

<b>Topic</b>	The Sign of the Covenant
<b>Reference</b>	Genesis 17
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Today in our text, we see that God is a covenant God. He wants us to live in a right relationship with Him, with Him being our God and us being his people. It's amazing that the creator of heavens and earth, the Lord over the entire universe wants us to live in covenant with Him. He has made that possible.

In our text today, we see that the covenant, which God made with Abram is an everlasting covenant. That means it continues today and it will continue on into eternity, long after this world, as we know it has come to an end. And the good news is that we can participate in this everlasting covenant. We can live in covenant with God.

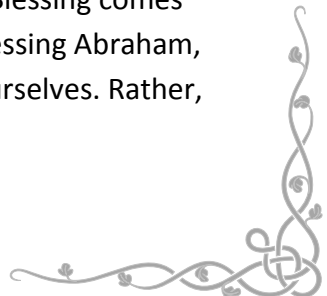
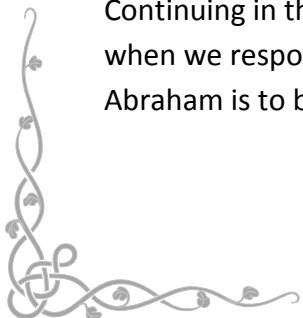
Today from our text and from other related texts, we want to look at the God of the covenant, who He is. We also want to look at the contents of the covenant with its blessings, its demands and responsibilities, and also the sign of the covenant; circumcision. And we will look at this, not only from the text in Genesis 17, but also from other Old Testament and New Testament texts. Then we will see that the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is in Jesus, and finally we'll examine what our response today should be.

But before we look at today's text, let's briefly review. To understand the covenant in chapter 17 of Genesis, we need to remember what has already happened so far in Abram's life. Abram first appears in chapter 11 of Genesis in a genealogy, but then in chapter 12, we come to a very important passage; the call of Abram.

God calls Abram to leave his country, leave his family, go to the land where God will show him. And then God makes several promises to Abram and I'll highlight some of them.

First of all, we see that God promised Abraham that he would make him a great nation. Abraham be the father of not just any ordinary nation but rather of The Nation through whom God would bring salvation to all peoples who believe. Through Abram's descendants, God would give the law, the prophets, the scriptures, and most importantly through them He would send the promised Messiah who would bring salvation.

Continuing in the passage, we see that God tells Abraham that he will bless him. Yes. Blessing comes when we respond to God's call. And then we see that God also says that since he is blessing Abraham, Abraham is to be a blessing. God's blessings are not for us to selfishly lavish only on ourselves. Rather,



we are blessed to be a blessing. We receive God's blessings so that we can bless others. And then very importantly, we see, God's say in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Because the promised Messiah Jesus would come to earth physically through the descendants of Abraham, all peoples of the earth will be blessed through Him. So the call of Abraham in chapter 12 is an extremely important event near the beginning of the story of God's plan for salvation. And as we read further in chapter 12, we see that Abraham not only listened to God but he obeyed him.

And then when we go to chapter 15 of Genesis, we find another very important passage concerning the covenant and the response of faith. Several years have passed since chapter 12 and chapter 15, but less than 10. Back in chapter 12, Abraham was 75 and he had no children, even though God said he would have many descendants. So in chapter 15, Abraham was probably in his early 80s, but still with no children. So in a conversation with God Abraham is talking to God and says, God I still don't have an heir. Who will be my heir? I don't have any children. And God takes them outside and shows him the stars and he said, look at the stars. That's how many descendants you're going to have.

And we see Abram's response in Genesis 15 verse 6, **Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness.** This very important verse, which is frequently quoted in the New Testament shows the importance of faith. Because here we see that Abraham responded in faith to God, and then God counted him righteous.

That's the response God wants from each one of us, faith. And when we like Abraham respond to God in faith then God will justify us. He counts us as righteous. Then in the last part of chapter 15, we see there's a covenant ceremony where God formally enters into a covenant with Abraham. Sacrifices are made, lined up in two rows and the presence of God passes between the rows of the sacrifices, showing that God is serious. He has committed himself to do what he has said he will do. So before we get to chapter 17, which is our text today, God has already formally entered into a covenant with Abraham, promising him that he would have many descendants, that he would be the father of a great nation, that he would be blessed, and that through his descendants all peoples of the earth would be blessed.

Last week we looked at Genesis chapter 16 and we saw where Abraham, perhaps out of frustration, maybe with wavering faith, maybe thinking that he had to try to help God out, Abraham had a son but the son was not through his wife Sarah.

Chapter 16 end saying that Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him, and the next very next verse says when Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him. Now, remember in the original manuscripts, there were no chapter or verse divisions in the texts. So there is really no break between these two verses. He goes from being 86 up to 99, 13 years have passed. Imagined that a 99 year old man is parenting a teenager and some of you thought you had it a little rough as parents.

During these 13 years, we don't know what has happened, but evidently nothing extremely significant in God's plan. During that time, it appears that Abraham had no new significant encounters with God. Then God appears to Abraham to confirm the covenant He has already made with him adding even more blessings, but also placing some demands and giving a sign that confirms the covenant.

As we let God speak to us through the text today, and as we consider living in covenant with God, let's first be reminded of who the God of the covenant is.

The first thing we notice is that God takes the initiative. He is the one who extends His grace, even after Abrams and Sara's lack of faith 13 years earlier, God takes the initiative and confirms the covenant. In verse one we see that the Lord appeared to Abraham. Just like earlier when God called Abraham in chapter 12, and when God entered into a covenant with Abraham in chapter 15, God reaches out to Abraham with His mercy, His grace, taking the initiative. And the same is true for us. God reaches out to us in love, offering us the opportunity of living in covenant with Him. Today God speaks to each of us. Are you ready to listen?

In verse one we also see a new name for God. This is the first time God reveals himself with the name El Shaddai. God says I am God Almighty. God Almighty is the translation of the Hebrew El Shaddai. Shaddai meaning all powerful for all mighty. Early Jewish writers recognized in the name Shaddai the meaning of sufficient. God is the all sufficient one, the all competent God, but God who knows what he is doing and how to do it.

It's like God is telling 99 year old Abraham, Abraham you have had some questions about whether you can have a child at your age and questions about having a child through your wife at her age. You thought you might need to help me when you had that son through Hagar, now learn something new about me. I am El Shaddai. Learn how capable I am to do everything that I desire to do, whenever I desire to do it.

Today we need to discover or rediscover the truth, the reality of El Shaddai. The God who is sufficient for whatever we are going through right now. We have worries and fears about so many situations in our world. COVID-19, the fear of growing sick with all that could bring. Economic downturns, financial difficulties, job loss, racial prejudice and unrest, lack of social justice, political problems, all of these are in the news, plus we all have personal problems that are not in the news. Some of you might be going through some relationship problems, maybe with a spouse or children, colleagues, neighbors. Some of you have real genuine health concerns other than COVID-19 and many are facing work-related stresses.

We also feel pressure sometimes to act in an unethical manner. So we need to rediscover and experience God as the one who is all sufficient. God is Almighty God, He will keep his promises, even giving a son to a man who will be a 100 years old with a 90 year old wife.

In our text we also see that God is the rightful authority, the master, the ruler, the Lord over all. He has the right to make demands. God can rightfully tell Abraham walk before me and be blameless. And he can say, as for you Abraham, you shall keep my covenant. We also see God's authority as Lord over us when we see that God changed Abram's name and also Sara's names. God told Abraham no longer will you be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. And as for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. This act shows that God is in charge because only someone with the right and the authority can change somebody else's name.

Now what is the significance in the change of names you might ask? Well, a new name often shows that there has been a change in character, an inward change. God is working in the heart or a change of names could mean a change of destiny, a renewed purpose, a clear mission. For Abraham that would be to realize more how he is going to be a part of God's plan of salvation, to bring blessing to a multitude of nations. Abraham recognized God's rightful authority over his life as is evidenced when the scripture says that he fell down on his face before the Lord. God has the rightful authority over our lives. Do you recognize that? Not just in theory, but in everyday life.

In our text we also see the God of the covenant is personal. God spoke individually, personally, intimately with Abraham, God told Abraham the covenant is between me and you, between me and your descendants. And we see, God says to Abraham, I will be with you. I will be their God referring to Abram's descendants.

So we see that the God of the covenant takes the initiative, extending His grace to each of us. He is all mighty, all sufficient, the rightful authority over all. This is the God who wants to be your God and my God. He wants us to live close to Him in a personal relationship with Him.

Now let's look at the contents of the covenant, the covenant that God made with Abraham. First of all, we'll look at the blessings in the covenant. Now we'll remember that God had earlier made some promises to Abraham and he had already entered into covenant with him, but now we're going to see that the covenant is expanded into much greater dimensions with even more blessings. So we want to look at the greater dimensions and the additional blessings in the covenant. The first thing that we'll see is that God will make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations.

In chapter 12 God had said to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation singular, but now God talks about a multitude of nations. God says behold my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And in case Abraham missed that God then said no longer will you be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham because I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. Now it's interesting Abraham still had no child of the promise, no child from his wife, Sarai but God says I have made you past tense.

There's no visible evidence of this yet, but God considered it done because when God promises something it is a certainty that it will come to pass even when we do not see any evidence. Another

blessing God adds to the covenant is that Kings will descend from Abraham. In verse six God says, I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations and Kings shall come from you.

In the Old Testament, we do see many Kings who descended from Abraham, but most notable was King David, a man described as being after God's own heart. And God promised King David that a descendant of his would come who would reign on the throne forever. This of course was pointing to Jesus. Jesus, the King of Kings before whom all will bow the knee was in his physical body a descendant of both Abraham and David.

A third blessing we see added to the covenant is that it will be an everlasting covenant. It will have no end. The word everlasting occurs four times in this chapter. In verse seven, God says,

*I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant.*

A fourth new thing we see about the covenant is that God says, Sarah will be the one who bears the son of the promise. Now in the earlier narratives God had promised Abraham that he would have many descendants but God had not specifically said the son would come through Sarah, although you would think that would be a logical assumption, but now God is more specific and he says, Sarah will bear the son of promise.

Abraham and Sarah had already given up on having children. After all, not only was Abraham 99, Sarah was 89. They had tried to have children for decades. Now in their old age, they assumed there was no hope left, but at this point they came to know God as El Shaddai, Almighty God, a God who can do anything, the God who will keep his promise, because with him, all things are possible.

In verse 16, God says I will bless her. I will bless Sarah. And moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall become nations. Kings of people shall come from her and God repeats in verse 19. Sarah will bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac.

Then God gets even more specific and gives a timetable in verse 21 he says, Isaac will be born to Sarah at this time next year. The son God promised Abraham would finally be born 25 years after the first time God made this promise. Have you ever thought you had to wait a long time on God to see Him move, to receive an answer to prayer? Imagine waiting 25 years. But when God makes a promise, He will keep his promise. Now sometimes we might think we have been promised something by God, when in reality, it's only our imagination at work, but a promise from God will be kept. God will act, but it will be according to His timetable in the manner He deems best.

We have seen some new dimensions and additional blessings of the covenant given to Abram. Now let's look at the demands of the covenant. God has taken the initiative, revealing himself. He has

spoken, offering this covenant relation and now he expects an appropriate response. We see that when we go back to verse one,

*The Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God almighty walk before me and be blameless.*

God require those who were in covenant with him to live in such a way as to please Him. So he tells Abraham walk before me, walk is a reminder that life is an ongoing pilgrimage. There is no once for all formula for instant holiness, because life circumstances and demands continue to change. To walk before God means to walk by faith. Also a reminder that faith is not a onetime experience nor a onetime prayer. Live every moment in conscious awareness of God's presence with you. Don't try to hide anything from God. Knowing that you can and do live continuously in God's presence will bring comfort assurance, encouragement. You can receive strength for living knowing that you are in the presence of El Shaddai, Almighty God.

And then God also said, be blameless. Blameless is the same word used to describe sacrifices in the Old Testament that are brought to God. Implying, we are to offer our lives as living sacrifices. The old King James Version translated the word blameless as perfect. And yes, there are definite moral and ethical implications of walking blamelessly before God, but the idea of sinless perfection is not what is meant, because no one will be able to live a totally sinless life. Rather, the idea is that of being completely dedicated to God, wholly devoted to him. Blameless means a singleness of mind in serving Him, living for Him, whole heartedly desiring to please the Lord.

Abraham is also told by God. As for you, Abraham, you shall keep my covenant. To keep the covenant simply means to do what God says, obey the Lord. And the specific command that follows is that Abraham and all the males in his household are to be circumcised. God told Abraham every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall be circumcised.

And we see Abraham obeyed God, verse 23 tells us that all the males, both those born in his household and those bought with his money, every male was circumcised that very day. And verse 26 reiterates that very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. Now we don't know how many males were in Abraham's household at that time, but back in chapter 14, we saw that at that time there were 318 grown men being described as having been born in Abraham's household, 318 men. And that does not count the boys, but all of the males in Abraham's household were circumcised that very day, He must've had quite a busy afternoon if close to 318 men were circumcised.

Abraham obeyed God, even though I'm sure it was painful. Sometimes obedience can be painful for a while, but those who obey God, who keep the covenant will be blessed. And there are serious consequences for those who do not obey, for those who break the covenant. In verse 14 we see any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my

covenant. When a person breaks God's covenant, there are consequences. When a person chooses to live apart from God outside of God's covenant, the person will not be the recipient of the blessings associated with the covenant.

We have considered the demands of the covenant; walk before me, be blameless, keep God's covenant. And that brings us to the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, which we've already mentioned in talking about obedience that is the sign of circumcision, all males, but only males were to be circumcised. This was a mark in the flesh, which just to symbolize that they belong to God, that they were dedicated to God. The physical act of circumcision, the cutting of the flesh was very important and all the physical descendants of Abraham were expected to be circumcised, but circumcision was never intended to be an end in itself, rather it was to be a token of the whole-hearted devotion to God that is to characterize God's people.

A religious ritual or symbol is meaningless unless it is accompanied by a life that is surrendered to God. A person can perform religious rights and ceremonies, but even while doing that their heart can still be far from God. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the word circumcision is also used metaphorically or symbolically in connection with other body parts, showing that God expects more than just a physical sign or an outward expression of religion. For example, look at Leviticus chapter 26, verse 40 and following.

*God says, if they shall confess their iniquity, if then they're uncircumcised hearts be humbled, then will I remember my covenant?*

Let's also look at Deuteronomy chapter 10. God's instruction is to circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart be no longer stubborn.

In other words, God is saying repent. Your heart needs to change. Now, some people might ask. What about today? Are followers of Christ today expected to be physically circumcised? Several years ago, we were leading a training session in India for pastors and church planters and evangelists, and some of the participants were relatively new Christians. They were already leaders, even though they were relatively new Christians, because they had been out sharing their faith, leading people to faith in Christ and starting new groups and house churches. But many of them had limited Bible knowledge, especially of the Old Testament and all of the participants had grown up in a Hindu background and had not been circumcised.

So they asked a lot about us. Do we need to be circumcised? So I explained to them. Physical circumcision was very important for the physical descendants of Abraham in the Old Testament times, but in the New Testament those who are not physically descended from Abraham, but who come to faith in Christ they are accepted by God because of what Christ has done for them. As he died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin and rose from the dead triumphing over death and all forces of evil.

Physical circumcision is not what is important now, rather circumcision is a matter of the heart. When a person responds in faith to the Lord Jesus allowing him to take control of his or her life, then it is as if they become circumcised in Christ because God is circumcising their heart. Consider these verses from Romans chapter 2.

*For no one is a Jew, (meaning no one is a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). No one is a Jew who was merely one outwardly nor is circumcision, outward and physical. But a true Jew is one who is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit.*

When one comes to faith in Christ. Acknowledging him as the rightful authority in his life, then God's spirit circumcises the believer's heart. Look at Galatians chapter 5

*For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly await for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only faith working through love.*

Also from Galatians chapter 6,

*For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but rather a new creation.*

When we come to Christ in repentance and faith, he makes us a new creation and that's what is important. And that brings me to the next point. The ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is in Jesus. Now, this may not be clear in Genesis chapter 17, but when we look at the New Testament it becomes very evident, very clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant.

For example, look at these verses from Galatians chapter 3, verse 14

*In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles*

Verse 16.

*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings" referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ*

Verse 29,

*And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring heirs according to the promise,*

These New Testament verses show very clearly but the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is in Jesus. Of course, Jesus is not explicitly mentioned in Genesis chapter 17 but that's because God's dealings with Abraham are at the very beginning of the story of God's plan of salvation, which culminates in Jesus. With the covenant he established with all who trust him, acknowledging him as their Lord.

But even though Jesus is not explicitly mentioned in chapter 17 of Genesis, there are several hints in the texts that imply that Jesus is the one who will be the fulfillment of the covenant. The first two hints



in Genesis 17 that are mentioned are that God said his covenant would be an everlasting covenant and that Kings would come from Abraham and Sarah.

We are back at Genesis chapter 17. God says,

*I will make you into nations, and king shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring for an everlasting covenant.*

We've already seen that the greatest King in the Old Testament to descend from Abraham was King David. God promised that his throne would be everlasting and that one of David's descendants would reign on his throne forever. Yet, no king descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has reigned on a throne physically here on earth for over 2500 years. How can that be? Does God not keep his promises? He said David's throne would never end.

A few years ago my wife and I were meeting regularly with a group of Hindus, studying the Bible with them by using chronological Bible stories. And when we told a story about King David, we of course mentioned God's promise to him that one of his descendants would reign forever. So one of the Hindu young men, somewhat puzzled responded that cannot be an ordinary man because no ordinary human being can rule forever. No human being can see that there'll be no end to his kingdom. I told him he was exactly right, because the coming one would not be just an ordinary man, and it was great for us to see that God was preparing this young man's heart to hear about the coming of the King of Kings, Jesus, the anointed Messiah.

Another hint we see in our text today that the text is pointing to Christ is that Abraham is to be the father of a multitude of nations, not just one nation, not even a dozen or so, but a multitude, so many they can hardly be counted. Genesis 17:4 God says

*My covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. Your name shall be Abraham for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.*

Now let's look at what multitude of nations means according to the New Testament book of Romans. Romans 4:16. That is why it depends on faith that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring, not only to the adherent of the law, but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who was the father of us all, as it is written, I have made you the father of many nations.

So we see that all Gentiles, all non-Jewish people from all their various ethnic groups, tribes, and nations who in faith expect Jesus as their Lord and savior, they become part of Abraham's family of faith. This truly does make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations. Related to this promise is a promise that God made Abraham back in Genesis chapter 12 when he said in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Now look at what the New Testament book of Galatians says about that verse. Galatians 3 verse 8,

*And the scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham, saying, "in you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*

All peoples are blessed along with Abraham when they respond in faith to Jesus. That's why Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection told his disciples go make disciples of all nations, make disciples of all peoples. And that's why we see this scene before the throne of God in heaven in Revelation chapter 7.

*After this I looked and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne, and before the lamb, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!"*

Yes, a great multitude from every nation before the throne of God praising the King of glory throughout eternity. Yes, the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant is in Jesus. This brings us then to the question, how should we respond to God today? First of all, we need to acknowledge God for who He is, recognize that God does take the initiative, He comes to us. He speaks to us. He offers us His grace.

Remember that God is God Almighty. Rediscover that He is all sufficient. There is no situation you face that is too big or too hard for God, and acknowledge God as the rightful authority in your life. Fall on your face before the Lord as Abraham did in humility, submission and worship. And by faith live in a personal relationship with God.

What response does God want us to make to him?

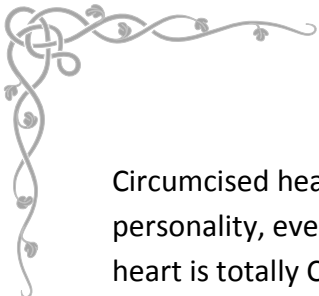
I think it would include what God told Abraham when God told him be blameless and walk before me. Live day by day in fellowship with God. And remember blameless refers to a whole-hearted devotion. You see, we are constantly trying to serve two masters to play self and also to please Christ. And we seem quite content to serve Christ if we can at the same time serve ourself. But God is saying your dual allegiance is not to be tolerated because no one can serve two masters.

So God says, be wholehearted, be wholly on my side, be mine.

How does God want us to respond to him?

He wants us to respond by keeping the covenant, but by that I don't mean in the same way Abraham did with circumcision of the flesh, rather keeping the covenant by having a circumcised heart. In Deuteronomy chapter 30 we see, God says,

*Return to the Lord your God,...obey his voice then the Lord, your God will have mercy on you and the Lord your God will circumcise your heart so that you will love the Lord, your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*



Circumcised heart. A heart is the symbol of the soul. The mind, the emotions, the will, the entire personality, every believer in Jesus is to bear on his heart the sign of Christ's Lordship, the believers heart is totally Christ's to use as he wills. Our entire being is to be dedicated and available, ready at the command of Christ. To be used for his purposes, but total personality as to be at his disposal.

This is a circumcised life. Christ asserted his practical Lordship in our lives. When you became a Christian, you recognize the right of Christ to be the Lord of your life. No, you probably did not understand all that would involve. But you knew that God's saving you included his right to guide you, is right to control you. And then you began to listen to the Holy Spirit and you began listening to God's word as you were told, start doing this, or stop doing that. When that happens that shows that Christ is asserting his Lordship in your life. And when you respond in obedient faith, you are then living a circumcised life. You are living in covenant with God.

That will be a life of fruitfulness and blessing, a life that is well pleasing to God, and it is enabled by the God who lives with in. The God in whom we trust, El Shaddai, the one who is all sufficient. Let us pray.

Almighty God, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come before you today, praising you for who you are, thanking you that you desire to live in a close relationship with each one of us. Thank you that through what Jesus has done for us on the cross we can be reconciled to you. Father God we confess our sin. We confess that sometimes we go about religious rituals and activities, but our heart is far from you.

We acknowledge that just as ancient Israel perverted the truth of circumcision in the flesh, so we to sometimes pervert the truth of the circumcised heart. We give the impression that we are totally yours at times and we act like we really love you and we are wanting to serve you and that all we have is yours and yet there are times when we know that that is not really true. Forgive us when our hearts do stray away from you, call us back to you. And I pray if someone is listening today who has never accepted you as Lord, allowing you to change their heart. We pray that today they will call on the name of the Lord Jesus, repenting of their sins, and turning in faith to Christ, receiving him as their Lord and savior. Through your almighty power grant us that we might walk daily before you, wholeheartedly committed to your will and ways in our lives in Jesus name we pray. Amen.