



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Genesis 17: 9-27

“The Sign Of The Abrahamic Covenant”

TRANSCRIPT

Today, we are attempting to finish the 17th chapter. Last Sunday, you will remember, we studied the first eight verses and so we are beginning with verse 9 and reading through verse 27. Genesis chapter 17 and verse 9,

“God said further to Abraham, ‘Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant.’ (You will notice in the next verse, it will be said, “It shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” and this is one of those occasions in which by metonymy, the word covenant is to be understood as covenant sign or covenant condition. The covenant as you know has already been spelled out in the promises that were given to Abraham and then ratified by the sacrifice in chapter 15, and so we are to understand the word covenant in verse 10 in the sense of covenant sign as the following words make, I think, very plain.) ‘This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with

money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.’ Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarah;’ (just in order I have been reading this Sarai as Sarah right along, but just for the sake of noting the difference, let me read it,) ‘As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.’”

So far as we know, these two words mean essentially the same thing, one being the more archaic form and Sarah being a more recent term. There is however one little difference that may be significant. You can tell from Sarah that perhaps this word is related a little more closely to the name for the covenant-keeping God, Yahweh or Yah, as it is found in the Old Testament, and so there may be some significance in that this name is more closely related to that, but so far as we can tell philologically, these names are the same. Some have suggested the first means princely and the second clearly means princess. So with that we will read on. Verse 16.

“And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.’ (That of course is why she is called princess. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said in his heart, ‘Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years of age, bear a child?’ And Abraham said to God, ‘O that Ishmael might live before Thee!’”

One of the ancient Targums or Aramaic paraphrases of the Book of Genesis has in addition to that verse, “O that Ishmael might live and worship before Thee!” And so the

sense of living is to live in the blessing of God’s covenant blessings, but God said, “no.” That’s a very revealing illustration of how God answers prayer. He always answers prayer, but sometimes no, and this is the case.

“But God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac (Isaac means laughter) and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes (Incidentally, their names are given later on in chapter 25 of this book) and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.’ And when He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael, his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.”

May the Lord bless this reading of His inspired word.

The subject for this morning in the exposition of the Book of Genesis is “The Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. One of the most striking truths of Abraham's story is the willingness of the eternal God to enter into a relationship with man like the familiarity and intimacy of friendship. As you may know, three times in the Word of God, Abraham is

called the friend of God. It's a remarkable statement, each one of them, but the thought of a man being the friend of God is astounding.

In the Old Testament, in that terrible moment, when news came to Jehoshaphat of Judah that a formidable alliance of heathen nations was arrayed against him, the great king stood in fear before the Lord God and prayed this prayer, “O Lord! The God of our fathers! Are Thou not God in the heavens? Are Thou not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Thy hands so that no one can stand against Thee. Didst not Thou art, O’ God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Thy people Israel and give it the descendants of Abraham, Thy friend, forever.”

Then in the New Testament, James, the brother of our Lord who has written that most practical epistle in which he has set forth the relationship of faith and works, has a clause concerning Abraham, “And he was called the friend of God;” the New Testament writer commenting upon the Old Testament and its reference to Abraham as the friend of God. I am sure that if we looked at this just humanly, however, we would say that the most significant reference to Abraham as the friend of God is the one in which Jehovah himself uses the term of Abraham.

Now of course, we know that all of the Bible is inspired and if one of the prophets should call Abraham the friend of God or if God should call him the friend of God, those statements have equal authority, but nevertheless it is very significant that the same one who in the same context is called the Lord, the first and the last, I am He, is the one who says, “But you Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham, My friend.” Isn’t it a wonderful thing to be known as the friend of God?

Now, Webster says that a friend is one who is attached to another by affection or esteem. That’s a human definition. It's not nearly full enough to encompass all that the Bible says about the friendship of God and Abraham because the friendship of God and Abraham is the friendship established by the Abrahamic Covenant, and in this

relationship, Abraham becomes God’s friend by virtue of the fact that he was chosen by God.

Now we know from other statements in the Bible that down in the ages of the past or back in the ages of the past, God already had, upon His mind, the choice of Abraham, but He chose him, and the time came when He justified him, and then, in the present part of our study of Abraham, he is on the way to sanctification, and ultimately to glory. So that to be the friend of God, encompasses the choice of God, the justification of God, the continuing work of sanctification, and ultimately glorification. Well, Abraham had a great experience. His experiences still continue. He is enjoying never as he did on earth the privilege of being the friend of God. This pattern of involvement is precisely the same found between us and the Lord, and may be this is one of the minor reasons at least why we are called, we who have believed in Jesus Christ, the offspring of Abraham or Abraham's seed. There is a relationship between us and Abraham that reflects the relationship that Abraham had with the Lord God.

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus speaks about this. In John chapter 15 and verse 15, he said to the Apostles in the Upper Room, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” No longer slaves, but friends. And in the context of that 15th chapter of the Gospel of John, in an earlier verse, the Lord had said to them, “I have loved you” and then in the sixteenth verse, “I have chosen you.” And he said also “I have appointed you that you should bring forth fruit.”

And so we find the same kind of pattern. It is the choice of our Lord Jesus Christ based upon the love that he had for them, and that choice and that love had as a distinct aim and goal, appointment for a specific service and sanctification or growth in holiness. So the pattern then is the same for us as for Abraham and that pattern is the pattern of divine initiating grace. Isn’t that a great expression? Divine initiating grace and faith

obedience, but a faith obedience that is given by God, and the result is a friendship that we cannot merit which is not earned by the things that we do, but is bestowed upon us in grace as God, through the Holy Spirit, works in our hearts and minds to bring us to trust in Him who died for sinners.

There are certain evidences of the establishment of the relationship, and we are reminded of some of them here, specifically the sign of circumcision for the covenant had a sign. The New Testament says that the sign of circumcision or that circumcision was a sign of justification by faith and of the necessity of purity in life. We shall talk about that in more detail in just a moment, but these are the things that mark out the friends of God.

In the case of Abraham, he was a man who had been, by the grace of God, been brought into this experience and finally he had been circumcised. And of course the necessity of purity in his life was expressed in the opening part of this chapter when God said to him “Walk before Me and be thou blameless.” So the marks of a true believer are the marks of the work of God in his heart and in his soul, and the resulting evidence of that life in his daily experience. These are the things that mark out the true children of God.

Now with that in mind, let's turn to the passage that we are looking at, and first of all in the opening verses of the section, beginning with the 9th verse, we have the stipulation set forth concerning the sign of the covenant. Now there are a couple of things that I would like for you to notice. First of all, I want you to notice just a simple fact of structure because I think it will help you in reading the Bible. Incidentally one of the reasons that we expound the text in Believers Chapel, generally speaking, in an expository way, book by book, is not simply to preach to your problems. That’s a very difficult thing to do, and furthermore, it's probably something that only an omniscient person could do effectively. We don't usually try to do that kind of preaching. And in second place, it's embarrassing and wrongfully embarrassing in the sense that we seek to mark out certain people especially needing the work of the word of God. We all need

that constantly and how much better it is to expound the whole of Scripture so that we can get the whole of the counsel of God and to allow the Holy Spirit to make the applications to the various problems that we have.

Now I feel that, in preaching, one of the aims should be when you leave the preaching of the Word of God, you should be able to read that passage and understand it better than you ever have before. So our aim, one of our greatest aims in expository preaching is to bring those who listen to it to the place where they can read it for themselves, and so far as that passage is concerned, you don't need some little miniature pope up here to interpret the word for you. We want you to be able to do it for yourself.

Now, there a few things that help us and this I think is one. You will notice in verse 3 and 4, we read, Abram fell on his face and God talked with him saying “As for Me.” Now what is that little clause “As for Me?” Now, what is unfolded in these wills and shalls, that we looked at last week, is the divine activity, but in verse 9 notice the change. And God said further to Abraham “now as for you” and in the Hebrew text, these clauses or phrases are opposed, one to the other. So, that in the first we have the divine activity whereas now here the stress will rest upon the responsibility of Abraham and those who are part of that covenant. So, now as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, throughout your generations.

Let me make one other statement here. It needs to be made I think. We are going to talk about circumcision. Now, that can be an indecorous matter to bring up in a congregation of mixed sex such as this. In fact, one commentator commenting upon this chapter said there is hardly a section of this chapter that could be preached on, maybe a part down here but he was anxious to avoid the stress upon things that might be embarrassing, not proper in a mixed audience.

Now we won't go quite as far as that, but decorum does demand that we give just as little detail as necessary. To circumcise was to cut off the foreskin of the male or female sex organ. Now in the Old Testament, the circumcision of females is not referred

to at all but it did exist. The circumcision of the male is the important thing. Now the circumcision or the act of circumcising was something that was practiced not only in Israel, but also among other nations, in Egypt, for example, but there was something very different about the circumcision of the heathen or the pagan. And the difference was simply this, that this circumcision is associated with a covenant. It has a specific meaning, and so we will bear that in mind when we talk about circumcision. It has to do with the cutting off of the foreskin of the male sex organ.

Now, notice in this opening statement in verse 9 that no details are given. The important thing is commitment to the covenant. God’s brand upon the males in Israel was circumcision. So He said you shall keep my covenant. He does not spell out details, because the fundamental thing is the commitment to the Lord, represented by obedience to this particular requirement. Now, I think that’s rather interesting because later on, at Mount Sinai, God will fill in a great deal by way of detail. He will set forth a whole manner of life encompassed in the Mosaic law. Now this may help us if we have difficulty in the relationship of the believer to the Mosaic law today.

It may help us to realize that holiness is not restricted to the keeping of the Mosaic law as is the opinion of some. Some feel that if you do not put yourself under the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments and even some of the civil and social laws, you cannot really have holiness and you cannot preach holiness. I remind you of the fact that for two thousand years, man walked with God without Mosaic law. Mosaic law is not necessary for a holy walk with God. In fact, the two individuals of whom it is said they walked with God were men who were not under Mosaic law. Enoch walked with God. He didn’t know anything about Mount Sinai. Noah walked with God. He did not know anything about Mount Sinai. Now, it was the same God and the same high principles of holiness prevailed. So let us remember that and we have here a call from God, “Walk before Me and be blameless.” And the obligations of the Mosaic law are not spelled out at all.

Well what about circumcision? We mentioned the fact that it was practiced in other lands. So far as the origin of it is concerned, we do not really know its origin. Unfortunately, we just don't have enough data. It is possible that it originated with this call of Abraham. Some have sought to support that and perhaps that's true, but we do know this, that regardless of the source of the practice, it is only in connection with Abraham's circumcision that covenantal relationships are set forth but what is its meaning, that's the important thing. And I want to say I am not sure that I understand everything that there is to be understood, well I can say that about anything in the Bible, but especially about this question of circumcision. And let me also say this is a very difficult subject and I hope that you will try to follow as closely as you possibly can. It's not easy to speak about the significance of this ancient rite. But I am going to suggest to you that the circumcising of Abraham and of the males in Israel included at least these four spiritual significances.

First of all, it included or it referred to the removal of the body of the flesh. Now what I would like for you to do is to turn with me to the New Testament in order to read with me, the New Testament commentary upon circumcision as it pertains to the removal of the body of the flesh, and so will you turn with me to Colossians, chapter 2, and will you listen as I read verse 9 through 11, but 11 is the important verse and so I will begin reading as you find Colossians 2:11. “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised.”

Now of course Paul is speaking metaphorically here, figuratively. “And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.” And he explains in the verse that follows, “having been buried with Him in baptism” a baptism also made without hands probably, “in whom you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

So Paul is saying that when Christ died and when He was raised again, you were identified with Him, in His death, His burial, and His resurrection. That’s one of Paul’s great doctrines of union with Christ on the part of the believers. He is our representative. We share in all of the activity that was His, but in verse 11, he identifies this with the removal of the body of the flesh, so that in the identification with our Lord in his death, burial and resurrection, we are in the sight of God those who have had removed the body of the flesh.

Now that is I think one of the primary significances of the work of circumcision. It was designed to be an illustration, a figure, even a type of what was accomplished when Jesus Christ died. So I suggest to you that circumcision was intended to refer to the removal of the body of the flesh. Now again without, for purposes of propriety, without going into details, there were natural impurities associated with the male sexual organ which circumcision was designed to correct. Furthermore, if you will remember that the male sexual organ is the source of the semen from which the generation of the race proceeds, you will see immediately that the idea back of circumcising has to do with the removal of impurities. And consequently too since it is the source of generation, the source of life, and the source of the propagation of life, it is suggested by God in this that what we have here is representative of the original sin of man and of its provision in the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that what is represented by circumcision has to do with the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new, or the removal of the body of the flesh.

Franz Delitzsch, one of the great interpreters of the Old Testament of the last century, after having cooperated with another writer in a book on the Pentateuch, wrote his own new commentary on Genesis and in that commentary, he wrote, “As sacrifice arose from the feeling of the need of an atonement, so did circumcision from the feeling of the impurity of human nature.” So represented then in the act of circumcision is an illustration. It is an illustration of the fact that in the death of Christ, we who are

identified with him have been removed from the sphere of the old man and translated into the sphere of the new creation in Christ. Therefore you can see this is a very important thing.

In the fifth chapter of the Book of Joshua, the children of Israel having forgotten to circumcise the males for a generation had to be circumcised again and the whole nation was circumcised and it took place at Gilgal, meaning “rolling,” and the idea back of that was the rolling away of the flesh. And it was to Gilgal incidentally in the conquering of the land that they always came back to, because it's from the place of the denial of self and flesh that one gains victory in spiritual life. But there at Gilgal, God said that was the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt. So circumcision then signifies the removal of the body of the flesh.

It signifies the removal of the reproach of the association that we have with the world, by nature, the purification that God intends to accomplish in the lives of all of his saints. In other passages, in the Old Testament, this becomes figurative and Moses will speak about, “circumcise the foreskin of your heart” and again the figurative sense of it is expressed in the fact that the heart is really the thing that lies back of this practice.

Now, there are people who have difficulty with these matters, but you see God is trying to strike at the root of the problem of human nature. Thoreau, who was not noted for good biblical things, said, “There are a hundred men hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.” Well, God was trying to strike at the root of evil, original sin, in giving them this right, so that they would think about this for they thought deeply about these things.

A preacher by the name of Seth Joshua once told how he met a man who said he could not swallow what preachers called original sin. Mr. Joshua said that, “My good fellow, there is no occasion for you to swallow it. It's inside you already.” So it is. It's something with which we have to contend, and this is one of the purposes of circumcision to stress the removal of the body of the flesh as suggestive of the fact that

those who belong to the Lord are those who have truly received the grace of justification, but whose lives then are characterized by a growth in holiness and purity. That’s the first thing that circumcision appears to suggest.

Now, we have already said that it signifies faith righteousness. It is the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 4 who makes that point and I would like for you to turn to that passage too because it’s another comment by the apostle on the Old Testament. The apostle -- incidentally, it would be interesting to have him sit in our audiences and hear us preach, wouldn’t it? -- but in some ways, I am kind of glad he is not here, but in other ways, I feel that if he were here, he would say, “Well you are right on this point at least,” because I was turning to his own work and giving his interpretation of the Old Testament in Romans Chapter 4 and verse 11.

Now remember in this chapter, Paul is arguing against those who thought that it was necessary not only to believe in Christ perhaps, but also to be circumcised in order to be saved. And he was making this simple little point. You haven’t bothered to look at the numbering of the chapters in the Book of Genesis. Why it’s in the 15th chapter that it says that he was justified, it’s not until the seventeenth chapter that Abraham was circumcised, and so it’s obvious that his justification didn’t depend on circumcision. So his answer is simply this. Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 17, but in making his comments, he defines circumcision. “And he received the sign of circumcision,” this is Romans 4:11, “A seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.” So circumcision was given as a sign or seal of the righteousness that came by faith.

So ideally when the males were circumcised, it was designed to represent the necessity of a true faith relationship to the Lord and ideally when the children of Israel grew up and believed in Jehovah, then the sign of circumcision was truly a sign and seal of a faith righteousness. It was never intended to be a righteousness by works, but human inability to take the doctrine of sin, original sin, frequently transforms the things that God intends to be illustrations of faith principles and practices and experiences, into

works, but it was a sign of faith righteousness. It was to mark out the children of Israel as distinct from the pagans and heathen about them. Every Christian is to be marked out as different from the world, separate. Now our separation is the separation of a faith righteousness and a measure of holiness, growth in holiness, in our daily life.

There is a third thing that circumcision signified. It signified a commitment to the Lord. Well that of course is simply the other side of the removal of the body of the flesh, but it is stated in the Old Testament I think very plainly in Jeremiah in Chapter 4 and verse 4. Now we will take time for a cup of tea while some of you find Jeremiah, but will you turn to Jeremiah chapter 4 and verse 4 and will you listen as I read – I’ll begin at verse 3 -- and I would like for you to read it for yourselves. So don't hesitate to turn there and if you cannot find Jeremiah, there is an index that you can look it up. We all have to start there sometime.

Verse 3, “For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, “Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns.” Now notice the first line of Verse 4. I am reading from the New American Standard Bible. “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord.” Here it's not “circumcise the foreskins of your hearts,” as in Deuteronomy 10:16 but circumcise yourselves to the Lord. Then he says “and remove the foreskins of your heart.” In other words, circumcision signifies the removal of the body of the flesh, the old man, but it also signified then the commitment too positively to the Lord, because holiness is not only negative but positive and both aspects are true of the purity that should characterize us.

Legalism frequently intrudes when attention is given to the negatives. Do not, do not, do not, do not. And frequently the negatives are things that we can do. There is a way. I remember when I grew up in churches, it was, when I first came in among evangelicals, I was puzzled. Do not smoke. Do not drink. Do not go to the theater. Do not wear lipstick. That was especially for you, ladies. It was alright to go to the beauty

parlor, but not to wear a lipstick. And so on. Do not listen to the radio. Later on, it was do not listen to the TV, and things like this.

These are the tendencies of human nature because you see people can do those things. I could stay away from the theater. I could stay away from other things, and I certainly could stay away from lipstick. [Johnson laughs] And so if you did these things, you were thought to be spiritual, but they were negatives. It is very easy to get entrapped in negatives, some of which may be good of themselves, but not to be approached from the standpoint of legalism. The positive is so important because when a person is committed positively to the Lord and develops that personal relationship to him positively, it won't be long before the true negatives begin to disappear. So circumcise yourself to the Lord. That's important.

So this signified commitment to the Lord, and then finally from the 14th verse of the 17th chapter of Genesis, it signifies commitment to the Lord's people. We read, “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken the covenant.” So the circumcised belong together in a company of the fellowship of Israel and likewise today, those who belong to our Lord Jesus Christ are a company of people. When we believe in him, we are not simply an individual saved by grace, but we are more. We are a part of the body of Christ and so it signified a commitment to the Lord's people.

There is some possibility of a parallel with baptism here, but that would take a lengthy period of time to discuss and I think Mr. Storms has discussed that certainly adequately in recent studies in the adult class in this room. So I will pass that by. Let me say this. This question of circumcision must have had some very personal and practical significance for the children of Israel. It was an extremely personal rite, of course.

Now let me just say this. It had special significance for parents, it had special significance for the wife of the man, and it had significance for the man himself. For the parents of the man, it would confirm the fact that they had been faithful in transmitting

the seed given them in their nature by God to a son with whom God had blessed their union. For the wife of the Israelite, it would be a sign to her. It would confirm to her and give assurance to her that the individual to whom she was married and who would share with her his life was a true follower of the covenant of Abraham and it would give her encouragement and assurance as she gave herself completely to him to know that this obedience to the command of God had been carried out, and she would therefore have greater hope that God would bless their union and bless their family. And to the man himself, it was a daily testimony that he and his family were consecrated to the God of Abraham. It was a reminder to him constantly of his obligations and especially of his privileges that he belonged to Israel, the chosen people of God.

Well, you can see that this was a very significant thing and therefore, it is extremely significant when someone defies it and we read of that in verse 14. “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” That would be the evidence of rebellion, and when a person refused to submit to circumcision, it was a sign that he was out of harmony with the God who gave this ordinance.

Incidentally, you will notice that the ultimate guilt is not the parents. It does not say in verse 14 but an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall have his parents cut off from the people of God, because ultimately the responsibility tended to attach to the individual involved. So that the human responsibility rested finally on the individual, and if he should discover later on what the word of God said and that the rite had not been performed upon him as an infant, then it was his responsibility to be circumcised even if he was as Abraham at age 99.

Now, we turn briefly and consider the participation of Sarah in the covenant remembering that up to this point no specific word has been given that Sarah is to be the mother of the promised seed. Now one might have thought that, if he had thought deeply about this, one might have come to the conclusion that Sarah must be the mother

because does not the revelation of God teach that the union of a man and wife should be monogamous? That is, polygamy seems to be excluded by the initial provision to Adam of a wife and he might then have reason from that, that if monogamy is the teaching of God’s revelation, then Sarah must be the mother.

But up to this point, there is no direct word that Sarah is to be the mother of the seed and thus the unhappy incident with Hagar. Well we read now beginning with verse 15. Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.” So she is to be given a new name just as Abram’s name became Abraham, “exalted father, father of a multitude,” without any but one child up to this point. So Sarah, if her name meant princely, she is to be called princess. And she is called princess because kings shall come from her.

So, just as God’s confirmation of the covenant to Abraham is marked by the change of his name and the seal is given, so here Sarah too is given a new name which more beautifully expresses the fact that she is a princess. I’ve known lots of female princesses, but she is the princess so far as I am concerned, so far as the Bible is concerned I should say.

Now Abraham’s response is incredulous reaction and I can certainly understand. Abraham fell on his face. That was what he did more than once you know. That’s not bad. Perhaps he had some marks on his face from sudden falls, but we read in verse 3 “and Abram fell on his face” and here again in verse 17. That’s not a bad place for the godly to be; on their face before the Lord. So he fell on his face before the Lord and as he did, he said within his heart, well he laughed first. He laughed.

Now there are some kinds of laughter that are the laughter of joy. That is the laughter of joy. For example, when an extra point is kicked, that means the game, or when a field goal is missed by the opponent, that means the game. Lot of good laughter takes place then, hearty laughter. This was laughter and I think in this case, it was the laughter of faith. Now later in the next chapter, Sarah will laugh too, but her laughter

happens to be the laughter of unbelief. But his I believe is probably the laughter of belief although there are some things that could be said otherwise, but since God does not reprove Abraham, I am rather inclined to think that it was incredulous reaction, but believing in its essence.

And so he said, “Shall a child be born to a man one hundred years old and will Sarah who is ninety years old bear a child?” And he couldn’t resist it, because for thirteen years now, Ishmael had been growing up and he had become attached to this young man who evidently was a very manly kind of man and no doubt had won Abraham’s heart. And so there came from Abraham, an evidence that he was not yet completely sanctified, for he said, “O that Ishmael might live before Thee.” And when he says live, he means live in worship, that is, live in the sense of possessing the relationship of covenantal union. “O that Ishmael might live before Thee.”

Perhaps, he thought Ishmael was the seed you see. He had the child. Could it be thirteen years? Could it be that Ishmael is the seed? No special word had been given to him evidently that Sarah was to have the seed. Now God replies in a very interesting way. He first of all says no. Now you would think that here is a father who loves a son, thirteen years old, he has become very attached to him and he speaks out of great love and devotion to Ishmael and certainly all of a father’s desire that the child might have the blessing of God. “O that Ishmael might live before there.”

You cannot help but sympathize with Abraham for his petition, but God is not a person who is moved to change His purposes by our pleas. Please remember that. Now He does bless Ishmael as we shall see, but so far as His purpose is concerned, that purpose is an inviolable purpose. So the answer is no. That’s a great lesson in prayer. Sometimes the answers are no, and we must bow to them. Sometimes they are yes. Sometimes we must wait. But the answer comes. It’s no in this case.

Now he will go onto say that he has heard Ishmael, but before he does let me read verse 19. “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name

Isaac” which means “he laughs” in order to remind Abraham every time he looked at Isaac, he laughed. Every time he looked at Mr. Laughter, he thought about how incredulously he has responded to the word of God. It reminded him too of the fact that Isaac was a supernatural son. This last week I said just as supernaturally as when God said, let there be light, there was light. So he spoke to the dead bodies of Abraham and Sarah and said let there be Isaac, and Isaac was conceived and born.

So call his name laughter. God has a sense of humor. Mr. Laughter. I imagine that did a good bit for Abraham's sanctification too. And He said “I will establish My covenant with Him for an everlasting covenant for His descendants after Him.” Now I have been saying all along and I know what you are thinking, Dr. Johnson is overemphasizing this. No, I am not. I am not. If you want to come and argue with me, I'll be waiting up here for you, but I am not overemphasizing this. Do you know why? Because there are so many people who say he is overemphasizing it when they really don't believe what I am talking about at all. It's their way of avoiding the issue. What we have here is God's distinguishing grace. No for Ishmael. Yes for Isaac.

Now there is no way in which we can avoid the significance of that and fortunately the apostles are our best guides. Do you know how Paul got all of those horrible things? I will put them in quotes because I of course think they are great, wonderful. Do you know how he got all of those horrible things in Romans, chapter 9 when he talks about foreordination, about how God has mercy to whom He will have mercy and how He hardens whom He will harden, do you know where Paul got all of those things? Did he go around the corner one day in Jerusalem and found them written in secret handwriting from God? No, he got them from the study of the Bible. He just studied the Bible and he read the Bible and he pondered it and he realized these were the things that God was saying in the Book of Genesis.

Now let me read you from the 9th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. Listen to what Paul says and notice the application. He is just arguing from having read this very

chapter that we are talking about, “but it is not as though the word of God has failed for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel. Neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but through Isaac, your descendants will be named.” That is it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. And then having talked about God’s purpose according to his choice, he adds, “So then it does not depend on man who wills or on man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”

You see, this is God’s purpose according to the election of grace. And so Ishmael is excluded. The purpose of God does not encompass him. Now you’ve got some better idea of how this ought to be done. I would like to hear it, but if I hear it, you have to give me the privilege of responding to it because there is no better way to do what has been done than the way that God has done it. It also is a test of our true submission to the word of God. So it was no for Ishmael, but it was yes for Isaac.

Now God is a benevolent God. He is a loving God in two senses. There are certain people He loves with the love of choice. “Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.” That’s the choice. But so far as the love of benevolence is concerned, He has been good to all of us. He is good to you. He has allowed you to live all of these years and have an opportunity to hear the Word of God expounded for all of the years of your life in order that you might respond and believe and become a member of the family of God. He has been long suffering to you when you’ve spoken against him and argued against him and despised his word and refused him in contempt of the mercy that he has given to you. So He is good and benevolent, and he is good and benevolent to Ishmael. Whether Ishmael ultimately came to heaven or not, the Bible does not tell us. It's possible that he did, but he was not in the purpose and plan of God so far as the Messiah was concerned.

Listen to what he says, “As for Ishmael” verse 20, “I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and I will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My

covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.” So the covenant is confirmed with Isaac who is to be born, Ishmael is blessed, but the purpose of God is through the supernatural son Isaac, an illustration of the supernatural son who will become the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, you know, I’ve seen a lot of presidential news and conferences; I don’t see quite as many now as I used to, not quite as interested for some reason these days, but anyway I do remember that when everybody gathers, somebody will say “Ladies and gentleman, the President of the United States of America.” Everybody quiets down and maybe there is some clapping. Well that’s kind of like Abraham’s manifestation of God to him, that is, God appeared to him, but when the time comes for the conference to end you know the president just walks off the stage after having said, ‘thank you.’ That’s the end. He doesn’t say, “Now do you mind if I leave?” He just leaves. Well that’s what we read in verse 22. “And When He had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.” And the result as you know is that Abraham immediately set out to obey the commands that had been given to him, a beautiful illustration of the obedience of faith.

Well our time has gone. Let me just mention to you this. Abraham’s experiences are in some ways unique. There is only one Abrahamic Covenant, but nevertheless the experiences in essence are experiences that are open to us. They are the experiences of faith and trust. And in the sphere of life in which He has placed you, it is in that sphere that you are to have the experience of faith and trust. In other words, all of the questions that affect your daily life are questions that are to be decided as Abraham’s destiny was decided in his relationship to the Lord God. You are my friends, the Lord Jesus said, if you do what I command you. And Abraham was a person who responded in this instance in faith.

I would like to close by just asking you, if you will when you leave to read the words that Mr. Meyer has written in response. “O friends of God, he says, why do you not make more of your transcendent privileges? Life is really one long talk with God, one

long en masse road journey. May the Lord help us who have believed in the Lord Jesus to treat it in that way. We are His friends and we are His friends when we do that which has been commanded us. Take advantage of your opportunities to come to know God, to know Him truly in your experience, and you will find that the blessings of life will be yours”.

If you are here this morning and you are not a friend of God, you may become a friend of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who offered the atoning sacrifice shedding his blood for the remission of sins and the forgiveness of sins is offered to all upon the basis of trust in Him. If, through the Holy Spirit, you have seen your sin, your sin has been covered in the cross of Calvary and may God bring you to trust in Him and receive as a free gift, everlasting life. Don't leave this auditorium without the personal word to the Lord in which you will receive as a free gift, everlasting life. Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are so thankful to Thee Lord for the word of God, the difficult sections as well as the simple ones, and we thank Thee for this account of the right of circumcision and all that it meant. Enable us Lord as those who have been circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands. Reflect in our lives the purity that will glorify Thee. May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.