

THE CIRCUMCISED HEART

Genesis 17

Sermon for Peace Church

October 25, 2009

PURPOSE – To teach the need for a “cut” heart for carrying out God’s destiny and call people to Spirit-attentiveness leading to such softening.

MAIN IDEA – God’s destiny for our life is fulfilled as we live trusting in His sufficiency, believing His call and keeping a soft heart to His will.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let’s open our Bibles to Genesis 17, returning to the story of Abram.

1. God gave to Abram a PROMISE and a DESTINY that every Christian can relate to:
“You are blessed to be a blessing!”

(i) Into this age CURSED by sin & death, God has RETURNED to bring blessing & life!

Those He calls – like Abram & every Christian – are AGENTS of that blessing!

“Abram”, God called to him while living in the city of UR of the Chaldeans, “leave your country, your people, your father’s and go to the land I will show you ... I will make you into a great nation. I will make your name great. I will bless you ... and through you all peoples on earth will be blessed!”

(ii) HAVE YOU HEARD THAT CALL INTO GOD’S BLESSING PROGRAM FOR THE WORLD? Are you part of that new kingdom of Divine Favor ... It is LIFE.

It’s here. It’s growing. It’s coming. It will never end!

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING!

2. Abram said YES to God's call. He believed God's promises for his life. He affirmed that DESTINY. He obeyed God's directions. He set out for the land of Canaan.

It wasn't long, however, before he realized that in order to fulfill this destiny, he needed something that only God could give – the same thing that you and I need in order to receive & give God's blessing. ... HE NEEDED A SON!

(i) "How can I become a great nation without a son?" he cried to God, over & again – as he and his wife, Sarai, turned 60, 70, 80 ... 90 years of age!

"I will die! How can I pass your light along, unless I have new life?"

= CONTINUITY, PERPETUITY, GENERATION in a son

A. The cry for a "SON" is ours as well. "You must be born ANEW" to be part of God's blessing program for the world. You need NEW LIFE.

That life has come in THE Son – Jesus – the Son of God, the Son of Man. It is only through HIM living in you that you RECEIVE God's blessing ... in order to GIVE that blessing!

We die – but He is ETERNAL LIFE.

You and I need JESUS to truly live IN God. And we need to GIVE JESUS in order that others truly live.

"He who has the Son has life ... He who does not have the Son of God does not have life." – 1 John 5:12

3. Now here's the tremendous witness of Abram – why we call him the "Father of Faith".

Even when he & Sarai were getting on in age, he STILL BELIEVED that God would miraculously give him that new life! He believed God's promise ... *"and God credited it to him as righteousness"* (Genesis 15:6).

THE LIFE OF THE SON COMES THROUGH FAITH!

4. So in our study of Abram we are drawing near to the time of God's gifting him with the Son.

But before that life comes, there is one more work of PREPARATION God must do in Abram's heart – and in ours - in order that the Son be born in you!
Let's read GENESIS 17.

Read Genesis 17:1-27

II. WHAT A CIRCUMCISED HEART IS

1. BEFORE new life comes to Abram – THAT PROMISED SON - the work that God must do in his heart, and yours & mine, is to CIRCUMCISE it!

(i) Circumcision PHYSICALLY is the removal of the foreskin of the male penis – the body's organ of procreation.

Circumcision SPIRITUALLY is the removal of the sin nature – that CRUST that surrounds the heart in independence, pride, self-protection, callousness, hardness to God.

A. Before God gives you new life, He CUTS that crust AWAY. He BREAKS OPEN your heart like a farmer who must break open the hard soil in the spring, TILLING IT in order to plant the seeds of new life.

(ii) That's what circumcision in the Bible always represents: the cutting / opening / softening of the heart for the life of God to enter.

Dt. 10:16 – Moses says to God's people: *Circumcise your hearts – do not be stiff-necked any longer before God.*

= > *“Don’t be a “steif-coup”, one might translate in my Dutch-Friesian background ... cut open your heart to God.*

= be humble / open / exposed / vulnerable / dependent / trusting / receptive to God’s Word & Spirit! = CIRCUMCISE YOUR HEARTS

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

2. Not only is this work of the heart needed to RECEIVE the life of the Son, it’s needed to GROW in that life of Christ in us!

(i) This past week I learned of a person – a pastor, in fact - who was bad-mouthing me. He’s not from this area. He was a pastor, in fact. Not only was he talking down (trash) about me, he was doing it to one of my own children (who thankfully is mature enough to see through such godlessness).

But when I got WIND of what he said, what went on in my heart was dangerous / violent / cold / steely / vengeful / proud / hard.

A. Now I believe, like Abram and every Christian, God has given me a destiny and a promise to fulfill that destiny.

The destiny – is to be a blessing to this world, even as God has blessed me.

The promise – is the life of the Son, Jesus, in me to fulfill that destiny.

But TRUST ME – my heart’s initial reaction to that pastor was NOT to bless him. It was not to manifest the Spirit & truth of Christ to him.

BEFORE I can live my destiny, that VIOLENT / HARD heart needs to be CUT OPEN to God – which I am praying toward – SO THAT the life of the Son can grow & be manifest through me – in whatever ways He might lead.

3. Before the Son can be born in us ... as the Son grows in us, we must be circumcised of heart.

So let’s return to our story to observe some qualities of a circumcised heart. LET’S START WITH ITS THEOLOGY.

III. THE THEOLOGY OF A CIRCUMCISED HEART

1. A CIRCUMCISED HEART MEETS GOD AS EL-SHADDAI.

- That's how our chapter starts. Verse 1 – *When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless.”*

The Hebrew term is: I am EL-SHADDAI. It's the first time that God reveals Himself using this name.

It essentially means, I am the God who is SUFFICIENT ... I am the God who is ALL-COMPETENT ... I am God AL-MIGHTY!

2. The CONTEXT for this revelation is important. While Abram is characterized as a man of faith, he was not perfect in faith. He had his lapses.

Genesis 16 was one of them, as Pastor James covered last Sunday.

(i) Abram and Sarai decided that this project of getting a son was really TOO HARD for God – that He needed them to take over the job – with this solution – why don't we try to get the Promised Son through HAGAR, my maid-servant?!!

> “Abram, you sleep with her”, said Sarai ... “We'll get a son. And the promise & the destiny will happen that way, not through me!”

A. Well, it happens. Hagar conceives. They do get a son – Ishmael. But they quickly learn that God's promises are to be fulfilled in God's ways – through miraculous conception. Hagar gets one-uppity to Sarai. Family strife develops. Marital strife develops. Abram allows Sarai to mistreat Hagar. She flees. God commands Hagar back. And it ends up a definite MESS!

(ii) Into THAT context comes this fresh word of God to Abram:

“Abram, I am EL-SHADDAI = all sufficient ... = all competent. I'm big enough to do what I promise. I am ALMIGHTY!”

A. But here's the KICKER – that word came 13 YEARS LATER! Abram was 86 when Ishmael was born. He's now 99!

- = 13 years of experiencing the folly of acting on your own wisdom
- = 13 years of learning that God's promises are to be accomplished in God's power
- = a 13-year circumcision (humbling) of the heart!

13 years of learning the inadequacy of self-sufficiency - 13 yrs.- ENOUGH ALREADY!

3. But sometimes it takes us longer than that – 20, 30, 40 years of learning that you can't build a true life apart from God – not a life that knows His blessing and is a part of His plans for the world.

- You can't build a church that way, a family, even a business.
- You can't handle bad-mouthing pastors that way! – Independent ways of handling that will definitely lead to more "MESS".

"Our sufficiency comes from God", writes Paul in 2 Cor. 3.

(i) HE IS EL-SHADDAI!

It can take us a long time before we have ears to hear that revelation!

It took Abram 13 years.

A. He may have thought, "God's given up on me ... I screwed up ... This promise & destiny, "Blessed to be a blessing" is OVER."

... BUT ... It wasn't for him, NOR FOR YOU.

B. In His time, God speaks the word:

I AM YOUR SUFFICIENCY. I AM YOUR COMPETENCE. I AM GOD ALMIGHTY!

Hear Him today – cause that's the theology of a circumcised heart.

IV. THE IDENTITY OF A CIRCUMCISED HEART

1. In that theology, next comes a NEW IDENTITY.

A circumcised heart receives a NEW NAME from God.

Verse 5 – God reaffirms His design for Abram’s life by saying, *“No longer will you be called Abram (that means “exalted father”), your name now is ABRAHAM (= father of many)!”*

- Some commentators think that part of Abram’s problem may have been that he was yet too much into self-exaltation in God’s program for the world, so God renames him in this heart-circumcision chapter - from exalted father to “Abraham” – fruitful father, father of multitudes.

2. Biblically, a name represents your IDENTITY = WHO YOU ARE.

I.e. - Shaquille O’Neil is nicknamed DIESEL – that’s who he is on the B-ball court.

Jesus calls Simon, his lead apostle, PETROS – the “Rock” of his apostolic team!

(i) In the fullness of salvation, God’s people are each given a NEW NAME for the age to come! – Rev. 2:17 = a new identity for the new age.

A. When Abram receives this new name, ABRAHAM, its purpose is that he USE it to affirm God’s destiny even now toward that age!

= “I am the FATHER OF MANY” (even though he & Sarai still haven’t had their own son!) ... I am Abraham” = Your name keeps your faith strong.

(ii) Christians call themselves names – some given by Jesus:

You are the LIGHT of the world – not that we always feel that way – but it’s a way of declaring: I am who God says I am. “You are the SALT of the earth.”(flavor)

The Word says: I am a NEW CREATION / I am God’s TEMPLE ...

WORKMANSHIP I am a SAINT ... I am a CITIZEN OF HEAVEN! ... I am who God’s Word says I am!

3. Sarai too is given a new name in this chapter – SARAH!

Sarai means “contentious” = quite descriptive of her home while Hagar’s there!

Sarah means “princess”.

Her heart too is being circumcised. From a divisive, nagging, contentious woman to a PRINCESS, someone described with these words in 1 Peter 3:4 – *a gentle & quiet spirit, in God’s sight very precious.*”

- A circumcised heart receives a new identity from God, expressed in a name.

4. Most fundamentally today, that name given to God’s blessed & blessing people is CHRISTIAN – that’s who I am – someone “in Christ”.

After the self-sufficiency of the sin-diseased natural heart is “cut away”, then who am I?

Who am I to that bad-mouthing pastor? I am a CHRISTIAN! – that’s what I tell myself ... someone who lives in Christ; someone in whom Christ lives.

I AM WHO GOD SAYS I AM!

V. THE SIGN OF A CIRCUMCISED HEART

Along with the name, thirdly, comes the SIGN of a circumcised heart.

1. God commands Abraham to circumcise himself and every male within his household – those born & bought (v. 13)

(i) The cutting of the flesh is a SIGN OF THE COVENANT.

Genesis 15 - God had pledged himself to Abraham by walking alone through “flesh cut” - those divided animal carcasses. In the New Covenant, God pledged Himself publicly to us through the cutting of Christ on the Cross.

(ii) The cutting of circumcision is a sign of the covenant – that one belongs to God – for Abraham and his household.

A. Along with that, it’s purpose is to remind God’s people of the need for a cut heart.

= living humbly before God, trusting, dependent, following His ways.

2. In the New Covenant, circumcision has been fulfilled by BAPTISM as a sign of the Covenant.

Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Covenant and initiated the New Covenant.

- In Him the Passover is fulfilled. He is the Paschal Lamb. So in the Lord's Supper we eat of Him in faith.
- In Him, circumcision is fulfilled. He is the One cut for our sins.

So we need not cut ourselves. The cutting has been done (Cross) once & for all!

(i) Now Baptism has fulfills circumcision = the washing of forgiveness, the water (new life) of the Spirit. Colossians 2:9-13 puts it this way:

"In Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given FULLNESS in Christ (= no more covenants to come), who is the head over every power and authority. In him you, (Christian), were also circumcised, ... in the putting off of the sinful nature (that's the hard self-sufficient heart), ... not with a circumcision done by the hands of men (physically) ... but with a circumcision done by Christ (spiritual) ... having been buried with him in baptism (your old self dead) and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (your new self alive). ...When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."

A. What baptism SIGNIFIES in the New Covenant is what circumcision was intended to signify in the Old Testament:

= Claimed by God & the removing of our sin nature, our hard-heartedness to God.

B. But in the New Covenant what we celebrate is that JESUS DOES IT!

HE WAS CUT FOR US.

To believe that is to repent of our sin nature and claim His cutting for us ... THEN, just as he was raised from his cutting to new life, we live a new life IN THE POWER OF HIS RISEN SPIRIT.

- So we no longer circumcise, we BAPTIZE = a sign of forgiveness and the Spirit

3. What circumcision & baptism have in common however is this: **THEY ARE ONLY SIGNS. THEY'RE NOT REALITY.** (The RR track sign is not the RR track.) **The SPIRIT IS REALITY!**

The HEART is what matters in BOTH covenants ... ALWAYS with God.
 “A CIRCUMCISED HEART BY THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT” (outline) ... who is here today speaking to you.

(i) In Romans 2:29, Paul writes, *“A man is a ‘Jew’ if he is one INWARDLY; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.”*

Paul had to write those words because in that day there were people who thought all that mattered was the SIGN ... > “I’m circumcised, therefore all is good with God.”

That was NEVER the intent of circumcision, as Moses wrote. It leads to ethnic pride & exclusivity.

A. Likewise, people today think, “I’m baptized – things are good with God.” But just because you’ve had water put on your forehead does not mean your sin nature has been cut away and is being cut away by the Spirit. It only POINTS TO the need for it!

THE HEART MATTERS WITH GOD!

VI. CONCLUSION

Let me close by pulling this together. Here’s what God’s Word is saying to us today:

1. Stiff-necked independence is the essence of your sinful nature. Like the foreskin it creates a CRUSTY COVERING between the heart & God, a hardness that must be removed before Jesus lives & grow in you ... in order that you might live in God’s call: *Blessed to be a blessing*

(i) Abram learned the hard way that self-sufficiency will ruin your life.

13 years difficult years ... until God appears to say, "I am El-Shaddai".

A. That's where we can plug in – we often find ourselves in that mode: I can handle it!

- Relying on self-sufficiency

= I can handle my problems

= I can handle those who sin against me

= We can handle the renewal of our ministry

Are we aware of our tendency to self-sufficiency as individuals & a community of faith?

2. God comes to us today to say: I AM EL-SHADDAI

I am your sufficiency / your competence. I am God Almighty.

(i) To believe is to invite the Spirit to circumcise your hardness & pride today.

3. When Abraham heard that command, it says in v. 23 ... *"THAT VERY DAY he took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with money and circumcised them & himself, as GOD TOLD HIM.*

In Jesus' Spirit may we do the same – this very day and any day to come – in order to live God's great destiny for our lives.

AMEN.