

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name."¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Commentary

The form of this text resembles ancient Near Eastern documents in which a king made a grant of land to a loyal vassal and his descendants, often in perpetuity. Even the phrase "walk before me" (verse 1) is found in these documents, as the king acknowledged that the vassal had behaved loyally in every way—no deceit or disloyalty but complete honesty and allegiance. God specifically named Sarai a co-progenitor of this people and gave her a new name—Sarah, which means "princess." Earlier in Genesis 16, Abraham had produced an heir by Hagar, but now learned he would have another son, through God's blessing of his wife, Sarah, who also would be ancestor to rulers and nations. The promise to Abraham and Sarah included Israel's neighbors—the Ishmaelites and Edomites back then and the Arabs today—all of whom trace their lineage back to Abraham.

Reflection

Sarah was named a co-progenitor. What do you think it meant for the writer, who lived in a patriarchal society, to provide Sarah such high social status?

Romans 4:13-25

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") --in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." ²³ Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Commentary

Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians to serve a number of ends. First, he wished to acquaint them with his message (and reply to circulating slanders) so they would support his missionary endeavors to the western part of the Empire. Second, he wished to resolve the tensions that had arisen between Jewish and Gentile Christians, arguing that both must welcome each other as full and honored members of God's family. By placing "works" and "trust" in opposition to each other, Paul expressed his conviction that a trusting response to the generous and faithful God, rather than the work of circumcision, makes one apart of God's people and heir of God's promises.

Reflection

How does the level of our trust in God enable or limit our discipleship?

Mark 8:31-38

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." ³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

³⁵ "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Commentary

Three times in Mark's Gospel we find the pattern of Passion prediction, misunderstanding, and teaching on discipleship. The repetition of this pattern provides the central chapters of Mark with their structure and shows the importance he and his community attached to these themes, as they illuminate the nature of Jesus' messiahship and the character of true discipleship (following this Messiah). Jesus' mission would redefine all concepts of greatness and precedence, indeed all definitions of being a success and enjoying quality of life. What it means to "take up cross" and "deny one's self" is clarified in the later two teachings on discipleship, even as Passion predictions become more descriptive. It means renouncing attempts to better one's position, as the world sees betterment, and taking up the role of a servant to all.

Reflection

Self-fulfillment and self-gratification are central values in our culture. How do these values fit with Christian discipleship? How does each set of values shape our lives?

Psalms 22:23-31

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those

who fear him.

²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

³⁰ Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,

³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.