God’s Covenant with man

Chapter 6 – “Seal of the Promise”

As we discussed in the introductory chapters on our subject of God’s covenant, a defining characteristic of covenants are seals and signs – things which we use to remind ourselves, and which God uses to remind us, of the promises and terms of the covenant. We saw that Abram believed in the Lord, yet we also saw that faith faltering at times. One of the things that God did in response to that faltering faith was give Abram a sign, something to look to in order to remind him of His promises.

In Chapter 6 of Covenants, Robertson takes up the subject of this sign and seal of God’s covenant with Abraham – circumcision. After God made His great promise to Abraham, and showed him graphically His commitment to him to satisfy both the promises and demands of the covenant, we see in chapter 16 Abraham taking matters into his own hands. In a sense, he makes an attempt to “keep the terms of the covenant by himself” through Hagar, Sarai’s maidservant. What follows in Genesis 17 is God’s institution of the sign of circumcision.
The reiteration of the promise

1. After the birth of Hagar’s son, God appears to Abram.
   a. How does He greet him?
   b. God follows the greeting with what command?
   c. Why do you suppose He does so here? How does Abram respond?

2. The order re-established, God then reiterates the promises he had previously given Abram. (Gen. 17:3-9)
   a. What does He promise?
   b. Does there seem to be a difference between the way things are said here and when the promises were first made? Are there additional things explicitly laid out about God’s role, and about Abram’s?
Introduction of the sign of the promise...

3. In 17:9-14, after reiterating the promises He’s been made to Abraham, God outlines the covenant which He’s establishing.

   a. What does circumcision, the cutting away of the flesh, symbolize?

   b. In Gen 17:12-13, who is Abraham commanded to circumcise?

   c. There is a large school of thought in the church which makes a very great distinction between God’s “programs” for Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church – indeed, a complete divide. They would argue that God dealt entirely differently with the physical nation of Israel than with his church as established after Pentecost. Do verses 12 and 13 (together with Exodus 12:43-49) give us something to say to this idea? For example, who was the sign of circumcision for?
d. The practice of circumcision was rather widespread in Middle Eastern cultures at the time of Abraham. The normal practice (which continues today in Africa and elsewhere) was that boys, upon reaching puberty, were circumcised as a symbol of their manhood. How does the circumcision of 8-day old infants differ? How does this command of God (to circumcise even infant boys of the household) affect our understanding of the meaning of circumcision?

The seal of the promise...

4. Did circumcision justify Abraham? The Apostle Paul has a lot to say about Abraham’s faith and justification, as we discussed last week. Let’s take a look at Galatians 3:6-14 and Romans 4:7-12.

a. Paul wrote his epistle to Galatia largely to counter legalism among Jewish converts to Christianity. In chapter 3, we see Paul making reference to Abraham. What does he say about those relying on their circumcision, or those who required circumcision as a prerequisite for consideration as faithful?
b. In Romans 4:7-12, Paul relates to us the relationship between Abraham’s circumcision and his justification.

1. When (temporally speaking) does Paul say that Abraham was justified?

2. The sign of the covenant is the circumcision itself. Here’s a somewhat ponderous question... How is it a seal? (See also Galatians 3:2-6) Do all of those who possess the sign possess the seal?

c. In Deuteronomy 10:16, and later in Jeremiah 4:4, the people of God are told to “circumcise” their hearts. Moses spoke in the plains of Moab to Israel, telling them that the Lord would circumcise their hearts, so that they might love Him. What does this mean? What was the true nature of circumcision?

d. Paul sums up for us the central point of Abraham’s story in verses 23-25. How does studying the development of Abraham’s faith & life help us?
In Conclusion

Next week, we will be discussing the relationship between circumcision, the sign of the covenant before Christ’s coming, and baptism, which is, as Paul notes, the “circumcision” of God’s redemptive plan after Christ’s life, death and resurrection. As you go through the next week and read chapter 7 of Covenants, consider the meaning of baptism from the covenantal point of view. What does it mean to be sealed to the covenant promises of God? How is it related to the sign and seal of circumcision?
Verse 10. How was it then reckoned?—In what circumstances was Abraham when this blessing was bestowed upon him? When he was circumcised, or before? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.—Faith was reckoned to Abraham for justification, as we read Genesis 15:6, (where see the note;) but circumcision was not instituted till about fourteen or fifteen years after, Genesis 17:1, etc.; for faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness or justification at least one year before Ishmael was born; compare Genesis 15, and 16. At Ishmael’s birth he was eighty-six years of age, Genesis 16:16; and, at the institution of circumcision, Ishmael was thirteen, and Abraham ninety-nine years old. See Genesis 17:24, 25; and see Dr. Taylor.

Verse 11. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal, etc.—So far was obedience to the law of circumcision from being the reason of his justification, that he not only received this justification before he was circumcised, but he received the sign of circumcision, as a seal of the pardon which he had before actually received. And thus he became the father, the great head and representative, of all them that believe; particularly the Gentiles, who are now in precisely the same state in which Abraham was when he received the mercy of God. Hence it appears, says Dr. Taylor, that the covenant established with Abraham, Genesis 17:2-15, is the same with that, Genesis 12:2, 3; 15:5, etc.; for circumcision was not a seal of any new grant, but of the justification and promise which Abraham had received before he was circumcised; and that justification and promise included the Gospel covenant in which we are now interested. St. Paul refers to this, Galatians 3:8: The Scripture foreseeing that God would justify us, heathens, through faith, preached before the Gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. The whole of the apostle’s argument, in this fourth chapter to the Romans, proves that we, believing Gentiles, are the seed of
Abraham, to whom, as well as to himself, the promise was made; and that the promise made to him is the same in effect as that promise which is now made to us; consequently, it is the Abrahamic covenant in which we now stand; and any argument taken from the nature of that covenant, and applied to ourselves, must be good and valid. It is also undeniably evident, from this eleventh verse, as well as from Genesis 17:1-11, that circumcision was a seal or sign of the Gospel covenant in which we now stand.

From Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 18:

And truly, we also attempt to rob God of his power, whenever we distrust his word. At the first sight, Paul seems to give cold praise to the faith of Abraham, in saying, that he did not consider his body, now dead, but gave glory to God, because he was persuaded that he could fulfill what he had promised. (Romans 4:19.) But if we thoroughly investigate the source of distrust, we shall find that the reason why we doubt of God’s promises is, because we sinfully detract from his power. For as soon as any extraordinary difficulty occurs, then, whatever God has promised, seems to us fabulous; yea, the moment he speaks, the perverse thought insinuates itself, How will he fulfill what he promises? Being bound down, and preoccupied by such narrow thoughts, we exclude his power, the knowledge of which is better to us than a thousand worlds. In short, he who does not expect more from God than he is able to comprehend in the scanty measure of his own reason, does him grievous wrong. Meanwhile, the word of the Lord ought to be inseparably joined with his power; for nothing is more preposterous, than to inquire what God can do, to the setting aside of his declared will.
Ver. 23. — Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him. This history of the way in which Abraham received righteousness is not recorded for his sake alone, or applicable to himself only, but is equally applicable to all believers. The Apostle here guards us against supposing that this method of justification was peculiar to Abraham, and teaches that it is the pattern of the justification of all who shall ever find acceptance with God. The first recorded testimony respecting the justification of any sinner, as has been already observed, is that of Abraham. Others had been justified from the fall down to his time; but it was reserved for him to possess the high privilege and distinction of being thus the first man singled out and constituted the progenitor of the Messiah. In him all the nations of the earth were to be blessed, and consequently he was to be the father of all believers, who are all the children of Christ, Hebrews 2:13, and the heir of that inheritance on earth that typified the inheritance in heaven, which belongs to Jesus Christ, who is ‘appointed heir of all things,’ with whom all believers are joint heirs. And in Abraham we see that, in the first declaration of the nature of justification, it is held out as being conferred by the imputation of righteousness through faith only. This passage, then, which refers to what is written, as well as those preceding it in this chapter, it must again be remarked, exhibit the character of the historical parts of Scripture as all divinely inspired, and all divinely arranged, in the wisdom of God, to apply to events the most important in the future dispensation. Every fact and every circumstance which they announce, as well as the whole narrative, was ordered and dictated by Him, to whom all His works are known from the beginning of the world, Acts 15:18.

Ver. 24. — But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. Righteousness shall be imputed to us, as well as to Abraham, if we have his faith. If we believe on Him that raised, etc. — Here God is characterized by the fact that He raised up Christ. This, then, is not a mere circumstance, but it is in this very
character that our faith must view God. To believe for salvation, we must believe not in God absolutely, but in God as the raiser up of Jesus Christ This faith in God, as raising up our Lord, must also include a right view of Him. It must imply a belief of the Gospel, not only as to the fact of a resurrection, but also as to the person and work of Christ.

From Martin Luther’s Commentary on Galatians 3:

It is, no doubt, a great prerogative and glory before the world, to be born of Abraham’s seed, as Paul sheweth (Romans 9), but not so before God. Wherefore the Jews do wickedly pervert this place concerning the blessing, in applying it only to a carnal blessing, and do great injury to the Scripture, which speaketh most manifestly of the spiritual blessing before God, and neither can or ought otherwise to be understood. This is then the true meaning of this place: ‘In thee shall be blessed.’ In which ‘thee?’ In thee Abraham believing, or in thy faith, or in Christ (thy seed) to come, in whom thou believest, all the nations of the earth (I say) shall be blessed; that as, all the nations shall be that blessed children, even like as thou art blessed; as it is written, ‘so shall thy seed be’ (<011505>Genesis 15:5). Hereof it followeth that the blessing and faith of Abraham is the same that ours is; that Abraham’s Christ is our Christ; that Christ died as well for the sins of Abraham as for ours. For ‘Abraham saw my day and rejoiced’ (John 8:56). All things therefore are the same. Wherefore we may in no wise suffer the Jews to make light of this word ‘blessing’ or to corrupt it. They look but through a veil into the Scripture, and therefore they understand not what or whereof the promise is which was made to the fathers; which we notwithstanding ought to consider above all things: so shall we see that God speaketh to Abraham the patriarch, not of the law nor of things to be done, but of things to be believed; that is to say, that God speaketh unto him of promises which are apprehended by, faith. Now, what doth Abraham? He believeth those promises. And what doth God to that believing Abraham? He imputeth faith unto him for righteousness; and addeth further many more promises: as, ‘I
am thy defender,' 'In thee shall all nations be blessed', 'Thou shalt be a father of many nations,' 'So shall thy seed be.' These are invincible arguments, against the which nothing can be said, if the places of the holy Scripture be thoroughly considered.

SO THEN THEY WHICH ARE OF FAITH, ARE BLESSED WITH FAITHFUL ABRAHAM

All the weight and force hereof lieth in these words: 'With faithful Abraham.' For he putteth a plain difference between Abraham and Abraham; of one and the selfsame person making two. As if he said: There is a working, and there is a believing Abraham. With the working Abraham we have nothing to do. For if he be justified by works, he hath to rejoice, but not with God. Let the Jews glory as much as they will of that begetting Abraham, which is a worker, is circumcised, and keepeth the law: but we glory of the faithful Abraham, of whom the Scripture saith, that he received the blessing of righteousness through his faith, not only for himself, but also for all those which believe as he did; and so the world was promised to that Abraham which believed. Therefore all the world is blessed; that is to say, receiveth imputation of righteousness, if it believe as Abraham did.