

The Covenant with Abraham: All Nations Will Be Blessed

Scripture Readings: Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-14; Galatians 3:16, 26-29

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Dear Congregation of Christ: The Christian and Islamic religions have one thing in common: both recognize Abraham as their father or patriarch. But the similarity ends there. Christianity believes in salvation by faith alone in Christ alone; Islam believes in salvation by works. Christianity believes that Jesus is the Son of God; Islam believes that Jesus is a mere man. Christianity believes that Jesus is the greatest Prophet; Islam affirms that Allah is the greatest prophet. Christianity believes in the Trinitarian God; Islam believes in one God in one Person. Lastly, Christianity—and the Jewish religion—recognize that Isaac is Abraham’s covenant son from whom Jews descended, while Islam teaches that Ishmael, Abraham’s son by his servant Hagar, is the covenant son from whom Arabs descended.

We continue this morning our study of God’s covenants with man. We began with God’s covenant of works with Adam in which God commanded him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam disobeyed this one commandment, plunging the whole human race into sin because he is the covenant head of all mankind. Then, we studied God’s two-part covenant with Noah, a covenant of grace. The first part is called *special grace*, because God chose to save Noah and his family in an ark from the great flood that God sent to destroy the wicked human race. The second part is called *common grace*, because God promised Noah that he would uphold his whole creation—including all mankind—until he purges it again by fire when Christ returns from heaven on Judgment Day. The rainbow is the sign of this covenant of common grace.

Within these two covenants, we find snippets of God’s plan of salvation for his chosen people in our Lord Jesus Christ. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God slaughtered an animal to clothe their nakedness. Then, he cursed Satan the ancient serpent, saying that the Seed of the woman would crush his head even after the serpent wounds his heel. This Seed is Christ who was “wounded” on the cross as the bloody once for all Sacrifice for the sins of his people, but who rose from the grave and now lives forever. The ark that saved Noah’s family from the flood is the covenant sign, a picture of Christ saving his people from their sins. And the rainbow in the clouds is also covenant sign of God’s common grace to all mankind.

Continuing this study, we come today to God’s covenant with Abraham. Again, we read snippets of this covenant in three main portions in Genesis: Chapters 12, 15 and 17. In Chapter 12, God reveals his covenant of grace to Abram, a pagan man in a pagan land, who responded in faith. In Chapter 15, the LORD makes an oath to Abram that he himself would die if he broke his covenant promises. And in Chapter 17, God reveals his covenant provisions and the covenant sign to Abraham.

So, our theme today is, **"The Covenant with Abraham: 'All Nations Will Be Blessed,'"** under three headings.

"The Father of a Multitude of Nations"

In Genesis 12, God called a man named Abram who lived in a place called Ur of the Chaldeans, which is Babylon. In three verses we read of God's fourfold promises to him. First, Abram's descendants will become a great nation. Second, his name will be great not only among his own people, but also in all the nations. Third, all people will be blessed or cursed based on their treatment of Abraham's descendants. And fourth, all the nations and families of the earth will be blessed through him.

God fulfilled the first three promises in the Old Testament, but not completely. All four of his promises are now continuing to be fulfilled after Christ's death and resurrection. The first promise of a great nation was fulfilled in his descendants, the Hebrews. His covenant son Isaac bore another covenant son, Jacob, who took his whole household of seventy people from Canaan to Egypt during a great famine. After 400 years in Egypt, Jacob's descendants multiplied into a multitude of 600,000 men and their families. This multitude escaped Egypt and regained the Promised Land of Canaan. Second, Abraham is recognized today as the father of all Jews and even of all Christians (we will discuss this later). In the Old Testament, the third promise was fulfilled by God when he destroyed all the nations that invaded and attacked the Israelites, beginning with Egypt, then the Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians and Greeks. In the New Testament, God punished the Romans, and in the end, God will destroy all nations who hate, persecute and martyr his chosen people. However, the fourth promise is also being fulfilled with the preaching of the gospel of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, and thereby making disciples of Christ in all nations. God is always true to his word.

In Genesis 15, Abram was old, but the covenant son that God promised has not yet arrived. So, God again revealed himself to Abram with another assurance that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. And Abraham *"believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness"* (verse 6). In verse 17, we read these strange words, *"When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces."* Those pieces were animals whom God commanded Abram to slaughter, cut into halves, and laid in two rows. During the night, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between those pieces. This was God himself passing through the bloody, slaughtered animals, a confirmation of God's vow that he himself will be cursed and die if he did not fulfill his promises to Abraham.

Finally, in Genesis 17, when Abraham was 99 years old, God again appeared to Abram and repeated his covenant promise of a multitude of children.

"You and Your Offspring After You"

Because he would be the father of a multitude of nations, God renamed *Abram* as *Abraham*. Abram means "exalted father," while Abraham means "father of a multitude." Not only will he

have many descendants; he will also be *"the father of a multitude of nations."* The genealogies of Genesis tell us that the Midianites, Ishmaelites, Edomites and Israelites, and all their descendants who formed many other nations, were all descendants of Abraham. Again, God fulfilled this promise in the Old Testament, and will be fulfilling this promise until the end of the world.

There are two additional information that God revealed to Abraham in Genesis 17. First, he promised, *"to be God to you and to your offspring after you... and I will be their God."* Throughout their history, the Hebrews—later called Jews—worshiped God, although later, they also worshiped other gods. Still, God protected and provided for them until God's patience ran out and allowed the Babylonians to conquer them and make them slaves in exile. Afterwards, God again restored them to Canaan. This is a partial fulfillment of the other promise God revealed to Abraham, *"And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession"* (verse 8). Our Lord Jesus Christ therefore was born in the Promised Land.

Another new aspect in Genesis 17 that is not found in Chapters 12 and 15 is the sign of the covenant. God says to Abraham, *"This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised... and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you"* (verse 10). As we have learned earlier, all of God's covenants with man had a sign. With Adam, the sign was the Tree of Life. With Noah, it was the ark and the rainbow. And the signs are for the covenant heads—Adam, Noah and Abraham—and for their covenant children. Notice that the covenant sign of circumcision is for Abraham and for all his children and all his household. And the penalty is severe for both father and son: to be *"cut off from his people"* (verse 14; see also Exodus 4:24-26), which means an accursed death.

This covenant sign has been a bone of contention between Presbyterians and Baptists since the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Sadly, this contention—which is about infant baptism—will never be resolved until we are all in glory. We who are Presbyterians believe that there is continuity between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism. And if there is continuity, water baptism should be administered to infants, since God commanded Israelites to circumcise their children when they were eight days old.

Paul makes this connection clear in Colossians 2:11–12, *"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."* Here, Paul refers to circumcision and baptism both actually and figuratively. Circumcision signifies the cutting off of our sins, while water baptism is a sign and seal of the washing away of sins. Paul also refers to the figurative circumcision of Christ who was "cut off" from his people when he was crucified on the cross, as Isaiah 53:8 says, *"he was cut off out of the land of the living."*

This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith (included in our Psalter Hymnal) 28:4-5 teaches that not only professing adults but also infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized. That also, it is "a great sin to contemn [criticize] or neglect this ordinance." It refers back to the penalty of cutting off from the people—death—those who neglect the sign of circumcision.

There are countless other arguments about infant baptism, that it would take me two or three sermons to explain them all—which will still be woefully insufficient—so let us go to our last point.

“Abraham Believed God, and It Was Counted to Him as Righteousness”

Genesis 15:6 is quoted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:3 as he was explaining salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, and not by works. He says that if Abraham was saved by his good works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. If he was saved by his good works, then he would never be saved because all mankind is sinful, excepting our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul says, *“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”*

But if not by good works, how can anyone be justified? Paul says that it is by faith alone in Christ alone that anyone is saved (Eph 2:8-9). This is the true gospel that is still being preached to all nations. Through this preaching, heaven will have *“a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”* worshipping God (Rev 7:9). Paul explains this in Galatians 3. All who have faith in Christ and have received water baptism in Christ are united to Christ, and are children of God (verses 26-27). Then he says that all believers are one in Christ, meaning, that all believers stand before God without any distinction as to Jew or non-Jew, servant or master, and male or female (verse 28). There is no racism in Christianity. Lastly, in Galatians 3:29, Paul makes a connection between Abraham’s descendants and believers in Christ, *“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”* All true Christians, Jews or non-Jews, are Abraham’s covenant children who are heirs of God’s promises to Abraham.

Therefore, the complete fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham of a multitude of children is the salvation of a multitude of true Christians in all nations. Paul also explains how this is being fulfilled earlier in Galatians 3:16, *“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”* Abraham’s one “Offspring” is Christ, who fulfilled all the laws of God all the way to his death on the cross. And by his sacrifice, Abraham’s “offsprings”—not only Jews, but also non-Jews—are being saved.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, a final promise to Abraham that is still being fulfilled is the “land of your sojournings, the land of Canaan.” God fulfilled this promise to the Israelites when Joshua led them into their rest in the Promised Land.

However, this too is still not fully fulfilled. As Hebrews 4:8-11 explains, Joshua did not fulfill this perfect rest that God promised. Therefore, there still remains a rest that awaits Abraham’s children. He exhorts us to rest from our good works so we may enter that eternal Sabbath rest in our heavenly dwelling-place. It will not be a temporary, earthly land of our sojournings, but an eternal new heaven and new earth. On that day and in that place, God will be our God and we will be his people, all of us dwelling together with God forever.