

Old Testament History and Theology (pt.2)

Acts 7:1-8

I hope you weren't too worried last week when I was just finishing up the first point of my sermon after a full half hour of preaching, maybe starting to worry that I was going to preach another hour just to finish my outline. I did note last week that this sermon would come in two parts and that I would finish that sermon today. So it really is one sermon, which is to say, one subject. One focus. And that focus is the covenant which God established with Abraham, a covenant which Stephen describes when he is called to give an answer to those who were opposing him, ready to kill him.

Acts 6:9 "Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."

And then, as chapter 7 begins,

v.1 "Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

Stephen gives an answer, under the threat of death, a threat which was actually carried out, and Stephen answers by talking about the covenant with Abraham which we find in Genesis 12.

So we read in our text,

v.2 "And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you."

The first great promise of that covenant was the promise of land, a great land. It is a land, if you remember, which does not merely refer to a small portion of real estate located in the place we now label as the "Middle East." The promise of land was nothing less than the promise of heaven, the promise of "a city which he himself, the God of glory, would build." And Abraham understood that. We're told so in,

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Yet Abraham himself never possessed that land, he was never a citizen of that great nation.

v.5 "And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on."

Thus, Abraham lived by faith, believing God's promise; and by that faith, he was reckoned to be righteous, justified. And thus Paul declares,

Gal. 3:7 "Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." 9 So

then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”

So this covenant promise to Abraham is nothing less than the promise of the gospel, the gospel preached “to Abraham beforehand.” And that brings us to the second part of the covenant promise to Abraham. That land promised to Abraham would become a great nation. And that means, people!

II. THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM.

Not only would Abraham have a great land, he would have many descendants. But, there was a problem, wasn’t there? Abraham had no children. He and Sarah were unable to have children. So no grandchildren. No descendants to inhabit the land. Yet we read,

v.5b “But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. “

Verse 6, therefore, speaks of descendants.

v.6 “But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land.”

Land and descendants, or seed, as the Bible often translates it. Those were the promises of the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham. Last week, point 1 of this two-part sermon, was the covenant promise of land. Today, point 2, beginning with...

A. The covenant promise of descendants.

That promise is explicit in,

Gen. 15:2 “But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!” 4 And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be

your heir.” 5 Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

Descendants as many as the stars of heaven! Let me go back to,

Heb. 11:11 “By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.”

This faith, the faith of Sarah and the faith of Abraham, this faith is the means by which we are justified. So we read of Abraham,

Rom. 4:18 “...who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” 19 And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. 20 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. 22 And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

The point I am making here is that this promise of descendants is the promise of the gospel. And those descendants are those who believe in Jesus! Not those who are physically and ethnically descended from Abraham. In other words, the recipients of the covenant promise to Abraham are believers, Christians, not Jews! I keep going back to,

Gal. 3:7 “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”

And that chapter ends,

Gal. 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Again, back in Genesis, that great covenant promise of descendants is explained in,

Gen. 17:1 “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: 4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 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. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Why is all of this so important? Why is this matter so crucial to understand? Because the gospel is at stake. Understanding the gospel is at stake, the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham.

And that gospel is revealed to us in the historical unfolding of the circumstances of the life of Abraham.

Remember my introduction last week, the two ways of studying the Bible, the two correct ways! One way is to study the whole Bible in terms of categories, doctrines, subjects of headings—like God, creation, man, sin, salvation, justification, sanctification Christ, the resurrection, and heaven. That is typically called systematic theology, and it is a great way to study the Bible for a complete and consistent understanding, which is why we have an thorough confession of faith, the Westminster Confession, with 33 chapters, 33 headings, covering all that the Bible teaches.

But we also study the Bible, and the doctrines of the Bible, as they unfold in the outworking of history. So here in Acts 7 we are studying the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of justification. And we are doing so through the life history of Abraham. That method of Bible study is usually called biblical theology, or a redemptive historical study. We are not simply studying history. We are studying redemption, salvation. We are studying the promises of God unto salvation, as they are lived out in the history of Abraham. So, we have God’s promise of land. And his promise of descendants. Those promises are for us, we who believe in Jesus. As I have said frequently today, WE are the descendants of Abraham. We are the recipients of this covenant promise of God, we who live by faith! Thus, in this text, with Abraham, we see...

B. The trust of faith.

And that is what faith is all about. Not just believing something intellectually. Not just knowing something, but trusting. Trusting the God who promises eternal life to those who would believe, trusting in the sense of receiving the gift. And we see that trust

with Abraham.

v.5

Back to,

Gen. 15:5 “Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

That’s the faith of a true believer. The trust of faith. Saving faith, as we would express it today. And that salvation is further explained and demonstrated by the redemptive-historical example of Abraham in terms of deliverance. Specifically, it is,

C. The promise of deliverance from bondage.

I could use the word redemption in place of deliverance, they are synonyms. The word deliverance gives such a descriptive explanation of what redemption is all about. And the simpler word for both of those things is the word “salvation.” So this Old Testament history of Abraham is the history of salvation. Or, more descriptively, deliverance from bondage. That is what salvation is, deliverance from bondage. So we read,

v.6 “But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 7 And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,’ said God, and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.”

They shall come out, out of bondage! In historical terms, that means coming out of Egypt. That’s salvation, that the people of God, the people of Israel, would be delivered out of the bondage of Egypt, delivered out of the house of bondage. And that historical event demonstrates the doctrinal truth and reality of

what salvation is all about.

Let me explain that promise of deliverance with the language of the New Testament, Jesus’ words.

John 8:31 “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” 33 They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?” 34 Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

Or these words from Paul,

Gal. 4:3 “Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.”

The unbeliever is in bondage. Bondage to the law, bondage to sin, bondage to the curse of condemnation. And the Christian is freed from that bondage, as Paul explains so thoroughly in,

Rom. 6:15 “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! 16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? 17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having

been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”

So when you read about the Old Testament people of God being delivered out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, understand that that great exodus represents the great work of God in our salvation in Christ. And that is the promise given to Abraham. With a sign.

III. A SIGN OF THE COVENANT.

v.8 “Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.”

Why a sign? What is the purpose and value of the sign? And then, what does the sign mean? Let me answer the second question first, the meaning of the sign. Circumcision is,

A. A sign of cleansing.

It is, so literally, a cutting away. It demonstrates outwardly what God, in salvation, accomplishes in our hearts. A cutting away of the old man, that man of sin.

Now, I should note that the sign was not optional. As I just read in verse 8, Stephen calls it “the covenant of circumcision.” It is so significant as to be identified with the covenant. And in the Old Testament, to forsake the sign, to neglect the sign, was to break the covenant!

Gen. 17:10 “This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; 11 and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you...14 And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My

covenant.”

Again the question, why is this so important? Because the sign of the covenant so fully expresses the work of God in salvation that the outward sign represents the inward reality of what is signified. Just as a wedding ring represents the union of a husband and wife, so that generally speaking, the intentional removal of the sign is a breach of the covenant. A willful decision refusing to wear a wedding ring is, under any ordinary circumstance, an offense to the other person.

Because the sign represents the union. And the sign of the covenant represents the covenant. And it is a sign of cleansing, the cleansing of the heart. Thus we read of the significance of circumcision in,

Rom. 2:28 “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.”

And further,

Col. 2:11 “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. 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.”

Notice the immediate connection between circumcision and

baptism, which is a rabbit trail I won't go down this morning, other than to say the Old Testament sign and the New Testament sign represent the same thing, "putting off [or removing] the body of the sins of the flesh." Circumcision of the heart means that God washes away your sin, that God cleanses your heart, that he forgives you your sin.

And, it is...

B. A sign to identify the generations of God's people.

v.8 "Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs."

You see, this covenant promise is generational. The nation of God's people is generational, the promise extending from one generation to another. Which is why particularly circumcision is so obviously and outwardly associated with the act of begetting. By its very nature, it testifies to the reality that God's covenant promise is extended from generation to generation. And thus, in that way, Abraham would become the father of a great nation, the father of many nations. And we, we who believe in Jesus, are the rightful heirs of that promise, the ones who can rightfully claim to be the children of Abraham.

Now, again, let me ask. Why is that so important? What is this so important that Stephen would use this historical example of Abraham when asked to give a defense of his teachings to those who wanted to kill him? And the answer is this, to all those questions. This reference to Abraham, to God's covenant promise to Abraham, is a declaration of the gospel. And as I proclaim that gospel to you, I do so first, for your salvation. That you might believe. And to you who do believe, I proclaim that gospel to you for your encouragement. This is the gospel, the

promise of God, that God says to his church just what he said to Abraham as the nation of Israel was founded in the Old Testament. This is covenant promise: "I will be your God and you will be my people." And if you wish to have that relationship with God, if you wish to have life, if you wish to be delivered from the bondage of sin and the law, then you must believe this promise of God. And you will be saved, by grace, through faith.

Let me end with that invitation of the gospel in the language of Moses in,

Deut. 10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? 14 Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. 15 The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. 16 Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer."

In other words,

Rom. 10:9 "...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved... 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."