

New Identity, New Responsibilities

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[0 : 00] You may be seated. Good morning. My name's Matthew Capone, and I'm one of the pastors here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church.

! And it's my joy to bring God's word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. We're glad that you're here. And we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good, they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it. Which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in his word.

This morning we're continuing our series in the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis first tells the origin of the world in chapters 1 through 11. And then it tells the origin of God's people, the story of Israel, in chapters 11 through 50.

We are focusing only on chapters 11 through 25 because we are in the Abraham story. And we're looking at Abraham for two reasons. First, because we are preparing to go back into our series in the book of Romans.

[1 : 12] Romans chapter 4 is about Abraham. Second, it allows us to ask the question, what does it look like to follow God in faith? Last week we were in Genesis chapter 16, which I told you was one of the most painful and tender passages in Scripture.

Painful because of human failing and tender because of God's great mercy and grace. This week we're in chapter 17. There have been 13 years of silence since the end of the previous chapter. So we have a large gap between 16 and 17. 17 is a follow-up in many ways to chapter 15. Because both 15 and 17 cover God's covenant.

When we talk about covenants, we are always talking about the nature of our relationship with God. That's the realm that we're in when we have covenant talk. Chapter 15, we ask this question, what is the foundation of our relationship with God?

You remember the foundation is that we are His children. That will never change. Chapter 17 is a different question, not what is the foundation of our relationship, but what does it mean to be in a relationship with God?

[2 : 29] How does that relationship change and form us? And so with that, I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 17. You can turn on your phone.

You can turn in your worship guide. You can open your Bible. And no matter where you turn, remember that this is God's Word. Proverbs chapter 30, verse 5 tells us, Every word of God proves true.

He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. And so that's why we read now chapter 17, starting at verse 1. When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty.

Walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly. Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.

[3 : 47] And I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

Verse 9. And God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you.

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of a covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised.

Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money, from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised.

[4 : 57] So shall my covenant be in your flesh, an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. Verse 15. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarah, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarah, but Sarah shall be her name.

I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?

Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? Verse 18. And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you.

God said, No, but Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.

[6 : 06] As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.

But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

Verse 22. When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him.

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.

That very day, Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. And all the men of his house, those born in the house, and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

[7 : 14] I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we do thank you again for your word, that you do speak to us in words that we can understand.

We ask that you would do that this morning, that you would open our eyes to what you have for us, that you would speak to us, you'd teach us, you would grow our love for you and our obedience as well.

We thank you that we don't worry this morning about whether we've earned or deserved these things. We know that we haven't, and so we simply ask for them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. In April of 2016, there was a news article that came out that threatened to break the internet, as they say, because the British government had commissioned a research vessel for polar research.

So this vessel was supposed to study global warming and climate change, polar science, rising sea levels, and they decided they had a great idea that they would find the name, they'd pick the name of this ship through an online poll.

[8 : 29] And so there were a variety of names that rose to the surface in this. One of them was Ice Ice Baby. Another one was I Like Big Boats and I Cannot Lie.

Science with three exclamation points. Clifford the Big Red Boat. None of those I've told you about won the poll, though. The winner was this, Bodie McBoatface.

And so the question that came up was this, are they going to honor the poll? Will they do what they said they were going to do? Will the British government have an RRS, Bodie McBoatface?

And the answer was this, no. British government went back on their word. They didn't do what they said they would do. They didn't honor the process.

No, instead they decided they're going to name the ship after a natural scientist. And so it was named after David Attenborough. It makes sense, right? It's fitting. It makes sense that a ship devoted to natural science would be named after a natural scientist.

[9 : 42] Principle is this, names really matter. names really matter. You actually can't name a research vessel by the British government, Bodie McBoatface.

Because the name of the ship, right, it needs to reflect the ship's purpose and mission. Names shape and show our identity. Parents, you know this. When you named your child, there's a good chance that name reflected your hopes for them, right?

Especially if you choose a name from the Bible. Man, I like this character and what they show and I want my son or daughter to show that. Wives, when you got married, maybe you took a new last name, right?

Because there's a change there in identity. That's what's happening here in chapter 17. Verses 4 and 5, we go from Abram, which means father, to Abraham, which means father of many nations. There's a change. Yes, Abram's a father. He hasn't been for most of his life. He has one son, Ishmael. That's the present. The future is going to be something much greater.

[10 : 56] The father not of nations, of a nation, many nations. Same thing happens with Sarai to Sarah, verse 15. Now, there's a vowel change that happens.

That's the difference here. And what's hard about this is that Sarai and Sarah actually mean the same thing. So they both mean princess.

Our best guess, then, is that the first name reflects the past, that Sarah came from this royal family. The new name reflects the future, that she will be the mother of kings.

Note that in verse 16, it's said in the context of the name change, she shall become nations, kings of peoples shall come from her.

By the way, this is the first, but not the only mention of kings in Genesis. The first time we're told that the kings are going to come from Abraham and Sarah.

[11 : 56] And so we see also, not just this identity marker, but there's a decisive break from the past here. We knew Abram and Sarah, they were a couple with no kids wandering around in the desert.

Now we're introduced to Abraham and Sarah. And we might say in a certain sense they're new characters because the new names matter.

What does it mean to be in a relationship with God? How does that relationship change us? First answer is this.

It means that God gives us a new identity. It means that God gives us a new identity. Now it doesn't mean that your name will change, although we do call ourselves Christians.

It does mean we get a new purpose, a new mission, a new life. I had a job interview many, many years ago and I think it was a large interview.

[13 : 06] It was me and a bunch of people around this big table and I think one of the individuals that interviewed had gone on the internet and searched questions to ask in a job interview and got in probably one of the worst lists possible.

And so she looked at me and she said, how would you describe yourself in one word? Which is extremely relevant to getting a job. And I'm terrible at questions like that and really the only answer I could think of was the one I gave.

I said, well, redeemed. That's the Christian in one word. What is one word that describes you as a Christian?

Redeemed. You've been bought by God. You've a new identity. So if you're a Christian, what is most true about you?

What is most true about you is not that you are a man or a woman or a boy or a girl. It is not that you are wealthy or poor. It is not your choices or your parents' choices.

[14 : 15] It is not your education or your lack of education. I'm not saying those things don't matter. I'm not saying they're insignificant. They are not what is most true about you.

They are not what is most important. What is most important about you is this, that you belong body and soul to your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He is fully paid for all your sins with his precious blood and he has set you free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over you in such a way that not a hair can fall from your head without the will of your Father in heaven.

In fact, all things must work together for your salvation. Christian, that is what is most true about you.

That is what is first. Of course, that brings to us both great humility and great hope. Humility, if we look to all those other things, if we think, I'm fine because I'm smart or wealthy or powerful, brings great hope if you don't have any of those things.

[15 : 39] What does the world say if you don't have any of those things? Either hustle or give up. The Bible says something quite different.

If you don't have those things, you still belong, body and soul, to Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, we do not make our own identity.

That is the great lie of our current age. The great lie of our current age is that it is all up to you to figure out exactly who you are and what that means.

That's actually too great of a weight for you to carry as a human. That's actually more than you were meant to figure out. It's like that quote that I told you from a few years ago by Taylor Swift.

I have some good news. It's totally up to you. I have some terrifying news. It's totally up to you. Christian, I have some good news.

[16 : 43] It is not at all up to you. We don't make our identity. We receive it.

What do you believe is most true about you? If it is something other than the fact that you have been redeemed, you have lost the plot.

That is what is most important. I also don't want you to miss that there is a decisive break from the past here. There's, of course, many things that have happened to Abraham and Sarah, and there's now a new future.

You, if you're a Christian, have a decisive break from the past as well. I do not mean that the past does not affect you. Remember, I had a professor in seminary.

He said, there are things that have happened to me in this life that I will never get over. Meaning, the impact of that is going to travel with me until I die.

[17 : 59] And so, I'm not saying the past doesn't affect you. What I am saying is this. It cannot define you. It cannot define you.

2 Corinthians chapter 5 tells us, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come.

If you belong to God, there is nothing else that gets the final word on you. If you belong to God, there is nothing else that gets the final word on you.

What did we sing? Verse 3, this is on page 4. And if he has redeemed me, I am not my own. The measure of my worth is his love alone.

He declares my standing and he declares my state. So, I will know myself by the what? By the name he gave.

[19 : 13] If you are cynical, you might be thinking, man, that sounds really great, Matthew, except you totally skipped verses 1 and 2.

What does God say to Abraham in verses 1 and 2? He says, walk before me and be blameless.

Man, that kind of sounds like a bait and switch, right? Sounds like you have to earn something from God.

Yes, get those new names and there's a new weight that comes along with it. Kind of sounds, right? You have to earn something from God. Then in verses 9 through 13, there's all these instructions about circumcision.

Verse 14, the threat of punishment. If you do not circumcise, you'll be cut off. So, how is this new identity, how is that a good thing if it also comes with this requirement, this demand to be blameless?

To understand that, we've got to grasp a couple of things. First, we have to understand what is meant by a covenant. The word covenant appears 13 times in this passage, and there's many different ways of defining it.

[20 : 25] The definition I like best shows up on the back of your worship guide. It's from a pastor who says this, a covenant is a stunning blend of both law and love.

It is more intimate and loving than a mere contract, more binding and accountable than a mere relationship. God's calling Abraham into this relationship.

It's a relationship that has intimacy in it. It's also a relationship that has things that are binding and accountable. The second thing then is God is not, Abraham is not earning God's blessing here.

What's being presented to us is the logic of relationships. That blessing requires certain activities. Okay, blessing requires certain activities.

You'll see this on page seven of your worship guide. Obedience then is the means of living within the sphere of blessing and enjoying it. Obedience is never the means of earning or deserving the blessing.

[21 : 30] In other words, you never earn God's blessings. You do have to be in the right place to receive them. Okay, you don't earn God's blessings.

You do have to be in the right place to receive them. So think about it this way. Today is July 6th. Two days ago was July 4th. If you were invited to a cookout and you went, you received a blessing. Right? Probably you got a hamburger or a hot dog. did you earn the burger? No.

Would you have received the burger had you not shown up to the cookout? No. You had to be within the sphere of blessing. Right? You had to be within the proximity of the grill.

Your invitation was not based on merit. The host did not say, come over to my house because you have performed so well. Come over to my house. You showed up.

[22 : 35] You didn't earn anything. But you had to be there to receive it. Kids, you know the same thing. If you want to receive your parents' wisdom and blessing and guidance, what do you have to do?

You don't have to earn it. It's given to you freely, right? You're their child. You do have to show up for it. You do have to be within the same thing here with Abraham and Sarah.

Do they earn anything that God has promised to them to become a great nation? Of course not. Do they have to do something? Yes.

It actually turns out there are certain things you have to do if you want to have a child. Abraham and Sarah are going to have to do those things. They don't earn the blessing.

They show up to know what's also included. The Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, I am God Almighty.

[23 : 41] The Hebrew word here is El Shaddai. El Shaddai talks about God's great power over creation. In other words, God is saying these great things are going to happen to you because I will do it.

Verse two, I will make the covenant. Verses five through seven, I will, I will. Of course, that's going to have to happen, right?

God was not in the ancient Near East looking for the most powerful or fertile couple, and if he were, he would not have chosen Abraham and Sarah. God loves to use the foolish and the weak.

Christian, God loves to use you. Gives him great honor and glory. And so what does it mean to be in a relationship with God?

How does it change us? We've seen that it gives us a new identity. We also see it gives us new responsibilities. Yes, Abraham has a new name and he's called to new things.

[24 : 58] We have two commands to obedience here. There's a general and a specific. We're going to look at both. The general, verse one, walk before me and be blameless.

The specific, verse two, is that Abraham would perform this circumcision. You might be wondering, why in the world is circumcision the sign that's presented here? This passage does not answer that question for us.

There's all kinds of theories and conjectures. What I want to point out is simply what we see here in these verses. We find out two things. Verse 13, circumcision is the sign because it's a permanent sign of a permanent covenant.

So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Permanent sign of a permanent covenant. We find out also in verse 14 the punishment and the punishment gets at the purpose. The meaning here. If the punishment is being cut off from the community, what must be part of the meaning of circumcision if not membership in the community?

[26 : 06] It's the same thing we see in baptism. The emphasis in this passage though is not on the meaning of circumcision. The emphasis is on obedience.

Is Abraham going to do what God has called him to do? Especially something so painful. When I was a teacher many years ago at a Christian school, I was teaching ninth graders and we went through the book of Genesis together and this sweet ninth grade boy, when we got to Genesis 17, raised his hand and he said, what is circumcision?

And I said, you know what? That's a great question for you to ask your parents at home. Came back to the next class and every time circumcision came up after that, he would just put his head in his hands and go like this.

The ninth grade girls would laugh at him. Why? This is not an easy command. God is demanding something very serious from Abraham.

The narrator of Genesis is very skilled and so the question in the mind of the ancient Near Eastern reader is, is Abraham actually going to do it? There's this suspense that the narrator is building.

[27 : 27] Verse 14 is when the punishment is laid out and then we have to wait. Right? We have to wait throughout the rest of the reading and so as we're waiting through the narrative, we're wondering, wow, is Abraham actually going to do this?

Is he for real right now? Is he going to follow through? And then to make it even better, verse 22, when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Scholars will tell us that when God finishes speaking, we almost always move on to the next scene. There is no note of God getting up and leaving.

And so this is especially important that we're told of God's exit. It is, in a sense, God's kind of his mic drop, right? Okay, you need to obey.

I'm out. And so we have that moment where the question is, is Abraham going to obey? That explains for us verses 22 through 27.

[28 : 33] Does Abraham obey? Yes. And not only does he obey, he really obeys. We are told, not once, not twice, but three times that Abraham circumcised Ishmael.

Why do we need to hear about that three times? So there's no mistake in our mind. Abraham did what God told him to do.

of course, our New Testament reading, Romans chapter 4, verse 11, points out, Abraham's righteousness came before circumcision.

Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 17. This obedience does not earn his new identity. It does not earn God's favor. It is the right response to his new identity, to God's favor.

God's favor. What does it mean to be in a relationship with God? How does it change us? Being in a relationship with God means that he gives us a new identity.

[29 : 45] Being in a relationship with God means he gives us new responsibilities. I told you that Abraham had a general and a specific command. There is a general and a specific command for us as well.

general command, walk before me and be blameless. As I told you a couple weeks ago, God's laws, his rules are not arbitrary.

God's rules, his laws are set up to cooperate with the grain of the universe. If you want to experience blessing and flourishing, do what God says.

God gives us his commands not because he is a harsh task master, but because he wants you to have what is good. He wants you to have what is good.

There's a specific command as well. Abraham has this call to circumcision. Now, circumcision has been replaced by baptism in the New Testament. Baptism means many things.

[30 : 58] One of the things it means is the same that we saw this morning in circumcision, which is membership in God's people. We know that, right, because of the punishment.

The punishment in the Old Testament often fits the crime. Verse 14, if you don't get circumcised, you'll be cut off from the people. What's the opposite of that?

The opposite is embracing God's people. Embracing the church, being a part of where God has said, this is the place where my blessing happens.

You cut yourself off from God's people. You've actually chosen what God says is a curse. Can you imagine an Israelite saying, well, I've been circumcised and I'm still going to leave?

No, that's where God's blessing resides. Don't choose the curse. Commit to God's church.

[31 : 58] Commit to his people. You will be blessed. That's the place. That's the place where we're equipped and empowered to do everything God's called us to do.

The article about Bodie McBoatface came out in 2016, and at the time, they said it was going to set sail in 2019, did not have its maiden voyage until 2021.

Why? The boat had to be equipped for the mission ahead of it, right? It is not easy to navigate the icy waters of the Arctic. Christian, the Lord never sends us out before he equips us.

Notice what happens here. the identity comes before the mission. The same thing with our Lord Jesus. Remember, Jesus is baptized before he goes into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. And what happens when he's baptized? God the Father says, this is my beloved son. Even Jesus needed to be reminded of his identity before his mission.

[33 : 15] Of course, it doesn't come free. Remember what we saw in Genesis 15. God is the one who pays the price of the covenant.

He's the one who pays for our failure. The punishment, verse 14, is that you will be cut off. What happened to Jesus? Jesus was cut off.

Jesus came, lived the perfect life that we should have lived, died the death that we deserve, cut off instead of us. We don't earn the blessings because Jesus earned them for us.

Because God has given us a new identity, we can live lives of obedience. Because we have a new identity, we can embrace new responsibilities.

let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do again praise you and thank you for your word. We thank you that you come to us, you seek us out like Hagar, even when we're not seeking you.

[34 : 28] That you free us from the burden of justifying ourselves and instead you're the one who gives us a name. We ask that you would drive that deep into our hearts, that it would lead us to love and serve you more and more.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.