requirement, however, was not explicitly stated in this giving of the covenant. The purpose here was not social but religious. It is also important to note that this was a rite exclusive to males. There was no corresponding ceremony for the female members of society. This may be explained either by the very patriarchal nature of Israel’s society, or perhaps it reflected the “one flesh” principle of marriage.

Circumcision was to serve as “the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (v. 11). Signs were important in God’s revelation. In Genesis 1:14 the sun and moon served as signs. In Genesis 4:15 the mark on Cain served as a sign. And in Genesis 9:12-13 the rainbow served as a sign. Each of these signs served its intended purpose.

But what of the sign of circumcision? To whom was it to be a sign? It might be argued that it was a sign for God. Some suggest that the sign was to remind God of His promise to increase and multiply the descendants of Abraham.

In this context circumcision is similar to the sign of the rainbow,

“¹²God said, ‘this is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; ¹³I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. ¹⁴It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, ¹⁵and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Genesis 9:12-15).

Or the sign of the blood on the doorposts at Passover,

“¹²For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments - I am the Lord. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:12-13).

However, most of the ‘signs’ in the Old Testament were not for God, but for the people of Israel. For example,

The Feast of Unleavened Bread - “⁶For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord. ⁷Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and nothing leavened shall be seen among you, nor shall any leaven be seen among you in all your borders. ⁸You shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘it is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ⁹And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:6-9).

The mark of the firstborn - “¹⁴And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘what is this?’ then you shall say to him, ‘with a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ ¹⁶So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:14-16).

The Sabbath - “But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘you shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (Exodus 31:13).

The phylacteries worn between the eyes and mounted on the doorposts - “⁶These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

The memorial stones from the Jordan River - “⁶Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, ‘what do these stones mean to you?’ ⁷Then you shall say to them, ‘because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.’ So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever” (Joshua 4:6-7).

Thus it seems that the weight of biblical evidence supports the conclusion that the sign was not for God, but rather for the Israelites themselves. Its purpose was to allow the individual to identify with God’s people and thus participate in the covenant promises. These signs were significant memorials for the people of Israel. They practiced them and taught them to their children. To no good Hebrew were they optional.

In addition to defining circumcision as the sign of the covenant, God further elaborated on who was to be circumcised, and when the rite of circumcision should be performed. “Every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants” (v. 12). Thus circumcision was unrelated to some rite of passage into adulthood as in other cultures. Neither was it a ritual associated with marriage only. The timing of circumcision also precluded it from being directly related to a factor in fertility. That is, the covenant promise to Abraham and his descendants that they would be fruitful was brought about by the sovereign act of God, not by the medical procedure of circumcision.

This rite was later codified into the Mosaic Law. “²When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. ³On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (Leviticus 12:2-3). Also to be noted is that circumcision was to be performed on all who belonged to Abram, whether by birth or possession. The idea that those who were owned by Hebrews were, in some way, incorporated into the covenant also became a part of the Law. For example, regarding the Passover meal, “⁴³the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘this is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner is to eat of it; ⁴⁴but every man’s slave purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it’” (Exodus 12:43-44).

God repeated the command that those not of the direct family line still participated in the covenant. “A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (v. 13). It would have been natural for Abraham to assume that his son would be a participant in the covenant, but not slaves purchased from distant lands or even slaves born to members of his household. The significance of the non-elitism of the covenant is on display here. God’s covenant was not restricted to members of a certain social or economic class.

The final point God made in this speech was that entry into the covenant was not optional. “An uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (v. 14). The consequence for failure to participate in the covenant was separation from the people of Israel. No concessions were made for those who refused.

They had not only broken the social requirement, but alienated themselves from God, Himself. The language “cut off” can mean either separation, or it can even be used to mean death itself.

“Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel” (Exodus 12:15).

“²⁰But the person who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the Lord, in his uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from his people. ²¹When anyone touches anything unclean, whether human uncleanness, or an unclean animal, or any unclean detestable thing, and eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the Lord, that person shall be cut off from his people” (Leviticus 7:20-21).

“If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die” (Exodus 21:14).

“⁸Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, ‘conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you.’ ⁹But the woman said to him, ‘behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?’” (1 Samuel 21:8-9).

Thus, poetically, the word play in the command was that either the people of Israel be cut, or they are literally to have their heads cut off.

The Promise of Isaac

God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of multitudes. And, He had reaffirmed that promise on several occasions. Now, however, God specifically promised a son. Though Abraham had likely assumed that Ishmael was to be the heir through whom his line was established, God had never intended that to be the case.

To begin, Sarai, like Abraham, was also given a new name. “¹⁵Then God said to Abraham, ‘as for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her” (v. 15-16). The explanation for the name change was not offered by God, but Sarah means princess, and as such was an appropriate title for the wife of the father of nations and kings.

This was the complement to the promise given earlier to Abraham that God would “make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you” (Genesis 17:6). Yet, apparently, despite all that God had done, Abraham found this revelation impossible to believe. Upon hearing that it was Sarah who was to conceive and give birth to the promised child, “Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (v. 17). This act of prostration seems quite different from that done earlier, where Abram, as he was then called, had fallen on his face before God. The context here seems to suggest rather that

Abraham fell over laughing at the suggestion that he would finally father a child through Sarah. Ishmael was about thirteen years old. Certainly though he was no expert in gynecology, Abraham simply knew that he, and his wife especially, were beyond the age of producing a child. God apparently appreciated Abraham's incredulity, for He did not rebuke Abraham (as He would later rebuke Sarah). God knew that His purposes were miraculous and thus difficult to comprehend.

But Abraham quickly recovered himself. His emotional state had moved from awe and reverence, to laughter, and now to reason and pleading. As he had done with Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham offered a compromise candidate to God, "oh that Ishmael might live before You!" (v. 18). Abraham was eminently practical, and as we will see in a later passage, always willing to negotiate. Perhaps this was due to his business dealings as a herdsman, trying to gain the most profit from his flocks. It was unlikely, though, that Abraham ever mentioned this suggestion to Sarah, whose relationship with Hagar and Ishmael bordered on the violent.

God refused the offer. Instead, He insisted that "no, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (v. 19). Abraham was not only promised a child, but a son. And the wording of the Hebrew implied that the birth was imminent. This was much different from the previous promises of God that Abraham would father offspring. Then, the promise was that one day Abraham would father children. Now God was stating that the birth would be soon. To embellish His promise, Abraham was even given the name by which that son shall be called. And even before that son was born, God assured Abraham that Isaac would have descendants.

But God had not forgotten Ishmael. "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (v. 20). God had *heard* Abraham. Though Abraham had strayed from God's will in conceiving Ishmael through Hagar, God graciously accommodated Himself to meet Abraham's desires. Ishmael was promised blessing, posterity, authority, and independence. But he was to remain outside the covenant.

Yet we must clearly see that there is no suggestion that this was due to the fact that Ishmael had disqualified himself through sin. That is, he was not outside the covenant because of anything he had done, but simply because God had elected another to be the chosen seed. That honor was reserved for Isaac. As God reminded Abraham, "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year" (v. 21). God was specific. Sarah, not Hagar, would soon conceive the promised child. Ishmael was not to be the promised heir. The conditional 'but' marks the division. Ishmael would be blessed, but Isaac was the chosen seed. God's covenant would be with him. This is yet another passage in Scripture that clearly teaches that God's sovereign choices are unconditional. Ishmael had no more disqualified himself, than Isaac had earned God's favor before he was born.

"When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham" (v. 22). The conversation had, for the moment ended. God had appeared to Abraham, and now God had departed. Abraham was left to ponder what he had seen.

The Obedience of Abraham

As we have seen before, after having received a vision of God, Abraham immediately obeyed.

“²³Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. ²⁴Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁵And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. ²⁶In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. ²⁷All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him” (v. 23-27).

Abraham completed the rite of circumcision “in the very same day” (v. 23, 26). Faith is never simply mental acknowledgement of a fact. It requires action. And Abraham acted. And he acted immediately. The passage here reads matter-of-factly. Abraham obediently entered into the covenant.

Though outside the covenant, notice that Ishmael was also circumcised. This reinforces the idea that Abraham was to be a father of many nations. Circumcision was not significant as a sign of separation from other peoples, but as a sign of covenant relationship with God. The relationship, not the sign, was important.

Takeaways

First, let us see that though modern evangelical Christians do not have many rituals and rites that embellish their faith, to the ancient Israelites they were the cornerstones of their relationship with God. Yet they, like us must never mistake the symbols of our faith for the faith itself. Though we are not required to keep the Law of Moses, and though we are not saved by our works, we can never forget that as believers we are still commanded to obey.

Second, let us observe, reflect on, and rejoice in the sovereign choices of an almighty God. God chose Abraham and Sarah. God chose Isaac. God’s plan of salvation, through the centuries, has unfolded as He has proposed from before the creation of the universe. And because God has chosen, our appropriate response is only to obey. We are not to earn our salvation, but thankfully respond in obedience to the One Who has chosen us.