

“A Covenant, a Curse, and a Cutting”

Text: Genesis 17:1-22; John 20:1-20

By Pastor Rand Lankheet, at New Horizon URC, First sermon, on April 1, 2018

Introduction: Today many Christian people and churches celebrate the resurrection (复活) of Jesus.

Three days after he died, Jesus' body was given new life. In John 20, we read that one of the first people to see Jesus alive, was the woman Mary Magdalene.

Later that same day, Jesus appeared to ten of his original disciples (门徒) .

Among other things, this is what the resurrection of Jesus showed:

It showed that God the Father accepted Jesus' sacrifice (献祭) for our sins.

God no longer shows us wrath, righteous (正义的) anger against us, because of our sins. No!

Now, we have peace with God. Through Jesus, we have a loving relationship with our God.

-In Genesis 17, this loving relationship is described as A COVENANT (盟约) . [Read Genesis 17:7.

God speaks of his personal, loving relationship with the man, Abraham.

He is the God of Abraham. And He will be the God of Abraham's descendants.

-In the Bible, a covenant relationship involves making promises. Each person in that relationship makes certain promises to the other person. Already in Genesis 15, God made a special promise to Abraham. God promised He would give Abraham his own biological son.

Here, in Genesis 17, God gets more specific about that promise:

He says He will give Abraham a son through his wife, Sarah. [Read vs. 16.

Now that's important, because something happened in the previous chapter. We have not read or studied that chapter. But in Genesis 16, we read that Abraham produced a biological son through his servant-woman, Hagar. Abraham was hoping this would be the promised son.

But, in chapter 17, God clarifies His promise. He says to Abraham: “my promise is to give you a son through Sarah.” And that took even more faith on Abraham's part, because by this time he and Sarah were past the age of child-bearing. Well past the age.

So God is teaching Abraham that he must trust God completely. Abraham will not fulfill the promise through his own planning, through his own scheming (谋划) . No! God and God alone, will make good on His promise. Abraham must learn to trust God completely.

Last time we learned that as a guarantee of his promise, God took a blood-oath (血誓) upon himself.

Appearing as a smoking torch, God walked between the bloody, cut-apart animals. “So let me be destroyed, if I do not do what I have promised you, Abraham.” That was the point of that blood oath.

What did Abraham have to do? Well, really nothing. He just had to trust (信靠) in God's promise.

He simply put confidence in God. And in trusting God, we read that Abraham was credited with righteousness. He was regarded as a righteous, perfect man. The apostle Paul says in Romans 4, that Abraham was actually receiving the righteousness of Jesus.

Now, here in Genesis 17, we find another aspect of this covenant. God repeats His promise of giving Abraham a son. But now God puts a covenant demand on Abraham.

It is a somewhat strange demand. [Read 17:9-11.

Abraham must be circumcised (接受割礼) . Some of the skin around his reproductive organ (生殖器官) must be cut off.

And if Abraham or one of his later male descendants refused to be circumcised, they will be cut off. They will be cut off from God's covenant.

Those refusing circumcision would have no relationship of love or friendship with God.

Instead, God's wrath, God's righteous anger, will fall upon those people.

So we read at the end of the chapter that Abraham, as an old man, was circumcised.

And so was every male in the entire household of Abraham. That was a lot of cutting! A lot of blood and pain! Remember how we read in an earlier chapter that Abraham had 318 men from his household, fighting against that one king? 318 men of young and middle adult age. Double that number, or triple it, to calculate the full number of men and boys in Abraham's entire household. All of them were circumcised.

Now, there are several things going on here, in this ritual of circumcision. One thing is this: now Abraham is taking his own "blood oath." Abraham is shedding some of HIS blood. Earlier it was God taking a blood oath on himself. Back in Genesis chapter 15. God walking between the bloody halves of the cut apart animals.

Now Abraham is making a kind of blood oath. He is saying something like this:

"So may I and my descendants be cut off from God's covenant, like my skin is cut off.

If I or my descendants do not KEEP God's covenant, let us be cut off. We will no longer be in a relationship of love with our God, if we fail to do what we have promised."

From his side of the covenant relationship, Abraham is promising that he will trust in God.

And that out of his trust, he will obey God. [Read 17:1-2. Abraham must "walk before" God...and be "blameless." (无可指摘的) "Blamelessness" does not mean absolute, moral perfection.

It means living before God with integrity (正直) , with seeking to obey God.

Now, don't become confused here. This is not Abraham being saved by his obedience, by being circumcised, as a good work. In Romans chapter 4, the apostle Paul is clear. We looked at it last week. We don't have time to look at it this week. I would encourage you to read it for yourself. Paul says that according to Genesis 15, verse 6, Abraham was declared righteous by God long BEFORE he was circumcised. He was declared righteous only by trusting in the promises of God. It is an essential point: Abraham was saved only by God's grace, through faith alone. Not by his works. Not by his obedience of circumcision.

Here, in Genesis 17, Abraham is RESPONDING to God's gift of righteousness. He is responding like we ought to respond to God's grace to us. We are justified (被称为义) , freely, by the righteousness of Jesus credited to us. Apart from any of our works. But AFTER we are saved, AFTER we are justified, then, we show our thankfulness to God. We respond with obedience before God. We call that, "sanctification." (成圣)

So Abraham is now living in sanctification. He wants to show his love and obedience to His God.

Part of that obedience is Abraham being circumcised.

Here is something else about this circumcision: You see, God is putting a special mark on Abraham's body and on the bodies of all the males in his household.

In so doing, God is setting them apart from the uncircumcised nations.

God is distinguishing Abraham and his descendants from the pagan (异教徒) peoples.

They are now "set apart" as God's own, special people. Through this mark of circumcision.

By the way, we in the Presbyterian and Reformed churches (长老会和改革宗教会) take this biblical principle to apply to water baptism (洗礼) . After Jesus has come, water has replaced blood, as the sign of the covenant. In the Old Testament, the bloody sign of circumcision was put upon adults and little babies. Today, we believe the water sign of baptism, must be likewise applied. That is, to adults as

well as to babies. To the babies of believers. Because God includes children of believers in His covenant. Children, like their parents, are set apart from unbelievers.

But now let us go back to the concept of the blood oath in this ritual of circumcision.

In the biblical teaching about covenant, there are both blessings and curses. Covenant blessings, and covenant curses. Not like we use that word “curse” today. In certain magic formulas, or in voodoo (巫毒仪式), certain “curses” are put on people. Certain mystical rituals and incantations (咒语 , 符咒) are believed to bring trouble and suffering on people who have a “curse” put on them. Though this idea is related to covenant “curses,” it is somewhat different.

You see, in God’s covenant, only He can bring a curse on people.

For example, let me read from [Deut. 11:26-28. Read.

And God brings curses, particularly, upon those who have “broken” his covenant.

[Read Genesis 17:14.

Now this brings us directly to Jesus. To the work of Jesus for us, on the cross, and being raised on the third day. Turn to Galatians 3. [Page ? The context here is about Abraham. Particularly the covenant blessing of God upon Abraham. [Read Galatians 3:7-9.

Paul is writing this letter to non-Jewish believers, Gentiles (外邦人). And Paul’s point is that God promised that “all the nations” would be blessed in and through Abraham.

Through Jesus, the descendant of Abraham, all kinds of people are blessed.

But now look at [Galatians 3:10-13. Read. The curse of the covenant!

That God has promised to bring trouble, suffering, punishment, upon those who broke his covenant. The curse of God falls upon those people.

But who took that covenant curse upon himself? [Vs. 13. Jesus!

When Jesus died on the cross he was taking the covenant curse of God upon himself!

So let me ask: could Abraham fully obey God? God says in Genesis 17: “Abraham, walk before me and be blameless.” Even if that doesn’t mean perfection, could Abraham walk righteously before God? With full integrity? No!

And who of us can do that today? Who of us this past week has lived in full sanctification?

Who of us have loved our God this week, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?

None of us!! So you see, in ways big and small, we continue to break God’s covenant.

We break God’s covenant in not giving Him the love He deserves.

We continue to sin against our God in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds.

Therefore, each of us deserves (配得 , 应得) God’s curse upon us. We deserve what Abraham was saying in his circumcision: “So let me be cut off, discarded (被丢弃), destroyed, if I do not keep my covenant promises before God.” So the curse of God rightly falls on us.

But this brings us to the crucifixion (钉十字架) of Jesus. And to the resurrection of Jesus.

On the cross, the curse of God, for our sins, fell upon Jesus. The wrath of God, his righteous anger against our sin, fell upon Jesus. Jesus was cut off, from the land of the living. Jesus was bloodied and cut off. As the curse of the covenant demanded.

Because Jesus was made responsible for the sin of everyone who would eventually believe in

him. Think of it: millions and millions of believers, with their billions and billions of sins. God the Father was making Jesus responsible for those billions of sins. So Jesus had to suffer the worst curse.

And he did suffer that. Charged (被控告) with our sin, imputed (被归咎于) with our unrighteousness (不义), God judged Jesus as the Unrighteous One. So as Galatians 3:13 says, Jesus had to become that Curse. Jesus took that covenant Curse. The curse of all the covenant breakers (违约者) has fallen upon Jesus.

And, in turn, the full covenant blessing is given to us, through Jesus.

[Read Gal. 3:13-14. Now, not just Jews, the biological descendants of Abraham, are blessed. But we who are Gentiles, non-Jews, share in that covenant blessing. Vs. 14. The blessing of Abraham comes “upon the Gentiles.” The Gentiles who have trusted in Jesus.

How far were you from God? How far from God were your parents or grandparents, or early ancestors? Many of the early peoples in Europe, were worshipping trees, or worshipping the power of nature—like the sun, and planets.

Some of the early peoples in Asia worshipped their ancestors (祖先) .

In Africa and the Near East, many people worshipped animals, like bulls and alligators (短吻鳄) .

But in His mercy, in the fullness of time, God sent His very own Son, Jesus.

Through Jesus, God has made a covenant of friendship and love with you.

Jesus took your sin, and became the curse for you.

And, through Jesus, God has poured upon you His many covenant blessings./

And on the third day after his body died, under the curse of God, Jesus was raised to new life.

Mary saw him. The disciples saw him at the end of that day.

Some time later, more than 500 people saw him at one time.

In raising him from the dead, God the Father showed He accepted Jesus' suffering and death for you. For your sin. And in raising him from the dead, God the Father has credited you with the righteousness of Jesus.

Like the man Abraham, we simply have to believe, we simply have to trust God's promise.

The promise of forgiveness, through the blood of Jesus. The promise of righteousness in J.

The covenant blessings are poured out upon us, through Jesus.

And those promises are for us, as adult believers, and for our children.

And for the generations of covenant children yet to be born. LET US PRAY.