



## **Gospel Lessons from the Old Testament – Part 1**

### **The Promises Through Abraham**

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I remember one warm summer morning as a kid in our east Long Beach home turning on the television and seeing a guy juggling and I was impressed. I said I want to learn to do that. So I went to the closet, pulled out an old can of yellow tennis balls and I got to work. I spent all day but by dinnertime I had it. I was able to demonstrate for my family that I could juggle. It's not, I mean, I didn't get on TV, I'm not that great, but I did learn to do it. But it's hard and it's going to take practice because you've got to keep your eyes on three things at one time and that's never easy for us.

But that is what I'd like to have you do for the next eight weeks as we work through Acts Chapter 7 is to try your best to keep your eye on three different things as we move through this, which will be a challenge. As a matter of fact, it'll feel a little frenetic as we bounce around from topic to topic and theme to theme as we go through this chapter of the Bible. It'll feel more like a class perhaps, or Sunday school, but I want you to not lose sight of that. I can't have you drop any one of these because they're all important to us getting a grasp on what God is saying in this great chapter.

Now, remember, we set it up last week. Stephen is going to give the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts. It's a 60-verse chapter, and for 52 verses he is preaching. It's the record of his sermon here. And I need you to keep in view three things. The first one, of course, is one that's the most obvious. He's walking us through the Old Testament. So I just want to keep our minds in the Old Testament for the next two months. We're going to be thinking about these stories. We're going to be understanding what the Old Testament flow of history is. That's one thing and that's easy to do. It's the easiest to do.

The second one is a little harder. That's to remember what this is all about. Stephen is testifying as a Christian before the Jewish court and this Christian who's standing there is trying to bring people's attention to why they need to put their trust in Christ. So he's being evangelistic, which is harder because though we have now eight characters of the Bible of the Old Testament described and talked about, not once does he mention the name of Jesus, he doesn't mention Christ. There is one reference to the Righteous One, of course, referring to Jesus at the very end of the chapter. But we're going to have to make those connections.

Matter of fact, if you saw the subtitle for this eight-week series, you saw it's called "Gospel Lessons from the Old Testament." So there I tried to combine the first two balls and we understand we're going to look at the Old Testament stories and we're going to look at all these characters of the Old Testament, but we're going to keep trying to make that redemptive connection, that christological connection to the gospel and to Christ. And we have to do that because it's not right there on the surface.

Thirdly, and this is the most difficult. It's the most difficult because we don't see him ever explicitly talking about his particular charges that have been leveled against him. Remember,



he is standing before a Jewish court, the Sanhedrin. It's like the Supreme Court of the Jewish people in the first century and they are accusing him of some things and he's making a defense. And if you ask, well what is his defense, I'll tell you that that's hard to see, it's by implication and innuendo. You've got to try to tease that out. So I don't want to lose track of his defense. I certainly don't want to lose sight of the gospel. And I want to make sure we focus on the stories themselves.

And all of those, by the way, are essential and valid. And there are some people today, I don't know where you're at theologically, but there are people out there reading books that like to downplay the first of those three balls. And I'm saying don't downplay that. In other words, we need to study the Old Testament, not only because the Old Testament is important, because we can learn how to make decisions. We can learn how to prioritize. We can learn to live by looking at Old Testament stories.

Now, I say that's passé and out of favor with a lot of people because they call that "moralism." You're going to the Bible to learn lessons and ethics and life and how you live. And I'm saying it's absolutely valid because the New Testament says that's valid. It says that's one way we should read the Old Testament. You should look at Abraham, you should look at Noah, you should look at Daniel, and you should say, what can I learn about what is godly and right and how can I exemplify that in my life? How are my decisions this week at work, how are they going to be impacted by the life of Abraham? What do I learn from him?

And I say that because First Corinthians Chapter 10 says we read the Old Testament, specifically speaking of the Old Testament, saying we need to know that those things were written down as warnings for us when they do the wrong thing. Romans 15, says they're written for our encouragement to push us ahead to do the right thing. And our endurance in Romans 15 says that's why the Scriptures are there, the Old Testament Scriptures. So I know that I go to the Old Testament to learn stories. You can call them moralism, but I should learn to be ethical and moral in my Christian life because I'm reading the Old Testament and applying those principles to my life. There's nothing wrong with that. As much as that is poo-hooped by scholars in seminaries these days. That's absolutely, 100% applicable. It's how the Old Testament is treated even in the pages of the New Testament.

Now, everyone's pretty much agreed in most circles, at least, Christian circles, that, hey, we're all about the second ball, which is we want to find christological truths in the Old Testament. I want to see the gospel in the Old Testament. Right? That's big and it's certainly biblical. Right? And in Luke 24 after Jesus' resurrection, he says he interpreted, Jesus says he interpreted as he's talking to those guys on the road to Emmaus, says all of Scripture concerning himself. "Interpreted," that word in Greek, by the way, is the word we get "hermeneutics" from, the transliterated Greek word hermeneutics. We are translating, we're interpreting, we're pulling out and extracting by rules of principles of interpretation from the Old Testament, things about Christ. Or to put it really starkly, in John Chapter 5, he says you guys are searching the Scriptures, but you missed the fact that it's testifying about me.

So I know I need to find Christ here in these Old Testament stories, even though Stephen does not bring his name up specifically one time. But we're going to look for that because he's a Christian, a witness. He's testifying to the gospel. So we need to find that legit. The third one is certainly legit because I don't want to think about the fact that he's up there not giving a defense. Right? It's like it's your time to put in your plea. Are you innocent, are you guilty? What are you?

Well, let's start with that by looking at the charges afresh. Even though our passage today is the first eight verses of Chapter 7, go back with me to Chapter 6. We went through this in some detail last week, but let's just get a quick glimpse and refresh ourselves as to what the charges against Steven were. What were they? What were the charges against Steven? Take a look at it with me in Acts Chapter 6.

It says in Acts Chapter 6, look at verse 11. He says, "We've heard him," speaking of Steven, "speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." You know what blasphemy means, right? That you were tearing down something that should be set up. You're making little and common something that is great. So my question is, I suppose, as you sit here thinking about his defense. Right? You're going to stand up and respond to that. "Are you blaspheming, Steven?" I mean, we're thinking now as Christians, "are you blaspheming Moses? Are you blaspheming God?" No, of course not. Of course not. In fact, the Bible's really clear that Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So he should be able to draw the parallels. I'm not trying to in any way demean Moses. I'm showing you how Christ fulfills Moses. I should be looking for that. That's the charge and it's not an accurate one. Certainly not blaspheming God. This is God's plan to bring his Christ, the Messiah into the world, and the people would trust him and follow him.

Look at the next thing here in verse 13, drop down a verse 13. It says, "This man," that's Steven, "never ceases..." There's a little hyperbole, right? Of course, he's talking about other things, but it says, "He never ceases to speak words against this holy place." Let's stop with that. Where are they? They're on the Temple Mount. He's standing before the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin is the Supreme Court of the Jewish people and the Sanhedrin, they have put him there on trial and they are in, and there are three different places that archeologists think that this was, but somewhere on the Temple Mount this court resided with the 70 leaders, judicial leaders of Israel sat. So, I mean, they could point probably through this big open, you know, portico to the temple building itself. "This place."

When they say he never ceases to speak words against "this place," he's talking about the fact that you keep speaking poorly about the temple. You speak antagonistically about this place, the temple, "and the law." Right? The law. You seem to be demeaning and downplaying the law. And this is elaborated on in verse 14. "We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place." Let me ask you that. Is that a valid charge? Oh, yes and no. Right? Did Jesus say he was going to destroy the place? No, but he said the place would be destroyed, did he not? Right?

In Luke, he said the armies are going to surround this place, he was feeling bad for Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. You who kill the prophets." I wish you would repent. You know, as he says in Matthew 24, all these stones that the disciples said, "Aren't they beautiful?" He says, "Not one stone is going to be left upon another." So Jesus did say that the temple would be destroyed. We're in 33 A.D. This is all going to happen in 70 A.D. So we're just a few decades off from when this is going to be fulfilled. But in that sense, I can't say, "Oh, no, Jesus said everything is going to be peachy." Now he himself is not going to destroy it, at least not personally. Right? So that's what they said and that "he'll change the customs," bottom of verse 14, "that Moses delivered to us." That was the charge.

Now, let's think about that charge. Is that charge valid? Does Steven want to change the customs that were delivered through Moses to them? Well, yeah. I mean, Jesus did talk about that. Right? He said this, to use the analogy that he used, there's going to be "new wine that's put in new wineskins." "You can't put new wine in old wineskins." Things are going to change. There is something that's going to happen in fulfillment to the law where there is this transition into a new era. And that meant you're not going to bring your sacrifices to the Temple Mount. The whole book of Hebrews is about the fact that those were "the shadow of the things that were to come." But the reality is in Christ. Right? The things like circumcision, the priesthood, all the celebrations and ceremonies that were all a part of Jewish customs. Well, in that sense, yes, they were going to be changed.

So this is already a hard charge because we've got some things that you have to say, "Well, yeah, I mean, things are going to change. And, yes, Jerusalem is going to be destroyed." Now Christ didn't say he was going to destroy it. I'm certainly not blaspheming God, I'm not blaspheming Moses. So you follow how difficult this is to respond to. And yet that's what our passage is about, is beginning the response. And as I said, we're going to walk through a lot of Old Testament history in the next two months.

But we're going to start today with the first eight verses where he talks about Abraham. He doesn't come out of the gate and ever directly respond to the charge. So we're going to have to look at how he's responding to the charge. That's one ball. We're going to look, obviously, at the Old Testament stories. What can we learn from those? And then we're going to see the christological truths and how do we see Christ in this? How do we see redemption in this? And we're going to be going back and forth for two months trying to keep that in view every time we move from one Old Testament story to the next, to gospel lessons in the Old Testament. Now, that's a long kind of, I don't know, wordy Bible studyish kind of introduction to it. But let's take a look at our text for today.

Acts Chapter 7, verses 1 through 8. Verse 1, "And the high priest..." Sunday school grads, who's the high priest at this point? Caiaphas. Caiaphas is the high priest, he's already had Jesus before him in trial at this very place. He's had Peter before him in trial at this very place. He's now dealing with Steven. I mean, he's working through the ranks of the Christians here. And he says, OK, we've heard the charges, "Are these things so?" "And Steven said," verse two, I'm thinking, "No, they're not. Yes, they are. Yes and no. Kind of." I mean, that's what we're going to have to look for what he says.

But then he breaks into this long story about the Old Testament. "And Steven said: 'Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and he said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land I will show you.' So he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and he lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living," right there in Judea and Jerusalem. "Yet he had no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length," he didn't own any property, "but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him," speaking of his promises, "even though he had no child. God spoke to this effect -- that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others." And certainly he was there in Canaan.

And then later we got another land, "who would enslave them and afflict them for 400 years," the rounded number of how long they were there in Egypt. But he quotes now Jeremiah 25. "I will judge the nation that they serve," said God." And of course, he did, the plagues, the ten plagues. "And after that it says they shall come out and worship me in this place." What's this place? Well, they're not talking about the Temple Mount. They leave Egypt and go where? To Mt. Sinai where they get the law and the glory of God there appears on that mountain. They get the Ten Commandments and they wander around for forty years.

And all of the promises that God made to Abraham, He gave him, a sign, a seal, a covenant, a covenant sign. "And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so that Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs." Those became the names of the twelve tribes and all these people sitting back there yawning, "We know all that, Stephen." And they did know all that.

What's the argument? It's subtle. It's by inference. I want you to look at it starting in verse 2. Verse 2, he's responding by saying, "Hey, the God of glory appeared..." Stop right there. If I asked someone in the Sanhedrin: scribes, Pharisees, leaders, if I said, "Hey, where's the glory of God?" They would point to the building because in the building they believe there was the manifestation of the glory of God, in the building. Inside the building of the temple there was a room, the cubed room, called the Holy of Holies. And inside of that, there was a box. Right? That's what ark means, an ark, the Ark of the Covenant, the promise and on it were gilded depictions of angels, the cherubim and their wings. And on top of that, they said that's where God's glory resides. And that's why they stood there as keepers of the Temple Mount, they felt very, very jealous and zealous for that property. And they said, "You cannot speak against this place. This is where the glory of God resides."

And he says, Oh, glory of God, Do you know the glory of God appeared to our father when he was in Mesopotamia? Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia. Well, Mesopotamia. OK, here's Israel, here's the Mediterranean Sea. OK? Where's Mesopotamia? Way over here to the east. "Meso" means "between" and "potamia" the rivers, there are two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates River. And there's this big, long valley. It's big at the top and small at the bottom. At the bottom of it, Abraham lived. He was worshiping other gods. He was an idolater. And in



that context, God calls him out of that and takes him up the valley of Mesopotamia to the very top at a place called Haran, which is in eastern Turkey. Right? It's there as the place where God then takes him from the southern Ur of the Chaldeans up to Haran and in Haran, he lives there, but the glory of God appears and says to Abraham, while he was in Mesopotamia and before he lived in Haran, he said, "Go out from your land and your kindred into the land that I will show you."

So he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and he lived in Haran. So God's patriarch went from Ur, where the glory of God revealed himself to Abraham and moved up to this other place. It became a very important home for the patriarch of Israel. We haven't even gotten Israel yet. He'd never even been over here to Canaan yet. I mean, we got all this focus on someone. The leaders are going to nod and go, "Yeah, he's important. He's the patriarch. He's the man, Abraham, our father, Abraham," they would say. Well, the glory of God was way over there in Ur introducing himself to the man who would be the patriarch of this nation, calls him out of the Ur of the Chaldeans down south. This is the old what would become Babylon. Right? The Babylonian empire. And after that and when his dad dies there in Haran, "God removed him from there into the land in which you're now living."

Finally, you're talking about our land. Yes, you're right. God brought Abraham here. Yeah, but when he was here, he didn't even own it. Right? He's not sitting around with his feet up on the Temple Mount going, "Yeah, this is my digs. This is my place." He had "no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length." Talk about God blessing him, he had no property here. It was just a promise is all it was for him. "But he did promise to give it to him as a possession." But he never got that in his lifetime. "And to his offspring after him, though he had no child." He didn't even have a kid.

"God spoke to this effect -- that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others." The leaders sat there as landlords with their arms crossed, saying, "Are you talking about this place? I hope your little Jesus of Nazareth theology isn't messing with this place." And here's Stephen going, "Let's talk about this place. Actually, let's talk about the greatness of God in Ur and then Haran. And then he comes through here. He owns none of this. So he's really not like you in that regard. And then, bottom of verse 6, they end up "enslaved" in another place called Egypt. They're not even there in the Promised Land. The descendants of the patriarchs are in Egypt for "four hundred years" plus and God comes and now shows his glory again, this time in wrath. The glory of God in judgment is given there in Egypt. Now we have God's great ten plagues and we got the law of God coming out of that and all of that taking place there coming out of Egypt and going where? "After that they shall come out and worship me in this place." Now we have "this place" in this not-dialog with the accusation being, are you speaking against "this place"? Well, "this place" here where God's glory would then again reside was on a mountain in the Sinai Peninsula, way down south.

Do you see what he's doing here very just creatively? The greatness of God here, your patriarch living here, your patriarch did come through here, but he didn't own anything. And then they went down here as his descendants lived here. And his descendants here were then drawn out of here. Look at God's glory in judgment there. He brought them here and



gave the glory of the law here in a place called Sinai. And we're not even talking about this place yet.

Now, I don't want to make too much of this and don't accuse me of reading into it. I shouldn't apologize for it because I'm looking for the answer to the question. Right? Stephen says, "You're trying to say you're accusing me of downplaying this place and that God's going to destroy this place, or at least you say you're accusing me that Jesus said he's going to destroy this place. But let's talk about 'place' and 'glory' and you being the landlords of the Temple Mount and all the rest of this. And I'm going to say this. Let's talk about the greatness of God all around everywhere." It's almost like God is a global God. It's almost like God has a lot going on outside of Israel. It's almost as though God's glory can reside wherever it wants. It's kind of like God who lives in heaven and his earth is the footstool. The whole world can be filled with his glory.

He can be in the desert as we're going to learn next time we get into Moses' life and in a burning bush, he can say, "Hey, hey, Moses, take your shoes off. The place where you're standing," in the Midian desert, "is holy ground" Right? Think about that, he's dismantling their view of this very ethnocentric, geocentric view of "this is where God's glory is." The leaders are saying, "Don't you dare think about having these Galileans from up north coming and creating this movement. You guys talking about reaching the ends of the earth. We've heard you talk about witnesses, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth. Is that your goal to decentralize? No, no, no. God works here. This is his place. That's his building. That's his box. That's his glory." And here we have this global view, this international God very subtly reminding them.

So the accusation is being responded to. That's ball number three. And there's that sense in which, yeah, OK, I see what he's doing there. And from us, I'm a preacher now in the 21st century, living on the other side of the planet preaching to you in a striped parking lot. Right? And I'm saying to myself, what should we understand out of that? How should a pastor think through this? Well, I'm thinking, hey, Gentiles, with maybe a few exceptions, on the other side of the planet, is God at work anywhere else? Is there a sense in which we should sit back and think about the fact isn't it good that Steven reminds these guys that God works everywhere, that the whole world, the whole earth is full of his glory, that God can show up in an Orange County parking lot and you could have an encounter with him? Tomorrow morning you can open your Bible at the kitchen table and you can have an encounter with the living God and the glory of God can be, in a sense, revealed to you as you connect, as God illuminates your heart by the Spirit. Is the Spirit active in a place that's not in Jerusalem, not in the Temple Mount, not in Judea, not in Israel? Absolutely. Matter of fact, that's the point.

God is an international God. Number one if you're taking notes, put it down this way. You ought to "Be Grateful For God's Global Promises." And the promise of Abraham, to speak of Abraham's covenant in Genesis 12, which let me just quickly review it. You can turn there before your small groups, but in Genesis 12, Genesis 15 and Genesis 17, we have the elaboration of the Abrahamic promise, the Covenant. It is a global promise. There are three components to it. Let me just quote it for you.



The first one is, "Hey Abraham, I'm going to make your name great. You're going to be great." And so it is. It's a personal promise of greatness. "And out of you, I'm going to make a great nation." So we're going to have a national promise and all the things that go with that. We need a place for your people to live. So we're going to give you Canaan and you're going to need a law, and I'll give you the law of Moses. You're going to need some property. You're going to need administration. You're going to need a law. You going to need civil law. So I'm going to give you all that. But we're going to give you a nation. And then the last part, and you're grateful for it as you sit on the other side of the planet 2,000 years later as people that don't have Abraham's blood in your veins. Right? It says, and "Through you, all the nations of the earth will be blessed." Right? ALL the nations of the earth, all the nations.

And here's the idea. You sit here saying, I am a recipient of the greatness and glory and the saving grace of God 2,000 years later and I'm not even related to Abraham. God is a God who's working outside of that. And just think about that. Right? Even when Abraham the patriarch, and it's put there for many, many reasons in Scripture, but we learn about the fact that he meets a man named Melchizedek, who is a priest, and he's described to us as a priest of the most high. Has that ever made you scratch your head? We don't have a priesthood yet. It's 600 years until we have a priesthood that is legitimately recognized in the Bible as the descendants of Aaron from the tribe of Levi. And yet we're meeting Abraham, bowing down and giving his tithe, his money, the spoils of the wars to a man named Melchizedek? Where did he come from?

I mean, you can't read through the Bible and not just be struck by how's God taking all these outsiders and they're right in the center of his glorious plan. People like Rahab in Christ's genealogy. People like Ruth, a Moabitess, a foreigner, in Christ's genealogy. People like Balaam of all people with all of his faults and all of his greed, here he is introduced this one getting the oracles of Yahweh, the living God. You were a prophet for hire by King Balak. How does God do this? He does what he does and it's not confined to a piece of property in Israel and it's not confined in a room that they can sit there and say, "We have complete jurisdiction over this. We have God's glory tucked over right there in that box. Don't be talking to me about God working outside of this system or this place or this piece of furniture. I mean, this is where God is and we are the brokers of that." That's not how it works.

The Jews started to think that way, but that's not what God ever said was going to happen. Matter of fact, he said, "I got global promises and I'm a global God. I've got an international program. I'm working it parallel to Israel as I developed the nation of Israel, because I do need to have a human messiah who's also divine coming into the time and space of humanity, and so I'm going to work through Abraham's lineage. Yes, Israel is going to be critically important, but I'm working everywhere." And we sit here today and say we praise God for that.

Jot this one down, Psalm 22. What a great text to remind us. This is a great catalyst for your worship and thanksgiving, Psalm 22 verses 27 and 28. Listen to this. It's punctuated throughout the Bible if you start looking for it. It says, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord." There are people. Now, here it is, all the nations without



exception. Right? That's true. But all the people without distinction. That's the point. In other words, we're not universalists because the Bible's not a universalist book. And that means that not everyone is saved. Right? The gate is really big and the road is really wide that leads to destruction.

But it does say in Revelation 7 that there are people who are redeemed from every language, in every tribe, in every nation. So we do know that people are saved from all different places. But God is a God who says here, and this is a great psalm, "All the ends of the earth are going to remember, turn to the Lord, and the families of the nations shall worship before you." Here we are. I don't know where you're from, I don't know where your family's from, I don't know what kind of genetical, you know, "23andMe" family you got. But if you sit here today repentant and following Christ, I want you to think about that. Right?

You are here engaged, as engaged as any high priest has ever been in the Old Testament, with the living God of the Bible and it has nothing to do, God's no respecter of the persons in terms of who you were, where you came from, how much money you make, what you look like, what color your hair is, what color your skin is. None of that matters. God is a God who's working within the human heart, and he's doing it all over the world.

Listen to this next line, verse 28. "For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." The Jewish leaders saw themselves as brokering the kingship of Christ in a temple, in a place, on a piece of real estate, in a nation because you were related to Abraham. They prided themselves in that. And when Jesus started getting hit with that kind of ethnocentric, geocentric thinking, he said, you know, "God could raise up children of Abraham from rocks." It is not about that. Is Israel important? Yes. We preached a whole sermon on that.

Matter of fact, I put it on the worksheet this week. I mean, is Israel important? Sure. Jesus even talked about Jerusalem this way, "the city of the great king." I mean, it's important. Does God have a future for Israel? Yes. Does God have a future for Jerusalem? Yes. Does God have a future for that piece of real estate on which the Dome of the Rock Shrine exists? Yes, he does. But it does not mean that it is exclusive to the plans of God or the glory of God. So we sit back as Gentiles 2,000 years later and we say, "I'm really grateful for God's global promises." OK?

Verse 8, that's a lot just to quickly skim to get that simple response and summation, but we did. But let's get to verse 8 because there's plenty here. So let's move on to verse 8. All of this promise: offspring, land, all of that through Abraham reminds us that the global plan of God, the promise of God, he gave him a sign of that promise. "He gave him the covenant of circumcision so that Abraham became the father of Isaac, he circumcised him on the eighth day of his life, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the 12 patriarchs." And guess what they all were? They were all circumcised. Think about that. Not too long. Not too detailed, but think about this.

This is weird, right? Cutting off a part of your body connected to the most intimate part of your body. Abraham is told to that. There's Jewish artwork of him taking the knife and cutting this



part of his body off. This is just weird, right? Talking before I do that, I'm going to make sure I got the instructions right. And do you really know what you're talking about? And can't I wear a ring or can we tattoo it on my chest? You want me to do what now? No, do that. Cut that. Cut that off. Cut that off. And your kid, go take your kid and your infant and cut that off of him. And then remember everyone that's going to be a part of this nation, this nation through which I'll bring the Messiah and anyone who's a proselyte and comes in, circumcise them. And this is a circumcision, a covenant of circumcision.

Covenant means promise. It is a contractual promise. And it's evident thereby that weird thing called circumcision. And that, man, that means it's serious. Right? And you start cutting parts of your body off in a contract that's serious. I'll sign something for you. I'll put some collateral up, but not parts of my body. Right? That's just a weird, weird thing.

But it reminds you how deep this promise is. And something that God wanted to say, I want to tell you never to forget it. I want it to even be a mark and a sign of the covenant that I've made with you, that you're mine and I'm yours. It was really a mark of belonging, right? You belong to me. And you were someone who in your own body will bear the marks of you belonging to me. That's just an amazing thought. It's a weird thought. And it was very important. It was important to say if I am a Jew who is following the custom, the law of Moses, I do this and I do it on the eighth day. It happened to John the Baptist, it happened to Jesus himself, circumcised as a picture of that fulfillment of God's promise to say, I am going to call these people in this nation mine.

Circumcision became a major debate because here the leaders are claiming, hey, you're disregarding the customs of Moses. And I guess if they pressed and say, "What do you guys think about circumcision?" Well, by Chapter 15 we know and that is you're not going to force people to be circumcised. It's not a part of salvation. Well, that's hard, man. It's got to be hard. A hard thing for them to really grasp as part of the Sanhedrin. And yet the reminder is that this is a promise and this is a sign of the promise.

Now, let's think of it this way. The sign and the reality. The cake, the tuxedo, the photographer, the flowers, the bridesmaid's dresses. All of those things are related to what? Weddings. And a wedding really is the ceremony that relates to marriage. Marriage, the legal covenant of two people coming together and being married. There are a lot of people to get married without all the hoopla of the ceremony. And I don't know how you pulled that off, but congratulations. Right? You did that. Amazing. Eloped. Most of us, though, go through all that. Because at least one party wants to have all that, so you do it [audience laughing].

So I can be legally in a covenant marriage without all of that. OK? But here's the weird thing that was happening by the first century, a lot of people were doing the photographer and the flowers and the cake and the tuxedos and the patent leather shoes and the bridesmaid's dresses and they weren't having the covenant. They weren't saying "I do" and signing the contract. They thought that going through the ceremony made them right in this covenant relationship. That doesn't. That was a sign of the covenant.



Romans Chapter 4 Paul makes the point, you do realize that the sign of the covenant was placed over the covenant that was already there because God had asked for Abraham to believe him and Abraham believed him. And the moment he believed him, it was credited and reckoned to him as a righteous thing. And so God accepted him as righteous, even though he wasn't. And he said he believes me, he trusts me. And in that trust, there's acceptance, there's forgiveness. He's my man. And then he said, here's the ceremony. And so I'm going to put the ceremony over the reality and the point he makes, which seems like kind of, you know, teasing through details, but he says, wasn't he already considered righteous because he trusted him before he even got the covenant of circumcision?

In other words, the sign was just a sign of the reality. The reality was already there. So Abraham was already declared righteous before he had his foreskin cut off. So the point is, one is the ceremony and one is the reality. And that sounds a lot like, by the way, and I'm on a sidebar right now. We'll get to the wording of point 2, but that sounds a lot like what you hear when we have a water baptism service, doesn't it? It starts to talk about, well, wait a minute, no one's becoming a Christian here on the platform because they get dunked in water. That's a sign we put over the top of the reality that's already happened. And I make that point. I say it that way when someone comes up to be baptized, I say they've already become Christians. They've become Christian by putting their faith in Christ. Now, this sign is being placed upon them and it's expressed to you so that you can see as an outward demonstration of an inward reality.

And that's the reality of baptism. It's just like it was with circumcision. But I'll bet a lot of this is happening when you talk to non-Christians about being a Christian, you say, "Hey, I need you to get right with God. I care about your soul. I care about where you're going to be a thousand years from now." And they say, "Oh, it's OK, I've been baptized." They point to baptism. Right? And it isn't just your friend trying to squirrel out of an uncomfortable conversation about evangelism.

There are entire churches today, churches down the street that have big canon law, not only canon law, but the actual doctrinal statement of the Catholic Church. It's called the catechism of the Catholic Church. If you really want to learn about it, go to sections 12... all the paragraphs are sectioned off. Start around 1250 and go through about 1290, 1300. That whole section is about baptism. It talks about baptism doing this, "washing away your mortal sin." It talks about making you "a child of God." It talks about the gratuitous grace of God being endowed to you when you take this sign. Right? That it is now given to you and when it's given to you, the reality happens simply because it's given to you. The old Latin phrase was "ex opere operato." Ex opere operato meant just by doing this thing, you have the benefit of what this represents. What we have been saying and what Christians have been saying, if they rightly understand this covenant is, "No, no, no, that's not it at all." You go make disciples and baptize them. I don't say let's make a disciple BY baptizing them. I make a disciple by calling them to repentance. They become a Christian and now we put the sign on top of it, just like Romans 4, just like Abraham and circumcision.



And you go, "Ah, those Presbyterians are right. If circumcision is a parallel to baptism, well, they did it on the eighth day when they were babies, so we should be baptizing babies." No, you didn't follow me. Like, follow carefully here. Here, here it is. Tell you Presbyterian friends. Here's the bottom line. They may have the right gospel, but they've misunderstood this ordinance. Very clearly, I've already said in Matthew 28, I make a disciple and I baptize them. And you say, "Yeah, yeah. But to be a part of the covenant community in Israel, you showed that with the sign of circumcision."

You're right. And I'm asking, how did you become a part of the Covenant community if we're talking about my relationship to Abraham genetically? Well, all you have to do is be born. If you're born, you become a part of the people of Abraham. Now, if I ask you the question, how do you become a part of the people, the covenant people of the New Testament? You don't get born. You got to be, Jesus said in John 3, "born again." You've got to be born again. And to be born again, now I can be baptized with the sign, I can show the sign, the external sign of becoming a part of the covenant community.

I don't say I want to get baptized because my dad became a Christian. See, I'm going to be baptized because I became a Christian. Baptism is many parallels to circumcision, but there's not a correspondence in terms of timing. When does one enter the covenant community in the Old Testament? When they get born. When do you enter the covenant community of the believers? When you get born again. See, so we have to understand the timing of all of this.

And that was all a sidebar to say this: like a ring, with much more commitment, the circumcision is an external sign of a promise. It promises, it's that picture of the Old Testament and God said that is not any longer going to be the practice.

Matter of fact, here's how it's put in the New Testament. Circumcision or uncircumcision, to quote First Corinthians, means nothing. Doesn't mean anything, really, no longer. It doesn't mean anything. Right? I mean, if you want to circumcise your kids, you're welcome to do that. But the reality of what it means spiritually that has all been fulfilled, Hebrews Chapter 10 verse 1, in the realities that came with the New Covenant. The New Covenant realities are the only ceremonies are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Circumcision's an irrelevant matter.

Matter of fact, Paul went so far to say in Galatians to the churches of Galatia that if you let yourself be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you. Wow! That makes me think twice when the nurse says, "Do you want to circumcise him," right? No, no, it's not about that. It's those who are trusting in the sign to be right with God, which is what was rampant in the early first century Judaistic belief system. But he's saying in Christianity, don't say I'm going to get circumcised so I can be right with God. If you're trusting in circumcision in the first century, he said, listen, then Christ is of no value to you. And I said the same thing about baptism. If you're trusting in getting wet on a stage or in a river or in the ocean by some pastor to be saved, then your Christ is of no value. So when someone says to you, "I'm OK with God because I got baptized," you say, "if you're trusting in your baptism, your water baptism to be right with God, Christ is of no value to you."



See, there's the idea and I just want to say it's all a reminder of the promise. And what is the contract? Basically, we're saying to God and I don't want to oversimplify, but let me simplify. I am saying to God, "I'm giving you my life." Right? To put it in terms there are so many... Romans Chapter 10, right? When I say Jesus is Lord, I'm saying "I am your subject, you are the Lord. I am your servant, you are the master." I'm giving myself to him. Second Corinthians 5:15. "I'm no longer living for myself," I'm giving you my life, "I live for you who died for me and rose again." That's what I'm basically saying, "I am yours."

And then God says, to quote Second Corinthians again, that I'm getting him. Right? The righteousness of Christ, all of that becomes mine. And so the transaction is I'm giving my life and I'm getting his life and there's this belonging connection and the reminder of circumcision should be, "Oh, yeah, all of that's based on a promise." Because what do I get when I become God's and God becomes mine? "I will get a relationship." OK, great. Well, what do I get out of it? Well, the bottom line is you get to be right with the creator. That's good. But here's the promise. There's going to be a fulfillment of God doing what he promised to do for his people on which his favor rests, which is not this cruddy world that we live in. Right? It's the world to come. And you're trusting on the promise of what's coming.

I want you to think about that, that really the transaction is really all about a promise. The prosperity preachers get this all wrong. Right? And I tell you this all the time, ad nauseam. But here it is again. Christianity is not about the "here and now." Christianity is about the "then and there." And what I'm doing is I'm trusting in Christ because I know something's coming. Matter of fact, let me show you... Well, first let me give you the point, because I know you're thinking this is going to be a really long sermon if I don't get point two soon. Here's point two, OK? You need to "Never Doubt God's Solemn Promises," never doubt them. They're so solemn, he wanted to cut it into Abraham's body. And I'm saying how solemn is that? The solemn promise and the promise in me giving him my life and him giving me his life is that all of this is going to come to fruition down the road that's coming one day.

And if you think about that, I want you to turn to Hebrews Chapter 11 to see this laid out and spelled out all against the backdrop and template of Abraham's life. Hebrews Chapter 11. Please turn there with me and take a look at this super important passage beginning in verse 8. Hebrews Chapter 11 verse 8. All the things we've tried to talk about in the first seven verses of Acts Chapter 7, it just all recurs here in this passage. Let's look at it. Hebrews 11:8. "By faith," which makes perfect sense if this transaction is about the future, I got to trust you for the thing in the future. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out of a place that he was to receive as an inheritance."

He leaves Ur of the Chaldeans in southern Mesopotamia and goes to Haran, Haran over to the land of the Canaanites, travels as a nomad. "He went out, not knowing where he's going." Never been there before. "By faith he went to live in the land of promise," it was promised to him, but he wasn't going to get it, not even a foot of it, "as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac," his son, "and Jacob," his grandson, "heirs with him of the same promise." They were going to get this land. "He was looking forward to the city..." Now we're looking beyond really the land down the road with my kids because I'm going to be dead. What good is that to me?



No, he's looking beyond that, "looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." I mean, the point is, this is something beyond this life.

Now, there's a little interlude in verses 11 and 12. Let's look at that. "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive when she was past the age," she wasn't of normal childbearing age, "since she considered him faithful who had promised." Now, she struggled with that. She choked that promise down with laughing at it at first. But she finally settled into it. "Therefore from one man, him as good as dead," thanks for that compliment there. The old man, Abraham. Good as dead, that old guy. Yeah, but "Were born descendants." Man, look how many kids he had. His kids went through those twelve tribes, you know, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, all the twelve tribes and all the land populated, all the Old Testament. I mean, man, born were descendants as many "as the stars of heaven, as many as innumerable grains of sand on the seashore." You couldn't even take a census of all the people. That's the point. All through the generations.

"Now, all these died in faith." Think about it. Not just the patriarchs, but all these people "having not received the things promised." Wait a minute, Joshua received it, right? He was part of the conquest. No, no, no, not really. "Having seen them and greeted them from afar." That's the real challenge for us this morning. "Having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." We don't belong here. "For people who speak thus make clear that they are seeking a homeland." Where? Here? No. "If they had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have an opportunity to return." But they didn't. As it was and "as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one," right? One that's going to come down out of heaven, it says in Revelation 21, "like a bride adorned for her husband." "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

That picture of looking beyond and saying, "God, I'm giving you my life, you're giving me your life, and with that, your favor and all the fulfillment. But it's yet to come," as Romans 8 says, "What good is hope if you already have it? You don't hope for something you already have." The Christian life is about the "then and there." We don't have that yet. And that's hard for us sometimes because we want it now. And you've got a version of Christianity that is a perversion of Christianity telling you can have it now. What you can have now is a relationship with Christ based on a promise.

And then it's going to get real hard because it's going to affect between the here and now. Look at the next verse, verse 17, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested," and that's the thing that's going to happen, "offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac your offspring shall be named.'" So it didn't make sense. I don't get it. This doesn't seem to be advantageous. "Yet he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." Remember the ram caught in the bush? And it was like, wow!

And what's the point here? We should be trusting in a God to get us into a new place. We are seeking a homeland that's not here. Citizens of heaven, Paul put it to the Philippines, and



we're looking for it. It wasn't the Roman Empire. It's not the United States of America. It's not the future of our country. It's about another country and we're hoping in that. In the meantime, between here and there we got a lot of hard things to do because God is going to test us, test our faith. God says, "Do you really believe me? Do you trust me? And if you trust me, then sometimes you're going to have to put the knife through some things that you think it doesn't make sense, it is not advantageous."

Now, if you want to return to the country that you're in, well, you can go back and tomorrow morning you can go to work and you can act like you're of this world. Right? You can do that. You can try to have one foot in the world, one foot here. And the reality is that just stinks. The Bible says that makes Christ want to vomit in Revelation Chapter 3. Right? "Makes me spew you out of my mouth." The reality is you can't... you have to make a commitment. Do I believe God? And God says "If you trust me, believe me, believe me for eternity, and then believe me for which decisions you have to make tomorrow morning. Believe me, when the hard pressure is on and the tests are on about believing me."

Abraham had to do that and he became a template then. Not only was he the genetic patriarch of the people of God, according to Romans Chapters 9, 10 and 11, there's still a future that God is going to do something with that ethnic Israel. But he's our father, the father of faith, Abraham is, because in that template of him trusting, he trusted God not only for the eternal homeland, but he trusted God also for the daily trials and tests of his faith. And the Bible says, listen, you need to learn from that.

I mean, that's ball number one. Right? And the point is, none of that's happening without Christ giving his life for you and making it possible. And so we put our focal point, our trust on Jesus Christ. That's the second ball. The reality of this is really hard to put into practice. But I just need to remind you that the promise that God makes is unlike any other promise you will get from any other person in your entire life. I'm just saying the value and the quality of that.

My gym shut down just like yours and went out of business, and so I was left to gain lots of weight. And I said I got to get out there and walk at least. Right? I can't fathom running, but I'll go walking. So every morning I get out there and I'd walk and I had my path, tried to briskly walk every day. It's interesting, when you walk the same path every day you start to see things every day, cracks here, tree there, root across, whatever. And so you notice all those things because you know, you're brainlessly walking. And I came upon one morning a banana peel. It was right there. You stepped right off the curb and it was right there, this banana peel. It was a Chiquita banana. I knew that because it had the little yellow and blue sticker on it with Chiquita, basket on her head and big sleeves. And so there it was.

And I remember stepping off and, I don't know, having some dumb conversation with myself. "Don't slip on the banana peel" or whatever. I just saw it and I didn't think about it until twenty-four hours later. I was walking and sure enough there it was again and it wasn't looking as good. Right? It had started to shrivel up, you know, spots went to black streaks and it just wasn't looking good. And I'm thinking oh some birds are going to take it away or the street



sweeper or whatever. I don't know, are there still those? So I thought, I'm not going to see it again. Well, the next day I see it again and the next day I see it again.

I mean, it became a joke in my mind. Like is this first time anyone's ever heard this story, you know. But I'm like, "Hi banana peel." I mean, it's like he was just a friend. Every day I'd see the banana peel. And the problem was it got so ridiculously grotesque that it was hardly recognizable as a banana. It was just like black little shards of, you know, just shriveled up nothing. Like you could just touch it and it would fall apart. It was just black hair. Except for little Chiquita. And I don't know what they print that on, but, man, that is impervious to sun, it doesn't fade. I just every morning I'd see the Chiquita sticker on the deteriorating banana peel.

And it reminded me of Romans Chapter 4. Because I thought to myself, here is what it's like living in this world. The older you get, the more cynical you can get, the more you can roll your eyes. You can listen to the politicians, you can just listen to the guy trying to sell your car and you listen to the guy trying to sell you insurance. You listen to people in your life, start listening to family members and go, groan. Right? I can't find anybody who's really, really trustworthy. Right? I thought of Romans 4, "Let every man be found a liar." Right?

But God is true. Right? "Let God be true and every man a liar." The qualitative difference between the truth of God giving you a promise like this, "If you trust in me, give your life to me. I will give you my Son, and he will be the qualification for a place where's there is no crying, no mourning, no tears. Where there are going to be weird things like you, it says in First Corinthians, "judging angels." I can't even manage my cubicle of paperwork. How am I going to administrate and adjudicate between angel disputes? I can't get my kids to make their beds. I mean, I don't understand how that's going to work. No, no, no. Believe me. Take charge of five cities, right? I can't. I can't. I can't imagine doing that. Think about the fishermen who were told in Matthew 19, you're going to sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Right? Thomas going, "Well... I doubt that." And you know, Peter, like "Yeah, I should be..."

I mean, just it's like those guys? Really? No, really. And living in a place where everything is just as it ought to be. I mean, people think that's pie in the sky. My question is, do you believe God? Do you believe him? Do you really, really believe what he says? You have to believe his character. And that's a hard thing for us to do. And by the way, our connection with God now is his word. He's inscribed his word.

And not only do I think of Romans 4, I think of Isaiah 40, which makes this picture, it says, you know, "the flower fades, the grass, it withers," but here's the thing that stands as a paragon, "the word of the Lord abides forever. The world does not believe that. They do not believe the promises in that book, and some of us say we believe it and I'm just sending us out there today going, "Are you like Abraham willing to put everything on the line to say I do believe that?" I believe it because I believe God. I believe what God has said. His promises are based on an impeccable character. He does not lie. He cannot lie. Even Balaam, the prophet for hire, stood up there and he's the one who said, "God is not a man that he should lie." Right?



God's going to tell the truth. And he trusts us with the promise that you and I should believe. Everything else fades, every other man's a liar. God is truthful. You and I need to live like we believe that.

Let's pray. God, help us in a day filled with a lot of reasons to doubt just the basic goodness of humanity. Of course we do. We live in a depraved world filled with liars. But God, how good it is to assemble together, to remember the God who made us who while he makes us wait, God, we know that you made Abraham wait 25 years from the time of the promise that he would have a son and he was so busy struggling with that promise that he was trying to have kids through Hagar instead of Sarah. You said, trust me, trust me, trust me. And we're thankful that overall he was a man who did trust you.

He had his moments just like Sarah did, but they put their confidence in you and you delivered not in this life. He never owned a foot of that property. But, God, we know that the new heaven and the new earth, he's going to own a lot of it. He's going to be the steward of a lot of it. He's going to be the one who sees all the promises fulfilled. So will we in our pain and our frustration, help our attitude not deteriorate as our knowledge of the untrustworthiness of this world continues to mount up. Let us trust in you with a kind of firm and confident faith that gives us joy and peace in the midst of the storm.

In Jesus name, Amen.