

Genesis, Part 17

Last session we saw God establish a Covenant of Circumcision within the Abrahamic Covenant. God will be working through a specific group of people that initially will be Abraham's family and immediate descendants along with the members of his now considerable household and herdsmen. All current males are to be circumcised immediately and all male babies will be circumcised on the eighth day after birth.

This is a sign of the larger Abrahamic Covenant, a physical reminder. It speaks of a special people and their special relationship with God. Circumcision is a sign of the relationship God will have with those who are under this special covenanted relationship.

It should be understood that the Abrahamic Covenant can be seen as having two parts: One part that is temporal and in time and one part that is heavenly and eternal. Some of the features of the covenant will be partially fulfilled in the course of human history. That would include the establishment of Israel as a nation as the seed of Abraham. Such fulfillment will require obedience on the part of the covenanted people based on a faith relationship with God. Technically, this isn't new but is only being more clearly stated here. All along Abraham has been under this faith/obedience requirement. God did not speak to him whenever he strayed from faith and obedience to the leading of God, such as when he lingered before entering the land, or when he feared the famine in the land and went down to Egypt for safety, lying to Pharaoh about Sarai, or when he and his wife devised the plan for him to have a child through her handmaiden. The fellowship with God was broken by Abraham's lack of faith and his disobedience. The covenant then shifted into neutral until Abraham returned to this required condition of faith and obedience. At no time was the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises ever in doubt since that depended entirely on God.

While the near fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would have many progenies speaks specifically of the future nation Israel to come from the 12 great-grandsons of Abraham, there is also the sense that the "seed of Abraham" will include born-again Gentiles (the Church). While the circumcision of the *flesh* is a sign to Abraham's physical seed (Israel), the circumcision of the *heart* is a sign for the "spiritual seed of Abraham" that

came after the Cross. Please understand that the *spiritual seed* is made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers.

God will place Abraham's physical seed in the land and give it to them. Unfortunately, like their patriarch, they will often slip into disobedience and get expelled for a period of chastisement. Abraham's spiritual seed will one day enter the land and not ever be moved from it again. This will be seen occurring in time as the Kingdom Age (Millennium) when Jesus will reign as Messiah here on earth. It will also be seen in eternity after the Kingdom when all believers are taken into the glorious eternal state forever. In that sense, the covenant is an everlasting covenant and fulfillment depends entirely on the will of God.

The sign of the covenant, circumcision, is a reminder of what God has promised for Abraham and his seed, specifically to his spiritual seed – born-again believers. Furthermore, the physical cutting away of the foreskin is symbolic of the “cutting away” of man's fleshly nature. It is a picture of and looks forward to the “circumcision of the heart” at redemption. This circumcision of the heart is an absolute requirement for entrance into the earthly Kingdom Age (Millennium) and the eternal Kingdom in Heaven.

So, the circumcision of the flesh is a sign for those under the Abrahamic Covenant. It is a physical reminder of their relationship with God. Furthermore, it looks forward to the circumcision of the heart, the sign of the relationship born-again believers have with God. The circumcision of the flesh speaks of temporal relationships with earthly blessings, while the circumcision of the heart speaks of spiritual and eternal relationships with heavenly blessings.

Abraham Gets a Visit

Genesis 18:1 Then the Lord appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. ² So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, ³ and said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. ⁴ Please let a little

water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that, you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant.”

They said, “Do as you have said.”

⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead *it* and make cakes.” ⁷ And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave *it* to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. ⁸ So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set *it* before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

The heat of the day when it is too hot to do any physical labor is the period of rest in the Near East. For guests to arrive at that time of day was unusual. Abraham was sitting in the shade of his tent door enjoying what air might be stirring, when he lifted up his eyes and saw three men standing nearby. At least, to all outward appearances they were merely men. Two of the strangers were created angels (19:1). The third was the same divine personage who appeared to Hagar at Beer-lahai-roi, the Angel of the Lord. While the first verse of the chapter alerts the reader to this identification, the subsequent narrative confirms it. Verses 17–22 make it clear that the Lord Jesus Christ was the third heavenly visitor. They came to confirm the time of the fulfillment of the promise.

In the exaggerated hospitality so characteristic of the region, Abraham ran to meet his guests and bowed himself to the ground before them. This action was a gesture of respect for distinguished visitors. Abraham addressed the leader of the three with great respect (“my lord”) and referred to himself deferentially (“your servant”). He promptly extended an invitation to his guests to stay with him and refresh themselves. This invitation was humbly offered (“if I have now found favor in your sight”) and modestly described (“a little water ... a morsel of bread”). Such language is designed to relieve the guests of any anxiety that they might have about being burdensome to their host. Washing the hot and dusty feet of travelers was the first act of hospitality performed for guests in the Patriarchal period. The three visitors promptly accepted the gracious offer (18:2–5).

Though one is justified in seeing lessons here about hospitality, the three certainly did not visit Abraham to teach him this. Why did the Angel of the Lord approach Abraham in this manner? Why did He not use an oracle, a vision, or a voice? Possibly He meant it as a test for both Abraham and the Sodomites. With hospitality toward strangers such an important aspect of the Near East culture at this time, the moral states of Abraham and Sodom may have been indicated by their different treatment of strangers. Abraham's peaceful, quiet visit contrasted greatly with Sodom's outbursts of brutality and inhumanity we will see later.

But more likely Abraham's visitors meant to convey intimate fellowship. To eat together was important for fellowship, peace offerings, and treaties. When the Lord was ready to specify the fulfillment of the covenantal promise, He came in person and with Abraham. Nothing could more significantly communicate their close relationship.

Gen 18:9 Then they said to him, "Where *is* Sarah your wife?"

So he said, "Here, in the tent."

¹⁰ And He said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son."

(Sarah was listening in the tent door which *was* behind him.) ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; *and* Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. ¹² Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

¹³ And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear *a child*, since I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son."

¹⁵ But Sarah denied *it*, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.

And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

Following the meal, the guests inquired concerning Sarah's whereabouts. The question must have surprised Abraham, for in that culture a gentleman never inquired about the wife of another gentleman. Even more surprising was the fact that these strangers knew the name of Abraham's wife, and

her new name at that! The question was asked to arouse Sarah's interest in the conversation. Her faith needed to be raised (18:10).

Assured that Sarah was listening, the leader of the three made an emphatic announcement that clearly revealed his identity to Abraham. He announced that Sarah would have a son and this son would be born one year hence (18:10). The Lord did return to them a year later.

Sarah received the announcement with skepticism. The patriarch and his wife were old and their capacity for procreation and conception was extinct. Sarah laughed within herself. She was too old, literally something that is worn out by age to enjoy any sexual pleasure with her mate (18:11–12). Even in her moment of spiritual weakness, the Lord found something praiseworthy in her! Sarah's respectful reference to her husband as "my lord" in this passage is commended by the Apostle Peter.

1 Pet. 3:5 For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

With two questions addressed to Abraham, the visitor solemnly confirmed the astonishing proclamation just made. The first question called attention to the skepticism of Sarah.

Gen 18:13 And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear *a child*, since I am old?'

Gen 18:15 But Sarah denied *it*, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid.

Sarah was afraid. She quickly lied to cover up her lack of faith. The visitor, however, would not accept her denial. "No, but you *did* laugh!"

The second question directed attention to the unlimited power of God. "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" Later in Bible history, that same question would be asked again by the Lord to a doubting prophet.

Jer 32:27 “Behold, I *am* the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?”

As unbelievable as this proclamation seemed to Sarah, the heavenly visitor would indeed return to her, and she would bear a son!

Abraham Intercedes for Sodom

Gen 18:16 Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way. ¹⁷ And the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, ¹⁸ since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.” ²⁰ And the Lord said, “Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, ²¹ I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”

This is the Lord’s soliloquy about His judgment on the cities of the plain, with the major city being Sodom. The guests arose and “looked toward Sodom,” i.e., they began to walk in that direction. Following oriental custom, Abraham accompanied them as they departed on their journey. At this point in the narrative, one of the three guests is plainly identified as Yahweh. Speaking to his two companions, Yahweh indicated three reasons why He should share with Abraham what He was about to do.

1. Abraham would become a great nation. He would be in a position to transmit to this nation the warning concerning God’s wrath against immorality.
2. All nations of the earth would be blessed in Abraham, i.e., his influence would spread beyond the bounds of his own biological descendants.
3. God had *known* Abraham, i.e., chosen him for a special mission.

As God's chosen vessel, Abraham was to be a spiritual teacher inculcating in his children: the way of the Lord, righteousness, and justice.

Here is a specific stipulation that a righteous life among Abraham's descendants was to be a condition for maintaining the faith relationship that was at the heart of the covenant promises that God had made to the patriarch (18:17–19).

Addressing Abraham, Yahweh announced his plan. He was about to make a judicial investigation of Sodom and Gomorrah. That is the meaning of the expression "I will go down and see." God already knew what He would find there. The wickedness of the place virtually cried out for God's wrath (cf. Gen 4:10). God, however, frequently condescended to social conventions so as to leave His absolute justice beyond question. Thus before pouring out His wrath on the cities of the plain, the supreme Judge dispatched His two representatives to investigate the situation (18:20–22; 19:1).

Gen 18:22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the Lord. ²³ And Abraham came near and said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare *it* for the fifty righteous that were in it? ²⁵ Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ So the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." ²⁷ Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who *am but* dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: ²⁸ Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for *lack of five*?" So He said, "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy *it*." ²⁹ And he spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose there should be forty found there?" So He said, "I will not do *it* for the sake of forty."

³⁰ Then he said, “Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?”

So He said, “I will not do *it* if I find thirty there.”

³¹ And he said, “Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?”

So He said, “I will not destroy *it* for the sake of twenty.”

³² Then he said, “Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?”

And He said, “I will not destroy *it* for the sake of ten.” ³³ So the Lord went His way as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

Yahweh’s remarks regarding Sodom jarred Abraham. He knew that an outpouring of divine wrath was inevitable. Would God sweep away the righteous with the unrighteous? Abraham was convinced there were righteous people in Sodom so he appealed for Sodom on the basis of God’s justice. Thoughts of his nephew living in that doomed city probably also spurred Abraham to one of the most dramatic intercessory prayers recorded in the Bible.

Five observations regarding this prayer are seen:

1. The prayer grew out of holy boldness, for Abraham *drew near* to the Lord.
2. The prayer is undergirded with the conviction that the Judge of all the earth would certainly do what was right (18:25).
3. The prayer is based on the premise that God would not slay the righteous with the wicked (18:23, 25).
4. The prayer demonstrates fervent persistence. Six times Abraham posed a hypothetical situation to God. Starting with fifty righteous persons, he systematically reduced the number to ten. If there be this number of righteous people in the city would God destroy those righteous souls along with the wicked in the city?
5. The prayer is a model of reverent humility, and the more so as the prayer moves through its successive stages. At one point, Abraham referred to himself as “dust and ashes” (18:27). The patriarch began

the last stage of his prayer by begging, “Let not the Lord be angry and I will speak but once more” (18:32).

Abraham’s great character is revealed by his intercession. He prayed that all in the cities—the wicked as well as the righteous—be spared for the sake of the righteous (v. 23). Earlier he had personally rescued these people in battle (14:16). Now he pleaded for them with the same boldness, perseverance, and generosity with which he had fought for them.

Abraham’s “bargaining” with God might jar some readers. But Abraham’s prayers, though audacious, were made with genuine humility and profound reverence. It was for justice that he pleaded for deliverance for Sodom if there were as few as 50.... 45.... 40.... 30.... 20, or even 10 righteous people there (18:24–32). He was *not* trying to talk God into something against His will.

Thus the theme of justice predominates: those who will enjoy God’s blessing:

1. will teach justice (18:19);
2. may intercede for just judgment to preserve the righteous; and
3. know that God may preserve the wicked for the sake of the righteous.

Certainly, Israel could learn from this:

1. that God is a righteous Judge
2. that righteousness exalts a nation (cf. Prov. 14:34)
3. that righteous people help preserve society (cf. Matt. 5:13).

Abraham’s intercession was successful. He got all for which he asked. Abraham quit asking before God stopped giving. So why did not Abraham go below ten in his importunity? Perhaps because to do so would have degraded the noble intercession to a narrow plea for his relatives. On the other hand, perhaps Abraham himself could not believe that there could be less than ten righteous souls in Sodom.

Sins of Ignorance

From a sermon by Charles Spurgeon.

Lev 5:17 “If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord, though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.

This text clearly states that men might commit forbidden sins without knowing it. Furthermore, the text not only acknowledges the possibility of sinning unknowingly but the following verses 18-19 provide for dealing with it under the context of the Law.

Lev 4:27 If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally by doing something against any of the commandments of the Lord in anything which ought not to be done, and is guilty, 28 or if his sin which he has committed comes to his knowledge, then he shall bring as his offering a kid of the goats, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed.

“Unintentionally” can also be translated as inadvertence. Inadvertence is an act of ignorance. We often do wrong for lack of forethought, not considering the results of our actions, or even thinking at all, resulting in hasty and careless blunders. All of us do this probably every day of our lives. There is no intention to do wrong, and yet wrong is done. Evil is done by lack of thought as well as by lack of heart.

Sins of ignorance, then, are really sins needing atonement because they involve us in guilt. Yet we should clearly understand that they greatly differ in degree of guilt from known and willful sins. Our Lord teaches us this in the gospels.

Luke 12:47 And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand more

He who did not know his Lord's will was less punished than the intentional offender, but still he was beaten, and beaten with stripes, of which a few will be far more than you and I may wish to bear. Even a few stripes from the hand of justice will be enough to afflict us grievously. Sins caused by ignorance are punished, "My people are gone into captivity because they have no knowledge," (Isa 5:13) and again in Hosea, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos 4:6).

Any breach of God's moral code cannot be excused because of ignorance, since the willful ignorance of the Lord's will is in itself a sin, and the sin which comes from it is grievous in the sight of the Lord our God.

The law is declared to be the supreme authority over men, not conscience. Conscience is usually based on a learned set of norms and standards, and not all are Scriptural. These norms and standards can differ dramatically from person to person, therefore the ultimate appeal concerning right and wrong cannot be to your half-blinded conscience or to mine. The ultimate appeal will be to "Thus says the Lord," which is the only perfect standard by which the deeds and actions of men can be measured.

One man says, "You may do that," and a second claims that he may do the other, but the law does not change according to man's judgment and does not bend itself to the spirit of the age or the taste of the times. It is the supreme judge, from whose infallible decision there is no appeal. Right is right even though all may condemn it, and wrong is wrong even though all of society might approve of it. The law is a fixed quantity, a settled standard, and if we fall short of it, though we do not know it, still we are guilty,

The divine law overrides custom, tradition, and opinion: these have no more effect upon the eternal standard than the fall of a leaf. "If a man does any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord; though he did not know it, he is still guilty." All the customs in the world cannot make wrong right, and if everyone who ever lived from Adam down to this hour had done a wrong thing and declared it to be

righteous, it would make no moral difference in the evil deed. A thousand ages of whitewashing cannot make a vice a virtue.

Think of the sins you may have committed; sins of thoughts which have too rapidly flitted through your mind for you to even remember them; thoughts which pass through your mind as mere imaginations, like clouds floating in the sky that cast a flying shadow over the landscape and are gone. Think of your evil thoughts, your pleasure in hearing of uncleanness, your desires, wishes, and excuses of evil; these are all iniquities. Then, too, our words, hurried words of anger, of falsehood, of petulance, and pride, our idle words, our murmuring words, our unbelieving words, our irreverent words: words scarcely meant, which fell from our minds and our lips without thought. What a multitude of these may be laid to our door? And all these are full of sin! And what of the actions in which we have excused ourselves, because we have never looked at them in God's light, but have been content to regard them in the dim illumination of custom; do not many of these acts contain sin?

When I think of all these forms of evil I am compelled to fear that much of our life may have been a continuous sin, and yet we may have never condemned ourselves, or even thought about it!

Remember that great command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." How far short of that you and I have come! Mentally we have not served God to perfection, neither have we loved him with all possible intensity, nor has the soul with its desires gone after him so eagerly as it should. Truly, we are guilty, guilty much more than we have ever imagined.

And as for that second command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"; who among us has done so? Have we loved our fellow man with a love that even came close to our love for ourselves? Oh God, in the white light of that one word "love," we stand convicted, and we perceive that our ignorance affords no covering for us!

No, God does not suspend his law because men did not intentionally violate it. No; the law is stern and does not change, and he who offends in ignorance pays the penalty. It is not possible that ignorance should be a

justification for sin, for if it did so, it would follow that the more ignorant a man was the more innocent he would be. And that old saying that "ignorance is bliss" would certainly be true, for perfect ignorance would be under no responsibilities and free from all sin.

If the guilt of an action depended entirely upon a man's knowledge, we would have no fixed standard at all by which to judge right and wrong. It would be variable according to the enlightenment of each man, and there would be no ultimate and infallible court of appeal.

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus Interceded for transgressors, but if there is no sin when a man does not know what he does, why did our Lord pray for pardon for ignorant transgressors? Why ask forgiveness, if there is no wrong?

The Spirit will "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8), but if not convicted of sin, they are innocent of it, so why convict them of it? Who is he who shall so blaspheme the Holy Spirit as to say that His work is needless and even idle? Sins of ignorance, therefore, must be sinful.

It is said that one sin often leads to another and then another. R. B. Theime called this "chain sinning," from one sin to another the man descends, and, as he descends, his mental and moral eyes grow dim, and he perceives less and less the sinfulness of sin.

God's way of delivering those who sinned ignorantly was not by denying their sin and passing it over, but by accepting an atonement for it. "The priest shall make an atonement concerning his sin in which he has erred, and did not know it, and it shall be forgiven him." The forgiveness was to come through atonement.

You are bound to confess your sins to God; but if pardon were offered to you upon the condition that you should mention every sin you have committed, not one of you would ever be delivered from sin. We do not know, and if we ever did know, we cannot remember all our shortcomings and all our transgressions; but the mercy is, though we do not know them, HE does and He can blot them out. Though we cannot weep over them

with a distinct knowledge of them, because they are not known to us, yet Jesus bled for them with a distinct knowledge of them all, and they are all put away by his sufferings.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

“ALL unrighteousness” must certainly capture those sins we committed in ignorance and carelessness.