

# What Does God Require of Us?

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[ 0 : 00 ] So let's, as we begin, ask that question, why would we look at this passage? How could a passage like this have any relevance to us this morning? And I want to kind of reframe the question or refocus as we look at this chapter this morning so that we see we're not actually looking at something here that's kind of weird and irrelevant just from a long time ago that has nothing to do with us.

Rather, this passage is about one of the biggest questions we could ever ask, which is this. What does God require of us?

What does God require of humanity for us to be able to know him, for us to be able to be with him, for us to be able to enjoy the relationship with him which we were designed for?

That's what this passage we're going to see is getting at, that there are plenty of voices in the world suggesting to us what God is like or suggesting what God would like.

But here is God's voice this morning telling us that. In fact, this chapter is the longest speech by God in the whole of the book of Genesis. It's this kind of climactic announcement as God brings together so much of what he's already spoken to Abraham and then he builds on that as well and we're going to see what God does for us but also, as we said, what God requires of us.

[ 1 : 28 ] We've been looking at the life of Abraham for a few weeks now. A reminder to bring you up to speed if you've not been around or if you just need a bit of a refresher. Really the key concept throughout this story is that of covenant.

When we think of Abraham, we want to think of covenant. This whole story with Abraham began back in chapter 12 with God making this covenant with Abraham, committing himself to Abraham through these relational promises.

That's what a covenant is. And promising that through Abraham, through blessing Abraham, he would bless the nations. And so that covenant then has been fundamental to everything that happens in the rest of Abraham's life and even more than that, in the rest of the Bible.

And still today, we've been making the point week by week that as a church, our hope is in God's faithfulness to these same covenant promises. And that covenant is what's at the heart of this passage.

And again, if that all sounds a little bit kind of overly theological or dusty and academic, remember this, remember what a covenant is. This covenant we're speaking about is all about the relationship with God we need and how that is made possible.

[ 2 : 49 ] And so actually, there is nothing more important. There is nothing more exciting. There is nothing more deeply personal as well than we could be looking at than this covenant that God makes.

So four headings we're going to look through as we work through this chapter together. And the first one is this, God's eternal covenant. God's eternal covenant.

If you've been with us for the last couple of months, you'll know that already in chapter 12, God has made these covenant promises. In chapter 15, he restated these promises.

A heads up, we'll find them again at the end of chapter 22. And so straight away, we can have this question, why does God keep coming back to this? Why does chapter 17 start with God introducing this covenant again?

I think a few reasons. Number one is simply because it's important. It's as if God is kind of repeatedly underlining these promises because they are fundamental.

[ 3 : 51 ] We repeat what is of importance to us. If I said to Julie, my wife, well, you know, I told you on the day we got married that I loved you. I'm not supposed to keep on doing that, am I? You know, the answer would be yes.

Yes, you are supposed to keep on repeating that. It's important. That's why God repeats this covenant. That's reason number one. Number two is because it's kind.

For us, it's only been five chapters. But verse 1 shows us it has been 24 years since chapter 12 when Abraham left his homeland and everything he knew on the basis of these promises God made.

And so God gives these reminders, encouraging Abraham to keep trusting, encouraging Abraham to keep going and that God has not forgotten.

Incidentally, that's one of the reasons we gather week by week as a church to remind ourselves not of new things, but of what God has promised and that God will not forget.

[ 4 : 54 ] But thirdly, and this is where we're going to spend our time really here this morning, we also see as these promises are repeated, we see a development or a clarification, or one author calls it a crescendo as these promises are restated.

We're invited to ask really, what did God particularly emphasize this time here in chapter 17 that wasn't so central in previous chapters?

What is the development here that God is emphasizing? And in chapter 17, part of that is just the sheer scale of things. This is kind of the biggest picture of the covenant yet.

Verse 4, Abraham's not just the father of a nation, but a multitude of nations, and he's renamed accordingly to Abraham. Verse 6, there's also the promise that kings will come from him.

This promise is a huge promise. But really, I think the key emphasis here is the eternal nature and the eternal relationship this covenant promises.

[ 6 : 00 ] that this is an everlasting covenant. God hasn't used that term with Abraham before. He's not described the covenant in that way. He then uses it four times in this one chapter.

Have a look at verse 7, really. I think it is kind of a key summary. 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 God highlights here, this is not just a covenant with Abraham. This is not just a covenant with Abraham for the benefit of his offspring. Actually, this is also a covenant with his offspring for all eternity.

Promising not just stuff, not just a place, but most importantly there, a relationship that will endure. That eternal, that everlasting promise, God says, that he will be their God throughout all the generations is underscored here in this everlasting covenant.

And we've said previously that we, that the New Testament church, are the heirs to this promise. We are the offspring of Father Abraham. Remember the kids' song we talked about?

[ 7 : 21 ] We are linked not through hereditary links, but through faith in Jesus, Abraham's ultimate descendant. And that means that God makes that covenant with us here this morning, that he will be our God.

Who is this God? We'll have a quick look back at verse one. At the start of the chapter, we're told two names there for God. The first is that he's the Lord.

You see that in little capitals there. That always means it's translating the word Yahweh, which is the kind of the personal name for God. It's a name showing his relational nature.

It's often a name used when it's speaking about the covenant, because it highlights that relationship that covenant is all about. But how does the Lord introduce himself?

Well, he says, I am God Almighty. El Shaddai is the Hebrew. It's a name that emphasizes God's universal power. It's a name that emphasizes his strength over all things, over all the nations.

[ 8 : 30 ] And that is the God who wants a relationship and who has made that covenant with us. Not just with people in the past, but with us in the present, because God's covenant is an everlasting covenant.

That is the God who's always with us, God Almighty. That is the God who will never leave us. That is the God who makes promises to us and we can be certain that he will fulfill his promises because he is God Almighty and nothing can prevent him carrying out his will.

He is the God who is over all things. And yet that God who has that relationship with us. And just as God reminds Abraham of his covenant promises, so he reminds us too, as we're also so prone to forget.

But there is nothing more important for us to remember in our day-to-day lives. That's why this covenant is not just academic, it is intensely practical and personal.

Because it means whatever situations you are facing this week, whatever complexities you are struggling with, perhaps whatever opposition you are going through, external opposition, what other people are doing, internal opposition, things you're struggling with, spiritual opposition.

[ 9 : 52 ] It means that there is nothing more significant than the fact that if we are a Christian, we face those things with God Almighty being with us.

Because right back here in Genesis, he made this everlasting covenant, this eternal covenant to be God to his people. So there's the first emphasis of this chapter, God's eternal covenant.

And we are the recipients, the beneficiaries of that. That is a covenant made with us, that God Almighty is our God. Now let's move on then to see what we see next.

And this is another new, or I think kind of heightened emphasis in this chapter, a development in this covenant. We see secondly, God's exacting requirements. God's eternal covenant, God's exacting requirements.

It's laid out in its broadest form in verse one. Now where God says, I am the Lord Almighty, walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you.

[ 11 : 00 ] And then specifically in verse nine, as for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. Again, the eternal nature of this covenant.

Verse 10, this is my covenant, which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you, each male among you shall be circumcised. So here's where the circumcision bit comes in.

We'll speak about that in just a moment. But it's important we see that in light of and as a sign of what is most important. What is the headline here, which is the call of verse one, to walk before God and be blameless.

We asked earlier that question, well, what does God require of us? And here's the answer, everything. The answer is that we are to be blameless before him.

And that is what God requires. It's actually the same word used in Psalm 15 that we sang earlier of who can draw close to God. It's the one who is blameless. So far, through the life of Abraham, the emphasis we've been keen to stress has been on God's work.

[ 12 : 13 ] We began in chapter 12 with God's gracious initiative, God's gracious promises. We saw in chapter 15 it was God alone who moved between the animal pieces in that kind of gory ceremony, but which was saying that he alone would do all that was needed to fulfill these promises.

It's so important that we don't kind of jettison that, don't forget that. We hold on to that, that that's true. This covenant is God's work. It is dependent on God's grace. But at the same time, we see God has requirements of his people that we are to keep the covenant.

We do that by living as his people, being obedient, being blameless. Again, we're not earning the covenant. That is God's grace.

That is his undeserved love toward us. But as we've just said, from Abraham continuing right down to us, at the very heart of the eternal covenant, of this eternal covenant is God having a relationship with his people.

And obviously, that involves us. One writer puts it this way, a covenant is a binding relationship and there is no such thing as, there is no such thing ultimately as a one-sided relationship.

[ 13 : 32 ] All relationships have two sides. The point is that as God's people, we're called to live out our relationship with him. To live out that relationship he has established.

And we ask, well, what does that look like? Well, we see that it means complete trust, complete loyalty, complete obedience to God Almighty.

And in terms of the details, I suppose, that's left quite open-ended, isn't it? Walk before me and be blameless. There's not much detail there. As the Bible unfolds, it will give really clear teaching that touches on countless aspects of life in terms of what it means to live as God's people, what it means to be blameless before him in all these different aspects of life.

But before we ever get to those kind of regulations, we see that ultimately it is an attitude of heart. It is not a whole list of boxes to tick, but actually it's more than that.

It is this complete devotion to God and his way of life. Again, not to earn his love, but to live as those he has graciously brought into covenant relationship with himself.

[ 14 : 48 ] Because ultimately, remember, this covenant, right from back in chapter 12, this covenant doesn't end with us. We are not the final destination. Rather, God instigates this covenant.

God promises to bless in order that his people might be a blessing. And so we are not earning our salvation, but we are our channels through which God blesses the world as we live in grateful, thankful obedience to him.

Our obedient lives are to bless others as we point to God who alone rescues. So that's the big picture then of these exacting, or we might say these extensive requirements that God makes of his people.

We have great benefits through this covenant, but also great commitments as part of it. To paraphrase that great Spider-Man quote, with great blessings come great responsibilities.

That's what happens in the covenant God makes. We live out our relationship with God. We are called to walk blamelessly before him. So that's the big picture.

[ 15 : 53 ] And then God in verse 9 gives Abraham this covenant sign as a perpetual reminder of this requirement that God calls his people to, the sign of circumcision.

In the New Testament, following Jesus, that covenant sign is replaced by the sign of baptism. Yet God still gives a sign that marks out his covenant people, marks out what he has promised, but also reminds us of our covenant responsibilities to live out and keep that covenant.

Worth mentioning here, this is why as a Presbyterian church, we would baptize the children of believers. Christians have different views on that. People in our church have different views on that.

We're keen to be generous about that. But it is good to understand our position as a church, which would be to say that just like here for Abraham, the covenant sign is applied to offspring of believers because the covenant promises, this everlasting covenant God is underlining here, includes the offspring of believers.

For us, that means children are part of this covenant community of the church, just as they were part of the old covenant community of Israel, and so they receive that covenant sign.

[ 17 : 21 ] But ultimately, whatever our views on that, at its heart, the sign of God's covenant, whether circumcision or baptism, we see here, it's not about what we do or a decision we make, it's about God's promises passed down through the generations.

Circumcision in the old, baptism in the new is a sign and reminder of that, of God's eternal covenant and what he promises, but it's also a sign of the fact that we have responsibilities to respond in faith and obedience to him.

That's our prayer for each one of us this morning, that we will take seriously the call of God on our lives, the exacting requirements that he lays out, that we will not be lazy in our faith, but that we would live as we are called to live.

That is our prayer for our young people in this church, that they would grow up knowing God's love for them, knowing God's promises for them, being reminded of that again and again, but not just knowing it up here, but responding in faith and obedience, striving to walk blamelessly before God.

That's our prayer for our wider community, those we live and work amongst, that they would come to know and be part of this covenant that God offers.

[ 18 : 46 ] Notice in verse 13, how the outsider is to be brought in. The outsider is able to receive this covenant sign as they become part of God's people and again, with that comes those responsibilities.

And just in case we kind of worry, this all sounds a little bit kind of legalistic, this talk of requirements and responsibilities. Remember Jesus' words at the Great Commission, go and make disciples of all nations.

Again, that inclusion of the nations, the fulfillment of that blessing to the nations. Go and make disciples of all nations. What does he then say? Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

God's covenant is this gracious and eternal covenant that brings us into relationship with him. And yet that covenant comes with these exacting requirements that we would live every aspect of life in obedience to him as God calls us to.

And that then leads us to the third main emphasis in this passage, God's eternal covenant, God's exacting requirements, thirdly, God's extraordinary provision.

[ 20 : 03 ] The next section in chapter 17, in verses 15 down to 21, God speaks now about Sarah. Despite Sarah's refusal to trust God's promises, we saw that last week in chapter 16 and the ugly consequences of that, we see here that she is still part of God's plan.

It will be her child through whom these promises are kept. Just like Abraham, Sarah is given a new name, Sarah. They both kind of mean the same, but that renaming is a sign that God is at work and that God will do as he has said he will do.

Again, the promise not just of a son, but of nations, of kings who will come from her again, verse 20, that this will be an everlasting covenant. A lot of what God says to Abraham is repeated about Sarah and her offspring.

And right in the middle of God speaking, Abraham laughs. In fact, we read he falls to his face and laughs. He almost falls over. He's laughing so much.

He says, there is no way that me or Sarah can have a child at this stage of life. And he's right. He says, I'm 100.

[ 21 : 17 ] She's 90. It's impossible. Why not keep these promises through Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar that we read about last week.

And yet God answers very simply and continues his speech. No, Sarah will have a son. He will be called Isaac and I will establish my covenant with him and his offspring.

And in fact, verse 21, this will happen this time next year. This time of waiting is coming to an end. God is going to do what is humanly impossible to fulfill this covenant.

This child will be born to this couple who are far beyond the age of having children. Now, this is God's extraordinary provision. The birth of Isaac is humanly, is biologically impossible and yet God is going to do as he's promised.

Just in case anyone is in any doubt that somehow because there are human requirements that the fulfillment of God's promises now rests on us, well, here we see underscored once more with this supernatural clarity that God alone will fulfill what is needed.

[ 22 : 29 ] God will provide the child as he has promised through which he will keep his covenant promises. And God's extraordinary provision here is pointing us straight forward to the very heart of the gospel where another woman will have an impossible pregnancy, not this time from old age but through being a virgin where there will be another miraculous birth of a son who will bring about the fulfillment of God's covenant promises!

Now, where God will provide Jesus, the son of Mary and also the son of God through whom he will keep all of these promises he has made right back here to Abraham and to his offspring as these promises unfold into the New Testament, into the church and into eternity.

And as we look at this passage and as we see God's fulfillment of it in Jesus, that is not just things, Isaac and Jesus, that seem kind of vaguely similar. That is not just me trying to be kind of clever and manufacture a link to speak about Jesus.

That is how the whole Bible works. That is where this covenant is all heading, that is all pointing to Jesus and finding its fulfillment in him. Every story whispers his name, remember.

And it is Jesus who is the solution to the tension that we've perhaps been feeling this morning and a tension that really runs right through the Old Testament as we've been brought face to face with our requirements.

[ 24 : 13 ] And that question, what does God require of us to be his people? Because we've seen that that requirement is perfection. That requirement is to be blameless.

And yet we look at our lives, we look at our hearts, and we see we don't reach that standard. And so we're left with this tension, with this question, is God's grace going to triumph?

Is it going to be us getting what we don't deserve? or are God's standards going to prevail? That holiness, that blamelessness needed to enjoy a relationship with God?

Which one of those two things is going to have to give way? And it's only when we get to the New Testament, it's only when we get to God's extraordinary provision in Jesus Christ that we see how the answer is both of those things will be maintained.

that Jesus fulfills the righteous requirements of the law. That Jesus is the only one who is perfectly blameless and so deserves a relationship with God.

[ 25 : 23 ] God will not drop his standards. Jesus comes to fulfill those standards. And yet we see as well that Jesus also suffers in our place.

That Jesus is separated from the Father upon the cross. where he takes the penalty for our sin that we might be forgiven and enjoy the relationship with our creator that we could never earn.

God's grace will not fail and yet God's holiness and standards are maintained. Jesus fulfills our covenant responsibilities, blamelessness, and we receive his covenant blessing, the blessing of the eternal covenant that gives us that promised relationship with God.

The promise and birth of Isaac point us forward to Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus Christ, in whom all God's promises find their fulfillment and in whom the nations are truly blessed as he offers forgiveness and that relationship with our creator that all of us were designed for and that all of us yearn for and that our world is longing for.

And that leaves us just very briefly then with the final section of chapter 17 which I've called here Abraham's exemplary response. verses 22 to 27 really echo verses 9 to 14 as Abraham carries out this circumcision, this sign of the covenant upon his household as he has been called to as Abraham is obedient to God's command.

[ 27 : 05 ] And this is a great place to finish because the great danger whenever we hear the gospel, whenever we hear that incredible truth on which our hope is found that Jesus has done what we cannot that he has stood in our place and that through God's grace we are given what we don't deserve.

The great danger is that we say oh thank goodness. Thank goodness they were only joking when they spoke about that responsibility stuff.

Thank goodness they didn't really mean it when they spoke about that holiness that blamelessness stuff. Jesus has done that thank goodness that I don't need to bother about that anymore.

But that is a really serious, that is a really dangerous misunderstanding of the message of the Bible. We see in these final verses Abraham, Abraham who will be saved by faith.

Abraham who will be saved by the outworking of this promise through Isaac the chosen offspring. But Abraham seeking to live out these covenant instructions he's been given.

[ 28 : 16 ] Abraham's works here will not save him and yet still we see his obedience both in carrying out the specific sign of the covenant but that sign remember pointing toward the bigger picture that life of obedience of blamelessness that God calls for.

And again that's the same for us. We said a number of times in this series the gospel which is the message of Jesus Christ fulfilling these covenant promises for us offering us forgiveness to bring that relationship with God.

The gospel is completely of God's grace. It is his doing from beginning to end. We do not earn it we could never deserve it. But the result of that is not that our lives is not that how we live doesn't matter it's that like Abraham we would respond in obedience obedience from the heart.

Again not that that obedience is going to save us it's our faith that saves us but that faith comes with works comes with obedience in response that our grateful response the outworking of our faith and the demonstration of the relationship we have with God as his children through his grace fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

God requires everything. God requires that we are blameless because he is a holy God and yet he is also a God who knows our weaknesses he knows our struggles he knows our failures and so he has fulfilled that blamelessness for us in the person of Jesus and our responsibility then is to give every part of our lives in loving obedience to him representing him to the world in which we live that they might know the greatest blessing of all a relationship with him through the gospel and work of Jesus Christ that God would bless us through his grace that through us the nations might be blessed as we point them to Jesus and the grace that he longs to show to all those who turn to him in faith and who seek to live as his people let's pray together heavenly father we thank you that in your grace you have made with humanity an everlasting covenant and that that is a relationship where you have promised that you would be our God and that we will be your people that we could have that relationship with you the creator

[ 31 : 03 ] God the almighty God the God who we were made for Lord we see this morning and we understand from your perfect holy nature that the requirement to be with you to share in that relationship is perfection is to walk blamelessly before you and we know that in our lives and in our hearts we don't match up to that standard and yet we thank you that in your covenant of grace you have provided through Jesus the means for that righteousness to be fulfilled on our behalf and for us to enjoy that relationship that we don't deserve but which you freely grant Lord we pray in response to that grace and mercy you have shown us in the gospel that we would be empowered and motivated all the more to seek to live holy lives as your people Lord we pray from that place of security in your love for us that we would live representing you well that we would live out our faith in grateful obedience to you in every aspect of life now we ask that you would show us what that looks like in all the different areas of life that we engage in but the most of all you would be shaping our hearts to seek you first above all things and so

Lord please do be with us this week please keep reminding us please keep in our minds and our hearts that the blessing of your covenant with us and help us to live out our covenant relationship with our hope continually in Jesus and our lives directed to share his glory and we pray all these things in his precious name amen amen amen