

Part 18: Signed, Sealed and Delivered

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When I was in college as a journalism student we would spend a good amount of time waiting around in the newsroom. One particular day, the conversation shifted to marriage and one of my peers said this, and maybe it's something you've heard before: "I've never loved someone so much that I looked at them and said, 'Boy, I'd love to bring some legal language into this.'"

It's true, at the surface, nothing seems more dry, dead, and dull than legal language. But when it involves something, or someone we love—we have learned to love it. Let me prove it to you.

Our American songbook on love is rich with legal pledges. Some of you may remember the great poet society NSYNC. Wasn't it them who captured the tenderness of a good promise when they said, "I give you my word, I give you my heart, this is a battle we've won, and with this vow, forever has now begun. Just close your eyes, each loving day, and know this feeling won't go away. Till the day my life is through, this I promise you."

Moreover, 18th Century English law said that only after a contract was signed, sealed, and formally delivered that one could say of any purchase, "it's yours." But when Stevie Wonder sings, "Signed, Sealed and Delivered," he's able to say of his own heart, "I'm yours." That's why the title of our sermon this morning is, "Signed, Sealed, and Delivered."

Today, we are in Genesis 17, and as the Lord speaks to Abram the theme is clear. The word "covenant" shows up 13 times as it is signed, sealed and delivered over the course of the chapter. But behind a further definition of the covenant with Abram, the Lord is outlining his very heart towards his covenant people.

This contract is a "love-track" that will organize Israel's hope throughout the Old Testament, and it is the same promise that brings us clarity in Jesus Christ. Life inside God's promise is still life amidst the world's problems. This passage gives us the language of assurance regarding God's promise and reminds us of the power of God's defining love when it seems we have been redefined by our own circumstances.

Our main point this morning is this: **Clarity for God's people requires certainty in God's promise.** Genesis 17 will show us this in three parts. First we will see **Who He Is**, as God signs his own name on the covenant. Then we will see **Who We Are** as God renames both Abram and Sarai. And lastly we will see **How We Know**, as he gives us a sign and seal of his very promise to those who accept it.

This is now the third time God reaffirms his covenant with Abram, each time he reveals more about the covenant, but this time he reveals more about himself.

Chapter 17 begins this way: **Genesis 17:1**, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.'" Here we see our first point today: **Who He Is.**

Now, a brief note for Bible study. When the word “LORD” is written in all capital letters—that is the translators telling you that it is the Hebrew word “Yahweh.” It’s capitalized as such because it is the personal name by which God will later introduce himself to Moses, and is the most common name he uses to speak of himself. Yahweh means, “I am who I am.”

This is God saying what we often say of our greatest sports stars when we say, “He is him.” We say that when there is no other athlete in their sport to whom they can be reasonably compared. He is who he is, and there is only one him.

Moses is writing Genesis to the Israelites who know God most intimately by that name, “Yahweh.” Which is why Moses uses Yahweh when he writes as the narrator. But here, when Yahweh speaks, he doesn’t introduce himself as Yahweh to Abram—he introduces himself for the first time by a new name: “El Shaddai” (or translated in our Bible as “God Almighty”). That’s a pretty good sense of what it means. It’s related to another word which scholars have found in other places which can be translated: “the thunderer.”

This is the name the Lord uses the least to describe himself in scripture. But it’s the name he uses the most when speaking to key figures in Genesis. He uses it most often when he speaks to those who are in difficult circumstances. And if we look at that little time marker in verse 1, we might know why he introduced himself as El Shaddai to Abram.

Abram is now 99 years old. That means 14 years have passed since Hagar had Ishmael. And 24 years have passed since Abram was first promised a child. Yet Sarai, his wife, is still without a child.

24 years is a long time to try for a child. And at this point it might seem impossible. But the God who promised a child is “God Almighty,” *El-Shaddai*. It conveys the infinite power of God when all we see are the unending problems of man.

It speaks to God’s supernatural power for those under natural problems. When we feel stuck, God reminds us that we have more than a God in the midst of our problems. We have a God who is Almighty over our problems. One scholar said the name describes “a God who so constrains nature that it does His will, and so subdues it that it bows to and [serves the purpose] of grace.”

God Almighty’s power causes even nature itself to bow to his purposes of grace. It reminds us that God defines nature, not the other way around.

It’s in light of this bigger than nature God that he gives Abram two commands: **Genesis 17:1-2**, “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.”

If you’ve ever looked through an old high school year book, what’s the first thing you look for? Yourself. And if you’re like me, the first thing I’m drawn to is what we are supposed to do here: walk before him and be blameless.

But what is really the central emphasis of this statement? It begins with God’s Almighty power to give grace and it ends with God’s zealous desire to accomplish grace. “I’m God Almighty, do this, that I may bless you.” God’s promise is not without man’s responsibility. Abram is responsible for what he’s

responsible for. But God's promise is not dependent upon man's ability. God Almighty wants to do almighty things.

You've maybe heard it said that religion is man's attempt to reach God. We build structures that help us ascend to our heavenly goal. But Christian religion is God's desire to reach us. He's built the structure. He wants to bless, he wants to multiply. And he's told us how we will enjoy it.

"Walk before me and be blameless." We will talk about our side of this in a moment, but to understand our side we need to be reminded of who it is we are walking before. We are to walk before him and be blameless before him. Who is he? God Almighty. And as one scholar noted, the image behind the words "walk before," is "taken from the shepherd who walks behind his herd directing it by his calls, or from the father under whose eyes the child walks." Abram is to walk before the Lord not out of dry obligation—but because that is precisely the place in which any child walks—before his father. This is the foundational beauty of that Psalm we ought to know and love, "The Lord is my shepherd."

I think it's the very reality of this privilege and weight that causes Abram in **verse 3**, to fall on his face.

This is an invitation into a life of fellowship before an almighty and infinitely loving Father and Shepherd. As good as that sounds, Abram knew himself.

The last time we were with Abram, he did not walk before the Lord, and he certainly wasn't blameless. He ran shamelessly into an adulterous relationship running outside the promise of God attempting to gain it by his own means. He blew it.

That's the context of Stevie Wonder's song. He messed it up, he walked away from his girl and it was the biggest mistake of his life. So heart in hand he returns and pledges himself in undying loyalty and endless affection saying: "The whole of my life and my heart is now wholly pure to you—I'm yours."

But there's no love song sweeter than the Bible's love song. Here's why: It's not Abram who approached the Lord—it's the Lord Almighty who approached Abram. The covenant keeper pledges himself to the covenant breaker and this God Almighty says to this wandering loser: "I'm yours."

That's some good news isn't it. And it's good news because he's a good God. This changes how Abram understands God's commands and it should change how we understand them too. Speaking about Psalm 23, one author said this: "[The Lord as my shepherd] points to letting [God] decide what it is I need, in the very process of ensuring whatever it is, I will not lack it...Psalm 23 is partly in the business of training my sense of need to be better attuned to what God provides."

I wonder if you look at the real and true commands God gives in scripture, even in the New Testament. I wonder how many of us say, "Man, that seems like a lot, I'm not sure if I can do it." But here, if this Almighty God is so mighty that he can cause a barren lifeless womb to conceive—is he not also mighty enough to make wandering and sinful people capable of walking blamelessly before him?

It is who the Lord is, and what the Lord has promised to do for Abram that shapes who Abram is and reorganizes what Abram is supposed to be doing. Who is he? Who is this God? He's the kind of God who can not only tell us who we are, but makes us into who we never were. Here's our second point: **Who You Are.**

In our age of AI, people often speak (and rightfully so) of the way in which artificial intelligence has an ability to fundamentally change our understanding of ourselves and our world. I don't doubt that artificial intelligence has the ability to do that.

But let's not forget what AI is. It is nothing more than sand, rubber and electricity that has been coded by another in order to mimic something it is not—and only artificially so. Yet if we are concerned with the transforming power of electric sand—what more might we expect from God Almighty? Is not the one who is in himself self-sufficient, independent in nature, infinite in essence, eternal in existence and limitless in might able to redefine and reorient our reality in a vastly more profound manner?

Make no mistake, God's words to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17:4-21 is nothing more than an entire rewriting of their reality. You can follow along with me starting in verse 4. Abram—you're no longer Abram. Your name is Abraham and you're going to be the father of a multitude. Abraham—your primary identifier is no longer who you are in relation to anything else in the world—your primary identifier is circumcision—the sign that you belong to me. Sarai—you're now Sarah because you will not just conceive with a child—but kings will come from you. You are the royal princess of a new people. Isaac, you're not even here yet. But here's who you are. You are the son of Abraham and Sarah and you are the one in whom I have made a covenant—the eternal one I made to your father, the one big enough to restore all the nations of the world. Ishamael—forgotten as you might be, I haven't forgotten you. You are not the child of the covenant—but you are not forgotten by the God of the covenant. I will bless you, and you will be great in your own way. But my covenant, and your hope, is in Isaac.

Doesn't this help us understand what life is like in our broken world, but under God's promise? If we look at circumstances and realities. Abram is not a faithful walker. Abram changing his name to "Father of a multitude" when he's got nothing is a bold take. Sarai was going to take a name that spoke to the royalty of her offspring even when others would laugh at her for having no children. If they were to define themselves, if the world were to define them—it's devastating in regard to the promise. But God's promise defines us not by what we see, but by what he says. It defines us not by the world's problems but by his promise. Not by your faithlessness, but by his faithfulness. Not by our immediacy, but by his eternity.

The power of God's promise and our role in it consumes the whole of our life. There is not one aspect of our life which is meant to be lived outside of the presence of God. It involves everything you do. It requires everything that you are. It lays claim on everything you've ever had. This is what is required for you to walk in the love of God. And yet we are reminded of what John tells us in **1 John 5:3**, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

Why is it not burdensome? Because what he demands from us is made possible because of what he provides for us in the promise. What does he provide for us? What does he give us? Himself.

Did you see that? Look back at **Genesis 17:7-8**, "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."

How will God establish his covenant to us when he demands seemingly so much from us? He gives us himself. It was God Almighty who came up with the idea to redeem a fallen humanity. It was God Almighty who wanted to bless blundering sinners. And God Almighty is mighty enough to do what he

wants. He's going to give us what we need to walk before him because he's committed to the promise. God is able to give you everything you need for obedience because God is capable of so much more.

Look at all God said he would do here: He's going to establish a covenant. He's going to make Abraham a father. He's going to make nations and kings come. He's going to make him fruitful. He's going to make it eternal. He's going to bring them into the land. He's going to give them a sign. He's going to bless Sarah. He's going to give her a child. He's going to enter into a covenant with Isaac. He's going to bless Ishmael and multiply him greatly. He's going to establish the covenant because he is the God of his covenant people.

When we come into the covenant that demands to a degree our own work—in fact, our own life—we come into a covenant that is also that of grace and grace alone. God's grace to make us who he wants us to be is the grace that simultaneously changes us into who we need to be.

How does he do that for us? What's the organizing principle of your life? Paul tells us in **Titus 2:11-14**: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."

There's a lot we are going to have to work through in this life. It's messy. It's hard. But when we see the power of God Almighty, we can view life in his promise and say, "God, almighty." He defines us, he empowers us. We are who he says we are because he is who is: God Almighty.

You've got to love how God ends this world-redefining moment: **Genesis 17:22**, "When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham."

That's an almighty God isn't it? That's a big mic drop. He doesn't give further instructions. He doesn't ask for Abraham's feedback. He speaks a new reality into existence and then leaves. But Abraham believed.

As unbelievable as the circumstances seemed—he believed everything God said. And we know that because of what happened next: **Genesis 17:23-25**, "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."

We knew Abraham believed in God because he set himself apart as one who had nothing but the promise of God. This is our final point: **How You Know**. How do you know you're in God's promise? You believe it.

Abraham's faithfulness to believe God's promise was seen as he took the sign of circumcision just as God told him to. As we discussed in Galatians, circumcision was the removal of the foreskin flesh on males. That's what it is anatomically. But did you see what it was theologically? **Verse 11**, "It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

In Abraham's day most nations didn't practice circumcision. The ones that did, used circumcision as a mark of a boy reaching maturity. But the Lord gave circumcision to Abraham to remind Abraham and the Lord of two realities. First, the Lord's people are distinct from other people, they are marked off. Second, they are marked off not by what they have done, but by what God himself has promised to do.

Circumcision wasn't a sign that Abraham had made it. When it's given to infants it's no sign that they had made it. It was a sign that the promised seed, the serpent crusher that we have been waiting on would come—and it would come from man but not by the power of man.

Abraham tried to stand in the promise by his own power. He attempted to gain a child with Hagar who would secure the promise. But that old way of thinking has been cut off.

Circumcision was a hidden sign of an invisible hope. Every time Abraham would be tempted to repeat the same kind of false thinking with Hagar, he would be reminded: "This isn't the promise." Every time Abraham and Sarah would try to conceive they'd be reminded, "If we conceive in our barrenness, it's not our work, it's God's work. We are responsible to try, but it's the Lord's responsibility to provide."

The only way to not be in the covenant then isn't to fail to keep it for yourself—it's to fail to accept it at all. A child marked off by circumcision couldn't become uncircumcised anymore than water can become unwet.

But it was possible for people to accept circumcision in the flesh—but live life according to their own way. The prophets criticized Israel for thinking their circumcision was enough. But what we see in Genesis 17 is that circumcision is not the covenant—it is the sign of the covenant. It requires an active faith in what it symbolizes.

Which is why the Lord himself promises this in **Deuteronomy 30:6**, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

They needed to be circumcised. But their circumcision of the flesh pointed to a greater need—they needed to be changed in their spirit, in their heart.

The sign that marked the reproductive organs of God's people was anticipating the one offspring of Adam who would do just that. When Jesus was born, he was circumcised. He accepted the sign of the promise—but he was also the seed of the promise.

He went to the cross, and he died for our sin, our inability to keep our part, our faithlessness—but he did this so that we might have our hearts finally set apart for God. As Paul says in Colossians 2, "in him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by a putting away of the body of flesh."

And now, there is no more circumcision. Not only because the law was fulfilled but because the son had finally come. God kept his word.

How do you now know that you stand in God's promise? You have faith in the place that God kept his promise. You look to Jesus and you take him by faith. This corresponds with two realities. The first is immediate and effective. Paul says that when we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and repent, we are filled immediately with the Holy Spirit. He is the seal and guarantee of our standing before God.

If you are in Christ Jesus you have an internal witness of the iron clad covenant in which you now stand.

But there are times where we too will struggle to be aware of that internal affirmation. But here, God gives us external markers as well: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Circumcision looked forward in anticipation of salvation, baptism looks backward to the accomplishments of salvation. Jesus really did it. He died for our sins, he rose to life. And now those who accept baptism do so not in hopes that the Lord would save them—but in response to what Jesus already did to save them. Circumcision was given after a lapse of faith, baptism was given as a response to faith.

And yet, there's still another sign. That is of the Lord's Supper. It's this particular meal which Jesus himself uses the same covenant language with. He says, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood—do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me."

Here's what we now need to bear in mind. God's promise to save us in Jesus is certain. But so is God's promise to sustain us in Jesus. Just as circumcision anticipated the birth of Christ in which we might be reborn, the Lord's Supper anticipates the hope we have in the resurrection of Christ that one day we too will be resurrected.

And we will get there not by our own power or might, but by continuing to let God's promise in Jesus orient our lives. This is what it looks like to walk before him and be blameless.

Do you allow God's promise to shape your identity? Do you really believe that what you confess to be true in the gospel has the ability to both organize and animate your whole life? The world can get confusing—if we let the world try and make sense of who we are, and where we are going, and what's certain, we will be endlessly confused. The world, and your perception of it cannot make sense of us. As Shakespeare says, life without certainty is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

But the gospel is not nothing. It is the certainty of God which makes sense of everything we can't.

I want to close with a final quote by the Puritan John Flavel who says this: "Let me tell you, there is no such a pleasant history for you to read in all the world, as the history of your own lives, if you would but sit down and record to yourselves from the beginning to end, what God has been to you, and done for you: what clear power and out-breakings of his mercy, faithfulness, and love, there have been in all the conditions you have passed through. If your hearts do not melt before you have gone half through that history, they are hard hearts indeed."