

# The Sign of Restoration

By: Peter Martin  
August 25, 2024

*“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram 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.”*

*-Genesis 17:1-8*

Genesis 16 depicts one of the worst mistakes of Abram and Sarai’s life. Sarai and Abram severely misinterpreted God’s intent in their life resulting in them using a pagan practice to try to create an heir for Abram using their female slave, Hagar. The results of this decision were catastrophic both for their marriage as well as for Hagar who was literally abused by Sarai until she fled into the wilderness. However, praise God that He is One who can restore the broken and give us beauty for ashes. God personally steps into this situation and speaks comfort to Hagar and her unborn son, Ishmael, and encourages her to go back to Abram and Sarai. Now in Genesis 17, God restores this broken family and gives them a sign of His restoration.

## Rebuke and Restoration

*“For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”  
-Hebrews 12:6*

I find it most interesting that God begins this process of restoration with a gentle rebuke. With the concern and subtlety of a loving father, God merely says to Abram “...walk before Me and be blameless.” God could have gone into a tirade of all the ways that Abram and Sarai had failed, but instead He uses a different approach and exhorts Abram to walk before Him in a blameless manner. This is the upward call of God on all His people. It isn’t a damning attack on their character designed to “scare” them into righteousness, but instead a firm but encouraging call to holiness.

## Loving Correction

*“She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.” Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”*

*-John 8:11-12*

The two equal and opposite mistakes that believers can make is either to see God as a distant judgemental figure that we serve with terror in our hearts, and the other is to believe that since God is the One who brings beauty from ashes and separates us from our sins, that His call is only that of loving acceptance and never of rebuke. The truth, as always, is somewhere in the middle. And these two points, that seem contradictory, are beautifully brought together by Jesus in the above passage.

In the above account, a woman is caught in adultery by the religious elite of the time. Their religion was the kind of legalistic self-righteousness that we ought to be weary of. They were men who wore religion as a symbol of status and self-assurance. Their response to seeing sin in their midst was to condemn it without mercy and to seek the quick execution of this woman. It is to these men that Jesus says “he who is without sin cast for the first stone.” This statement was made, not to justify the adultery of the woman, but to reveal the hypocrisy of her blood thirsty judges. Jesus then brings the truths of love and mercy to a point and tells her “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

Because God loves and justifies His people, He has done away with the terror of the law and brought us into a loving relationship with Himself. And it is this point that Jesus is expressing when He says to her “Neither do I condemn you.” But, because God is holy and just, He also must call His people to live holy lives in accordance with His justice. Which is the point that Jesus makes when He says “go and sin no more.”

These points may sound contradictory, but they are both necessary to produce the true goal, and that is genuine repentance, or sincere life change from the inside out. Jesus is not actually interested in mere outward obedience to law, He desires genuine change from the heart. The problem is that this life change actually requires both sides of the love and correction. If someone is only exposed to the justice of God, while they will want to move forward towards holiness, they will do so either out of a fear to meet God’s high standards, (which will produce constant anxiety and self-doubt). Or, they will foolishly believe that they are actually meeting God’s standard of holiness, like the religious elite of Jesus’ day, and be filled with self-righteous arrogance.

On the other end, if someone is only exposed to God's love and assurance, while they will experience amazing love and comfort for their souls, they will receive no genuine call towards holiness. When we look at the story of Abram and Sarai we don't see God supernaturally judging their sin, but instead the natural consequences of their depravity destroying their relationship and dishonoring the glory of God within their lives. It is for these reasons that we can't possibly tolerate sin and disobedience within our souls, we need sincere repentance that we might flee from the evil of our sin and towards the forgiveness and restoration of our God.

It is in the kind, but direct, rebuke of our Father that we have the ability to repent well. Abram is at once, rebuked for his conduct, but also called lovingly to overcome it. In our own lives, we must strive to hear and apply the words of Jesus "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."

*"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

*-Philippians 3:12-14*

## A New Name

*"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."*

*-Genesis 17:4-5*

*Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. "And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "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?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" 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. "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."*

## -Genesis 17:15-21

After God gives Abram this upward call, He then establishes this call through a new name given to both Abram and Sarai. God's poetic intent here should not be missed by us. In Abram and Sarai's mistake, Abram is most at fault through his bad leadership, and then Sarai picks up on his lead and coerces Abram into having an affair with her handmaid Hagar. God then corrects this mistake in an interesting and poetic manner. He first meets Hagar in the desert to affirm her and bring her back to Abram and Sarai. This means that Abram, the one who God called personally to bless the whole earth, was rebuked by his wife's maidservant as she is the first one to actually "see" God and receives a blessing for her and her child. Then God meets with Abram and gives him a new name and a sign of this restored covenant, which we will talk about in a second, and then God blesses Sarai and gives her a new name as well.

Just as Abram's error led his family into this precarious situation, God gives Abram the opportunity to right the ship, and through Abram's faithfulness to this new covenant, God restores Abram and Sarai and gives them new names.

## Names and Identity

*"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, Loving favor rather than silver and gold."*

*-Proverbs 22:1*

For the biblical authors the concept of "names" was far more important than it is to us today. For us, when we name our children, we tend to find names that simply sound good. We might look for a good meaning, but predominantly, we are merely looking for a name that we like the sound of. There is nothing wrong with this perspective, but, when we read the Bible, we have to keep in mind that this was not the ancient understanding of names.

Take a couple examples from the book of Genesis to illustrate this point, in Genesis 2, it is seen as significant that Adam names the animals, many of the early names prophecy the importance of significant figures (an example would be "Noah" whose name means "rest", prophetically showing that he would bring "rest" to the world), and in these two chapters, God personally names both of Abram's sons, Ishmael (meaning "God hears" which refers to God "hearing" the pain of Hagar and blessing her) and Isaac (meaning "laughter", which refers both to the response of Abram and Sarai to his birth announcement, but also to God's plan of bringing "laughter" or "joy" to the world through his line).

What this means for us, is that for ancient man, a “name” was more associated with identity than simply something that you called someone. “Identity” is a crucial theme throughout Scripture, it is through our identity, (our innate sense of self), that we derive our self worth, our purpose, our sense of belonging, as well as our overall trajectory within our lives. This is why our current culture is so obsessed with “finding yourself” as well as gender identity, sexual identity, racial identity, and so on. Although I believe that our current pursuit of identity in these arenas is misinformed, we will talk more about this in a second, the pursuit of “identity” is not misplaced, it is actually one of the most important pursuits we have in our lives and, for this reason, God emphasizes this theme throughout the text of Scripture.

## Ancient Identity

In order to understand why our modern culture seems more obsessed with a search for identity, we have to first better understand the ancient idea of identity. The main reason why ancient man, as well as more traditional cultures in general, associate names with identity so strongly is because they believed that identity was something that you were born into, not something that you “looked” for. You were born into a particular land, a particular family, and a particular class, and these things were unchangeable for the majority of people. Your career, your social status, your religion, even your spouse, were all determined by your family without your consent.

This is also why ancient religions have a ritual that is given to children born into the tribe. For ancient Jews, this would be circumcision, but even think about astrology and the signs of the Zodiac. It wasn't odd for ancient man to assume that someone's whole destiny and identity were given to them simply by the visible constellations that they were born under.

## Modern Identity

For the modern person, we don't receive our identity from our birth, we are taught to form an identity through our works. Someone born in the west today doesn't have a fixed social class, their future career is not decided for them, they can move wherever they want, and marry who they want. All this liberty is nice, but it means that for modern men and women, we are not given an identity, we have to form one for ourselves. This might sound nice from a distance, but when you think about it more intently, you can see how anxiety producing this prospect is. If our sense of self is what gives us our self-worth, our purpose, and our life trajectory, to have no fixed identity means that all these things are in flux for us in our adolescence.

It isn't a mistake that most ancient cultures have a "coming of age" ceremony at this exact point in someone's life. For Jews, this would be the Bar and Bat Mitzvah which happens at 12 or 13, and for Mexican's this would be the Quinceañero and Quinceañera at 15. Celebrations like this happen right in the middle of adolescence because this is the time in our lives when we most need a sense of self. We are too old to be kids anymore and that means we don't want to be dependent on our parents, and we are trying to figure out our place in the world. These ancient celebrations met this need and that is precisely why this transition was so much more smooth in ancient cultures.

In modern western culture, adolescence is a time of extreme upheaval. We are too old to be considered children, but we are not given any responsibility that mirrors that of an adult. We are still in school, we can't work, we can't drive ourselves, we can't vote, we can't serve in the military, most of us have no idea where we are going in life, and so on. All this angst is actually not a good thing. It makes boys become increasingly reckless and young girls become increasingly anxious. We strive to find helpful role models, usually coming up short in today's cultural landscape, we search for a group identity, we search for acceptance in romantic relationships, and we wrestle endlessly with our eventual career path. So we spend multiple years in psychological limbo, trying to find a firm sense of self that feels increasingly shaky. And beyond that, we are given terrible advice to find our sense of self in our own self esteem.

I want to illustrate this point by talking about a film series called "Inside Out". In the first "Inside Out", the main character's sense of self is shaken when she is moved from her home in Minnesota to San Francisco. This movie, surprisingly, has a more traditional message to it. While she is in this state of extreme turmoil, (told very cleverly through a metaphor of her inner emotions depicted as actual characters in her mind), her emotions go awry and she has to rediscover her sense of self by being comforted by her family.

While I did like the second movie, it had a subverted message. In this movie, the main character is, once again, thrown into upheaval. But this time it is caused by a combination of puberty and hearing that her best friends are going to a different school the following year. The message of identity is then told through a different metaphor in which she has an internal sense of self that repeats an aphorism in her mind "I'm a good person". But, because she is in personal upheaval, anxiety takes over her mind and shuts out her other emotions, all while constructing a new sense of self that instead says "I'm not good enough". The other emotions then "confuse" her identity by flooding her sense of self with many contradictory self impressions. This turmoil reaches a

boiling point that is resolved by her own emotions embracing her “sense of self” and she find inner self confidence that helps her re-establish her identity.

There is much I can say about this, but for this sake of this paper let’s just focus on that final point. Modern youth are being taught that they can’t rely on anything outside themselves to give them their sense of self, they have to literally construct it for themselves, and then find inner harmony through self-acceptance. If you have ever wondered why there has been such a sharp increase in gender identity and sexual identity, this is the reason. “Self-acceptance” is not an easy thing to come by, and even the ones who are capable of doing this usually become narcissists as a result. For this reason, it is very tempting to try to root your identity in a more fixed framework like your sexuality, gender, or race.

This in itself would not be a viable solution, unless there was a group that would “confirm” this new identity and allow for young people to feel accepted through their transition. These powerful “group identities” are actually a rebellion against the modern notion of self-identification. Our culture is becoming more tribal for this same reason. Political affiliation is becoming a strong source identity, and even more traditional religions are becoming more popular. All of this is symptomatic of the same ailment, we are people longing desperately for a sense of self.

## Christian Identity

*“Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”*

*-2 Corinthians 5:16-17*

There was one exception to the ancient concepts of names and identity, women. For a woman, while they tended to marry within their social strata and had pre-arranged marriages, their last name was not fixed, nor was it necessary that they marry within their own land or social class. Through marriage, a woman was given a new name and a new identity that was based on her husband’s status and not her own.

This leads us to the Christian view of identity. The reason why the New Testament emphasizes the metaphor of marriage so much, is because we don’t receive our identity through birth, but instead through a “marriage”. When we enter into a relationship with God, our whole sense of self is challenged. Just as a woman’s whole identity was changed through marriage, and all her priorities were then ordered beneath her

husband, so a Christian's sense of self is completely altered when we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Our priorities shift, our eternal destiny is altered, and our worth is completely changed. Now, instead of having self-worth that emanates from our career, social status, sexuality, race, etc. We now have an identity that is received from Christ that is solid and eternal. That is why the Christian rite of passage is not given at birth, but at the time of the "new birth". When we are born again, we go through the rite of baptism that signifies our death to our old life, and our new life and identity in Christ.

This identity is something that can be simultaneously under-appreciated as well as over-appreciated in Christian circles. We can under-appreciate our new identity by not taking seriously the worth that Christ has given us and the importance of our calling in Him. Instead of looking outside, as ancient man did, and deriving our sense of self from our tradition and our culture, or looking inside for self-acceptance, as modern man is counseled to do, we are called to look upward to God to receive a new sense of self built on His eternal word.

This means that our sense of self is dependent on our trust in God and His word. For those who are proud and self-reliant, we need to accept from God's word the truth that we are fallen and in need of forgiveness, repentance, and grace. For those who are self-abasing, we need to accept that Christ has forgiven us and does love us eternally. Neither proposition is easy, but this is what it means to "hear" the voice of our Lord:

*"But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. "To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. "And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice."*

*-John 10:2-4*

At the same time though, many are tempted to "over-appreciate" our identity in Christ. What this means is that some talk about our identity in Christ as if it is the only matter of significance in the life of the believer. For them they just keep talking about the love of Christ as though it replaces all other loves and responsibilities within the life of the believer. Let me be clear, the love of Christ is sufficient for the human soul, and it alone can sustain us even if all other comforts and sources of identity are taken from us. It is this truth that has allowed faithful followers of God throughout time to suffer persecution and death for their faith in God.

However, our identity in God doesn't dispense with our other identities, it hallows them. Just because I belong to God, does not mean that my identity as a son, a father, a husband, an American, a pastor, and so on all of a sudden disappear. Instead, my relationship with God elevates all these other identities and gives me the opportunity to subordinate them to my identity in Christ. In other words, the Christian must ask themselves *how* they might live into their other identities in a way that honors their main identity in Christ.

*"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality."*

*-Colossians 3:18-25*

## Abraham and Sarah

We see this concept powerfully in the lives of Abram and Sarai. When God gives them new names, notice that each of their names are altered by receiving the Hebrew letter "hei" (English "H"). Abram becomes "Abraham" and Sarai becomes "Sarah". This letter is significant because it is the letter that denotes "breath" since, in enunciating it, we have to exhale. By God putting a "hei" in the names of Sarah and Abraham it is symbolic of God breathing life into Adam in Genesis 2 as well as Jesus "breathing" the Holy Spirit into the apostles in John 20. This is God imparting life and spirit to His people, giving them an identity and a source of existence that is not merely corporeal and mortal but spiritual and eternal.

Beyond the symbolic meaning, God imparts a particular meaning to both Sarah and Abraham. For Sarah, as we talked about in Genesis 16, she struggled with her own sense of worth before God and only considered her husband to be called by God and not herself. This is why she was so willing to give her maidservant to Abraham to produce an heir. The significance of this sense of self is communicated through her name. "Sarai" in Hebrew is a term of royalty meaning princess, but it is a more specific term. It denotes Sarai as being royalty *to* Abram, or receiving her royal status *from* Abram. This would be like a commoner marrying someone who is royalty, they become royal through the marriage, but their royalty was imparted by a different family, and not their own family identity.

Sarah on the other hand is a more general term for “princess”. This would instead be someone who is royal by their own identity, or someone who is born royal. To put it another way, what God was telling Sarah with this new identity was that she was royal, not through her relationship to Abram, but through her relationship to Him. In this act, we see the essence of what I have called “Christian identity”. Christian identity doesn’t erase our other forms of identity, it subordinates them to the supreme worth that we have in God. “Sarah” is still a wife to Abraham as well as the future mother of Isaac, but now all of those identities come underneath her eternal primary identity of being a daughter of God. Through this supreme identity she can weather the various difficulties that will face her other sources of identity.

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, And whose hope is the LORD. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, Which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit.”*

*-Jeremiah 17:7-8*

The one who finds themselves in God is not promised a life free from trial. Instead what we are promised is a source of identity that is immune to the ups and downs of life. Notice in the above metaphor the “tree” is not kept from “drought” but instead sustained within it. By Sarah receiving this new name she now has the means to face marital difficulties, as well as the shame of her own behavior. Remember that part of this restoration is that Hagar is going to live with them again and Sarah is going to have to face what she did to her and the shame of having to help raise the child of her husband’s mistress. This would be an impossible task for her if God had not given her a new identity that allowed her to face the consequences of her failure.

The same is true for Abraham. His original name means “exalted father” but his new name means “father of many nations”. What God is telling Abraham is that even though he failed to treat his marriage with the appropriate respect and had fathered an illegitimate heir as a result, God would not only bless Isaac, but Ishmael as well. To put it another way, the nation that would descend from Isaac would not be the only nation to come from Abraham, and God is promising to bless all of them.

This is again a testament to God’s amazing faithfulness. For many of us we have failed in similar ways to Abraham and have created issues within our romantic relationships. Whether these be broken homes, children with multiple partners, failed marriages and so on. None of these things are good in themselves, but God can actually bring good from these things, and the way God does this is expressed to us in the official “sign” of this renewed covenant.

## Cutting Away Sin

*And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; "and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. "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. "And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."*

*-Genesis 17:9-14*

This seems like another very strange, and brutal, condition of God's new covenant, but it carries with it extreme significance if we are willing to see it.

*"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, "and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? "Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. "The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. "If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you."*

*-Deuteronomy 10:12-16*

This passage, which is given hundreds of years after this sign was given to Abraham's descendants, Moses gives the symbolic understanding of circumcision. Though I could talk about the practical benefits of circumcision, which is why many non-Jewish people do it to this day, that is not really what Moses had in mind. Instead, he saw it as a acted out symbol, literally carved into the flesh, that represented what God wanted to do to the spirit of Abraham.

For all of us, when we enter into a relationship with God, we realize that there are parts of us that desperately want to honor God, but parts of us that are corrupted and weak. It is this part of himself that Abraham came face to face with in his failure with Hagar.

Times like this can actually make us seriously question our sense of self. Who are we really? Are we the people who want to honor God, or the people who engage in terrible sin? And if we are the people who commit terrible sin, do we have hope of changing?

The sign of circumcision gives us an idea of how God sees the sin in our lives. He doesn't see our sin as a part of our innate identity, but instead as something superfluous that needs to be cut away. To put it another way, God approaches us as a surgeon does a patient with cancer. Although the cancer has become a "part" of the patient, it isn't a part of their innate identity and therefore it would benefit the patient to cut it away from them. This is what circumcision is meant to signify.

*"For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem:*

*"Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, And take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My fury come forth like fire, And burn so that no one can quench it, Because of the evil of your doings."*

*-Jeremiah 4:3-4*

The reason why it is a violent act that includes blood is because this process is a violent one. Sin, like cancer, does not go easy nor painlessly. In order to get rid of it, there has to be radical intervention, otherwise the damage will be fatal.

## Radical Amputation

*"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*

*-Matthew 5:29-30*

This passage may seem radical to us, but that is only because we don't really see how dangerous our sin really is. When Jesus warns that our sin can result in us being cast into hell, He isn't saying that if we fall to sin we necessarily go to hell, but that the consequences of sin are hell. Even for the believer who has been saved from the ultimate consequences of sin, we are still subject to the natural consequences of our bad decisions.

For Abraham, his sin threatened to destroy his marriage, his wife's view of herself, Hagar, and even his unborn son Ishmael. Sin is radically destructive in everyone's life, whether they know God or not. Just as the joy that we experience in the blessings of

God, like love, community, and beauty, speak of the higher reality of heaven, the suffering of life like the consequences of sin, speak of the lower reality of hell. For the Christian, we are supposed to see in the temporal consequences of our sinful behavior, the ultimate consequences of sin that we have been saved from and strive diligently to repent of these sins. But for the unsaved, the consequences that they experience are a foretaste of their ultimate consequence in hell.

So, when Jesus tells His followers to “pluck out” their “eyes” or to “cut off” their “hands”, while He is speaking symbolically, His actual point is more radical than the symbol He uses. As life changing as it would be to lose a hand or an eye, such a loss would be over in an instant. The kind of radical “cutting off” that Jesus is telling His followers to do is life long and requires immense levels of will and determination. We are not called to merely change our outward, but our inward. While the sign of circumcision is a radical one, the reality being symbolized is actually more intense.

And, just like in the previous sign that God gave to Abraham in chapter 15, the heart of Abraham was already aligned with God, this is why God gave Abraham the means to act this out and actually restore Abraham’s home. And we can know the sincerity of Abraham in that he immediately follows the instruction of God, though this would be an incredibly painful act of obedience.

*Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham. So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house, born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.*

*-Genesis 17:22-27*

While the symbol was quite radical, the promise signified is just as radically beautiful. The reason why this sign was actually cut into the male member was a picture of how God answers the desire of his people to “walk blameless before Him.” God doesn’t just command us to pursue holiness, He actually gives us the ability to do so.

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*

*-Philippians 2:12-13*

This passage illustrates for us the cooperation of faith and works in the Christian life. Abraham had to actually perform this symbol in his flesh, but God promised to confirm this work in his soul. The believer must “work out” our “own salvation with fear and trembling...” This isn’t something God will do *for* us with no effort. However, such a work would be impossible in our own power. Which is why Paul ends this passage by saying “...for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” God is always at work in the hearts of those who are submitted to His purposes and pursuing His holiness. This doesn’t mean we will be perfect, only that as we are faithful to “cut off” the sin and the wickedness in our own lives, we can trust that God will do the impossible work of changing our souls to conform to true goodness and virtue.

More than this though, by placing the sign in the flesh of the male member, this sign signified for Abraham and all the Jewish fathers after him that they can pass something spiritual and holy on to their children. Since the fall, the main thing that we pass on to our children is our mortality and our spiritual frailty. But now, God gives His people the opportunity to show in their bodies the truth that they can actually pass onto their children their desire to follow God in spirit and in truth.

The symbol of this promise is given to each man, but then, as they give the sign to their sons, they were symbolizing their willingness to bring up their children in this holy pursuit. And the reason why this had to be acted out in such a powerful sign is because this pursuit will not be simple and it won’t be accomplished with mere words (though correct teaching is essential as well.) To truly raise a child in a way that prepares them to pursue God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength it requires a father to be correctly instructing their children as well as being that radical example for what it means to follow God. This example isn’t just in doing the right thing, but in doing what Abraham does here, acknowledging his wrong and repenting well.

For us as Christians, while we do not need the outward sign of circumcision anymore, it is important for us to understand it. While we do practice the signs of the Old Covenant, we need to learn them since their ultimate fulfillment is in Christ.

*“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the*

*cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”*

*-Colossians 2:11-17*

For the Christian, we have confidence that Jesus really has “cut away” the consequences of our sins. The fullness of our failures was literally carved into His flesh and forgiven through His suffering. When a believer looks at the cross we are reminded of the great sacrifice of Jesus and what He has done for us. We still try to embody the same symbol as the Jews, living our lives in accordance with the upward call of God, but we can do so with infinitely more confidence than the saints of old. We have the benefit of knowing that Christ has actually put away the requirements of the law and formed a new identity for us through His perfect forgiveness and acceptance of us.

This gives the believer more resources that help us to repent and live holy unto God, but it doesn't remove our responsibility to actually pursue God. The Christian must have one eye on the past and one on the future. When we look back, we should see our sins being forgiven by the cross of Jesus Christ. But when we look forward, we should see the absolute assurance that we will be like Christ. The same power that raised Him from the grave is the same power working in us to conform us to His perfect image.

*“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”*

*-1 John 3:1-3*