

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

NRSV

Sarai is childless and advanced in years; she has not provided Abram with an heir. A covenant is between two parties, each of whom have benefits and obligations; it is made by both, and can be terminated by either. God's covenant with Abram is different: (1) God *makes* (vv. 2,6) and *establishes* it (v. 7); (2) most of the obligations are God's and benefit Abram (making him "the ancestor of a multitude of nations", v. 4, with "numerous", v. 2, descendants; giving him Canaan, v. 8); (3) how God benefits is not clear; (4) Abram has one obligation: to "walk before me [God], and be blameless" (v. 1); (5) God will never break the pact (v. 7); (6) it applies to Abraham and his descendants (but not to all humans).

Abram's change of name in v. 5 is significant: the gift of a new name signifies a new relationship, a new status, a new stage in life. It was believed that such a change altered one's personality and fate. In v. 8, God promises the land of Canaan, where Abraham is now an "alien", to Israel for ever; he will be God of Israel. As a sign of this agreement, all males will be circumcised, soon after birth. (Egyptian and Canaanite practice was to circumcise at puberty.) Being circumcised as infants, Abraham's descendants will bear this mark of identity, showing them to be members of the covenant community, throughout their lives. Sarai shares in God's blessing, as shown by her change in name (v. 15). She will be blessed with fertility; she too will "give rise to nations" (v. 16) and kings. In v. 17, Abraham laughs in incredulity at the idea of Sarah bearing a son (who will be named Isaac, meaning *May God laugh in delight*).

Psalms 22:23-31

NRSV

This psalm, as a whole, is a prayer for deliverance from illness. The psalmist, gravely ill, feels that God has forsaken him. In the past, God has helped his people (vv. 4-5): may God help him now. His detractors laugh at him for trusting in God (vv. 6-8); his suffering is worse because they think that his illness is proof of God's displeasure. But, he says, God helped me when I was an infant, so I trust in him (v. 9). I will offer thanksgiving in assembly of the community in the Temple: v. 22 is that vow. God does hear, even the "poor" (v. 26, or *afflicted*); he provides perpetual life for the "poor" those who live in awe of him. May all people everywhere turn to God and worship him (v. 27). God is Lord of all (v. 28). All mortals, all who die ("go down to the dust", v. 29) worship him. I, the psalmist says, will live following his ways, and so will my offspring: they will be God's for ever, and will tell future generations about God's saving deeds.

Romans 4:13-25

NRSV

In Chapters 2 and 3, Paul has argued that through the gospel, it is faith that brings

humans into harmony with God. Now he considers Abraham as an example. At the time, rabbis argued that God's blessings came to Abraham because he kept Mosaic Law (which, they said, he knew in advance – before Moses received the tablets on Mount Sinai.)

In v. 13, Paul argues against this rabbinic lore: Abraham was blessed because he believed, had faith, that he would be father of a nation and a source of blessing for "all ... families" (Genesis 12:3). If only those who keep Mosaic Law are God's people, faith is meaningless ("null", v. 14) and God's "promise" of universal godliness is nonsense – because the Law is a contract; in a contract, each party has responsibilities, each *knows* what he will receive (e.g. "wages", v. 4), but a promise is a gift, and is therefore an *object of faith*: faith that what is promised will be received. Paul now notes: because we all deviate from God's ways at times, sinning does happen. For those under the Law, a penalty (God's "wrath", v. 15) ensues, but for us, not living under the Law ("no law"), there is no contract to violate. Paul now returns to his main argument: so rather than the human relationship being legally based, "it depends on faith" (v. 16), on God's freely given gift of love ("grace"). Were it legally based, continually breaking the pact would make a nonsense of it, but being faith-based, the relationship is "guaranteed" to all peoples in every age – not just to Jews but also to others. Per Genesis 17:5, Abraham is spiritual father of us all (v. 17). Sarah's bearing of Isaac when beyond child-bearing age ("gives life to the dead") was due to his faith; it had been promised to him by God. Isaac was *called into existence*. So Abraham is a model for the Christian. Contrary to expectation, in hope ("Hoping against hope", v. 18) he believed. He had every reason to doubt that he would become a father, but believe he did – because of the hope given by God's promise – in God's creative power. Abraham's faith grew stronger as he thanked God for his gift ("gave glory to God", v. 20). He attained a right relationship with God ("was reckoned to him as righteousness", v. 22). Our faith in God's promises will also be considered worthy by God when Christ comes again ("our justification", v. 25).

Mark 8:31-38

NRSV

Jesus has asked his disciples: "... who do you say that I am?" (v. 29); Peter has answered him: "You are the Messiah". Jesus now predicts his Passion for the first time. He teaches them something unexpected: that the Messiah ("the Son of Man", v. 31) will suffer, be rejected, killed, and rise again was contrary to contemporary (and their) expectation. When Peter impetuously rejects Jesus' teaching, he is told that he is under the influence of the devil: he is relying on human values, not divine ones (v. 33). Jesus then describes true discipleship: first, a disciple must renounce self-centeredness ("deny themselves", v. 34) and follow him. Those who are prepared to give even their lives ("take up their cross") for his sake and for the sake of spreading the good news ("gospel", v. 35) will have (eternal) life. Those who seek worldly well-being and deny their true selves will be the losers (vv. 35-37). View things from a divine, rather than human, viewpoint! At the Last Day ("when he comes in ... glory", v. 38), Christ will not stand up for those who shirk from being identified with him and the good news.