

Sunday 28th August 2022
Genesis 17:1-2, 7, 9-14 and Titus 2:11-14
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Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- God's plan: a people of His own
- God's plan: old and new covenants
- God's plan: the place of children

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word. Let's pray together:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God that we might receive what You have for us today.

Come Holy Spirit and reveal to us the plan of God.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.

I'm going to put three statements up in a moment and I want to ask you, in a moment, to turn to your neighbor and decide which one of them or which couple of them are true.

Okay. The statements are:

- baptism saves a child
- infant baptism is a relic of Christendom
- sharing in communion requires cognition – understanding.

So, baptism saves a child infant; baptism is a relic of Christendom - when the church was at its height and such like; and, sharing in communion requires cognition, understanding. I'm going to give you 30 seconds and if you feel up to it, turn to your neighbor and see what you come up with. Which of these is true? Over to you.

So, okay, sounds like I could have left you to talk about that for some time but if you've, if you want to, you can obviously debate that over tea and coffee after the service. But, in my understanding of things, I would say that none of these statements is true and we'll get into those issues over the next two weeks. Now, at the outset of this series, I'm going to put up front that I know that we are quite a broad congregation theologically and some of these issues, particularly around baptism, have actually split the church and I'm certainly not wanting that however, I hope that, from the series, that wherever you stand on this, and you might be someone who holds to more a kind of believer's baptism, a credo baptism, that you think someone should only be baptized when they respond in faith themselves, that could be as a child but not as an infant, not before you're able to make your own choice, that might be you and I have people that I highly respect that hold that position and this series is not about persuading you to change that position necessarily however, we need to understand the tradition that Brightons Parish Church finds itself within, a reformed presbyterian tradition, what is it we understand about God's covenants and God's sacraments, that we, that might then guide our practice, our life as a congregation, particularly, as I said earlier, as we think about allowing children to be more proactively included. And so, I hope this series will bring greater unity, not disunity, and again, another thing to put out at the start is that this is all a journey for each of us and it has been a journey for me too. A journey that has felt like a maze at times. I grew up in the Church of Scotland. I was baptized as an infant. I would say I really came to faith when I was 19, although there was always a belief in

God over those years, but when I came to own a personal faith in Jesus, I was very, very frustrated with the denomination, with my congregation, probably even with my own family, and part of the reason is because I cannot remember one person having ever told me the Gospel that Jesus died for me because God loves me and I need to own that for myself for me to be forgiven and be part of what God is doing in the world. I had not heard that and so, when I came to own that I was frustrated, I was annoyed, I was upset that that hadn't been done and I attributed that lack of sharing to nominalism. I saw, within the church, of people saying they were Christians or even coming to church where there seemed to be no faith, no follow-through on what was being taught and it was simply a tick box exercise for a lot of people. That I saw, or at least I thought that way. The youth of me was rather more judgmental than I am just now. And I blamed some of that nominalism also on infant baptism, that too many people thought 'Well, if I get my child baptized, get them dunked, get them wetted, get them christened - I never use the word christened, it's not in the Bible, so I'm not going to use it, baptism, infant baptism - so, because of that practice, because of the misunderstanding around that practice, I attributed that to a lot of nominalism. 'Well, my wean's been done. Job done! Don't need to turn up at church anymore.' That's how it felt and appeared to me and so as I grew in faith over those early years, I came to hold myself to believers-baptism, that you should only get baptized when you can respond in faith. That would deal with all the issues that are wrong with the Church of Scotland, or so I thought. And, actually, in my early 20s I was part of a church where I was training to be a youth worker where they didn't believe in infant baptism and I chose to get baptized again which I'm never going to do now as a minister. I would not offer that. I would not say yes to that, but I did at that time.

And then, God has a sense of humor and he calls me into the Church of Scotland, calls me into ministry as part of the Church of Scotland and I, as part of that discernment process, I had to wrestle with 'Can I ascribe to this? Can I be open to this? Is there underpin an understanding that is okay for this? Can it be justified from the Scriptures?' And, eventually, I came to a point of acceptance but still with a measure of discomfort, confusion even, and, I must admit, I've even had that over the last three and a half years as a minister until this summer. Because of the request of the Kirk Session, I've done much more digging into this than I've ever done before and two books, in particular, that no one had ever pointed out to me before have been so helpful. One book is 'The fulfillment of the promises of God: An explanation of covenant theology' which is a branch of systematic theology and 'The case for covenantal infant baptism.' These books have been so helpful, bringing things that I'd never come across, never thought about and so I'm actually now at the point of being much more convinced of those arguments but also just being more confident and passionate about God's plans and purposes and the place of children within that. Now, so let me repeat, we're all on a journey. I'm on a journey still. I don't have all the answers to this and I know that three sermons is not going to cut it for everybody. You might have more questions and I'm willing to engage with those questions, I just asked for some grace as we wrestle with something that can be quite tricky and we can have very different perspectives and, at times, it's going to be maybe a little bit heavy, and some things might go in one ear and out the other, but I encourage you to try and come back to it. Maybe re-watch the

sermon on our website or Youtube Channel. If you don't have internet at home we will get you either a CD a DVD or a printed copy of the sermon, so we can cover everybody's needs. So, whatever you need, if you want to go over it again, just ask because this stuff is actually so important, so important.

Beginning the journey then, over these next few weeks, let me ask this question - What is God up to? I mean overall. What is God up to? What is His goal? What are His saving purposes? If we were to put it that way. Because, at the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis, at the very start, we see that God creates and within that creation He makes humanity unique amongst all creation. He makes them in His image. That God can then relate to them in a very personal way. And we understand from scripture and theology that God does this because, as a God who is trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, He wishes to lavish His love upon humanity because God is community, as trinity and so He makes another community, and, within that perfect community of Trinity, there is perfect love, and perfect love just desires to lavish itself upon others. We know that with our own children, with our grandchildren, children in our church, we just want to share that love with them. Well, imagine being a perfect being with perfect love, at the overflow of that love He creates and He creates humanity to be recipients of that love. But then, we rebel. Adam and Eve sin and the fall creates a whole host of issues and problems within creation.

Theologian Wayne Grudem who doesn't hold to infant baptism, he's a Baptist writer, he says this, 'The rest of scripture after the story of the fall in Genesis 3 is the story of God working out in history the amazing plan of redemption whereby sinful people could come into fellowship with Himself.' So, we have the fall, and the rest of scripture, you can see, is a story, not just the story but there is a story there, a thread of a story of what God is doing to bring about a plan, to bring us back into relationship with Himself, that He can lavish this love upon us. And we see that in our passages today we read, God's saying to Abraham 'I will establish my covenant to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.' I'm your God Abraham. I'm coming into relationship with you, and you and your descendants are going to be my people. And then, what do we find Paul saying to Titus and in the letter, he writes he says of Jesus 'Jesus, who gave himself', who came to earth, died on a cross, who gave himself 'to purify for himself' for himself 'a people that are his very own. The great and grand plan of God is to have a people of His own. There's more besides to the plan for sure. He's going to deal with sin, death and the devil, so that the kingdom of God can be all in all and God can receive glory. All of that is there in the plan but core to all, central to the plan is this purpose, that God would have a people of His own, a people upon whom He can lavish His love.

So, let me pause there. Is that part of your understanding of God? Can you see this overarching purpose within and across the scriptures? And let me get a bit more personal, I don't want this just to be a lecture for three weeks. Does it move you? Does it move you? As you recognize what you've been invited into, does it move you? Because, let's remember, we don't deserve this. It's undeserved because each of us,

like Adam and Eve, has told God to take a hike. We've told God we know better; we want to live our way, we've rebelled. The bible says that's sin.

So, we don't deserve this. God wasn't obliged to include you. God didn't need to include you and yet He does, He has. Doesn't that move you at all at the wonder of that?

And maybe you're sitting there or watching at home and you recognize that you don't share in that yet. You've not said yes to Jesus. Well, this is what you're missing out on. This great purpose, this great security, this great belonging that God is working out in history and that, one day, that's all there's going to be. This great people with God and His new kingdom and, without you choosing to follow Jesus, you'll miss out on that.

Maybe that's what needs to move you today to explore that. Is the preacher just mentioning some rubbish, or not? We'll dig into the Scriptures. Come along to Alpha when it starts up in the autumn term. Explore these things because, maybe you need to be saying yes to Jesus. So, wherever we are on the face journey, I hope that, as we just touch on this, that it moves you, in some shape or form. You might have heard this a million times but I hope you've not grown cold too it. I hope it stirs something within you.

So, God has this plan to have a people of His own and it spans the Scriptures both Old Testament and New Testament. But, you know, the words Old Testament and New Testament refer to more than just two halves of the Bible. I think a popular misunderstanding of Old and New Testament is 'Well, the Old Testament is just the first half of the Bible and the New Testament well, that's just the other half of the Bible.' But that's a popular misunderstanding because, really, those words are chosen because of what those words mean. Because testament in the Greek actually is derived from a word meaning well or covenant, and we find the Bible full of , both old and new covenants. And so, we read it today in Genesis 17 God said 'As for me, this is my covenant with you. You will be the father of many nations I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you.' So, God enters into this special relationship with Abraham, a covenant, an agreement and, really, what He's doing here in chapter 17 is building upon what happened and began in chapter 12, then was given greater detail in chapter 15 and as now you're given even more detail in chapter 17. It's all the one covenant made with Abraham but given more detail over those chapters. I encourage you to read them separately later on.

But maybe, you're wondering 'Well, what is a covenant, Scott, because you're using that an awful lot, but I have no idea what it means? Well, again, Wayne Grudem, just to stick with that one book, it says this 'A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed, legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.' So a covenant is God setting up a relationship with humanity and He sets the terms and He invites humanity into that and it has legal consequences, both good and negative, and there are actually, in the Old Testament, there are five covenants: the relationship with Adam that's set up in Genesis chapter one and two that can be described as a covenant; there is a covenant with Noah; with Abraham as we've seen; with Moses; and with David. And some of those covenants stand-alone, like the

covenant with Noah, and we give thanks and praise for that covenant because it means, despite our rebellion, across all this world, God is not going to flood the earth again and that's a good thing, we thank God for that covenant. There are other covenants that become intertwined, like the covenant with Abraham and with David, that they build upon one another. There is also mention in the Scriptures, including in the Old Testament, there is mention of a new covenant. In fact, that's where it's first mentioned by the prophet Jeremiah. And so, God says through Jeremiah 'The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel... this is a covenant I will make with the people of Israel ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.' So, God says a new covenant is coming and it has certain hallmarks. Again, we see that hallmark of being, Him being their God and they being His people. He carries that on, He will also write the law in their hearts and if you look at the surrounding verses, He also says that each person who shares in that new covenant will know God and that their sin will be forgiven and remembered no more. That's all part of the new covenant that God describes in Jeremiah. But what is striking, what is striking is that all those aspects of the new covenant were there already in the covenant made through Moses, given through Moses and that was building upon the covenant given to Abraham. So, God made a covenant with Abraham and to help bring that to fruition, He made another covenant with Moses, but that covenant with Moses didn't bring to fruition, that the things that God had promised to Abraham and that's because the covenant made to Moses did not have power to transform God's people from the inside-out, it did not change them, they continued to rebel in terrible ways and so, God makes a new covenant to replace the old. And again, Wayne Grudem says this to sum all this up 'Only the covenant under Moses is called the 'old covenant' ... to be replaced by the 'new covenant' in Christ. The Mosaic covenant was... given for a time to restrain sins and... point people to Christ. So, really only the old covenant is that one given to Moses. So, we had Abraham and then Moses and then David but they all built on one another, but the covenant with Moses did not transform the people, something better was required and so, God promised to bring a new covenant that would replace that covenant with Moses and that new covenant was brought about through Jesus, to transform us from the inside out, to fulfill that initial promise given to Abraham that there would be a people, a people that spanned the nations, and they would know God and relate to God and be God's people, and share in all His promises. So, God began this purpose in the Old Testament, fulfilled it through Jesus, and we live in the time when it has been worked out in reality.

So, again, let me pause because that was heavy, that was a heavy section and I tried to keep it as short as possible. There are chapters on this stuff, so you've got the very condensed version, but let me ask this as we take a moment to catch our breath, maybe we need to catch our breath quite literally or maybe we should literally have our breath taken away, have our breath taken away by the sweep of God's plan, have our breath taken away by the intricacy and the interconnectedness of God's plan, that He has been working out for thousands of years, across all these different people and yet, they speak with one voice and with one purpose, that there's this thread, through all that, God has a plan to have a people of His own and that plan has been worked out now through Jesus and all who will follow Him and that is what you are caught up in if

you claim to be a Christian, if you claim to be a Christian, if you said yes to Jesus if, whether at home, in your heart or last week with a piece of Lego saying yes, if you said yes to Jesus this is what you are caught up in, brothers and sisters, this is what you're caught up in. We are not about keeping the lights on in the building. We are not about keeping a charity on the go. We are not about being religious or being more moral than we once were, or be more moral than our neighbors. We're not about any of that. We're about God's purpose to be His people and invite others into that and, if it doesn't take your breath away, I don't know what else will because that's incredible, incredible. you are part of God's great and gracious plan and that's amazing because it's undeserved and all of love, all of love. But, you know, when we start thinking about this plan and we start thinking about how it relates to our lives, as I said in the prayer, we can turn it very inward because, as a culture, we're very individualistic and that can make us often very selfish, and we can do that with our faith, but God's covenant with Abraham included others. In Genesis 12 He mentions 'the nations and in Genesis 17 He mentions 'children. So, we read earlier that God said to Abraham 'As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, for the generations to come, every male among you 'shall be circumcised, you are to undergo circumcision and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.' So, God establishes this covenant, this binding legal agreement, this way of relating between God and His people, and children are included, from infancy, they are part of the covenant community, they share in the covenant promises and as a sign to remind them of these promises, they're given circumcision to point towards that covenant, and we'll think more about baptism next week. But, for now, let's note that the Jewish people, across the centuries, and up to and including the Jews in Jesus day, saw children as sharing in the covenant community, sharing in the covenant promises, both the blessings and the repercussions of that, and so, when Peter stands up on the Day of Pentecost and the church is birthed and has this great speech and 3000 people and more pile in to say 'Yes, I'm following Jesus!' he has a couple of very interesting lines. He says this '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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call.' Peter speaks of 'the promise', 'the promise'. He might be referring to the promise simply made through Joel who he quotes earlier on in that passage but even if he's only referring to that particular promise, that particular prophecy, that prophecy tells of things that are part of the new covenant and, as we saw, the new covenant builds on the covenant made with Abraham, a covenant which included children and so, in Peter's understanding, children are included under the new covenant as well and it's natural for him to do that, as it would be for any Jew listening to his speech, because the old covenant included children too.

And it's carried on into the rest of the New Testament because not once in all of the New Testament are the place of children questioned. They're encouraged to heed teaching and to grow in faith. They are addressed as members of the church but they're never questioned, their place is never questioned. There are many other questions and raised and answered. For example, dietary requirements, the dietary requirements of the Old Testament, they're lifted, they're done away with, and that's noted. That the

priesthood and the sacrificial system, that's done away with through Jesus, and that's noted. The requirement to be circumcised to ensure that you were saved well that's rejected, and it's noted. That now both males and females are given a covenant sign, baptism, well that's a change and that's noted. But what's never questioned, never written about, the place of children, the inclusion of children, because God, in His plan cares for and welcomes the children of His people.

Now this is going to raise a lot of questions for some of us. Some of us will already be going to questions like 'Does that mean children are saved?' and 'What about the place of faith? salvation comes by faith in Jesus alone. An infant can't have faith. So, what about the place of faith?' and 'What happens if someone has been baptized, as an infant, but drifts away from the faith? What then, what do we understand then?'

Well, I'm afraid time's up! And so. I'm going to have to come to those questions in the next two weeks, but I'm not going to try and duck them, I want to try and wrestle with them because I know some of you will be asking them. Yet, for now, let's note what we've surveyed so far and what Peter says the promise is for you and your children. God's plan includes you and your children, such is His goodness and grace. It was a plan conceived by the Trinity, an eternity passed amongst the persons of the Godhead and They chose to make it known through the various covenants that God made with His people across the centuries, until it was finally fulfilled and secured through Jesus in the new covenant and proclaimed now by the church in His name. And, I wonder if God is raising this up for us now, not simply because the Kirk Session asked a question, but because He wants us to wrestle with this afresh, to maybe understand afresh, maybe even for the first time, to understand something of His purpose and plan, something of His provision for salvation and maybe, within that, we've got to allow the breadth of Scripture to shape our thinking and understanding more than we've ever done before, so that it might deepen our confidence and fuel our passion. I pray it may be so. Amen.