

The Sign of the Covenant

by F.B. Meyer

F.B. Meyer's sermon emphasizes the profound nature of God's friendship with humanity, highlighting the conditions of separation, purity, and obedience necessary to enjoy this relationship.

Scripture: Genesis 17:2, 2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, Matthew 5:8, John 15:15, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, Galatians 5:2, Philippians 3:3, Colossians 2:11, James 2:23

Topics: "Covenant Relationship", "Friendship with God"

Description

F.B. Meyer emphasizes the profound relationship between God and Abraham, highlighting Abraham's status as 'the friend of God' and the significance of the covenant established through circumcision. Meyer illustrates that this friendship is not unique to Abraham but is available to all believers through Jesus Christ, who calls us friends. He outlines three essential conditions for enjoying this divine friendship: separation from sin, purity of heart, and obedience to God's commands. The sermon encourages believers to engage in open communication with God, sharing their burdens and joys, and to recognize the spiritual significance of their relationship with Him. Ultimately, Meyer calls for a deeper appreciation of the privileges of being friends with God and the transformative power of His grace.

Transcript

"I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly." -- Genesis 17:2.

Three times over in Scripture Abraham is called "the friend of God." In that moment of agony, when tidings came to King Jehoshaphat of the great heathen alliance which had been formed against him, he stood in the Temple, and said, "Art not Thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land... and gavest it to the seed of Abraham, thy friend, for ever?" (2 Chronicles 20:7).

And the Apostle James, at the close of his argument about faith and works, tells us that when Abraham believed God, "it was imputed unto him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God" (James 2:23).

But, better than all, Jehovah Himself uses the title of friendship, and acknowledges the sacred tie between this much tried spirit and Himself: "Thou Israel art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham My friend" (Isaiah 41:8).

And it would almost appear as if these two chapters, Genesis 17 and 18, had been written for this, among other things: to show the familiarity and intimacy which existed between the Eternal God and the man who was honored to be called His "friend". However, in reading them, we must not suppose that there was something altogether exceptional and unique in this marvelous story. Without doubt it is a true record of what happened more than three thousand years ago: but it is surely also intended as a specimen of the way in which the Eternal God is willing to deal with true-hearted saints in all ages. To hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of His saints, God has been all that He was to Abraham; and He is willing to be all that to us still.

Let us peruse these ancient lines beneath the flood of light shed on them by our Savior, when He said: "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

The friendship of God is freely offered to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. We cannot merit or deserve it. We cannot establish a prior claim to it. We are simply His bankrupt debtors forever, wondering at the heights and depths, the lengths and breadths, of the unsearchable riches of His grace. May we not say that one ultimate cause of this friendship is in the yearning of the heart of the Eternal for fellowship? But it must remain for ever a mystery why He should seek it amongst ourselves; the fallen children of Adam; the tenants of bodies of dust; the aphidae on the tiny leaf, called earth, amidst the forest foliage of the universe.

Surely, if He had so desired it, He might have found -- or if He could not have found, He might have created -- a race more noble, more obedient, more sympathetic than ourselves. Or, at least, He might have secured one which should not cost Him so dearly, demanding of Him the anguish of Gethsemane, and the blood of the cross. So, perhaps, we are sometimes prone to think. And yet it could not be. That which is, and has been, must on the whole be the best that could be, since infinite love and wisdom have so ordered it. And perhaps none could be so perfectly the companions and fellows of the Son of God through all the ages as those who know the light, because they have dwelt in the darkness; who know the truth, because they have been ensnared in the meshes of the false; and who can appreciate love, because they have been in the far country, wasting their substance in riotous living, but have been redeemed by His blood.

But what a wondrous destiny there is within our reach! One to which the first-born sons of light might aspire in vain! At the best they can only be ministers, flames of fire, hearts of love, excelling in strength, hearkening to His word. But we may be the FRIENDS of God; sons and daughters of the great King; members of the body of Christ; constituent parts of His Bride, in her peerless beauty and meetness for her Spouse. As one writes such words as these, the brain almost reels beneath the conception that flashes before it of the blessedness which awaits us, both in this world, and in those ages which rear their heads in the far distance, as lines on lines of snowy breakers rolling in from a sunlit sea.

Oh, FRIENDS OF GOD! why do you not make more of your transcendent privileges? Why do you not talk to Him about all that wearies and worries you, as freely as Abraham did, telling Him about your Ishmaels, your Lots, and His dealings? Why do you not fall on your faces while God talks with you (17:3)? Life should be one long talk between God and us. No day at least should close without our talking over its history with our patient and loving Lord; entering into His confessional; relieving our hearts of half their sorrow, and all their bitterness, in the act of telling Him all. And if only we get low enough, and be still enough, we shall hear His accents sweet and thrilling, soft and low, opening depths which eye hath not

seen, nor ear heard; but which He has prepared for those who love and wait for Him.

There are, however, three conditions to be fulfilled by us if we would enjoy this blessed friendship: SEPARATION, PURITY, and OBEDIENCE, each of which was set forth in the rite of circumcision, which was given to Abraham for himself and his descendants at this time.

Circumcision seems to have been in vogue among the Egyptians and other nations, even before it was taken up and adopted as the seal of the sacred covenant between God and Abraham. It existed previously; but it had never borne the interpretation with which it was now invested; just as the immersion of new disciples had been long practised both by the Baptist and the Jews, before our Lord appropriated it and gave it a significance which opened up in it entirely fresh depths of meaning and beauty.

We are all of us more or less dependent on outward symbols and signs; and Abraham and his children were no exception to this rule; and it therefore seemed good to God to carve in the flesh of His people an unmistakable reminder and sacrament of that holy relationship into which they had entered. A similar function, in the Christian Church, is met by the ordinances of Believers' Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The rite of circumcision was rigorously maintained amongst the children of Abraham. Moses was not permitted to undertake his life-work whilst his son was left uncircumcised. Nor were the people allowed to enter Canaan until they had rolled away the reproach of Egypt, and had submitted to this rite on the threshold of the Land of Promise. The sanctity of the Sabbath might at any time be invaded, rather than permit the eighth day of a child's life to pass without the act of circumcision being performed. It is said of the child Jesus that "eight days were fulfilled for circumcising Him" (Luke 2:21 RV). Paul noted the fact that in his own life, according to Jewish usage, he was "circumcised the eighth day" (Philippians 3:5). And no one could receive benefit through sin-offering or sacrifice who had not passed through this initiatory rite. So strict was the line of demarcation, that the Jew counted the uncircumcised as unclean, and would not eat with them or go into their houses. It was a formidable charge against the Apostle Peter, on his return to Jerusalem from visiting in the house of Cornelius, "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them" (Acts 11:3).

It was concerning this matter that controversy waxed so warm in the early Church. The Pharisee party were quite willing for Gentiles to meet with them in Church fellowship, if they were circumcised as Jews; but not otherwise. They went so far as to affirm, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1,24). And, not content with affirming this in Antioch and Jerusalem, they sent their emissaries far and wide, especially visiting the churches which had been recently founded by the Apostle Paul's assiduous care, and insisting upon the circumcision of the new converts so soon as he had turned his back.

There was no compromise possible in this matter; and both the Council at Jerusalem and the Apostle Paul, guided by the Spirit of God, made it abundantly clear, both by circular letter and epistle, that circumcision was part of the temporary ritual of Judaism, which was destined to pass away. "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing." "In the new man there is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision." "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Galatians 5:2; Colossians 3:11; Galatians 5:6, 6:15). And thus this danger was averted from the Church, which had been in peril of becoming a Jewish institution, a kind of inner circle of the Judaistic commonwealth, but which henceforth became the common meeting-ground for all who loved, trusted, and obeyed the Lord Jesus in sincerity.

At the same time, as in so many other Jewish rites, there was an inner spirit, which passed on into the Christian Church, and is our heritage today. St. Paul, the deadly foe of the outward rite, speaks of the spiritual circumcision, and says it is made without human hands, by the direct interposition of the Holy Spirit; and that it consists in "the putting-off of the body of the sins of the flesh" (Colossians 2:11). Oh, blessed High Priest, this is what we need: take the knife in hand; and, though it cost us blood, make haste to set us free from the dominion of evil, and to constitute us the true circumcision: "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3).

It is only in proportion as we know the spiritual meaning of circumcision that we can enter into the joyous appropriation of the friendship of God. But if we are willing, our Lord and Savior is both able and willing to effect in us this blessed spiritual result.

(1) SEPARATION

Abraham and his seed were marked out by this rite as a separated people. And it is only as such that any of us can be admitted into the friendship of God. Blood-shedding and death -- the cross and the grave -- must lie between us and our own past life; yea, between us and all complicity with evil. The only trysting place for Christ and His followers is outside the camp, where the ground is still freshly trodden by the feet of the exiled King.

There are times when we may be expressly bidden to abide where we were originally called of God; but this will be for special purposes of ministry, and because the darkness needs light, and the carcass requires salt. For the most part the clarion note rings out to all who are wishful to know the sweets of Divine fellowship: "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you" (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

This was the key to Abraham's life; and is the inner meaning of the rite of circumcision.

(2) PURITY

"Putting off of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2:11 RV). There is hardly a single grace dearer to God than this -- to keep lily-white amid the defiling atmosphere: to walk with unspotted garments even in Sardis: to be as sensitive to the taint of impurity as the most delicate nostril to an evil odor. Ah, this is a condition of great price in the sight of God, and one to which He unveils Himself. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

Purity can only be attained by the special Grace of the Holy Spirit; and by doing two things: first, by our turning instantly from paragraphs in papers, or pictures on the walls, and all things else, which excite impure imaginations; secondly, by our seeking immediate forgiveness, when we are conscious of having yielded, even for a moment, to the deadly and insidious fascinations of the flesh.

There are some who sigh after the white rose of chastity, with a kind of despair that it should ever become their own. They forget that it is only possible to us by the grace of Christ, and through the Holy Spirit; whose temples we profess ourselves to be. Let us trust Him to keep His own property in the perfect loveliness of that purity and chastity which are so dear to God; this is the circumcision of Christ.

(3) OBEDIENCE

For Abraham this rite might have seemed less necessary than for some in his camp. But no sooner was it commanded than it was undergone. "In the self-same day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son." Does it not remind us of Him who said, "Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you"? Instant obedience to known duty is an indispensable condition of all intimacy with God: and if the duty be irksome and difficult, then remember to claim all the more of the Divine grace; for there is no duty, to which we are called, for the discharge of which there is not strength enough within reach, if only we will put forth our hands to take it.

We do not obey in order to become friends; but having become friends we hasten to obey. Love is more inexorable than law. And for the love of Him who calls us by so dear a title, we are glad to undertake and accomplish what Sinai with all its thunders would fail to nerve us to attempt.

Of the secrets which shall be revealed; of the delights which shall be experienced; of the blessings which shall accrue to ever widening circles, through the friendship of one man with God -- we have not space to speak. This, however, is true, that the soul laughs to itself (ver.17), not with incredulity, but with the uncontrollable gladness of conscious acceptance and love.

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