

An Outward Sign

Genesis 17:9-27

What is covenant theology? Giving a brief and focused answer to that question is actually a very difficult thing to do. I'll try. Covenant theology is a system of doctrine which defines God's relationship with his people as a covenant, a bond in blood, which God himself administers. And, in this system of theology, which you hear from me every time I preach and teach, God's covenant, his plan of salvation, began with Genesis 3:15, right after the fall, when God promised that the seed of the woman would crush the seed of the Serpent. Everything after that, throughout the rest of the OT and all of the NT, is the outworking of what we rightly call the "covenant of grace," by which God saves his elect people through the work of Jesus Christ.

Well, that wasn't so simple was it? Let me try again. Covenant theology is a system of doctrine that defines a great unity between the OT and the NT, it is a system of doctrine that teaches that God's people from all ages, are saved one way. By faith. In the OT age, they were saved by faith in the Messiah who was to come. In the NT age, they are saved by faith in the Messiah who has already come. The Covenant, God's covenant with his people, is the theme that structures and unifies the whole of the Bible.

But there is another aspect of covenant theology that I haven't yet mentioned, and it is emphasized here in our text this morning. This aspect of covenant theology is of obvious practical importance to every one of you who has children, or grandchildren. Or great-grandchildren. Or whoever will have children. I am referring to the truth that when God makes a covenant promise with his people, he makes it with you and with your children after you. The clearest NT statement of that, found

in,

Acts 2:37 "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.'"

The promise of salvation, the promise of the covenant, is for you and your children and for all who are far off. That's why we call our young children, covenant children! That's why we call them non-communicant MEMBERS of the church. Because through us as parents, God makes a promise to our children. To review from last week, let me read again,

Gen.17:7 "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you."

That covenant promise given to our children is visibly demonstrated by what we read in our text today. The subject is circumcision. Circumcision is the outward sign of the covenant. And that sign was so significant, and so worthy of emphasis, that I can properly say that,

I. THE INWARD REALITY OF THE COVENANT WAS DEFINED BY AN OUTWARD SIGN.

The sign actually defined the covenant. The sign, Moses writes, actually was the covenant.

v.10-11

Signs are such wonderful things, for they are able to give us a

picture of things that we might not fully understand. Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words. I have never worn any jewelry my whole life, just a watch, but since the day I was married, I feel undressed without my wedding ring on. I almost never take it off. It's such a useful reminder, a constant reminder, of the reality of a covenant relationship.

And this table, what a wonderful sign this is, too. For we have things that we can touch and taste, see and feel. What a useful reminder, to realize that Jesus' body was given for us, just as that bread is broken and we eat from it. And his blood was shed for us, the blood of the new covenant which, through the sacrament, we can actually drink.

Such useful and practical things are signs, for they have the ability to define inward realities with simple and easy to understand outward forms. In this case, regarding the sign of circumcision, we see that,

A. The outward sign represents all of the responsibilities of the covenant.

The outward sign represents all that God had commanded his people to do, the obedience to which they were called. We read,
v.9

To keep the covenant meant to obey its stipulations. With a focal point on the one primary sign of that covenant...
v.10

There it is, to keep the covenant is to be circumcised. Again, surely there were more things God required, but all those requirements are summed up with this one requirement--be circumcised. Then God is very specific,
v.12-13

And then the warning is given,
v.14

To break the covenant is to disobey. Simple to understand, isn't it. We see in this passage the obedience of Abraham and his family. They did exactly what God commanded.
v.22-27

So, the outward sign is a sign of obedience. It represents everything that God requires of his covenant people, just like this wedding ring symbolizes everything which I promised to my wife the day we were married, everything which she promised to me. The point is that the outward sign represents all the responsibilities of the covenant.

But this sign of circumcision has even deeper symbolism. For this sign was applied to the male organ, and the sign was a removal of the foreskin. The sign was an actual cutting away of that skin, signifying something very important. Cleansing.

B. The outward sign represents the need for cleansing.
Again, some of these verses.
v.11

This covenant would be a covenant "in the flesh." That is, the flesh must be cut away, particularly in reference to the sinful flesh of wicked man. The flesh, representing all that is sinful and dirty about fallen man, must be cut off. Put to death. So the symbol is appropriate. It is a symbol in the flesh. Its a literal cutting away in the flesh. The covenant was in the flesh.
v.13-14

The cutting away of what is sinful has the same meaning as cleansing, washing. Let me explain how this physical sign of

circumcision is a sign of our need for cleansing. Briefly, I'll give you three cross references. First, the promise of the gospel found in,

Ezek. 36:24 "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. 25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. 28 Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. 29 I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses."

Ezekiel declares that our greatest need is the need to be cleansed. Cleansed from impurities. And in the second cross reference, that cleansing is clearly identified as circumcision.

Deut.30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

And, Deut.10:16 "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer."

Circumcision represents cleansing. The outward sign, in the flesh, represents our need for cleansing in the heart. And,

C. The outward sign represents God's provision for cleansing.

I should say that circumcision is still commonly performed today, but not for religious reasons except for Jews. It's usually done today for hygienic reasons, for it has still not lost its connection with the idea of cleansing. But as a religious symbol,

the cleansing is internal, and only the Lord can accomplish that. Again,

Deut.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 with all your soul, and live."

And, Ezek.36: I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

And in the gospel, God actually provides the only possible way for cleansing to take place. Blood. Only blood, only the blood of the covenant, could atone for sin. Thus the old covenant sign of circumcision was, itself, a bloody sign. And that blood of the old covenant looked forward to the blood of the new covenant, which is the blood of Christ. And so God's provision for cleansing of sin is the blood of Jesus Christ!

1 John 1:7 "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

We see this cleansing work of Jesus so clearly connected with the sign of circumcision in,

Col. 2:9 "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; 10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. 11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through

faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

In him, in Jesus, you were circumcised. But Paul is not talking about the literal, outward, physical act. Rather he’s talking about the symbolic meaning of circumcision, not what is done by human hands. And you were circumcised in Christ, Paul writes, when you were baptized!

Paul then continues with the language of the gospel,

Col. 2:13 “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, 14 having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

The point of Paul’s thought in those verses is that baptism has the exact same significance as circumcision, the cleansing of sin and the cutting away of our sinful nature. And true circumcision is not physical, but spiritual, that which Christ does in cleansing our hearts.

I hope all of that makes sense for you. The point is that the inward realities of the covenant are defined by an outward sign.

But there has to be a warning given, given to us as it was to the Israelites. The outward sign, by itself, was not enough. Outward forms of religion, when separated from inward reality, are useless. Paul couldn’t have stated it any clearer to the Jews, when he wrote in,

Rom. 2:25 “For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his

uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? 27 And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? 28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

We could say the same of baptism. Baptism does save a man, nor does the outward sign wash away sin. The inward realities must be present, and unfortunately, sadly, many people who do receive the outward sign actually fall away. They actually reject God and show themselves to be covenant breakers. The outward sign of the covenant doesn’t save a man, it just points to the salvation which God works in a man’s heart.

And it does something else.

II. THE OUTWARD SIGN OF THE COVENANT DEFINES THE NATURE OF GOD’S PROMISE TO SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS.

This outward sign of the covenant was to be given to succeeding generations! It was to be administered to 8-day old infants, long before they had any objective or intellectual understanding of what was happening to them. Look at the command,

v.12-13

Clearly, God commands that the sign of the covenant be given not only to his people, but also to their whole household, including infant children. As we studied last week, God’s covenant extends to succeeding generations. The promise is for us and for our children. And so is the sign!

It is often said by those objecting to the practice of infant baptism that God nowhere commands his people to baptize their infants. And I immediately say, “Yes he does.” Right here. In the Old Covenant, the sign of the covenant was commanded to be given to children. And in the New Covenant, though the actual sign has been changed from circumcision to baptism, that command is not repealed. The command still stands. We baptize our infant children because of this command given in Genesis 17, and if we fail to baptize our infant children, we are disobeying this command.

God’s covenant is with you and with your succeeding generations. Each succeeding generation needs the cleansing symbolized by this sign, for the sign of circumcision shows that,

A. Each succeeding generation inherits a sinful nature.

There is, I believe, significance to the fact that the OT sign was a cutting away of the reproductive organ, for it showed that a sinful nature is inherited. Sin is passed on from parents to their children.

Now, you don’t need to be overly literal here, as if the act of begetting a child carries in the physical elements the sin nature. The sin isn’t in the fluid. That’s crass, and improper. But the symbolism is valuable. Though a child is born with the genetic contribution of his father and mother, combining 23 chromosomes from each to form a unique creature in God’s image, in addition to that genetic, physical inheritance, there is also a moral inheritance. And unfortunately, for every one of us, that is a bad inheritance.

The sign of circumcision shows that each succeeding generation inherits a sinful nature. But, by God’s glorious grace,

B. Each succeeding generation is promised the provision of cleansing.

Again,
v.11-13

It will be an everlasting covenant. And those who miss the emphasis of this covenant promise from one generation to another are missing something terribly important, something that I take great comfort and hope. The promise of salvation is for us and for our children. The promise of cleansing is for us and for our children. This outward sign unmistakably defines that for us.

And it does one more thing. This outward sign has one more function.

III. THE OUTWARD SIGN OF THE COVENANT DISTINGUISHES GOD’S COVENANT PEOPLE FROM THOSE WHO ARE NOT.

Look at,
v.14

One who was not circumcised was cut off from his people. One who refused circumcision has broken God’s covenant. So it is, the sign distinguishes between the only two groups of people who exist among all mankind. Those who are God’s and those who are not. And what is stated so plainly here is that,

A. God rejects those who are not his covenant people.

v.14

Liberals really hate this idea. They really hate it. God wouldn’t reject anyone, they teach. He wouldn’t cut off anyone. He wouldn’t condemn anyone. But Scripture says that he does! He rejects those who are not his covenant people.

Now, I should say that as an invitation, an invitation to come to Christ and be saved. An invitation to come to Christ in faith and be baptized, along with your family. The call of the gospel not a declaration of condemnation, but a call to repentance. Turn from your sins and your wicked ways. Turn to God and be saved. And I urge you to do even today.

And I do so with every awareness of the warning of God's eternal judgment. Anyone without Christ, anyone whose heart and soul has not been cleansed by the blood of Christ, anyone without the inward reality of that which is symbolized by the sign of the covenant, WILL BE CUT OFF.

v.14

I warn you, covenant breakers will be cut off. So who can be saved? Those who rightly identify themselves as God's covenant people. Those who trust in Christ. Those who believe in God and believe his word to be true.

But still I would say this to every one of you, just so that you understand the source of your salvation,

B. God establishes his covenant with particular people of his own choice.

Now, in my preaching I often mention God's choice, God's election, and I mention it and stress it because the Bible does. I stress it to give you a greater sense of God's unconditional love, and to free you from any sense of obligation of thinking that someone you have to find yourself worthy of God's saving love.

The whole point is that he saved you in love, despite your unworthiness. And he did so because, in love, he chose to do so.

Eph. 1:4 "...in love, 5 [he] predestined us to adoption as sons

by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved."

And here in Genesis 17, in the middle of this chapter on circumcision, we find again emphasized God's sovereign election in choosing his covenant people. God's covenant people would not come from the line of Eliezer, Abraham's servant. God's covenant people would not come from the line of Ismael, Abraham's son with Hagar the maid-servant. No, according to God's sovereign will, his covenant people would come through the line of Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's own son.

And so finally, after 25 years, the promise is specified and personalized.

v.15-16

The covenant people would come through Sarah's son. Indeed, the blessing to the nations would come through Sarah's son. The kings of God's people would come through Sarah's son. Ultimately, Jesus Christ would come through Sarah's son.

Then we have a moment of genuine humanity, perhaps to the point of disrespectful doubting or possibly just the laughter of unexpected joy. God gives the assurance in unmistakable terms.

v.17-21

"My covenant I will establish with Isaac." And Isaac's name, in Hebrew, means laughter. In the next generation, God's purpose in election stands out even more plainly,

Rom. 9:10 "And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of

works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” 13 As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

Clearly, God establishes his covenant with particular people of his own choice, his own free and sovereign choice. And he gives those people an outward sign to represent their identity as covenant people. The sign of circumcision, replaced in the new covenant by the sign of baptism, is the sign of entrance, and is administered to one person only once.

There is another outward sign, of course, that God has given his people as a sacrament is to be repeated, for it is the sign of fellowship or communion. It is a sign which ultimately anticipates the great wedding supper of the lamb, when we shall feast with Christ for all eternity.

And so this morning, as God’s covenant people, we get a taste of that feast. And through this spiritual feast that lies on this table before us, I proclaim to you the words of Jesus himself,

John 6:35 And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst... 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. 50 This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”...53 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. 56 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. 57 As the living

Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. 58 This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

Covenant people of God, come and eat. Come and drink. And by the covenant promise of God, live forever.