

Life & Death in the Covenant

Genesis 17:15-27

Halifax: 20 December 2009

Introduction:

Every Lord's Day we have the privilege and benefit of coming together as God's people to give thanks to Him, confessing His name, in remembrance of His covenant mercy toward us.

- This Lord's Day is no exception.
- But today, we also have the added blessing of welcoming a child who has been born into a covenant family and who is to be presented for baptism.

It was almost a year ago (a year less one week, in fact) that we welcomed Faith Kubik into this congregation at her baptism.

- At that time, I began a three-part series on God's gracious inclusion of our children in His covenant from Genesis 17.
 - This is where the doctrine is first put forward to us, and where God instructs us that when He establishes His covenant to be a God to us,
 - He also promises to be a God to our children.
 - This gracious promise to include our children is never repealed.
- In Genesis 17:1-8, we saw how God came to Abram and said astonishing words to him,
 - He said, "Walk before Me and be blameless!"
 - This is something that a sinner, which Abram was, cannot do.
 - But this was as much a blessing from God as it was a command.
 - In other words, God was going to enable Abram to walk before Him and be blameless by His own powerful working and grace.
 - He was calling Abram by His powerful Word that creates what He commands,
 - just as He did in the beginning when He commanded the light to shine out of the darkness or the animals to bring forth after their kinds.
 - And then we saw that the LORD went further and changed Abram's name (which means exalter father) to Abraham which means "father of a multitude."
 - This was an amazing promise!
 - Not only was God going to bless Abram with eternal life,

- but He was also going to grant this life to a whole multitude of other people with Abraham...
 - He was going to raise up this multitude both from Abraham's descendents and from the nations of the world that would be blessed with life through Abraham's seed!
 - They would all enjoy the blessing of Abraham in Jesus Christ.
 - Just think, a whole multitude of people would be brought forth by God's grace who would be holy and without blame before Him!
 - The promise was to Abraham and to his children and to all those whom God would call!

- On October 11, we had the second sermon in this series at the baptism of Isaiah Poulin.
 - It was based upon Genesis 17:9-14.
 - In that sermon, I focused on the sign of the covenant that God appointed at that time—which was circumcision.
 - We saw that circumcision still pertains to all of us because it is a sign of the cleansing that God gives to those who are effectually called.
 - No one is reconciled to God unless his heart has been circumcised.
 - However, we saw that the physical sign was clearly terminated when Jesus came because circumcision showed that blood must be shed for our cleansing.
 - Jesus fulfilled this aspect of circumcision by the shedding of His own blood.
 - Now that He has come, it would be completely inappropriate to circumcise the members of the covenant...
 - because it would suggest that Jesus has not come and made atonement for us—
 - or that His atonement was not sufficient for our cleansing!
 - And so now baptism, a bloodless sign, has been appointed to replace circumcision as the sign of cleansing.
 - And based on the fact that God is still the God of us and our children,
 - the New Testament speaks of our children as being holy...
 - and in all the examples of the baptism converts who have households, the entire household is baptised,
 - just as Abraham's whole household was circumcised including his servants whose number exceeded 300.

And now, today, we come to our third message from Genesis 17 on God's inclusion of our children in the covenant.

- We come to verses 15-27
 - Here, we have a contrast made in the two sons of Abraham who are in the covenant.
 - Isaac is established in the covenant for an everlasting blessing...
 - But Ishmael gains the whole world (so to speak) but loses his own soul.
 - It presents to us the difference that God's electing grace makes among those who are in the covenant.
 - It shows us clearly the supernatural character of our conversion and proves that salvation is not accomplished by the works of the flesh, but by the power of God.
 - To use the language we recently met with in Isaiah 25,
 - Conversion is a wonder (pelee in Hebrew) that God performs—
 - a wonder being something that is far beyond human power or ability—
 - something that only God can do!

TRANS> And that brings us right to the first thing we are shown in our text today... namely,

- Here we see that...

I. The LORD gives life in the covenant by His wonderworking power.

A. He says something here to Abraham that is astonishing!

- Look at verse 15 & 16!
 1. He tells him that he must change his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah!
 - and the reason is because He is going to give Abraham a son by her!
 - a. That name Sarai means "my princess."
 - A princess is one who gives life to kings and nations...
 - When the sound "i" is added to a word it means "my"
 - For example, the name Eli is El which means "God," plus "i" which means "My God."
 - So the change from Sarai to Sarah, as the LORD explains in verse 16,
 - is a change from being a princess in a limited sphere to being a princess who brings forth kings and nations!
 - So just as Abraham was to be an exalted father of kings and nations,

- so Sarah was to be the princess who brings forth kings and nations in the kingdom of God!
 - She who was barren was going to bring forth nations that would have eternal life.
- b. This was astonishing because Sarah was well beyond the age of childbearing!
- She was 90 years old and Abraham was 99 years old!
 - Her body, as far as nature would have it, was no longer capable of conceiving a child!
 - Yet God tells Abraham in no uncertain terms that He is going to bless her and give her a son by him!
 - It is so amazing that the LORD repeats it three times in this short passage.
2. Abraham falls on his face again, just as he did when God said “walk before me and be blameless” back in verse 1.
- a. He falls on his face and laughs with astonishment!
- You see that in verse 17.
 - “Then Abraham fell on His face and laughed.”
 - He is awe struck by what God has just declared to him.
 - Much like Mary when she was told that she would conceive a child and she said,
 - “How can this be, for I have never had relations with a man?”
 - We are told what Abraham says in his heart...
 - Gen 17:17: "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"
 - How can this be?
- b. It is clear from Abraham’s response that he had not expected this at all!
- And this is understandable!
 - Abraham already had a son by Sarah’s maid Hagar... a son whose name was Ishmael.
 - When God had changed Abraham’s name from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude),
 - He had naturally supposed that God’s blessing to him and to the nations would through Ishmael.

- Thirteen years before, when Sarai and Abram had no child, and it was clear that Sarai was too old to do so,
 - they had (wrongly) decided that Abram should try to have a child through Sarai's maid Hagar,
 - and it worked!
 - Hagar conceived a son and he was born and become Abraham's heir!
- Perhaps Abram had even thought on this very day when God had met with him and had changed his name to Abraham,
 - "It's a good thing Sarai and I decided for me to try to have son by Hagar. Otherwise, there would be no way for me to be the father of a multitude and bring forth a son by which all the nations should be blessed!"
 - Perhaps he felt that even though he had sinned by going in to Hagar, at least good had come from it!
 - At least now it was possible for God to bring forth the blessing to him that he had promised.
 - But *now* God is promising Abraham a multitude through Sarah!
 - The child of promise is to come through her—even now that she is well advanced in years!

3. Abraham now makes a suggestion...

- a. For so long, he has been supposing that all of God's promised blessings would come through Ishmael,
 - so he says, in verse 18:
 - Gen 17:18: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"
 - This is as if to say,
 - "Why don't we just go on with things as they are now?"
 - "Won't the original plan work just fine?"
- b. But the LORD refuses this suggestion and insists that Sarah will have a son and that His everlasting covenant will be established with him instead of Ishmael.
 - Look at verse 19:
 - Gen 17:19: Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.
 - "Established" means "caused to stand."

- This is not just an offer that will be given to Isaac, but God is actually going to establish His everlasting covenant with Isaac...
- He is going to bless Him in this covenant.
- His electing grace will bring eternal life to him.
 - God is going to do the impossible and it is so marvellous and astonishing that the child is to be named Isaac which means "laughter."

TRANS> Now I want you to stop and think about what God is teaching Abraham and all of us here.

B. He is teaching us that salvation is supernatural.

- It is a wonder that only God can do.
1. Sarah's barrenness is symbolic of us all in our fallen estate.
 - My friends, we are dead in trespasses and sins.
 - Because this is so, it is absolutely impossible for us to bring forth fruit for God.
 - We are as barren as a desert.
 2. Abraham did not yet know all that God would have to do to bring the blessing of eternal life to him...
 - a. Of course, when I speak of *eternal life* I don't just mean existing forever...
 - I am talking about eternal life in which we walk before God and are blameless!
 - I am talking about life in communion with our holy God from whom we were cut off by sin.
 - I am talking of life with Him who is of purer eyes than to behold evil...
 - Life in sweet fellowship with the God who is a consuming fire that envelops all that is defiled in flames of eternal vengeance...
 - not because there is something wrong with God,
 - but because there is so much wrong with us that divine justice demands it.
 - b. Abraham understood that somehow, God was going to give life to him and a whole multitude through his seed...
 - but he did not yet understand all that God would have to do to make that life possible.

- He did not yet understand what was required because it had not yet been revealed to him as it has now been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.
- c. But *now* you know.
- Now it has been revealed in Jesus Christ.
 - Now you know what great wonders God had to work to have a people who were blameless before Him!
 - You know that He had to send His Son from glory into this sinful world...
 - And that His divine Son had to take unto Himself our human flesh and be conceived of a woman!
 - He Himself had to become the seed through whom Abraham and all the nations would be blessed...
 - He Himself had to take the everlasting curse upon His own person in order that we might be completely pardoned.
 - It was only in this way that we sinful human beings could be pardoned!
 - And it was only in this way that we could be prepared to receive the Holy Spirit whom Jesus poured out on us all to regenerate us and renew us into the life that God wants.

TRANS> This is a divine work!

- This is something only God could do.
 - We cannot atone for our own sins—God must do it Himself!
 - We cannot change our own rebellious hearts into obedient hearts—God must do that also!
3. And so to teach us and Abraham the supernatural character of our salvation,
- God arranged it so that the child of promise should be born to Sarah when she was well past the age to bear a child.
 - He was telling us with a loud voice that we can't bring forth our own salvation by human effort!
 - We must look to Him to do it all for us!
 - A hard message for us to accept!

TRANS> And that brings us to our second main point...

II. If you would be saved, you must accept the fact that your own way utterly fails!

A. Ishmael represents man's efforts to save himself.

1. He is the child that was the product of Abraham and Sarah's own effort.
 - a. He is the child that is produced by the "we've got to do something" efforts of man.
 - You know how this is.
 - God's way does not seem to be working, so we feel we have to do something to help it along a bit... just a bit!
 - b. This is the very essence of idolatry.
 - 1) The worship that God has appointed does not seem to be doing enough...
 - It does not seem to be drawing me and others to God the way it should... we are still unfruitful...
 - So we will do something...
 - We will write some songs that will speak to us more...
 - We will contextualise the gospel to fit with our times—people don't like all the stuff about God's wrath—they want a positive message.
 - We will make up some holy days that we can celebrate because the Lord's Day is not quite enough...
 - And we will bring in some more practical teaching from psychology that will help people more...
 - And we will ignore some of the commandments that don't seem to relate to us today and add a few of our own...
 - And we will have a good band for the young people and good choir for the older people—that will help them draw near...
 - And we will use drama and video so the word can be understood better.
 - And because a lot of people are not doing family worship, we will get a youth pastor to teach the kids.
 - 2) And sure enough, as soon as these changes are made, we bring forth a son!
 - His name is Ishmael!
 - We feel closer to God and we have new people coming who also feel a lot closer to God.
 - Our plan is working!
 - 3) So then something else happens...
 - Gradually, the message of the gospel is altered until it becomes all about us saving ourselves...

- Christ becomes nothing more than an example that we use to support whatever it is we are doing...
- Soon we have our own commandments and own way of salvation by human effort.
 - The offence of the cross is not there because the cross is not there...
 - It is nothing more than a symbol of overcoming hard things.
 - It is not the way by which we are reconciled to a holy God who rejects us on account of our sin.
 - When this happens, we have become rank liberals with our own way of salvation.

TRANS> That is the essence of idolatry, and that is the essence of the liberal church.

- It is salvation by man's own way—by the flesh.

2. God makes it clear to us in His Word that Ishmael represents our own efforts to save us.

a. Look with me in Galatians 4:21, and you will see that this is so.

- Here, Paul is speaking to the Galatians about their efforts to obtain eternal life by the works of the law...
- And he compares those Jews who had rejected the gospel to those born of Ishmael, the child born by fleshly human effort.
 - Gal 4:21 – 5:1: Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written: "Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband." Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

TRANS> Don't tie yourself up into the bondage of seeking salvation by your own efforts!

- It is bondage and it will fail!

- b. Notice how verse 29 shows us that those who rely on the flesh come to despise the promise and those who believe...
- Gal 4:29: But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.
- 1) This refers to what happened when Isaac was born as recorded in Genesis 21.
 - In Genesis 21:9, we are told that he scoffed at Isaac.
 - Understand that the invitation was open to Ishmael to trust in the salvation that God promised through Isaac...
 - Ishmael's problem was not that there was no salvation available, but that his pride caused him to reject the way that God had appointed.
 - 2) Ishmael was circumcised at the same time Abraham was—along with Abraham and all his servants—over 300 of them.
 - He was circumcised unto the same promise as Abraham, the promise of salvation from God for all the nations through Isaac.
 - But when the promised child came by divine power, Ishmael scoffed because he looked at Isaac as a rival—
 - a threat to his own life rather than a source of life.
 - Ishmael, you see, is the first liberal church leader!
 - He scoffs at salvation by Christ and advocates salvation by human effort, by the works of the flesh.
 - 3) And you know what happened to Ishmael!
 - He was the first circumcised person to be excommunicated.
 - He was the first covenant child to receive the sign of the covenant and then be cut off for apostasy—for rejecting God's salvation.
 - Here is one who has the sign of the covenant in his flesh,
 - but who rejects the covenant by unbelief.
 - Galatians 4:30 reminds us that Ishmael was rightly cast out from the covenant people.
 - It says:
 - Gal 4:30: Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman."

- As a son of Abraham, Ishmael was rightly circumcised,
 - But as a son who rejected the promise, he was rightly cast out.
 - This is why the elders of this congregation have to cut off those who are in the covenant if they come to reject Christ.
 - It is right for us to exclude them because they do not inherit eternal life with us through Christ.
3. To this very day, Ishmael looks upon Christ as a rival...
- His descendents, by and large, follow Islam...
 - which relies on the flesh rather than on Christ who was crucified for sinners.
 - But you see that according to Galatians 4,
 - The Jews who reject Christ are also identified with Ishmael...
 - Like him, they have the sign of the circumcision upon them, but they reject the promise of salvation in Christ alone...
 - And by this very same principle, we may identify all those in the church who are baptised,
 - but who do not delight in Christ as the only Saviour,
 - as the sons of Ishmael...
 - Though they are baptised according to the promise, we are not to regard them as members of God's household because they scoff at the true Christ.
 - They will not inherit God's salvation with those who believe.

B. So let me urge all of you to see that you let go of your Ishmael.

1. You see that even Abraham has a hard time letting go of Ishmael...
 - a. He wants Ishmael to live before God!
 - 1) He wants God to go ahead and bless Ishmael because this is where his confidence has been all this time...
 - Not that Abraham thought to bless himself—
 - but he thought to be blessed through Ishmael, the child whom he had brought forth by the flesh.
 - In Philippians 3 Paul tells us of all his attainments as a leading Pharisee, as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as one blameless according to the law...
 - but he lets go of all these things—many of them good things—that he had trusted in because they are inadequate to save him.

2) Now of course it was right for Abraham to want Ishmael to live before God.

- Every father who has God's salvation wants his children to have it too.
- Every mother who has God's salvation wants her children to have it too.
 - If you are more concerned for your child's success in the class room or in the arena, on in his music or art lessons,
 - of if your great concern is for health and happiness rather than godliness,
 - then you are a parent whose values are extremely distorted!
 - It is painful to see how often we parents are distorted.
- In this, it is good to follow Abraham's example and to cry out that your children might live before God...
 - "O that Ishmael might live before you!"
 - We ought to pray with the persistence of the woman from Syro-Phoenicia, refusing to let go until we have the blessing.

3) But Abraham's prayer for Ishmael was not quite right.

- It needed to be corrected...
 - because in this case, it would have been like Paul asking God to let him live by the works of the law that he had obtained by the flesh.
- God had told Abraham that the promised blessing was to come through Isaac, the child who was to come by miraculous promise,
 - rather than by Ishmael who came by Abraham's own works.
 - It is in that respect that Abraham had to let go of his Ishmael and receive the promise of God.

b. This is difficult for us to do.

1) We have those things about ourselves that we take pride in, those idolatrous ways that we have trusted in, and it is hard to let them go.

- But God works in us all our life to help us let go of these things.
- You see that God was faithful over Abraham's life to enable him to die daily—to take up his cross and die to his own self-confidence.
 - He finally was so strong that he was prepared to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice when called to do so, knowing that God would raise him up.

- 2) My brothers and sisters, you must be crucified with Christ.
 - You must die daily to all the comfort you find in your own flesh.
 - When you come to Christ, you must let go of all that you have trusted in.
 - Your own goodness, your deeds, your intelligence, your background, your disposition, your personality...
 - Not that all these things are bad—but that they are not to be relied upon to gain acceptance with God.
 - You must come to God with nothing to receive life from Him.
 - It is a painful cleavage.
 - You want to hold on to the things you thought would commend you to Him!
 - But He says, “No—my blessing is through Isaac.”
 - That is, “my blessing is all to be found in Christ, not in works of righteousness which you have done.”

TRANS> But I want you to notice something interesting here.

2. See here that God promises to bless Ishmael for Abraham’s sake!
 - In verse 20, He says:
 - Gen 17:20-21: "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year."
 - a. This needs a bit of sorting out—
 - What does God mean that He will bless Ishmael if He is not going to establish His covenant with Him?
 - What kind of blessing is it?
 - 1) Well you see that it is a blessing of prosperity in this present world.
 - It would seem that Ishmael will be one who gains the whole world and loses His own soul.
 - God is going to bless him, in part, for Abraham’s sake.
 - 2) This may seem unusual at first, but it is actually quite common.
 - It is often the case that the children of believers who turn from the covenant are blessed in this life for the sake of their parents.
 - This was done with Esau and it has been done with many others.

- I could name prosperous covenant children who have become liberal Christians, relying on their own works to save them.
 - God often sends worldly prosperity to His people after a generation or two of covenant faithfulness,
 - and apostate children often reap the benefits of this prosperity.
 - That is really the case with us in Western Christendom.
 - We have many material blessings that are really the reward of our forefathers' faithfulness to God.
- b. But why would God give such a blessing that is not really a blessing?
- What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses His own soul?
- 1) Surely it is to show us clearly that the essence of the covenant that God establishes with His elect is not about houses and lands!
 - God promised to give Abraham and his seed the land of Canaan as an inheritance,
 - and multiply them and make them into a great nation,
 - but this is not the principle blessing of the covenant!
 - It is not the principle blessing because God gives the same thing to Ishmael—and to Esau,
 - declaring all the while that they are rejected from His covenant mercy!
 - 2) This teaches us that the blessing consists in something much more important than houses and lands and numerical increase!
 - Ishmael and Esau got what they wanted because worldly increase was all they really wanted.
 - But the Covenant of Grace is the blessing of sweet fellowship with God in Jesus Christ!
 - It is about eternal communion with God as our God and us as His people!
 - It is about walking before Him and being blameless through Jesus Christ forever and ever!
 - 3) In this we find the difference in those who are elect and those who are not.
 - Those who are elect yearn for the righteousness that comes only through Jesus Christ.

- They see their need of salvation and cannot be content with blessing that is only in this life.
 - Like Moses in Exodus 33, if God promises to give the land to His people but refuses to have His presence go with them,
 - the elect refuse to take the land!
 - Moses said, “If your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here.”
 - And so I would ask all you—what do you want?
 - Is your only desire that things would go well for you in this world?
 - It is tragic if you get what you want—for it will lead you to everlasting destruction if it causes you to ignore God!
 - But if you yearn for life with God in Jesus Christ—
 - rejoice greatly because God will give you this life if you will but look to Him and believe His promise.
- c. But let me add one more thing about Ishmael’s blessing...
- There is in his blessing of becoming a great nation a certain future hope for his descendents...
 - Because God’s blessing promised to Abraham was that not only his household, but in time, all the nations of the earth would be blessed in his seed.
 - That is why we see many descendents of Ishmael coming to Christ today!
 - And perhaps in the future there will be even more!
 - God’s covenant is there for them if they will but humble themselves and believe the promise of God in Jesus Christ.

TRANS> And this brings us to our third point this morning—namely...

III. It is for you to fully submit to God’s way as Abraham did—that you might have life in the covenant!

A. Look at what Abraham did as soon as God departed from him!

1. At 99 years old, he immediately was circumcised according to God’s commandment!
 - He did not think about it...
 - He did not call together his servants to discuss it for several weeks...
 - He had God’s command, so he obeyed it right then and there!

2. And believe me, this was not a very easy command for a 99 year old man to obey!
 - He obeyed it for only one reason!
 - Because He believed what God had promised!
 - He believed that God was going to give him a son through whom salvation would come to him and to the nations.
 - He believed that God would cut away from him the barrier that kept him from being fruitful.
 - He believed that He would cut away the sin from his heart...
 - He believed that God would cleanse him so that he might be completely forgiven and walk before Him as one who was blameless.
 - He believed that God would do this through Isaac who would be born to him in the following year, just as God had promised.
 - Abraham came joyfully to be circumcised, saying,
 - "Be my God as you have promised me through this sign."
 - "Be a God to me and my entire household that we may walk before you and be blameless!"

B. And why was it that Abraham had his servants and Ishmael circumcised also?

1. It was because God had commanded him to do so.
 - a. You can see the command in verse 12 and 13.
 - Gen 17:12-13: "He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.
 - b. The pattern of household baptism is followed in the New Testament.
 - But in the New Testament, it is not explained who is included in household baptism.
 - It simply says that the household of this person or that person was baptised.
 - There is no need to explain what is meant by a household because it is clearly laid out for us in Genesis 17.
 - The only change is that now women are included in the administration of baptism, and this we are told.
2. We learn several things about circumcision in Gen 17 that are often misunderstood in our individualistic culture.
 - a. First, that it is not a merely a sign of a national covenant (as some say).
 - When Abraham was circumcised, Israel was not yet a nation.
 - In fact, it did not become a nation for 400 years!
 - So it was not a mere badge of citizenship.

- b. Second, that it is not merely the descendents of Abraham that are circumcised.
 - It is true that until Jesus came, the Lord did not begin to call the other nations as He did when Jesus was lifted up,
 - But Abraham's servants are included, and there were over 300 of them, and they were not his descendents according to the flesh.
 - Besides that, in Exodus 12, instruction is given about circumcising foreigners who came and wanted to eat the Passover.
 - c. Third, we learn that God's covenant is not just for those who are old enough to profess their faith...
 - The children of Abraham and of his servants are to be circumcised on the eighth day.
 - On the same principle, children are to be baptised into God's covenant today and then to be nurtured in the faith.
 - d. And fourth, we learn that even though God told Abraham (by special revelation) that Ishmael would not be established in His covenant,
 - it was still proper for him to be circumcised.
 - We do not baptise on the presumption of regeneration, but on the fact that our children are among those whom God has outwardly called...
 - They have the privilege of having the oracles of God, His promises and commandments and ordinances...
 - And as such they are to be marked out by the sign of cleansing, which sign calls them and reminds them (in conjunction with the word) of God's promise to all who believe.
- C. So what, then, does it mean to be circumcised or baptised?
- It means that the sign of God's promise to be your God is upon you and your children!
 - It assures you that if you believe, God will truly be your God and will cleanse you and cause you to live before Him.
 - As we know now that Jesus has come, He will do this through His Son.
1. If you reject the promise, you will be cut off like Ishmael was.
- a. Ishmael was circumcised, but as we saw already,
 - he was cut off because instead of rejoicing in Isaac through whom salvation was to come, he mocked at him.
 - Nothing was stopping Ishmael from believing and receiving God's blessing in the covenant that was held out to him,
 - nothing, that is, but his own sin and pride.

- That is what keeps all who are called from salvation!
 - God will remove the barrier that separates us from Him if we will come to Him in faith,
 - but if we will not come, we will be cut off from the inheritance as Ishmael was.
 - And the truth is, you will not come unless God initiates the action because your heart is too hard...
 - But you can't use that as an excuse—if you want to come, you can come—nothing is stopping you.
- b. And I tell you, now that Jesus has come, it is far worse to be cut off from God's covenant!
- You sin against a whole lot more when you reject Christ!
 - Here we see how far our loving gracious Lord has gone to redeem us!
 - He has sent His Son to shed His blood!
 - To reject that is a grave offence that cannot be atoned for—for it is the rejection of the very atonement you need!
 - Ishmael was sorely punished for the rejection of the promise as far as it had been revealed in his time...
 - Heb 10:29-31: Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
 - Yes, we have a very loving Saviour who cares deeply for us...
 - but that is why it is so much worse to reject Him than it was to reject what was only a promise.
2. Ah! But if you believe, you will be established in God's covenant forever and ever.
- You, who are barren and without life in yourself will live!
 - You are dead in trespasses and sins!
 - It is He who gives you life by His divine power and grace!
 - He does what you could never do!
 - He provides atonement of your sin and transformation of your nature!
 - Look to Him for yourself and for your children,
 - and do not let Him go until He blesses you!
 - Any one who has this life is a recipient of the wonderworking power of God that enabled barren Sarah to bring forth a son in her old age!
 - Your reconciliation to God is a miracle that only He could accomplish.
 - Rejoice greatly in what He has done!