引言 INTRODUCTION

Tradition can be something outsiders cannot understand or even make sense of. Some of those practices are unique, others are just plain weird. I graduated from a university that has rich traditions, and many of them have to do with football. There are lots of crazy fans in the campus every fall. They gather at midnight before a game to cheer for the team. They call it a "yell practice" because they will shout some slogans together. When the team scores, a man has the right to kiss the lady he takes to a game. I am sure guys will fight for their lives to keep this tradition! Our mascot is a sheep-dog. It has to be a female. Again, it is the tradition. A designated student cares for the dog. He will even bring the dog to classes. If the dog barks, then the class will be dismissed. There are many other customs that look silly. But these traditions bind people together like a family. In Genesis 17, God was about to start a new tradition for Abram. Thirteen years have passed between the final verse of the last chapter and the first verse of this chapter. Nothing is recorded about Abram's life during that period. He just continued to wait patiently for God to fulfill His promises. But wait no more! The faithful God would bless Abram with a son. Before God did that, He reaffirmed the covenant He made with Abram. It is hard to miss that "covenant" is a key word in this passage. The word is used 13 times. God put Himself in a binding agreement with Abram. Everything He promised would surely come true. God asked Abram and his descendants to undergo circumcision to show that they are in God's covenant. In doing so, God puts a mark on those He makes to be His children.

解釋 EXPLANATION

1. 祝福的擴展 Expansion of God's Blessings

God told Abram a few important things. First, it was about the expansion of His blessings. Let us read from verses 1 to 8. God reiterated some promises and made them more specific. First, Abram's would have many offspring (v. 2 and 6). Second, they would form various nations to be ruled by kings (v. 4-6). Third, God would be their God (v. 7-8). Fourth, God would give them the land of Canaan (v. 8). Of the four promises, the second and the third ones were new. Different countries and rulers would come from Abram. Ishmael, born from Hagar, was the ancestor of the Arabs. Isaac, who would be born from Sarai a year later, was the ancestor of Israel. Another new promise was about God's relationship with Abram's offspring. God would be their Lord, and they would be God's people. Those were the blessings in God's covenant. Next, God did something special to reinforce His message. Look at verse 5: "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." Abram means "exalted father." His new name Abraham means "father of a multitude." His descendants would be numerous. In the Bible, God changed the names for certain people when He chose them for new missions. Abraham's grandson Jacob was later called Israel. He would become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the New Testament, God made Saul into Paul, and called him to be the apostle for the Gentiles. God made a covenant with Abram. He asked Abraham to do two things to stay in this covenant. God says in verse 1: ... "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless." Here we see a new title for God. God Almighty in Hebrew is El Shaddai. "El" means God and "Shaddai" stands for powerful. He has mighty power to fulfill all His promises. The two requirements for Abraham are: First, he had to walk before God. A direct translation is to walk in the face of God. Abraham had to be mindful that God is always watching. It is related to the second requirement about being blameless. The word "blameless" means complete. It is used in sacrificial ritual. Any animal to be offered to God must be blameless, meaning that it cannot be losing an eye or crippled in one leg. Abraham must obey God and be upright in his conduct. What does this covenant have to do with us modern Christians? Paul explains in Galatians 3:7 – Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. Abraham is not only the father of the Israel race. He is also the model of our faith. Those who follow his example and put their faith in Jesus are children of God and spiritual descendants of Abraham. Once a pastor traveled by air. He chatted with a man sitting next to him. The guy told the pastor that he is a Jew. The pastor replied: "What a coincidence! I'm a Jew too." The man was surprised, because the pastor looks Chinese from all angles. The pastor quoted this Galatians passage and shared the gospel with his Jewish friend. To the Jews, we are Gentiles. But in Christ, we are also recipients of the promises God gave to Abraham. We do not live in Canaan, which is today's Israel. But Jesus' followers are spread out all over the world. Many Christians do not have children. However, we become spiritual parents when we lead others to Christ. In doing so, God blesses others through us. When Jesus saves us, He also gives us new titles. We used to be lost sinners, but now we are adopted children of God. We used to be enemies of God due to our sin, but now we are one family in Christ. God becomes our Lord, and we are His people. He sends us to tell others about this blessing God prepares for them. We witness Jesus to others by living a righteous life that God requires of us.

2. 儀式的說明 Explanation of the Ritual

God spoke about the expansion of His blessings. Second, He also gave an explanation of the ritual for those He made a covenant with. Listen to verses 9 to 14. All the males must undergo circumcision by cutting away the foreskin of their male organ. It is a sign on the body that they are in God's covenant. All the women would automatically be in the covenant along with their fathers or husbands. Why did God specify that it must be done on the eighth day after birth? There are scientific reasons behind the timing. Circumcision will cause bleeding. There are over 10 factors in our body involved in blood clotting. Vitamin K and prothrombin are two of them. New-born babies have very low level of vitamin K. They begin to produce it in the gut 5 to 7 days after birth. By day 8, there will be a higher amount in the body. Whereas, Prothrombin will be at 110% of the normal level in infants on the 8th day. God is full of wisdom. He does not ask people to do things randomly. Abraham obeyed the instruction. See verse 23: Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Every male was circumcised on that day. Since then, all the Jews follow the same command. They are proud to be God's people, so much so that they despise the Gentiles, calling them the "uncircumcised people." Here lies a problem: a sign of God's promise can become a source of pride if they focus on their own effort and not on God's grace. They believe a surgery is all it takes to get into God's family. However, those who made a cut on their bodies do not necessarily make the cut into God's Kingdom. What God looks for is not a ritual but a relationship. In Deuteronomy 30:6, Moses told the Israelites what God required of them: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you

will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." God is not removing any muscle from their hearts. The symbolic meaning is to clear up anything that hinders people from loving God. That includes sins, laziness and excuses. Think of it like plaques inside blood vessels that restrict blood flow. You must get rid of those foreign objects to restore the normal functions of a heart. Today, God does not ask men to go through circumcision. Your doctor may suggest that for your baby boy out of hygienic reasons. However, we can be prideful like the Jews do. Many Christians believe that they will go to heaven because they have finished all the necessary steps: they said a prayer to accept Jesus into their hearts and they received baptism. They do not love God in their hearts. They attend church only when they are free on Sunday. That may be the only time they open the Bible! Some of them just bring their phones but not their Bibles. They pray to God when they need something beyond their control. They see serving in the church as a waste of time. God has to perform a circumcision on our hearts to jump start our spiritual growth. He has to trim away things that make us ineffective for His Kingdom. Perhaps we love the world and ourselves more than God. We spend too much time on the social media and other entertainment, we turn career and kids into idols or we chase after money and success. When our hearts are made right, then our love for God will increase. When there is love, there will be obedience. A right attitude will play out in right actions. Then we will be willing and eager to follow God's commands in our use of time, money and resources.

3. 兒子的預告 Expectation of a Son

God told Abraham the expansion of His blessings and He gave him an explanation of the ritual of circumcision. Next, God shared the good news about the expectation of a son. We will look at verses 15 to 22. The birth of a son through Sarai would be the first fulfillment of God's promises. Like He did to Abram, God changed Sarai's name to confirm that His blessing was not restricted to one son but a race. Sarai means "my princess," whereas the new name Sarah means "a noble woman." She would become a mother of many nations. How did Abraham react to the news? Look at verses 17-18 again: 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" It was a joyful laugh of surprise, not a jeering laugh of doubt, because Abraham bowed before God. He was delighted to learn that finally God would bless him with an heir. God showed His humor. Abraham laughed when he heard the news. Then God named the baby Isaac, meaning "he laughs." In the future, Isaac would retell this story about his dad when people asked about his name. Abraham thought Ishmael would be his heir. God reiterated that Sarah's son would be the true successor. However, God intended to bless Ishmael through Abraham anyway. He says in verse 20: "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation." Ishmael's descendants would be numerous, he would be the ancestor of twelve tribes and the father of a great nation. God gave Abraham the same blessings. He would have a lot of offspring. His grandson Jacob would be the father of the 12 ancestors of Israel tribes. A major difference is spelled out in the next verse: "But I will establish my covenant with Isaac..." The covenant was only reserved for Isaac's descendants. Ishmael was excluded from the covenant even though he went through circumcision. That underscores the fact that a ritual means nothing without a relationship. Ishmael's material blessings were temporary while Isaac's spiritual blessings would be eternal. Having the same earthly father does not count if he does not

recognize God as the Heavenly Father. Paul elaborates in Romans 9:6-7 – 6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." Not all biological Jews are children of God. Receiving circumcision and obeying God's Law cannot save anyone. Only those who copy the faith of Abraham by putting their trust in Jesus are spiritual children of Abraham. Let me encourage the parents among us. Your children are blessed by God. Many of them grew up in a church. They listened to Bible stories since they were kids. They must make up their minds to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. Being born into a Christian family, go to the church weekly and follow what other believers do will not save them. You must bring your kids to the Lord. This is the most important task God assigns to you, more critical to the food your children eat, the extra-curricular activities they participate and the colleges they go to. Pray for them that they will be like Isaac, who inherited God's promises, and not be like Ishmael, who only enjoyed earthly treasures.

結論 CONCLUSION

God puts a mark on those He makes to be His children. He took the initiative and made a covenant with Abraham. God promised to give Abraham a son. The child foreshadowed God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ. He used His blood to make an eternal covenant with those who believe in Him. We may not receive circumcision today. But all who accept Jesus have the Holy Spirit live in them. Once entered, the Holy Spirit will stay forever. It is a sign for those who belong to God. Throughout the ages, God calls people from all over the world to come into His Kingdom. These members share the same values regardless of their original backgrounds. The story of Kansei Matsuzawa illustrates that principle. He is a 26 years old young man from Tokyo. He played soccer in high school. When he was vacationing in the U.S. 5 years ago, he saw a professional football game in a stadium for the first time. After he returned home, he decided to become a placekicker of American football. He learned the technique by watching YouTube videos. Later, he came to the U.S. to study. A small college in Ohio had confidence in him and let him be a kicker. He played well during the next two years. He was then transferred to the University of Hawaii. A few weeks ago on 8/23, Matsuzawa became a hero of the team. He scored the final 9 points with three consecutive field goals, including the game winning kick. Hawaii defeated Stanford 23-20. When interviewed by the press afterward, he admitted that speaking English actually makes him more nervous than playing on the field. An overseas student embraces a different language, culture and sport to become a teammate. It gives us a glimpse of heaven, where people of various skin colors and who speak different tongues will gather around the Lord to worship Him. We are the messengers who God sends into every corner to tell people that God's covenant is for them too.

引言 INTRODUCTION

傳統有時是外人無法理解,甚至難以理解的事情。有些傳統是很獨特的,甚至是很奇怪的。我畢業的大學有很多傳統,其中大部份都與美式足球有關。每年秋天,校園裡都會有一大堆瘋狂的球迷。他們會在比賽前一天的半夜聚集,為球隊加油打氣。他們稱之為「吶喊練習」,因為大家會一起大聲喊口號。當球隊得分時,男士們可以親吻他的女朋友。我敢肯定,男生們會拼命維護這項傳統!我們的吉祥動物是一隻牧羊犬,必須是母的,這又是一個傳統。有一位指定的學生負責照顧這隻狗,他甚至會帶牠一起上課。如果狗在課堂中叫起來,那麼便馬上下課。還有其他很搞笑的習俗。這些傳統讓人們像家人一樣緊緊相連。在創世記第17章中,神要為亞伯蘭開始一個新的傳統。從上一章的最後一節到這一章的第一節之間,已經過了十三年。聖經完全沒有記錄亞伯蘭在這段期間的生活。他只是耐心地繼續等待神實現祂的應許。他的等待將要結束了!信實的神將會賜給亞伯蘭一個兒子。在這之前,神重新確認祂與亞伯蘭所立的約。在這段經文中,「約」這個字是個關鍵詞,一共出現了十三次。神把自己與亞伯蘭放在一個盟約的關係中。祂所應許的一切都必定會實現。神要求亞伯蘭和他的後代行割禮,以表明他們在神的約中。藉此,神在祂所揀選為兒女的人身上留下記號。

解釋 EXPLANATION

1. 祝福的擴展 Expansion of God's Blessings

神對亞伯蘭說了幾件重要的事。首先,是關於祂祝福的擴展。我們來讀第1至第8節。神重申了一些應許,並使它們更加具體。第一,亞伯蘭會有許多後裔(第2節與第6節)。第二,他們會成為多國之民,並由君王統治(第4至6節)。第三,神要作他們的神(第7至8節)。第四,神要將迦南地賜給他們(第8節)。在這四個應許中,第二和第三是新的。亞伯蘭將成為多國的祖先。夏甲所生的以實瑪利成為阿拉伯人的祖先;而一年後撒萊將要生的以撒是以色列人的祖先。另一個新的應許是神與亞伯蘭後裔的關係:神要作他們的主,他們也要作神的子民。這些都是神盟約中的祝福。接著,神做了一件特別的事來強調祂的話。我們看第5節:「從此以後,你的名不再叫亞伯蘭,要叫亞伯拉罕,因為我已立你作多國的父。」亞伯蘭的意思是「尊貴的父」,而亞伯拉罕的意思是「多國之父」,表明他的後裔會極其繁多。在聖經中,當神呼召某些人去完成新的使命時,祂會改變他們的名字。例如,亞伯拉罕的孫子雅各後來被稱為以色列,他成為以色列十二支派的始祖。在新約中,神使掃羅成為保羅,並呼召他作外邦人的使徒。神與亞伯蘭立約,也要求亞伯

拉罕做兩件事來持守這約。神在第1節說:...「我是全能的神。你當在我面前作完 全人。」在這裡我們看見神的一個新稱號:「全能的神」,希伯來文是 El Shaddai。 「El」是神的意思,「Shaddai」表示大能。這位神大有能力,可以實現祂一切的應 許。神對亞伯拉罕的兩項要求是:第一,他要行在神面前,意思是亞伯拉罕要時刻 意識到神在看著他。第二,他要作完全人。「完全」在原文中有「完整」的意思, 是獻祭儀式中的用語。任何獻給神的祭動物必須是完整沒有瑕疵的,不能缺掉一隻 眼或瘸腿。亞伯拉罕要順服神,並且要行為正直。那麼,這個約和我們現代基督徒 有什麼關係呢?保羅在加拉太書 3:7 中解釋說:所以,你們要知道:那以信為本的 人,就是亞伯拉罕的子孫。亞伯拉罕不只是以色列民族的父,他也是我們信心之 父。凡效法他的信心、信靠耶穌的人,就是神的兒女,也是亞伯拉罕屬靈的後裔。 曾經有一位牧師坐飛機,他與鄰座的一位男士交談。那個人說自己是猶太人。牧師 回答說:「真巧,我也是猶太人!」那個人很驚訝,因為這位牧師從外表看起來就 是個華人。牧師於是引用這一節加拉太書的經文,並向他傳福音。對猶太人來說, 我們是外邦人;但在基督裡,我們是神賜給亞伯拉罕之應許的繼承人。我們雖然沒 有住在迦南地,就是今天的以色列,但耶穌的門徒分布在全世界。許多基督徒可能 沒有親生兒女,但當我們帶領人信主時,就成為他們屬靈的父母。如此,神透過我 們祝福別人。當耶穌拯救我們時,祂也賜給我們新的身份。從前我們是迷失的罪 人,現在我們是神所收養的兒女;從前我們因為犯罪與神為敵,如今我們在基督裡 成為一家人。神成為我們的主,我們成為祂的子民。祂差遣我們去告訴別人:神為 他們預備了同樣的祝福。神要求我們過敬虔、正直的生活來為耶穌作見證。

2. 儀式的說明 Explanation of the Ritual

神談到了祂祝福的擴展。其次,祂也說明了與祂立約之人的要接受的儀式。請聽第9至14節的經文:所有的男士都必須接受割禮,去掉他們生殖器官的包皮。他們要在身體上留下與神立約的記號。所有的女士自動因為父親或丈夫的關係而包括在這個約之中。為什麼神指定要在出生第八天行割禮?這背後有科學的根據。割禮會引起流血。我們體內有超過10種與凝血有關的條件。維生素 K 和凝血酶原(Prothrombin)是其中的兩種。新生嬰兒的維生素 K 含量非常低,要在出生後5至7天才開始在腸子中生產這種元素。到了第八天,體內的維生素 K 含量會明顯增加。而在第八天,凝血酶原的水平會達到正常的110%。神滿有智慧,祂並非隨意吩咐人做事。於是亞伯拉罕聽從了指示。請看第23節:正當那日,亞伯拉罕遵著神的命,給他的兒子以實瑪利和家裡的一切男子,無論是在家裡生的,是用銀子買的,都行了割禮。每一位男士就在當天接受了割禮。從那時起,所有猶太人都遵守同樣的命令。他們因為自己是神的子民而感到自豪,他們甚至藐視外邦人,稱他們為「未受割禮的人」。問題在於:如果他們專注於自己的行為,而非神的恩典,神應許的記號可以變成驕傲的原因。他們認為只要接受一個小手術就可以進入神的家。然而,那些在身上割了一刀的人,不一定能進入神的國度。神所看重的,不是

儀式,而是關係。在申命記30:6,摩西告訴以色列人神對他們的要求:「耶和華你 神必將你心裡和你後裔心裡的污穢除掉,好叫你盡心盡性愛耶和華你的神,使你可 以存活。」這裡「將心裡的污穢除掉」在希伯來文的意思是「在心中施行割禮」。 當然神不是要切掉他們的心臟的肌肉,而是要除去一切攔阻人愛神的東西,包括 罪、懶惰和藉口。就像血管被東西堵塞,會阻礙血液流通。你必須去除那些東西, 才能恢復心臟的正常功能。今天,神沒有要求男士接受割禮。醫生可能會出於衛生 考量建議為嬰兒行割禮。然而,我們也可能像猶太人一樣驕傲。許多基督徒以為自 己會上天堂,因為他們完成了所有的步驟:他們曾經禱告接受耶穌進入心中,也接 受了浸槽。但他們內心並不愛神。他們只在週日有空的時候來聚會,那可能是他們 唯一打開聖經的時候!有些人甚至只帶手機而不帶聖經。他們只有在碰到自己無法 解決的事情時才會向神禱告。他們認為在教會服事是浪費時間。神必須在我們的心 中施行割禮,來幫助我們的屬靈生命成長。祂要剪掉那些妨礙我們成長的東西。也 許我們愛世界、愛自己過於愛神。我們花太多時間在社交媒體和娛樂上,把事業和 孩子當作偶像,或是追求金錢與成功。當我們的心態被調整正確時,我們對神的愛 也會增長。有了愛,就會有順服。有順服就必須有相應的行動。這樣我們就會樂 意、也渴望在使用時間、金錢和資源上遵守神的命令。

3. 兒子的預告 Expectation of a Son

神告訴亞伯拉罕祂祝福的擴展,並向他說明了割禮的儀式。接下來,神分享了一個 好消息, 祂預告兒子的來臨。我們來看第 15 至 22 節。撒萊兒子的出生,將會是神 應許的首次應驗。就像神更改亞伯蘭的名字一樣,祂也改變了撒萊的名字,來證明 祂的祝福並非限於一個兒子,而是延伸到整個民族。撒萊的意思是「我的公主」, 而撒拉的意思是「尊貴的婦人」。她將成為多國之母。亞伯拉罕聽到這個消息後有 什麼反應?請再看第 17 至 18 節: 17 亞伯拉罕就俯伏在地喜笑,心裡說:「一百歲 的人還能得孩子嗎?撒拉已經九十歲了,還能生養嗎?」18 亞伯拉罕對神說:「但 願以實瑪利活在你面前。」這是意外驚喜的笑,不是懷疑的譏笑,因為亞伯拉罕在 神面前俯伏敬拜。他聽到神終於要賜給他一個後裔,心中感到歡欣。神也表現出幽 默感。亞伯拉罕聽到這消息時笑了,於是神給這孩子起名叫以撒,意思是「他笑 了」。將來人們問起這名字的由來時,以撒便講述這段關於父親的故事。亞伯拉罕 以為以實瑪利會成為他的繼承人,但神重申,撒拉的兒子才是真正的後嗣。然而, 神打算透過亞伯拉罕祝福以實瑪利。神在第20節說:「至於以實瑪利,我也應允 你:我必賜福給他,使他昌盛,極其繁多。他必生十二個族長;我也要使他成為大 國。」以實瑪利的後代將會眾多,他會成為十二個種族的祖先,一個大國的父。神 給亞伯拉罕的祝福也是如此:他的子孫將會無數。他的孫子雅各將會成為以色列十 二支派的祖先。然而,下一節經文指出一個關鍵的差異:「...我要與他堅定所立的 約。」這個約只保留給以撒的後代。縱使以實瑪利也行了割禮,他被排除在盟約之 外。這再次強調:如果沒有和神建立關係,儀式是毫無意義的。以實瑪利所得的物 質祝福是暫時的,而以撒所承受的屬靈祝福是永遠的。雖然他們在地上有相同的父親,但如果以實瑪利不承認神為天父,那是沒有用的。保羅在羅馬書 9:6-7 進一步說明:6 這不是說神的話落了空。因為從以色列生的不都是以色列人,7 也不因為是亞伯拉罕的後裔就都作他的兒女;惟獨「從以撒生的才要稱為你的後裔。」不是所有猶太血統的人都是神的兒女。接受割禮、遵守神的律法,都不能救任何人。只有那些效法亞伯拉罕的信心、接受耶穌的人,才是亞伯拉罕的屬靈後代。讓我來鼓勵在座的家長們:你的孩子是蒙神祝福的。許多孩子從小在教會長大,聽聖經故事。但他們必須自己做出決定,接受耶穌為救主與生命的主宰。出生在基督徒家庭、每週上教會、模仿其他信徒的行為,這些都不能拯救他們。你必須把孩子帶到主面前。這是神交託給你最重要的任務,甚至比你為孩子預備的食物、課外活動或進入的大學都更重要。你要為孩子禱告,求神使他們像以撒一樣,承受神的應許,而不是像以實瑪利,只享受地上短暫的財富。

結論 CONCLUSION

神在祂所揀選為兒女的人身上留下記號。祂主動與亞伯拉罕立約,並應許要賜給他 一個兒子。這個孩子預表了神的愛子——耶穌基督。耶穌用自己的寶血,與所有信 靠祂的人立永恆的約。今天我們雖然不用接受割禮,但凡接受耶穌的人,聖靈就住 在他們裡面。一旦進入,聖靈就永不離開。這是屬於神之人的記號。歷世歷代以 來,神從世界各地呼召人進入祂的國度。這些成員無論原來的背景如何,都分享同 樣的價值觀。松澤寬晉(Kansei Matsuzawa)的故事正好說明了這個原則。他是一 位來自東京、26歲的年輕人,曾在高中踢足球。五年前,他在美國度假時,首次 觀看一場美式足球比賽。回國後,他決定成為一名美式足球的踢球員。他透過觀看 YouTube 影片自學踢球技術。後來他來美國留學,俄亥俄州一所小型大學對他有信 心,讓他擔任踢球員。在接下來的兩年中,他表現優異,隨後他轉學至夏威夷大 學。幾週前的8月23日,松澤成為球隊的英雄。他連續踢進三個定點球,拿下比 賽最後的9分,包括勝利的一球,幫助夏威夷大學以23比20擊敗史丹佛大學。在 比賽後接受訪問時,他坦白說,說英語其實比在球場上比賽讓他更緊張。一位國際 學生融入不同的語言、文化和運動,成為球隊的一員。這讓我們看見天堂的景象: 不同膚色和說不同語言的人,將聚集在主的寶座前敬拜祂。我們就是神差遣到不同 角落的使者,向人傳達信息,告訴人們神的約也是為他們預備的。