

## “Abraham the Father of All Who Believe”

Scripture Readings: Genesis 17:1-14; **Romans 4:11-12 (text)**

October 29, 2017 • Rev. Nollie Malabuyo

Today, we witnessed as a congregation the baptism of little Laura Hessed Vasquez. Churches like ours that baptize infants and little children are often misunderstood by many other churches who view this practice as “unbiblical.” So before we look at our text this morning, I would like to mention a few things about water baptism that are misunderstood—often caricatured—by many evangelicals. I would begin by briefly explaining what water baptism, particularly infant baptism, is not. I’m sure that these things were already explained in more detail in your previous studies.

First, we do not baptize only infants and little children, but we do baptize adults as well—if they have never been baptized even as infants. Second, we do not believe that baptism saves a person (baptismal regeneration), the view of Roman Catholics and Lutherans.

Third, infant baptism was not invented by Roman Catholics. As early as the mid-2nd century, only about 50 years after all the apostles died, the early church fathers already wrote that the practice of infant baptism was widespread. And since there was no such thing as the Roman Catholic Church until about the 7th century, Roman Catholics did not invent infant baptism. In fact, throughout the first 1,500 years of church history, there was no dissenting voice against infant baptism, until the radical Anabaptists came in the early 1500s.

Fourth, contrary to popular evangelicalism, Jesus as a 40-day-old infant was not “dedicated” at the temple by Mary and Joseph. Rather, they went to the temple to fulfill their Old Testament duties under the Mosaic Law (Exo 13:2, 12; Lev 12:6-7;). Fifth, sprinkling is not a Catholic mode of baptism. It is well-documented in all of Scripture, symbolizing the washing away of sins and the giving of a new heart by the Spirit (Ezek 36:25; Zech 12:10; Heb 10:22). Sixth, baptism does not always mean immersion. It could mean dipping (Mk 7:2-5), being united to someone (Rom 6:3), death (Mk 10:38-39), and even sinking permanently. In the account of the great flood and the Red Sea crossing (1 Cor 10:1-2)), who were immersed? It was the unbelieving world and the Egyptians! Noah and his family and the Israelites escaped without immersion! (1 Pet 3:18-21)

We now go to the text at hand. In Romans 4, Paul points out that justification before God is by faith alone. The greatest example of this justification by faith alone is Abraham, “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*” (verse 3). Since Abraham was the first Jew to be circumcised, he was the father of all Jews who believe in Christ. But since he also was already righteous before God by faith even *before he was circumcised*, he was also the father of all uncircumcised Gentiles who believe.

When God made his covenant with Abraham, God himself “signed, sealed, and delivered” it to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15 and 17. And to whom did God deliver his covenant? Not only to Abraham, but to his children and his children's children for an eternal covenant.

### **The Sign and Seal of His Righteousness by Faith**

What then is water baptism? Unlike what most people believe, baptism is not “a public confession of our personal faith in Jesus Christ.” What's wrong with this is the focus on ourselves and on what *we have done*: our “decision” to “accept Jesus.” On the contrary, baptism is a “sign” and “seal” of *what God has done* for the person being baptized: the washing away or forgiveness of sins through Christ's broken body and shed blood. It is also a promise by God to the parents that the child who believes, whether in infancy or as an adult, will receive forgiveness of sins.

Our text goes all the way back to Genesis 17 when God made his covenant with Abraham, *“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised... and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you”* (verses 10-11). All of God's covenants with man have a sign: the tree of life in the covenant with Adam; the rainbow, with Noah; the sacrificial animals, with Moses. Why is a sign needed? A sign confirmed covenants between God and man. It is a witness given by God to remind man about his obligations under the covenant (Gen 9:12-17).

God's covenant with Abraham was not only with Abraham, but God told him, with *“you and your children after you.”* All of Abraham's descendants are under this covenant forever. The promises given to Abraham—a multitude of descendants and nations and a land of their own inheritance—are confirmed with the sign of circumcision. All of his descendants are God's people, and the sign of membership in Abraham's family, God's people, is circumcision.

That is why the penalty for violating this sign of the covenant is severe: *“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant”* (verse 14). To be “cut off” means the death penalty, because the penalty for violating any of God's commandments – sin and transgression – is death. If any of Abraham's children are not circumcised, he is not counted as a member of his family and of God's people. He will be treated as one of the Gentiles who are *“alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”* (Eph 2:12). So without circumcision or baptism, a person, though physically alive, is *spiritually dead*, because he is outside of God's covenant.

How is this related to baptism? Baptism, according to the New Testament, is *the sign and seal of belonging to God's covenant people*. Water baptism signifies and seals the washing away of sins under the same new covenant. Paul makes this connection directly in Colossians 2:11-12, *“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”*

Jews who were converted to Christianity easily saw the continuity between the two signs: the old covenant circumcision and the new covenant water baptism. In Acts 15:5, some of them wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised. Why did they think so? Since they knew the requirement of the Mosaic law that all those who converted to Judaism were required to be circumcised, they applied the same principle to Gentiles who converted to Christianity. This connection alone would necessarily lead to the conclusion that the children of the Gentile believers would also be baptized. It would be absurd if these Jews demanded the circumcision only of adult Gentiles!

So just as circumcision signified God's ownership of Jews as his own *"treasured possession [and] holy nation"* (Exo 19:6), water baptism signifies God's ownership of all Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, as his *"holy nation... a people for his own possession"* (1 Pet 2:9). Thus, water baptism can never be the believer's own declaration of his faith in Christ. On the contrary, it is the Triune God's own work of washing away of the believer's sins, "signed, sealed and delivered."

### **The Giver of the Sign and Seal**

Baptism then signifies what God has done for a believer: forgiveness of sins, being washed clean of all his uncleannesses. To break this curse of sin and death on mankind brought about by Adam's fall, God sent his Servant Son to be *"cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people,"* (Isa 53:8) to fulfill the requirements and promises of the covenant. When this Servant was born, he was born under the Law, and was given the sign of circumcision. But not only his foreskin was cut off; on the cross, his whole body was "cut off." Just as Abraham's only covenant son Isaac was *figuratively* cut off and raised from the dead (Heb 11:19), so would the only-begotten Son of God be *literally* cut off and raised from the dead.

In baptism, God unites us with his Son by the Holy Spirit, so Paul makes this connection between baptism and union with Christ in Romans 6:3-4, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* A Christian is united to Christ from the moment he believes. His old sinful self is crucified with Christ, and a new creature is raised with Christ in his resurrection. And with a resurrected soul, he can now walk in newness of life. God has provided the means for this new life: the Holy Spirit. That is why John the Baptizer revealed, *"I have baptized you with water, but [the Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"* (Mk 1:8).

After Christ ascended into heaven, he poured out his Spirit on his disciples, baptizing them with the Spirit, just as John prophesied. On the same day, Peter announced that *"God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."* Cut to the heart, the Jews asked the apostles what they must do, and Peter commanded them in Acts 2:36-39, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the*

*Lord our God calls to himself.* If they repented and believed, their sins would be forgiven, and baptism would be applied to them *and to their children.*

## **The Recipients of the Sign and Seal**

In the introduction, I mentioned most of the misunderstandings about infant baptism. For example, John MacArthur said that the practice of infant baptism is “devilish” because “it’s not in the Bible.” Many Presbyterian and Reformed pastors and teachers were infuriated by this “devilish” claim, including myself. We believe the Baptist position is wrong, but unlike MacArthur, we never call the Baptist view as “devilish.”

As was mentioned earlier, Paul points out the connection between the two signs of membership in God’s covenant nation: circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:11-12. In Genesis 17, who were circumcised? It was Abraham, who was 99 years old, because he already had faith, which was counted to him righteousness. So we baptize adults.

Who else? Ishmael was circumcised when he was a 13-year-old teenager. Did he have faith? No, because he turned out to be an unbeliever. Many circumcised Israelites who escaped Egypt later also turned out to be unsaved, dying in the wilderness under God’s wrath. Who else was circumcised under God’s covenant with Abraham? It was Isaac, when he was eight days old. Did Abraham know if Isaac would come to faith? No, he did not. But God commanded him to circumcise his children, not because Isaac already had faith, but because he was the child of Abraham, and the covenant was between Abraham and all his children forever.

To be a member of God’s people and to distinguish them from their pagan neighbors, God commanded all Jews to be circumcised. Israel was separated as God’s chosen nation from “among all peoples,” his own treasured possession, and as a holy priesthood to serve God (Exo 19:5-6). So when we baptize our children, we are saying to the congregation and to the children, that they are distinct and separate from those outside the church. They are not pagans, and we treat them as elect children, unless they later in life reject God’s covenant membership because of unbelief.

So baptism of little children is not about whether the children have faith or not, because we do not know. Only that baptism is their initiation and ingrafting by God into the Christian church. But even if it is about faith, most Christians wrongly assume that children cannot have faith. We know that Jeremiah (Jer 1:5), David (Psa 22:9-10), and John the Baptizer (Lk 1:41) were already elect children even when they were still in their mother’s womb!

Lastly, most evangelicals say that there is no explicit command in the New Testament to baptize infants. But we see many “household baptisms” in the New Testament. In fact, I would say not only five instances in the Book of Acts and 1 Corinthians, but thousands. Why? Because there were 3,000 Jewish men who professed faith on the day of Pentecost. And since we see the pattern of baptizing whole households in Acts, surely many, if not most, of these households were baptized

with the heads of households who believed. It is an impossibility and a huge stretch of the imagination to say that there is not even one little child among these thousands of households.

Why are we so sure that children are included in a household? Because in the Bible, parents, children, servants, and sojourners constitute a household. In Greek, the word is *oikos*. The whole of Scripture refers to all the members of the family—husband, wife, children—as a household. God referred to Abraham and his household in Genesis 18:19, *“For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his oikos after him to keep the way of the Lord.”* In Genesis 45:18-19, Jacob’s household consisted of himself, *“your little ones”* and *“your wives.”*

So it is clear that when the head of household believed, the whole household is baptized, whether they believed or not. We read in Acts 16 about the faith of Lydia and the Philippian jailer alone, but their whole households were baptized (Acts 16:14-15, 34). **The pattern is clear: Whenever God establishes a covenant with man, it is with the covenant head and his descendants after him. And the faith of the covenant head of household is followed by the baptism of his whole household.**

**D**ear brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice this morning with Pastor Paulo and Abby. Their little Laura Hesed was given the sign of membership in God’s covenant of grace. They will always remember this day. You also who have been baptized are continually being reminded of Christ’s “baptism” on the cross to wash you of your uncleannesses by his Spirit, signified and sealed by your baptism with water. And being washed by the Spirit of Christ is your daily purpose as you grow in the faith.

You who are Gentiles by birth are the true circumcision by virtue of your *“walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised”* (verse 12). You are truly circumcised *“who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 3:3). When God has truly circumcised your heart, *“you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live”* (Deut 30:6). Then, and only then, will your baptism be confirmed. Your love for God and your good works also confirm that you indeed are Abraham’s spiritual children in Christ (John 8:39, 42; Gal 3:29).

We continually praise the Triune God because we do not deserve his kindness, mercy and love in Christ. Yet he has made you members in your profession of faith and in your baptism, you and your children, and your children’s children after you, *“to the thousandth generation of those who love God and keep his commandments.”* Do you know why little Laura’s middle name is *Hesed*? *Hesed* has really no English equivalent, but is usually translated as God’s “steadfast love” or “lovingkindness.” So with this name, Pastor Paulo and Abby are giving praise and thanksgiving to God for his faithfulness and steadfast love to their family in blessing them with a child. As the Lord our God was faithful to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all Israel, so he is faithful in his promises to you and to your children after you.