

# The Story of the Bible

Genesis 17:1–14

A baptism is a very special occasion. This is recognized by just about everybody, but not everyone can explain why. Different churches understand baptism differently. To understand the Bible rightly one must start with the story of the Bible.

The title of the sermon today is “The Story of the Bible.” I have three points: (1) a single story, (2) a covenantal story, (3) a Christological story. First,

## 1. A single story

The Bible is a large volume comprised of sixty-six books, 1,189 chapters, 31,102 verses and over three-quarters of a million words. That’s a lot of material to digest. But the story of the Bible is a single story, and has a cohesive theme. Ultimately it has to do with God’s relationship with his covenant people through faith in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice the importance of the covenant in our Old Testament text today. We read that when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make *My covenant* between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, *My covenant* is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And *I will establish My covenant* between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an *everlasting covenant*, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

Out of all mankind whom God created he chose Abram (“exalted father”), whose name he fittingly changed to Abraham (“father of a multitude”). He gave this man an amazing promise: “I will make my covenant between me and you . . . I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you *in their generations*.”

The Hebrew word for *covenant* is בְּרִית. This word the lexicons variously translate as *agreement, alliance, treaty, pact, compact, pledge, covenant*. How utterly amazing that the God of heaven chose to enter into covenant with Abraham—a human, a sinner! It is not as though Abraham deserved it. No! God’s covenant was all of grace. His covenant with man was totally by grace.

Moreover, it was a *generational* covenant. Abraham would eventually die, but God would continue his covenant with his descendants—his seed. Though all Abraham’s physical descendants would be included outwardly, there would be a

spiritual seed that would follow in the faith of Abraham. As Romans explains, Abraham would be “the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:12). Paul would clarify that “only those who are of faith” are the true, spiritual sons of Abraham. Ultimately, what really matters is not being a physical descendant of Abraham but having the *faith* of Abraham—faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The New Testament begins with the words, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the *Son of Abraham*.”

God says, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and your descendants after you*.” The importance of this covenant cannot be overemphasized.

While dispensationalists fixate on “the land of Canaan,” the most important promise by far is *spiritual*: “I will be *your* God.” God promises to have a personal relationship with his people. He says to us, “I will be your God. I will be joined to you by covenant.”

While there are other covenants in the Bible—for instance, the covenant with Noah—in which God promised that he would never again send a worldwide flood to destroy all flesh—the covenant with Abraham (that God would be a God to him and his seed, throughout their generations) is the unifying theme of Scripture. The law given to Moses, with its Levitical priesthood, tabernacle and sacrifices, was “added” later (Gal. 3:19); the ceremonial law would eventually become obsolete, grow old and finally vanish away (Heb. 8:13) with the destruction of the temple in AD 70. But the promise to be a God to Abraham and his “seed” (singular) would continue on and be fulfilled in the “*new* covenant” (Heb. 8:7–12), where God reiterates: “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” and “*all* shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” This knowledge is supernaturally imparted in regeneration—the new birth. Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The Spirit of God, sent by Christ in time, is powerful. The Holy Spirit has the power to create life from death. He has the power to regenerate and give faith to a tiny baby in the womb, not yet born, not yet able to express that faith verbally, as John the Baptist, still in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, who “leaped for joy” at the approach of the incarnate Christ—himself not yet born, still protected in the virgin Mary’s womb. Since the unregenerate run from God and want nothing to do with God, and only a regenerate person would leap with Spirit-produced joy in the presence of the Lord, the church concludes that John the Baptist, who inherited a sin nature like any son or daughter of Adam, was supernaturally regenerated (“born again”) prior

to his encounter with Christ. If the preborn John the Baptist was regenerated and given the gift of faith even before he was able to express it in words, the church rightly understands that the sovereign Spirit of Christ has the power to regenerate a spiritually dead person, giving new spiritual life and the gift of faith even to the preborn and the severely mentally retarded. Our sovereign God has the power to regenerate whom he will. This gives the church hope in a world cursed because of Adam's sin, with the ever-present possibility of miscarriages, stillbirths and birth defects. Our God is able to save his elect, even when they cannot give testimony to faith in Christ. God knows those who are his. He is able to identify his own with perfect certainty and bring them infallibly into the courts of heaven, where there will be "no more death, neither sorrow or crying or pain," where those who didn't have perfect minds or bodies in this life will receive new, perfect, glorified bodies capable of singing the praises of Christ with the saints forevermore. Amen. The new-covenant promise "*all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them*" doesn't mean *adults only*; it includes all the elect. The new covenant is not a promise of man's ability but of God's sovereignty, and God is able to accomplish his purpose.

Moreover, the words "*all shall know me*" do not mean that the visible church would not include unregenerate persons. No matter how carefully church elders examine candidates for membership, it is sometimes the case that those who give a credible profession of faith later show by their lives and conduct that they never knew the Lord. Sometimes even those who profess Christ renounce the faith and become enemies of Christ, destined for destruction.

The great Charles Spurgeon, in a sermon on particular redemption, said, "'The whole world has gone after him.' Did all the world go after Christ? 'Then went all Judea, and were baptized of him in Jordan.' Was all Judea, or all Jerusalem, baptized in Jordan? 'Ye are of God, little children, and the whole world lieth in the wicked one.' Does the 'whole world' there mean everybody? The words 'world' and 'all' are used in some seven or eight senses in Scripture, and it is very rarely the 'all' means all persons, taken individually. The words are generally used to signify that Christ has redeemed some of all sorts—some Jews, some Gentiles, some rich, some poor, and has not restricted his redemption to either Jew or Gentile."<sup>1</sup>

"*All shall know me*" does not mean that suddenly, with the coming of the new covenant, the children of believers would be cast out of the church; treated as little pagans; considered in no sense Christian, though being the children of Christian parents and part of a Christian home; no longer distinguished from the world; no longer entitled to the church's care and prayers. To do such would have been to

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, πᾶς (Logos Bible Software)

radically change the nature of the church established by God himself in his covenant with Abraham over 2,000 years previously, with no explanation as to why the God of heaven, whose promises are Yea and Amen and cannot be revoked, had suddenly repudiated his earlier solemn promise “I will be a God to you and to your children.” Our loving Father will *not* cast off his covenant children! Rather, “*all shall know me*” indicates that, in keeping with the fuller revelation of God’s will with the coming of Christ, the blessings of the new covenant would be even greater and more marvelous and more extensive than previously. As Proverbs 4:18 says, “the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth *more and more* unto the perfect day”—the day of Christ. “*All shall know me*” means all *comparatively*, not all *absolutely*.

The story of the Bible is a single story, not a mishmash of incoherent stories. It has a single subject: Christ. Secondly, it is

## **2. A covenantal story**

In our Old Testament text God says, “I will make My covenant between Me and you . . . . I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.” God is revealing himself. He says two things: “I will *make* My covenant” and “I will *establish* My covenant.” He says essentially the same thing twice for emphasis, to assure his people of the certainty of his promise. This is important, and God does not want us to miss it. God is telling a story, and its focus is on God’s covenant with the patriarch Abraham. This covenant will culminate in the coming of Christ, who will initiate the Lord’s Supper as he celebrates the last Passover of the Old Covenant era with his disciples, telling them, “this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.” Here is the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who sheds his blood for his covenant people for the remission of sins. “Remission of sins” refers to the ceremony of sending the scapegoat away, far off into the desert, during the observance of the old covenant Passover. When Jesus lived on earth during his incarnation he said, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and *remission* of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). Remission of sins is one of the blessings of the New Covenant, and those who are Christ’s are painfully aware how much they need it. We need our sins removed from us, lost in the unmeasurable depths of God’s forgetfulness. He says, “Your sins and iniquities I will remember no more.”<sup>2</sup>

The story of the Bible is the story of God’s covenant with man. Our first musical selection this morning was from Psalm 106, where we sang, “O sing

---

<sup>2</sup> Heb. 8:12, 10:17

hallelujah! Praise God for his goodness; his *covenant mercy* forever endures. . . . We've sinned like our fathers, done evil; we're guilty; our fathers in Egypt did not heed your signs. They did not remember your *covenant mercy*, but they, at the Red Sea rebelled against God.”

This history is *our* history—church history. The book of Psalms is for God's people *for all time*. Paul says, “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord . . . Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”<sup>3</sup> Paul doesn't warn us: “Beware! This is for Israel, not the church”—no! This is a command to the *church* of Jesus Christ.

When the church sings of “our fathers in Egypt,” we are not singing of *another* people's fathers but the *church's* fathers. All of them were sinners. Some of them were faithful, some were unfaithful. Some were good examples, some were not good examples. All stood in need of the grace of Christ, as do we all. All were destined to eternal perdition apart from Christ, as are we all.

The word translated “covenant mercy” is the Hebrew word חֶסֶד, which occurs about 250 times. In Deuteronomy 7 Moses reminds the congregation: “you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, *the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy*<sup>4</sup> for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Deut. 7:6–9).

In Isaiah 55:3 God says, “Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you—the *sure mercies* of David.”<sup>5</sup> The word translated “sure mercies” is the plural form of חֶסֶד. God's mercies are sure and will never be revoked. Hallelujah!

Under the old covenant God's people gathered together as the church to worship him. Jonathan Cruse observes that “the greatest *ekklesia* in all the Bible—that is, the most significant assembly—is when God gathered Israel before him at Mount Sinai and entered into a formal covenant with the nation.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16

<sup>4</sup> חֶסֶד וְחַמִּדָּה שֶׁמֶר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֶסֶד the God, the faithful one, keeping (the) covenant and (the) mercy

<sup>5</sup> חֶסֶד וְחַמִּדָּה עוֹלָם הַבְּרִית an everlasting covenant, the [sure] mercies of David

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Landry Cruse, *Church Membership* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2024), p. 27

How wonderful that gathering was, as the people of God heard the voice of God out of the thunder, lightning and smoke spewing out of the mountain! Whole families were there. God didn't tell the adults at Sinai, "Leave your children with a baby sitter." He didn't tell Moses, "Be sure to set up a children's church so there are no distractions." Clearly, God's covenant with Israel included adults *and* their children.

B. B. Warfield summarized the point well: "God established His church in the days of Abraham and *put children into it*. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church."<sup>7</sup>

Yes, God put children into his church. There are not *two* churches in the Bible: an earthly church made up of ethnic Jews, and a heavenly church made up of those who are saved by Jesus Christ. That is a manmade idea *imposed* on the Bible. It is not the teaching of the Bible itself. No one in the history of the church ever thought such a thing until the advent of dispensationalism barely 200 years ago.

God does not have two churches—two peoples. Acts 7 speaks of "the *church* in the wilderness" (KJV) with Moses at Mount Sinai. Though most of the modern translations, influenced by dispensationalism (and perhaps out of a desire to maximize readership and profits) translate it "assembly" or "congregation," the Greek word is ἐκκλησία (church). Strong observes that this word is translated as "church" 115 times and "assembly" three times.<sup>8</sup> Why the uneven treatment of ἐκκλησία in this text? Old Testament Israel is "the *church* in the wilderness."

On the other hand, Paul tells the Galatians, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, *then you are Abraham's seed*, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:26–29).

So there you have it: the saints gathered around Mount Sinai to worship the Lord are called "the church," and New Testament Christians are called "Abraham's seed." The Bible couldn't be clearer. There is *one* church, *one* people of God, in both Testaments, made up of those chosen by the Father and given to Christ before the foundation of the world—a people whom he came to save by his blood atonement and upon whom he poured out his Spirit at Pentecost. God doesn't have an earthly people that inherit the holy land and sit under their own vine and fig tree, while his church inherits heaven and gets to stand around the throne of the Lamb, singing his praises forevermore. Owning a little real estate in the Holy Land is not a bad thing, but inheriting a mansion accessed by streets of gold is far better!

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 29

<sup>8</sup> When the town clerk in Ephesus attempted to quiet a riotous crowd, it is properly translated that he "dismissed the assembly" (Acts 19:41). This was obviously not the saints gathered for worship! Context determines the translation.

I would not want to settle for second best—Lord, take the world, but give me Jesus! Thirdly, the story of the Bible is

### **3. A Christological story**

We don't have time to develop this point, and we'll take it up on another occasion. But suffice it to say that in Christ all the promises of God are Yes and Amen (2 Cor. 1:20). The story of the Bible is the story of Christ. He, by his sacrificial death on the cross of Calvary, paid the penalty for our sins. He is the only way of salvation. Look to him in faith.

So you have it: the story of the Bible is (1) a single story, (2) a covenantal story, (3) a Christological story.

The case for infant baptism can be stated simply. In the words of R. Scott Clark, God promised to be a God to believers and to their children. He gave a sign to Abraham to illustrate that promise. He repeated the promise in the New Testament and gave a new sign to illustrate the promise.<sup>9</sup>

There is one church, one people of God, made up of those who confess Christ *and* their covenant children. Amen.

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://heidelblog.net/2021/01/why-does-it-take-so-long-to-explain-infant-baptism/>