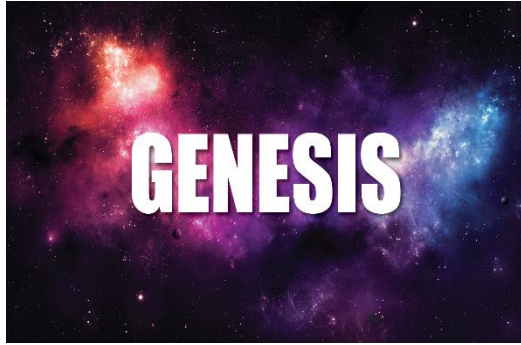




Part 39 – The Covenant Sign

Genesis 17:9-14

Within the scope of human history there are only two divine covenants: The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. The covenant of works was that covenant God made with Adam wherein perfect obedience was required for the possession of eternal life. Adam's sin brought an end to the covenant of works. But God, being rich in mercy, provided the way for his human creatures to be redeemed from the

guilt and penalty of their sin. For this to happen mankind could only relate to God by the means of Divine grace. So God made an everlasting covenant of grace to be fulfilled by the Savior whom he would send. This covenant is first announced in Genesis 3:15 and later reaffirmed and ratified with Abraham (**Genesis chapters 12, 15, 17**).

God promises the continuity of faith.

- Here, for the first time, God explains his gracious purpose – a purpose repeated throughout Scripture from Moses to the prophets, to the Apostles – that it is God's intention to be the God of believers and their children and their children's children.
- It is an organizing principle in the Bible that God's promise embraces parents and their children and summons parents to be accountable for their children's spiritual training. And almost immediately in Genesis we will see both the promise and the accountability working themselves out in the succeeding generations of Abraham's family (**Galatians 3:7-9**).

God gives his covenant a sign.

- Legal documents require signatures. In a sense we may consider the covenant sign as God's signature; his personal guarantee. The rainbow for instance was God's "signature" that he would never flood the earth again. The sign of circumcision was God's signature that he will remove the sin of his people by his grace.

The sign must be accompanied by faith.

- There is a necessary connection between faith and the sign of the covenant. Without faith the sign never achieves what it signifies. Without faith the sign achieves nothing.
- God's people have a responsibility to "keep" the covenant. While the covenant of grace will continue to its final completion according to God's sovereign will, individuals can forfeit the promise through their lack of faith and obedience.

1. What the sign does

a) The sign is God's pledge to his people.

- The sign of the covenant was a form of proclamation in that it served as a physical means for God to declare his promise. Circumcision was not the recipient's pledge to God. It was something they received, not something they did. This principle is seen in the fact that the people were to give the sign to their infant sons. Those infants were not yet able to believe or make any commitments. But they would bear on their bodies a sign of God's promise.

b) The sign signifies the removal of the sinful flesh.

- The sign of circumcision involved the shedding of blood and the removal of flesh which symbolized the removing of sin. It reminded the people that the remission of sin required the shedding of blood.

c) The sign signifies inclusion into the visible company of God's people.

- Circumcision functioned as the formal initiation rite into the company of God's people. It did not give anyone the ability to judge the heart but at least outwardly, those who received the sign were included as members of God's covenant people.

2. What the sign does not do

a) The sign does not remove actual sin.

- The sign signifies the removal of sin but the sign on its own does not actually accomplish this. Without being joined to faith, the sign accomplishes nothing.

b) The sign does not guarantee one's inclusion in the spiritual fellowship of God's people.

- Because circumcision could not change the heart, unless it was accompanied by faith, it could not actually make one a member of God's people beyond simply receiving some of the outward benefits. As Paul later explained to the church at Rome who were wondering why so many Jews had rejected Jesus:
But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (**Romans 9:6-8**).

3. Who receives the sign?

a) Male believers

- Circumcision was a sign unique for males. But women bore the sign representatively through the principle of headship. That is, while women did not physically carry the sign of circumcision, the blessings of the sign were conferred to them through the principle of representative headship. A wife bore the benefits of her husband's circumcision; a daughter bore the blessings through her father.

b) The children of believers

- After receiving the sign himself, Abraham was commanded to place the sign upon Ishmael and all the males of his household. When Isaac was born, Abraham was commanded to circumcise him on the eighth day which remained the practice for God's people until Christ, by his atoning work on the cross, changed the sign to baptism.
- Why did God command that Israel circumcise the male infants? The question has at least three answers: 1) Because the sign marked them as Israel from birth, 2) The sign would "proclaim" God's covenant to them their entire lives, and 3) Receiving the sign as infants drove home the message of grace. God claims us in our total helplessness.

4. One covenant, two signs

a) Baptism corresponds to and fulfills circumcision

- The covenant of grace that God announced in Genesis 3:15 and first ratified with Abraham is the same covenant fulfilled by Jesus Christ and under which he saves his people. Throughout the generations the substance of the covenant of grace has not changed. It promises salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And while the sign of the covenant has appropriately changed from circumcision to baptism (**Matthew 28:19**), everything we have said about circumcision we can say about baptism (**Colossians 2:11-15**).

b) Baptism and church membership

- Just as circumcision was the sign of inclusion into Israel, so now baptism is the sign of inclusion in the church. And just as one's inclusion in the visible company of Israel did not guarantee faith and perseverance so too in the church. The fact remains that some who profess faith, receive baptism and become members of the visible church nevertheless forsake Christ and prove themselves to be outside of the spiritual union of the saints ("invisible church"). This is what the various 'warning passages of Hebrews refers to (**2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29**).

c) Who receives baptism?

- Because the substance of the covenant of grace has never changed, it makes sense that God never rescinded his command for believers to place the sign upon their children. At Pentecost, the Apostle Peter preached Genesis 17 ("For **the promise** is for you and your children..."). The Book of Acts records several household baptisms in which the entire household received the covenant sign once the head of household believed.