S1E15: Cutting the Flesh

THE PROMISE: God Calls a Family (Gen. 11-50)

In Genesis 17 God institutes circumcision as the sign of his covenant with Abraham.

The promise will come God's way. Abraham's family would display God's power and faithfulness, not Abraham's virility.

Why circumcision?

- In an ancient patriarchal culture, the head of the family made binding agreements for the whole family, and a contract made by the father bound everyone
- Cutting the flesh was a common way to seal and publicly affirm a covenant
    - Here the sign moves to the body of the family head and every male after him, and so to the whole family
    - Individual and corporate: God builds his kingdom through a family

Why that part of the body?

- It involves procreation, and the covenant promises a nation of people
- Abraham and Sarah's inability to reproduce is the obstacle, which is what makes this covenant so powerful

Children and power in the ancient world

- Many children displayed virility, power, and significance
- Ps. 127:3-5: children are a heritage and a reward from the Lord, like arrows in a warrior's quiver. Akkadian and Egyptian texts from Abraham's time say the same
- Children meant wealth, labor for farming and herding, and security in old age (no Social Security or Medicare)
- So childlessness was a real social defect for Abraham, despite his wealth

What God is teaching Abraham

- He will be the father of many nations, biologically and not just metaphorically
- God had already ruled out adopting Eliezer as heir (Gen. 15)
- The means of fulfilling the promise is under God's control, not Abraham's

Back to Eden

- Gen. 2: procreation is creative power and authority; we take part in creating new life
- Marriage and sexuality are the highest demonstration of the image of God
- We are free to multiply, fill, and have dominion (Gen. 1), but on God's terms
- Circumcision is a physical reminder of this at the very point of the question of where Abraham's descendants will come from. God puts his mark right there

The order of events: Gen. 16-18

- Ch. 16: Abraham trusts the promise but tries to bring it about his own way, a child with Hagar. Legal and acceptable, but his own effort
- Ch. 17: God puts his mark on the organ Abraham had used in a way God didn't intend
    - Name changes: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah. The family matters, Abraham and Sarah together
- Ch. 18: three divine visitors share a meal of hospitality. "This time next year Sarah will give birth to a son." Sarah laughs
    - "Is there anything too hard for God to do?" runs through the whole promise and covenant
    - Abraham had tried several ways to secure the promise himself, and it all led to naught

This isn't about Abraham's virility and greatness but about who God is and what he will do: call a family, begin with a childless couple, and work miracle after miracle to show how good, faithful, and powerful he is.