

God's Plan in Place

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening everyone. It's good to be back here with you. If you've got a Bible, will you turn to Genesis 17? Or if you're following on your phone, I'm trusting with, I never know in church these days, people claim they're looking at their reading on their phone.

I'm never absolutely sure that's the case. I hope it is for you anyway, but yeah. Good. Genesis 17. We're going to be following our reading this evening, but let me begin by asking you a question to think about at the beginning.

Does God watch the news at 10? When you see national and world events, I just watch the news at lunchtime, on television screens, yet another mass shooting in an American school, seemingly unending, horrendous conflict in Syria, sexual misconduct in aid organizations in Hollywood, even in football, and in terminable Brexit negotiations.

Do you wonder, if God sees and cares, does God watch the news at 10?

Now, maybe you don't believe in God. You believe that life has no ultimate meaning. History has no real purpose.

[1 : 3 5] But if you do believe in God, if you believe in the God of this book, and the God of the Bible, you know that life has a meaning, that there is a story behind it all, with a plot line, and that the author is God.

Even on that most dreadful of days, when our first parents rebelled against God, with disastrous consequences for them, and for our world, God already had a plan in place to put things right.

And that plan centered on a 75-year-old man whom God called to leave his home in the urban center of his day in the Middle East some 4,000 years ago, and to set out on a journey to a promised land.

The name of the man was Abraham. And God promised to bless him, and through him, his plan was blessing God's intention, his good intention, for all peoples on earth.

Now, the highlights and lowlights of Abraham's life are described in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. And you've been following them in your series on Sunday evenings with this wonderful picture you can see, Father of the Faithful, which I took off your website.

[2 : 5 6] Now, today we come to a particular point in the narrative. Almost a quarter of a century has passed since Abraham embarked on his journey.

And we wonder, as maybe Abraham himself did, whether God is watching the news in Canaan, in Egypt, in the surrounding nation.

Today we discover, and this is our theme, today we discover that God's plan is still in place. God's plan is still in place.

So, let's follow this through. We've got quite a big chunk of the Bible. I was looking at my records when Graham asked me to speak on this. I discovered to my horror I preached two 45-minute sermons in Charlotte Chapel on this section.

So, hold tight and do the maths. But, it won't be that long so don't worry about it. Okay? So, we're going to follow it. And what I want to look at, I'm trying to group together so we can focus on this passage and I hope it's helpful.

[4 : 02] Three reminders to Abraham that God's plan is still in place. And, we will find similar reminders in our own lives as we follow this through.

So, here's reminder number one that God's plan is still in place. The reassuring presence of the Lord. Genesis 17 verses 1 to 2 or verse 1 in particular.

If you've got your Bible open you'll see at the end of chapter 16 the last verse it says, So, Hagar bore Abraham a son. I'm not going to go over the story.

You already followed it last week or maybe you already know it. Abraham gave him the name Ishmael to the sons he had borne. Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Now you turn to chapter 17 and the opening verse says, When Abraham was 99 years old the Lord appeared to him. In his daily reading book which I commend to you, my wife and I read it together for our devotions, Don Carson, great New Testament scholar, has written two volumes called For the Love of God which follows through Robert Murray McShane's daily reading plan and he comments on one every day and a few weeks ago he commented on this passage Genesis 17 and this is what he says.

[5 : 23] I've got the two things I get behind on my PowerPoint here. We are not to think that God disclosed himself to Abraham every day. The decisive moments take place over considerable time.

Now he is 99 and Ishmael is already 13. So we ask ourselves what has happened in the intervening 13 years between the end of chapter 16 and the beginning of chapter 17.

And I tell you with some confidence what has happened in those 13 years is nothing decisive. No decisive moments, just the daily routine of life and work and family.

And I ask myself does Abraham think God has forgotten after 13 years is a long time, isn't it? What about this prospect of future descendants more numerous than stars in the night sky?

What future prospects for a childless marriage of a man who is 99 and a woman who is 89? But despite the passage of time, God's plan remains in place.

[6 : 38] For the one who made the plan has a different idea of time and concept of time. The eternal God stands outside of time but is involved in time but he sees things differently to us.

If you've been following the series, God has already said to Abraham, you and your descendants will inherit this land in 400 years. And once again, as we come to chapter 17, God takes the initiative.

He's the one who starts the conversation, who breaks the long silence. Rarely do we seek God and when we do it it's only because he has put that desire within our hearts. Most of the time, let's be honest, we are too consumed with the daily routine of living, the concerns and cares of daily life.

So God appears to 99-year-old Abraham to reassure him that his plan is still in place. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

And the Lord's words revealed to Abraham a new dimension of God's character, who he is. Now you don't see this in the text here but there's a new name that is introduced here, the name for God used here in the original Hebrew, the Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew.

[7 : 51] The word that's used, El means God, El Shaddai. There's a lot of dispute exactly what Shaddai means but it's the idea it's connected actually to a word for mountain, it's a word of immovability.

If you're interested, the Greek translation is Pantokrata which means omnipotent God and so our English translations have translated it by God Almighty.

It's quite a good translation, it conveys the right sense. When the title is used later on in scripture in the story of the Old Testament, it is usually the time of great crisis in the life of God's people, a time when they need reassurance that God can and will fulfill his promises despite outward appearances.

And so as we see the breadth of the promises that the Lord reaffirms to Abraham and their impossibility from a human standpoint, it is especially appropriate title and revelation of the Lord's character which Abraham needs at this particular time.

Let me pause and say, perhaps it's a reminder that some of us need this evening for God is the unchanging God. David Jackman, pastor, Bible teacher, says, when we're at the end of our tether, we need to remember that at the other end is El Shaddai.

[9 : 19] When we're at the end of our tether, we need to remember at the other end is El Shaddai. So what does El Shaddai require of Abraham?

What he requires is faithful commitment. You see, in the days, the months, the years of his pilgrimage on earth, when nothing dramatic seems to happen, Abraham is to faithfully walk before the God who sees, enjoying fellowship with him as Adam and Eve did before the fall.

We're told in those days that God walked with Adam and Eve. And God still walks with people. He still, in the day-to-day walk of life, shows his presence to us.

And Abraham is to be blameless. It's not a word that means perfect, for no one is perfect. Behind that word is the idea of wholehearted commitment to a relationship. Now, what God required of Abraham, he requires of all of those who believe in his word and trust in his promises.

Those of you who are older like me, you can look back over your life. I'm over 70 now. You all gasped and said, I would never have guessed, but anyway, as you look back over, as I look back over my life, there are significant moments in my life, significant occasions when God met with me in a particular way.

[10 : 40] And some of you can look back on that. But for most of the time, it's just been a daily, hopefully consistent, not as consistent as I would have wished sometimes.

It's a daily, consistent walk with God day by day. Walking by faith, living by faith, and eventually, for most, if not all of us, unless Christ returns, we will die in faith.

Significant, isn't it? Billy Graham, 99 years old, died this week. What a consistent life over 99 years. Faithful, consistent walk with God.

So, the New Testament book of Hebrews comments on the life of Abraham quite extensively, encourages Christians to walk by faith like Abraham.

This is what he says, by faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. Notice the phrase, he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise, for he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

[11 : 52] So, here's the first reminder. Abraham is reminded, encouraged that God's plan is still in place because of his reassuring presence. For his part, God then makes a promise to Abraham, a second reminder that his plan is still in place.

Look what he says. Then I will make a covenant, my covenant, between you and me and I will greatly increase your numbers.

Now, if you've been following the story of Abraham, you ask yourself, what's this about? Back in chapter 15, all those years before, God made a covenant with Abraham. On that day, God made a covenant with Abraham.

Genesis 15, verse 18. But now, God graciously reaffirms the covenant he made with Abraham. Just occasionally, I don't know whether any of you have done this, and I certainly haven't yet.

Sometimes couples decide after a significant period, maybe a golden or diamond wedding, to reaffirm publicly the vows that they made to each other in the covenant of marriage.

[13 : 01] It's not a bad idea. My wife and I just passed 40 years, so if God preserves us to 50 minutes, it's a good thing to do. But it reaffirms that commitment. Now, here God, the almighty God, El Shaddai, is renewing his covenant with Abraham.

So let's read on. We're going to keep reading as we go through. Verse 2, Then I will make my covenant between me and you, and I'll greatly increase your numbers. Verse 3, Abraham fell face down, and God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you.

You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abraham. Your name will be Abraham, for I've made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful. I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.

And I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you, and your descendants after you for the generations to come to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you, and I will be their God.

[14 : 08] Then God said to Abraham, As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep.

Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision. It will be the sign of the covenant between me and you for the generations to come. Every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner, those who are not your offspring.

Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who has not been circumcised in the flesh will be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. Now, I just wonder again, we can only speculate, maybe after all these years, after the covenant was first made, maybe, maybe, maybe Aram looks at Ishmael and wonders, have I made a mistake here?

Whether after 13 years of silence, God's plan is still in place, but God leaves him in no doubt as he renews the covenant and Abraham falls on his face in worship before El Shaddai, who responds by giving him two things, a new name and a new sign.

[15 : 33] The new name is given his name is changed from Abraham, a bit of Hebrew here, to Abraham. It's actually an anagram, if you like anagrams, in the original language, it's switching around to the letters.

All right? Abraham means a high, exalted father. Abraham means father of many or a multitude. It's a play in Hebrew on the words, I will greatly increase.

notice how this is to come about. God says to him, I will make you very fruitful. Right back in the beginning, God's command to Adam was to be fruitful and multiply, Genesis 1.28.

He disobeyed God's word and his descendants were almost wiped off the map of the earth, nor emerged from the ark and God says to him, be fruitful and multiply, Genesis 9.1.

And now, the command is a promise, I will make you very fruitful. God Almighty is at work through Abraham to fulfill his promise. The covenant, which before was private and personal, is now corporate and public.

[16 : 44] It's promised not just to Abraham, but to his descendants, who will include nations and kings for generations to come, people who inherit the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession.

Now notice, at this particular point, nothing has yet changed. But it is so sure that the words are actually, in what's called the prophetic perfect, they're written as though it's already happened.

He does not say, well, I'll make you a father of many nations. Literally, the literal translation says, I have made you a father of many nations. Now, to other people, this must have seemed rather ludicrous.

I kind of imagine, you know, Abraham meeting up with some of the locals later, and one of them says, good morning, Abraham, how are you? And he says, I'm fine, thank you. By the way, I've got a new name.

What is it? Abraham, father of a multitude. Kind of, you can imagine, I'm smiling. Yeah, a multitude. How many kids have you got?

[17 : 43] One by a servant girl? Hmm. Yet it is as sure as the promise of the one who has made it, El Shaddai, the Lord Almighty. And along with this is a new covenant sign, that of circumcision.

The sign of his obedience is circumcision of every male member of the covenant. Circumcision was practiced by other nations, and we know from contemporary documents at the same time, but normally it was practiced when a young man came of a certain age of maturity, around the age that Ishmael had been 13 or 14, something like that.

But here it is from birth, and it marks them out as belonging to God's people. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep. Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Notice, very importantly, it is not a means of salvation, but a sign of obedience which follows it. If you know the Bible, the Apostle Paul in Romans 4 points out that circumcision was given long after Abraham trusted with God and was declared to be righteous.

However, although circumcision does not put a person right with God, it does not mean it's unimportant and can be ignored. It's essential that Abraham is obedient to the Lord.

[19 : 00] And so, at the conclusion of Genesis 17, we can kind of just skip over a little to verse 23, and we'll come back to the second section in the middle. Verse 23 says, On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and those born with in his household or bought with his money every male in his household circumcised him as God told him.

Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised. His son Ishmael was 13. Abraham and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day and every male in Abraham's household including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner was circumcised with him.

See, circumcision was an outward sign of an inner consecration to God and it marked out that you belong to God's people. Now, of course, both the prophets and the New Testament tell us that it can just be an external thing.

They talk about the circumcision of the heart and it needs to reflect an inner obedience to God. But it had great value as a permanent and tangible reminder that an Israelite belonged to the Lord and his people.

Now, jump over where we are. We are not part of that old covenant. We are part of the new covenant and notice the new covenant, the new covenant sign is baptism.

[20 : 19] The apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been poured out on God's people. The crowd are horrified to hear they've murdered their Messiah and they cry out, what should we do? And Peter says to them, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.

You'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promises for you and for your children, for all who are near, for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call.

We often think of baptism. Let me say a few words about baptism. I think I'm a good Baptist. We often think it's some kind of personal decision that we make, which it is.

Each one of us needs to personally choose by God's grace to put our faith in Christ and as an activist to be obedient in baptism. But there is a corporate sense to baptism.

It's the sign that marks out you're declaring publicly in baptism that I now identify with the Lord and with the Lord's people. Now, in many parts of the world, this is far more significant than it is in our culture.

[21 : 27] I think many years ago of a young woman that I had the privilege of baptizing. She was from a very wealthy family, I won't even tell you the country, probably anyone will pick this up, but in North Africa, her father was a government minister.

And she started to show an interest in the Christian faith and by God's grace put her faith in Christ. So far, so good, even with her family.

The day I baptized her, we baptized her in the church. After that day, her father then told all his friends and family, my daughter is dead.

See, there's a tremendous cost. You'll find, having worked in Pakistan, for example, for several years, that the mark of belonging to God's people is baptism. I simply ask you, have you taken that decisive step of baptism at far less cost, let's face it, in our culture?

It's very important. It's a covenant sign. So, Abraham is a reminder that God's plan is still in place. First of all, God's reassuring presence. Then secondly, his renewed covenant.

[22 : 45] Thirdly and finally, the third reminder is the repeated promises of God. As I said before, I wonder if Abraham realized he'd made this mistake by trying to fulfill.

God had made this promise, you'll be fruitful, many people will come from you. As his wife got older and older, he began to think, this is never going to happen. We need to help God out here. And his wife said, I've got this servant girl, why don't you take her and we can have a family through her.

Studying it and you realize what a disaster that was. Still with us today. Had it not taken that step, you wouldn't be talking about ISIS and Al-Qaeda and Islam, frankly.

But anyway, it seemed successful with the birth of a son, but now 13 years have gone and it seems even more unlikely that anything is going to happen as far as Abraham and Sarah are concerned.

Certainly had no more expectations of a son and an heir through Sarah. But now God surprises him by what he promises. Let's just read on a bit in verse 19.

[23 : 54] Sorry, verse 15. God also said to Abraham, as for Sarah, your wife, you're no longer to call her Sarah. Her name will be Sarah. The two names actually both mean princess.

It's not quite clear why the change of name with her. I will bless her and I will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she'll be the mother of nations, kings and peoples will come from her.

Now here's Abraham. We're studying him. Abraham, the man of faith. When Abraham hears this, Abraham lifted his voice to heaven and praised God and said, marvelous, fantastic. No, Abraham fell face down and laughed and said to himself, will a son be born to a man a hundred years old?

Will Sarah bear a child at the age of 90? And Abraham said to God, if only Ishmael might live in your blessing, surely Lord, he's the one. Then God said, yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son.

You will call him Isaac, which means he laughs. Every time they shouted at Isaac, it's time for dinner, they would remind themselves of their laughter, of joy as well, of unbelief.

[25 : 01] As for Ishmael, I've heard you, I'll bless him, I'll make him fruitful, greatly increase him in numbers, he'll be the father of 12 rulers, I'll make him into a great nation, but my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.

When he'd finished speaking with Abraham, God went up from him. It's hardly the response of faith, is it? Abraham fell face down and laughed. He fell face down and laughed.

But God graciously assures him, there is no mistake, it will happen. Abraham is not rebuked for his laughter and unbelief, rather the Lord reaffirms what he said about Sarah, gives her a new name, and the promise of this child, Isaac, he laughs.

And this is reaffirmed in the next chapter, so let's just look, we'll all look in detail, we won't get another 45 minutes on chapter 18, if you were dreading or anticipating it, but let's read on in chapter 18 because we see the repeated promise of a son through Sarah.

It's this wonderful story. Shortly afterwards, the Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

[26 : 17] Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, if I've found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by, let a little water be brought, then you may all wash your feet, rest under this tree, let me get you something to eat so that you can be refreshed and then go on your way now that you've come to your servant.

He obviously senses these are important people and this is Eastern hospitality. Very well, they answered, do as you say. Rather than a little bit of water, we get a full meal. So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah.

Quick, he said, get three sears of the finest flour, knead it, bake some bread. He ran to the herd, selected a choice tender calf, gave it to a servant who hurried to prepare it. This is no instant McDonald's meal, is it?

This is pretty, pretty serious stuff. He then brought some curds and milk and the calves that had been prepared and set these before them while they ate. He stood near them under a tree.

Where is your wife, Sarah, they asked him. They're in the tent, he said. Then one of them said, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

[27 : 26] It turns out this one, two of them are angelic beings. One is the Lord himself as you'll see as you read on. Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.

So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, am I worn out and my Lord is, after I am worn out, my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure? Then the Lord, it seems it's the Lord himself, said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh and say, will I really have a child now that I'm old?

Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son. Sarah was afraid so she lied and said, I did not laugh but he said, yes, you did laugh.

Here's the promise reaffirmed. I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

And the response of Sarah is like that of Abraham. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, after I am worn out and my Lord is old, will I now have this pleasure? And notice the Lord's response to Sarah's unbelief.

[28 : 37] Why did Sarah laugh and say, will I really have a child now that I'm old? Is anything, here's the key verse, is anything too hard for the Lord? I'll return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.

Sarah is afraid, she denies, she laughed but the Lord says, yes, you did laugh but here's the important point. Nonetheless, the laughter, the unbelief of Sarah and Abraham does not negate the promises of God or frustrate his plans.

David Pryor, commentator in his book on Abraham living by faith says, God had brought their unbelief to the surface and forced them to face up to it.

He had spoken his definite word of promise into their unbelief. So Abraham and Sarah are reassured that despite all the seeming impossibility, God's plan is still in place.

David Pryor comments again very helpfully, I think. The last 25 years had not been haphazard or pointless. Abraham and Sarah had not destroyed or even damaged God's purposes by their doubts, fears, and unbelief.

[29 : 48] God had been weaving everything into his predetermined pattern. Living by faith means such a ready but not irresponsible acceptance of God's sovereignty. You see, the challenge to us is not how big is your faith but how big is your God.

Jesus said you want to need faith the size of a mustard seed, the tiniest possible seed, providing that faith is focused on the great God, El Shaddai, the God for whom nothing is impossible.

So again in Hebrews 11 we get the record. By faith Abraham, even though his past age and Sarah herself was barren, was unable to become a father because he, here's the key bit, because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.

And so from this one man and he as good as dead came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. So we look back and see a year later, less than a year later, a month later, little laughter, Isaac is born.

And we look back on the history, on the story for the Bible as a narrative that traces God's plan through the generations. All that God promised came true. From Isaac came all his descendants, numerous descendants.

[31 : 14] And finally, through this line, the Lord comes again to earth, again, this time in human form, as a tiny baby, as a promise is made to a young girl, a promise made by a prophet 700 years before, that a virgin will give birth to a son.

Impossible. How will this be, she asks. The answer of the angelic messenger promises a greater miracle. The angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come upon you.

The power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age and she who was said to be barren is in her six month.

Very interesting parallels. Elizabeth and Zechariah with Abraham, Sarah, we don't have time to look at it. But nothing is impossible with God. When God makes a promise, he keeps it.

But notice the response of Mary, not like that of Sarah. She doesn't laugh. She doesn't say ridiculous. She exhibits a greater faith. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

[32 : 31] May it be to me as you have said according to your word. So we know the story. Her baby, Jesus by name, is born.

He fulfills perfectly in every detail all the promises of God made over hundreds of years in his perfect life, in his sacrificial death, in his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into heaven.

The plan is still in place. Now we await the final chapter in the story. Promised by angels again to those who saw him ascend into heaven.

Here's the end of the story. This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you've seen him go into heaven.

That's the end of the story. All of human history is working towards that ultimate goal. In ways that we cannot understand through all the details of the news and all the things that are happening in our world, God is working out his sovereign purposes towards that ultimate goal when Christ will return in power and great glory.

[33 : 48] We may look back and say it seems a long time, 2,000 years. Right back in the New Testament, one of the last books were in the New Testament. The Apostle Peter says people are still saying that and what is his answer?

One day with the Lord is a thousand years. A thousand years is one day. Like one day. God is giving people an opportunity to repent and as an opportunity for mission to fulfill God's plans and purposes.

God is still working out his purposes. Now, let me finish. I've almost finished. Are you ready for his return? Are you looking for his return?

Are you longing for his return? Are you part of the plan? Are you ready when he returns? Because when he returns, he will return either as your judge or as your saviour.

We need to be ready for that. We need to anticipate this greatest event that is happening. If you said this on BBC News, they would say you're stupid. What a ridiculous claim. But nothing is impossible with God.

[34 : 54] If God has kept all of his promises right back to Abraham as we've seen today, through the generations, through the centuries, surely he will fulfill his ultimate purpose at the end of time when Christ returns and we live by faith, we walk by faith, we die in faith in this great hope that God's plan is still in place.

I hope that's your assurance. Let's pray together. Gracious God, we thank you that you are the sovereign Lord who works out all things according to your great purposes.

And when you make a promise, it will be fulfilled. We look back over history even briefly this evening and see that all your promises have been kept.

But your word says all of them are yes and amen in Christ. We look back and affirm that nothing is impossible for you, that you delight to work in situations that seem humanly impossible, to show your great power and to show that it is you who is at work and that you have done it.

Lord, we pray this evening as we bow in your presence, that if we're not ready for this, that we might repent while there is still opportunity and put our faith in him who is the savior, who died for our sins.

[36 : 29] And for those of us who have that hope, reaffirm it in us again this evening. Maybe for some of us, it seems a long time since we first put our trust in you. We look back over the years, but we thank you as we sang right at the beginning.

You are the faithful God. Your promises are unchanging. So fill us with great and renewed hope in believing. Reassure us by your presence.

Renew that hope within us in that new covenant in Christ. And remind us of all your promises, which will be fulfilled.

And we look forward to that great day when Christ himself shall return. Help us and encourage us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.