

## FAITH REQUIRES KEEPING THE COVENANT

Fourth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Living by Faith* from Exodus 4:18-26  
“Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met [Moses] and sought to put him to death.” Exodus 4:24

The north Atlantic was raging with another of the storms that had kept the ocean boiling that Fall of 1620. The hatches had been sealed tight, and the orders had been strict: No one, but no one, except members of the crew, was to venture out on the top deck. But 28 year-old John Howland, employee of William Carver, one of the Pilgrim leaders, could take it no longer. He was sick of the crowded space between decks where you couldn't stand up straight, of the semi-darkness and stale air, of the stench and vomit, the cries of unhappy children, and the bickering and short tempers of the passengers on the Mayflower. Simply put, he'd had it. He had to get fresh air.

Howland unbolted one of the hatches and heaved himself upward. Waves towered over the tiny ship, tossing it like a bobbing cork on the water. They crashed heavily over the planking, submerging the vessel until it popped to the surface once more. Suddenly Howland himself was swept overboard into the icy sea. His last conscious act was to fling his hand out blindly. By the grace of God, at just that moment the ship heeled so far over that the lines from her spar trailed in the water. One of them happened to fall across his wrist, and Howland grabbed it and held on.

Someone below decks noticed he was missing, found the open hatch, and spotted Howland in the water. They hauled him back aboard. By then he was quite blue. It took him several days to recover, and from that time on, Howland willingly stayed below. Eventually John Howland married one of the surviving young women in the Pilgrim company, and together they had something like a dozen children. He became a leader in the Plymouth colony and lived to the age of 80.

I found out last Thursday from my brother that John Howland was my grandfather, ten generations of grandfathers removed. Barb instinctively doesn't believe my brother—probably out of jealousy since her father didn't come to this country aboard another ship until 1923. But nevertheless, it's true. However, to be honest with you, being a descendant of one of those who sailed on the Mayflower is not exactly an exclusive honor. There are 45 million of us whose ancestors were on that ship.

Here's my point: The majority of the Pilgrims who arrived in the Promised land of America in November of 1620 were Christians, people who had consciously entered into the Covenant of Grace that God has made with his people. These people had brought their children into that covenant with them through baptism. That is the real heritage they handed to their descendants. Today as we continue our series from the book of Exodus on *Living by Faith*, we come face to face with the covenant and its importance to our experience of following Jesus Christ.

This morning we are going to look at Exodus 4:18-26 and we will examine three things we learn from these verses. **1. What circumcision meant to the sons of Israel, 2.**

### **Why Moses neglected to circumcise his son Gershom, and 3. Why the covenant is so important to us and our children.**

As we begin our look at the passage before us today, you will recall that Moses had received from God the commission to go to Egypt and the Pharaoh, and to lead Israel out of their slavery and into the Promised Land of Canaan. Moses left the burning bush and in chapter 4, verse 18, we are told that he went to his father-in-law, Jethro, and negotiated a release from his responsibility to manage Jethro's flocks and herds so that he could travel to Egypt. He wanted to check on his family, he said. It had been a long time since he'd seen them. Jethro granted him permission, and in verse 20 Moses took his wife Zipporah and his sons, Gershom and Eliezar (Exodus 18:4) and set out.

And then we come to a strange and troubling verse, verse 24. *"Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death."* Just a few days before, God had appeared to Moses in the amazing encounter at the burning bush. God told Moses he had picked him to liberate Israel. He provided him with three miracles to authenticate God's commission. He satisfied every problem, every objection Moses threw up which might prevent him from going. Finally Moses set off on God's errand, and the first thing we read is that God tried to kill him. What in the world is going on here? What kind of God are we dealing with? As we read on we discover that the answer has something to do with the fact that Moses had failed to circumcise his son Gershom. Verse 26 says, *"Because of the circumcision."*

**1. What circumcision meant to the sons of Israel.** In order to understand why God was so upset at Moses, we must go back to the first words God spoke to Moses when he called him at the burning bush. In Exodus 3:6 God introduced himself to Moses. He said, *"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."* First of all, God reminded Moses of his father's faith. It was his mom who had placed him in a basket and set him floating in the Nile in front of the daughter of Pharaoh. But it was his dad as the head of the family, who had made sure Moses was circumcised when he was eight days old, and who had led his family in worship and instilled his own faith in the hearts of each of his three children. Moses had cherished that commitment to God for eighty years. When I was young I sometimes wished I had a testimony like several of my friends who had turned to Christ out of a life of sin. I rather longed for a dramatic experience of conversion. But instead, all I could talk about was how I had grown up in a Christian home and how God was always real to me. I'd never done the bad things others had. It seemed so boring, so bland. Later I realized that God and my father had given me the greatest gift a young person can experience—a godly heritage, a head start on faith. I'm grateful my memory is not branded by images of things I'd now be ashamed of. Did you enjoy the privilege of growing up in a godly home? You dads, are you providing that for your children? It's a blessing beyond value.

Next, God identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Genesis 15 we find the story of how God introduced himself to Abraham. *"I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."* (v 7) God gave Abraham his personal name, *Yahweh*, which literally translated means, *I AM*.

And then God made a covenant with Abraham. A covenant is a legally binding agreement by two or more parties. Each commits to do certain things. In God's case he promised to be present with Abraham, to protect him, to provide for him, to answer his prayers, and to grant him eternal life. For Abraham, the covenant obligated him to follow God and to obey his commandments. Since Abraham could not do this perfectly, God promised him that he would send his son who would fulfill Abraham's obligations for him. Then God identified himself as the God of Isaac, Abraham's son. In Genesis 26:24-25 God said almost the same thing as he had to Abraham. "*I am the God of your father, Abraham; Do not fear, for I am with you.*" Notice the *I AM* again. Isaac passed the covenant on to his own son, Jacob. At the biggest crisis of Jacob's life, God appeared to him in a vision we call *Jacob's Ladder* and God said, "*I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants.*" (Genesis 28:13) In each of these cases God was reestablishing the covenant with Abraham's sons the covenant he'd made with Abraham. Now here he was, in almost the same exact language, repeating the old formula and reestablishing with Moses the covenant God had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We learn from this that God always deals with his people by means of a covenant. It is not a casual relationship God has with us. It is extremely serious, so serious that God places it in the category of a formal legal agreement. We might say that God signs a treaty with his people. But there is one more thing we must understand. Back in Genesis 17 God told Abraham that this treaty or covenant had to have a seal placed on it when it was agreed to. If you look at the draft copies of a treaty between two nations, you will always find the seal of each nation affixed to it. The seal used to be in the form of a ring pressed into melted wax to make a unique impression, a mark that represented the ruler of the nation. The seal that God prescribed for his treaty with Abraham was circumcision. Circumcision represented the cutting away of sin and included the shedding of blood as a reminder that in order for the covenant to be upheld, it would require the blood of God's own son to be shed on behalf of his people. So in Genesis 17:23 we are told that Abraham went that very day and circumcised every male in his household, from the oldest to the youngest. As God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he spoke as one of the two parties to this covenant, this treaty, to the other party in the covenant, to Moses. And circumcision was the seal that made the covenant valid.

**2. Why Moses neglected to circumcise his son, Gershom.** Moses, however, had failed to circumcise his son Gershom when he was born. We can only speculate as to the reason, but there are some clues. When Moses fled Egypt with the Egyptian police hot on his heels for killing the Egyptian taskmaster, Moses had disappeared into the Arabian Peninsula. He had stumbled across the family of a man named Jetho Reuel who is described as the priest of Midian. (Exodus 3:1) The Midianites, as we mentioned a couple of weeks ago, were descendants of Abraham through his wife Keturah, whom he married after Sarah died. Abraham certainly would have circumcised Keturah's sons and brought them into the covenant with God, but before he died he gave them an inheritance and sent them all away, for it was through Isaac and his descendants that Christ would come. There were five tribes among the Midianites and over the centuries they had drifted south and east and some, like the family of Jethro, had ended up in Arabia.. Most

of the Midianites abandoned the knowledge of the true God and began to worship idols. But the name Reuel means *Friend of God*, so we may suppose that in his family knowledge of the true God continued. And yet, even in this family, memory of the covenant had grown dim for they had gradually dropped the practice of circumcision, the seal of the covenant.

Why do we say this? Look at Zipporah's reaction. In Exodus 4:25-26 she takes a knife and circumcises her son Gershom, and she's angry about it. She and Moses must have quarreled over it. Verse 25 says, "*Zipporah...cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, 'You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.'*" Let me suggest here, along with many other Bible commentators, that Zipporah had objected to her son being circumcised, and she only did it now in order to save her husband's life. But she still wasn't happy about it. Moses apparently had yielded to his wife's opposition when his son was born. He fell under the influence of Jethro's family. He apparently came to feel that the seal of the covenant, perhaps even the covenant itself, was optional. His justification may have gone something like this: "Jethro and his family worship the same God I do. We share a similar heritage. Why must I maintain the form and legal details of the covenant like the Israelites have maintained in Egypt? My father-in-law obviously thinks a relationship with God can be an informal thing. Isn't it enough to love God in a casual manner? He was listening to others and not to God.

**3. Why is the covenant so important to us and our children?** The real question is, just how important does God consider the covenant to be? The answer is in verse 24. "*Now it came about that at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death.*" Can you believe this? God tried to kill Moses because he hadn't brought his son into the covenant! That ought to give us pause. We don't know how this attack came. Maybe an angel with a sword assaulted Moses. Perhaps God struck him with a plague. At any rate, Moses understood what was happening and ordered Zipporah to perform the circumcision. When she did, the attack ended.

Still, isn't God being a little extreme here? So we would think. But God didn't think so. Let's consider the reasons. First, there was the history of the Midianites. They were descendants of Abraham. They had started at the same point the Israelites had. They were well familiar with the covenant and the requirement of circumcision as the seal of the treaty. And yet the Midianites had drifted away. If Moses had continued in the tradition he found in Jethro's family and treated the covenant casually as he led Israel, it would not be many years until Israel also would be in danger of falling away from God. Then what would become of the promise of salvation and the coming of Christ? You see, the real problem here is our sinful tendency to drift away from God. One family fails to hand the faith on to their children. Soon another family follows the same path. The covenant helps to put a brake on our tendency to disregard God.

Let me take you back to the 45 million descendants of the Pilgrims. The Pilgrims were very committed Christians. They came to America to worship God freely, according to what they believed the Bible taught. In addition, they were afraid that their children would become like the world and forsake God. The Mayflower Compact which

they wrote and signed before they set foot on American soil, and which they intended to be the governing constitution for their colony, begins, *“In the name of God, Amen.”* And yet how many of their descendants today still follow God? Only the ones who are committed members of faithful churches. Several years ago I spent some time in New England visiting churches, a couple hundred of them. There is hardly a church to be found in New England that remains Biblically faithful. You can trace their steps historically. They compromised membership in the church and made faithful obedience to God’s covenant optional.

The second reason God took the covenant so seriously is found in verses 22-23. God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh, *“Israel is My son, My first-born.”* God was going to send his son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross to save his people. Christ makes us sons of God by faith in him. In Genesis 17:14, in the command God gave Abraham to circumcise his sons, God tells him that any man in Israel who was not circumcised would be cut off from God. In other words, he would be like the Egyptians. And what would become of the Egyptians? In verse 23 God says to Pharaoh, *“I will kill your son, your first-born.”* If Moses didn’t circumcise his son, Gershom, soon that man would lose his place as a son of God. Do you see? The covenant is a matter of life and death. It’s absolutely important!

Do you want your children to live? Your grandchildren? Do you want them to be God’s? You must bring them into the covenant. After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus changed the seal of the covenant from circumcision to baptism. That’s why when a person comes to faith in Christ we baptize him. And we believe, following the Biblical practice of 4000 years, that our children may also be included in the covenant through baptism. The point is that if you, like millions of American Christians today, think a relationship with Christ is casual, that being part of the church--the family of believers with whom God has made his covenant--is optional, you are risking disaster for yourself and for your children and your grandchildren. That’s what we learn from this passage.

But of course, the covenant must be more than just an outward, formal obedience of God’s commandments. The act of baptism never saves any person. It must be a matter of the heart. Do you really love Jesus? There is a chilling finale to this story. In Judges 17 and 18 we are told how Moses’ grandson, Jonathan, the son of Gershom, became a private priest to the tribe of Dan, and led them into idolatry. He’d been circumcised and grew up in the covenant, but he didn’t love God like his grandfather, Moses. Did his father, who had been circumcised on the road to Egypt, harbor his mother’s ambivalence toward the covenant? Did he communicate that to his son? Maybe that’s where it all went wrong. We don’t know. Friends, God wants you to care enough about having a living relationship with him that you will make a treaty with him, signed in blood, if you will—Christ’s blood. But the most important thing is that you love him and teach your children to love him. Because he loves you he will draw your heart and the hearts of your children to him if you ask him to help you.

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