

God's Forever Covenant

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 April 2023

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder, have you ever wondered, how did you today get to be part of a church like this? How did this church get here? And how did you get to be part of it? Or if this isn't your church, how did you get to come in and to visit it and to be here today? In short, how did you get to be here? Well, today we're dropping back into Genesis, into Genesis 17, which takes us way back to answer that very question. In terms of church history, this is as far back as it gets. About 4,000 years ago, three and a half thousand miles away in Israel, when God made a covenant, an everlasting and forever covenant with Abraham. Let's remind ourselves, what is a covenant? It's been a few weeks, hasn't it? A covenant is a relationship that God initiates that is based on his promise.

That's what God's doing here, isn't it? He says, this is my covenant. And then even if we just skim down, he says, doesn't he, I will, I will, I will, I will. He is promising things.

And we'll see today that there is a response required to God's covenants. But maybe you're wondering, where is the church in this passage? Where do we fit into this? It doesn't look much like a church, but I hope when we see where this is going, we will see that this everlasting covenant lays down the blueprints for the church that God is still building today, that we are part of together.

The first book that I was given when I came to Scotland, actually connected with the church, was called The House That Jesus Built. The house that Jesus built, a welcome to the church.

And this is the house that Jesus is building, the very same house that he begins to build here in this chapter of God's word. So how do we get to be here? Well, where do we fit into the blueprints that God lays down here in the church he builds? This is one of the most significant passages in the whole Bible.

[2 : 2 6] So we'll get into it and it will unfold as we go along. So beginning this morning with God's promise plan, when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty.

Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you. Now, quick question, how many years has passed? How many years has passed? If you're good with numbers and you have a good eye for detail, you'll see it's 13 years. How old was Abram at the end of chapter 16, Luke?

He was 86. Now he's 99. And we know that what happened before when he was 86 was 10 years after he had moved to the land that God showed him. So it helps us just to see that these couple of pages in our Bibles take place over nearly quarter of a century. All right, this is God's dealing with a guy over decades of his life. It wasn't one day this happened, one day that happened, the next day another thing happened. And that's really important just to see because if there's one thing that Genesis wants us to take away from this part of the book, it is this, the trustworthiness of God's promise.

That his word is secure for decades, generations, that you can stake your life on God's promises, however long you have to wait to see them. He will never let you down. Abram is a kind of living monument to that truth. He is waiting in faith, not always waiting well, but he is waiting in faith.

What is he waiting for? Well, he is waiting for the working out of God's covenant, this relationship, or we could say the unfolding of God's promise plan. What do I mean? Well, 25 or so years ago, back at the beginning of chapter 12, God said to Abram this, I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great. So you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. Whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

[4 : 58] Now, at the time we picked out three elements of that promise plan. If you remember this far back, three M's, remember? Okay, that God would multiply Abram, he would be a great number, and that God would magnify Abram, that he would have a great name. Both, I think, in order that Abram would be a mediator of God's covenant blessing. Through you, every family of the earth will be blessed. So this is the promised plan, isn't it? Through this one man and his family, God is promising to carry out his promised redeeming work for fallen humanity, to get back what had been lost through our rebellion against him, to save us from the curse of our sin, so that we could have his forever blessing.

In fact, if you trace the word covenant back through Genesis to this point, you can see that God made his covenant with Adam back in chapter two, everlasting life on the condition of perfect obedience. But Adam didn't do that. He broke the covenant, so sin and death became realities for us.

We have lived under a curse. But God made a promise that day, the very next chapter, that sin wouldn't get the last word. He promised to send a child who would crush the head of the serpent, who would deal with sin, who would overcome death, who would take away the curse. He promised that through this Redeemer, human beings could be saved from the curse of our sin and be right with God again. And later, God upholds that covenant promise with Noah and the whole creation. In chapters six and nine, he promises what? That the world wouldn't be ended by sin, that he would keep the world turning, that plants would grow, that people would live until the Redeemer came to save us. Sin would not get the last word.

Then chapter 15, we're bringing it up to the present, aren't we? God makes a covenant with Abram and his family, that through this family, he would bless every family. Though we are all ruined by sin, though we deserve his curse, because through this family, the promised Redeemer would come.

And so can we see it. It's the same plan. It's the same promise that is being worked out in progress. Every covenant is building on the same covenant. A bit like the different phases of a building project, the land survey, the architect's drawings, clearing the plots, getting down the foundations.

[8 : 07] I'm not an architect. I don't know what order these things come in, but they come in phases, don't they? It builds up as a whole. And so God didn't begin with a finished house. He began with a blueprint that he builds up over time. Okay, and nor are these covenants different houses.

That God built, and then he thought, oh, this isn't going to work, so he tore it down and built another one, and then tore that one down and built another one. No, it's the one same house that God is building. God's covenant is one promise in different phases of its fulfillment. It is one plan in different stages of its completion. And that helps us. That is why he can call it here an everlasting covenant.

Because it is one great promise plan. One long story of redemption. One everlasting covenant in progress. So that in fact, the whole of the book of Genesis and the whole of the Bible is one long unfolding of that one covenant promise back in Genesis chapter 3, that God would send a child to redeem us from sin. Once a month, I get a chance to meet with some other ministers in the city and around the city. And together we study a wonderful confession of Christian belief called the Westminster Confession of Faith. And this past week, we read about Christ the mediator.

And we read this, listen. It says, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices of the Old Testament, he was revealed and signified to be the seed of the woman which should bruise the serpent's head, and the lamb slain from the beginning of the world, being yesterday, today, and forever the same.

So do you see, brothers and sisters, when we come together like this on an ordinary week, in an ordinary Sunday, and we gather together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, what are we doing? We are laying claim to the promise God made at the beginning of the world that he carried through Abraham and his family and fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus when he took our curse that we might have his blessing. So that his church is the one only and the same church that he has ever built. And we have arrived later on in the work, haven't we? This is no longer the blueprint. We've arrived when the windows and the doors are put in, the dust is being swept up, because he has come, and in him we have God's blessing.

[11 : 07] Now what's any of that got to do with chapter 17 of Genesis? Well, only that we see this, that the promises that God is making here are the same promises, just a bit further on, that he would multiply Abram in verse 2, a great number, that he would magnify Abram in verse 5, a great name, in order to make him a mediator, verses 6, 7, and 8, of his blessing to the nations of the world and to the generations to come. Abram waited and trusted in that same promise plan, and that is the same promise that we are still trusting in today. We are Christians, but no longer waiting for. That's the difference, because the promised redeemer has come, and he is Jesus.

And so, friends, what do we learn from God's promised plan? That his promises do not fail, that he has fulfilled them in the Lord Jesus, and therefore, we can rest the whole weight of our hearts, lives, and faith upon his word, for it is rock solid for eternity. Abraham laughed, didn't he, at the thought that just one of his sons would be blessed and benefit from that promise. What would he do if he was here with us today? You would think he would cry, and he would laugh until he had no more tears, and no more laughter. Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day, said Jesus.

He saw it and was glad. So, what do we learn from this covenant? Oh, friends, you can rest the whole weight of your life upon it. You can put your trust in this promise today and be saved as Abraham was in his day, which makes this house not only a building, does it, but a church, a gathering of God's people together. This is our second point, that God makes this covenant not only with one man, but with a family, a family look. Let's see then, secondly, God's covenant community. Just glance down, if you would, verses seven and eight, and ask, who is this covenant made with? I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. Who is the covenant made with?

Not just one man, but his children, right? This forms, this promise, a covenant community, a family.

Specifically, Abraham, the man of faith who believed God's promise and was counted righteous, and his children, as yet unborn, as yet unbelieving. God promises to be the God of him and his family. And so his covenant brings into being a community living under his promise and increasingly trusting in it as others come into the community to put their trust in this God, and children grow up into their faith in this God. And the covenant community, it doesn't seem to be a temporary thing, like scaffolding, like scaffolding, if we were to keep the building idea going, but rather a bit more like a kind of load-bearing wall. It carries on through scripture to be the God of you and your offspring. Just as the idea of the land that God promises, it only gets bigger, doesn't it, until he promises what a new creation. Well, so does the promise of God to be the God of us and our children only gets bigger to be not only the God of an ethnic group, but a worldwide family and their children. Just listen to Peter in Acts chapter 2, when he says, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy

[15 : 38] Spirit. The promise is for you and your children, there's that phrase, and for all who are far off, even bigger than it once was, for all whom the Lord our God will call. So that that covenant community, that outward visible church of God is made up of those who trust in God's promise, those who come in to trust in God's promise, and their children.

Now, how far are these children included? Well, God is pretty clear in verse 10, isn't he? This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep, that every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and ye. So everyone in the covenant is to bear the sign, to be circumcised. Abraham and his sons, others from outside the family, verse 12 as well, those born in his house, those who come from the outside. So that there's no distinguishing marker between Abraham who believed and his children, who as yet do not and cannot, they were all to have this sign cut into their bodies from birth, the sign that God is their God, and that they are heirs to his promise to save through the Redeemer.

Now, those children could yet turn from God, couldn't they? Not trust in his promise, be cut off from him and from his people, but their inclusion in the covenant community doesn't wait until they've decided for themselves, does it? They are included from the time they are eight days old when they receive the sign. And that seems to be how it goes on in God's promised plan, this one and the same church that he is building. The sign of God's covenant has changed since Christ has come and fulfilled the promise from circumcision to baptism, but the principle is the same.

Okay, here's Lydia in Acts chapter 16. She is the first Christian convert in Europe. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. So she puts her faith in the promise of God to save her in Jesus. And her and her household are baptized and receive the sign of the covenant. That's one of the few instances we see of families being baptized, not only individuals. And this whole story, this church that Jesus is building, the promise plan of God, this is why we here, along with all Presbyterians, believe that baptism is for believers and for their children. Understand not because our children are automatically saved or don't need faith or that baptism somehow saves them. Rather because of this, baptism is the sign of God's covenant promise to redeem us in Christ. And that promise is held out in a special way to his covenant family, to his church. He says he is the God of us and of our children.

Now, not all Christians believe that. Maybe you're not sure. Maybe you come from a church where this isn't taught. You need to know that we love you dearly, that we are one with you in Christ, that this isn't something to divide us over. We're glad that you are with us. In fact, three of the five ministers that I meet with every month would not agree with me about this, that it doesn't hinder our communion in Christ. Let me be really clear about that.

[19 : 57] Yet, here's the question. Since we are so keen, rightly, for it not to be an issue between us, is it not an issue still, though, for us? God could have made his covenant with Abraham on his own, couldn't he? And not included his children, so that the covenant and the sign could have been only for those who believed by faith in his promise. But that is not what God chose. God chose to include his family, to form a community based on grace, a covenant and a sign based on his promise, not on our response. And so how incredible is it to us then that God says he is the God not only of you personally, but of you and your family and of this church family. Is that not pure grace to us, to our children, that God by his promise has formed a church with us in it, from the very, very youngest to the very oldest and from all across the world. Now, what does that change, you might ask? Well, it means that your faith and your doubts and your disbelief and the faith, doubt, and disbelief of your children is not a personal private affair between you and God.

It is between you and God and this community. He has formed a family. That's why publicly owning Christ before the church and entering into the membership of the church is so significant, because you are standing in front of the church and telling the covenant community that you have personally owned Christ as your savior and that you belong now by faith to the community.

We share our faith together. We walk it, we talk it together. And even if you're not sure today where you stand, if you've been baptized, here's the thing, you are part of this church family and we are walking with you. So do not cut yourself off. Do not keep it hidden and closed and private.

Share it. Talk about it. Let your family point you to Christ. Let us help you. Our faith is shared because God has made a family. And what about the sign? Well, again, rightly, we don't want baptism to become an issue between us. But is it not an issue for us? Just glance down at verse 14 and ask, would any Israelite couple have ever wondered whether or not to get their new son or not to be uncircumcised? Any uncircumcised male who's not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.

Okay, whatever you believe about baptism, it can't be unimportant, can it? It is the new sign of God's covenant. And if we see that continuity, that unfolding plan in God's covenant over time, then we can't think the baptism of our children is incidental or insignificant or just down to personal preference. They are baptized into the church family. Why wouldn't we want that?

[23 : 37] They are heirs to God's covenant promise. How do we let them know that at home, at church? So, God's covenant community, let us celebrate this grace to us. Let us own it. Let us thank God for it, sharing it. And here's the thing, if we're responding rightly in our hearts to this grace, then it won't divide us because we will simply be rejoicing in it and celebrating his grace to us and welcoming others into it. God's covenant community. But the third thing to see in this family is God's chosen son. See if the two sons that Abraham has, only one is a promised child.

In verse 16, God says of Sarah, I will bless her and surely give you a son by her. Now we can surely understand Abraham laughing at the idea that he and Sarah would have another son. He 100 years old, she 90. Paul says in Romans 4, he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead. No wonder he laughed at the thoughts because from what he could see, of course, having children was an impossibility. What he can see is his 13-year-old son, Ishmael. Abraham said to God, if only Ishmael might live under your blessing. See, he is waiting, isn't he? He's trusting, but still partly trusting in what his eyes can see, what is there in front of him. Surely Ishmael, Lord, will do. He's already made son and heir. He's already here. Surely it can be him that God had promised a chosen son.

God does not need an Ishmael, a human-sized solution to a God-sized problem. Rather, he has promised an Isaac, a God-sized solution to a God-sized problem, a solution that only he can provide for a problem only he can fix. So that this covenant family learns not only to trust his promise, but to trust his promise in the face of all that they can see, which says the opposite.

Their bodies said, no more children. God says, another promised child. So will they live by faith in God's promise or by what they can see? Now, God does give Ishmael the temporal blessings of his covenant, that he would multiply and magnify him. But it's clear in verse 21 that the promise plan itself, his promise to redeem fallen humanity from the curse and bring his blessing to the world will come only through Isaac. He will be a great nation. He will be a great number and have a great name, so that he will be the mediator of God's covenant blessing to the world. And it had to be Isaac.

It had to be so that they then and we now would know that God's plan to redeem is all down to him and not to us. Friends, God wants us to know that for sure today, that his salvation all comes down to him and not to us. And that we can trust him with that. How do we know? Well, God would do it this way again, of course, but bigger with the birth of his own promised son. Not with an old woman, but a young woman.

[27 : 25] Not with a woman past childbearing age, but pre-childbearing age. Both humanly impossible and yet one completely beyond human comprehension. If Isaac was too much for Abraham to believe, well, how about Jesus? Conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin, what could have stressed more thoroughly that God alone was seeing through his promise? That he alone was providing the chosen son?

And what more could convince us then? Not to live by what our eyes can see to tell us what God can or will do and won't do, but rather by trusting what he says he will do, what he says he can do.

What more than the miraculous arrival of the long-promised Christ? I hope we can see that that's where God's covenant goes. His promise to bring his blessing to all the families of the earth through a chosen son of this man, the promised redeemer Jesus. And so let me encourage you, again, whichever family you've been born into, and wherever you come from, and whenever you were baptized, not to make the same mistake that Abraham made in thinking that it could still be another way, that it could still be a human answer to a God-sized problem. You friends, it just isn't. Whatever solution you think you can provide for your own sin, it is not big enough. Whatever, living a good enough life, coming to church the right number of times, not doing the really bad stuff and doing some nice stuff instead, thinking the right thoughts, sharing the right tweets, whatever it is, our sin is against God, so we have a God-sized problem that needs a God-sized solution. So do not grasp after something that is just there in front of you, grasping at an Ishmael, when God has provided a promised and chosen son, an Isaac, Jesus Christ, for you to grasp hold of, take hold of, and be saved. He is God's answer for the church and for the world, his chosen son. So what do we do? Well, that brings us, finally, to our faithful response.

We read in verse 23, on that very day, Abraham took his son Ishmael and those born in his household or bought with his money and circumcised them as God told him. What's he doing? He's putting his faith in that promise, in what he couldn't yet see. It was an incredibly humbling thing to do, and it was a response of faith because he did it simply because God told him to.

So what is our faithful response? How does God call us to respond to his promise now arrived in Jesus?

[30 : 39] He says to us, turn from your sin, put your faith in Christ, and be baptized. Friends, again, baptism does not save you. We must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and if we do, then we do as he says, and be baptized, us and our children. That is a humbling response, to live trusting by faith in a promise, not that we see and hear, but that is here for us in God's word. It is humbling to receive baptism as the sign of baptism as the sign of that promise. But again, this is the relationship, the covenant he initiates based on his promise. It doesn't come from us, and it doesn't depend on us, and so our response is simply to trust him, to believe his words, and to live as he has called us to live.

We stand as a church today on this covenant. God's promise unfolds to us today in Christ to this church out of this covenant. So what do we do? We rejoice in Christ, who is the yes and amen.

Amen. We celebrate his grace to us, and we long for the building up of this covenant community in faith, in love, and in faithfulness to our God. Let's pray for that together now.