

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

The Covenant Making God (Genesis 15:7-21)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 21, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ If you've been with us this past month, you know we're in a series in Genesis on the life of Abraham. **It's been helpful to study Abraham because his relationship with God seems to set a pattern for us.** The call he received in Genesis 12 and his response informs how we ought to respond when God shows up and calls us in a new direction.
 - The struggle to trust that Abraham faced in chapters 12 and 13 remind us how often we're going to face situations where we have to decide whether we're going to trust what our eyes see in front of us OR or what our ears hear coming from God's Word.
 - Or consider that experience of God's protection and provision that Abraham enjoyed in chapter 14 – that blessing is available for us as well. And the gift of righteousness that he received through faith in the beginning of chapter 15 – that provides the pattern of salvation laid out for us in the gospel.

- ❖ In the same way, whatever we learn in today's text is going to set a pattern for us. So what's our passage all about? **It's about God taking all the wondrous promises he made to Abram and cementing them in an unbreakable covenant.** Here we see God establish a covenantal relationship – binding himself to Abram and his descendants. This is what theologians call the Abrahamic covenant, and it ends up defining the very characteristics of a saving relationship with God that applies to us all.
 - And the key term here is *covenant*. **God entered into a covenant with Abram. Not a contract.** No one calls it the Abrahamic contract. Because those are two different relationships. A contractual relationship and a covenantal relationship are two different things.

- ❖ **In a contract, two parties commit to each other based on certain conditions and obligations being met.** You stick with a contractual partner – you remain faithful, if you will – because they have met those conditions and have kept those obligations. And therefore, they have earned your loyalty and deserve your commitment to that relationship. But if your partner drops the ball and fails to meet obligations, there are consequences they'll have to pay. And you're freed from the contract and any contractual duties. That's how it works.
 - **Now we'd probably never describe it that way, but the reality is that many of us treat our relationship with God as if it were based on a contract.** We treat him like a business partner or like an employer. We enter into a contractual relationship with God because it's mutually beneficial. He has goods and services or compensation that can benefit us. It's in the form of blessings or answered prayers or just providing a general state of peace in our lives. And in turn, we offer him our devotion, our obedience, our service. That's how we benefit him. It's a transactional relationship.

- ❖ If you're not sure that describes your relationship with God, then ask yourself: **How did you respond the last time you were disappointed by him?** Think back to when you were praying so hard for God to answer in a certain way but he never did – how did you respond? If you grew resentful or bitter, it might indicate that you have, in God, a contractual partner. He didn't keep his end of the agreement, and now you feel like you have a legitimate gripe.

- ❖ **That makes sense in a contractual relationship. But if it's covenantal, then it's different.** Then you can't expect a transactional, *quid pro quo* type of relationship where I put in this amount of devotion to the Lord and expect to withdraw a certain amount of blessing in my life. Relationships within a covenantal framework don't work that way.
 - That's why this text in Genesis 15 is going to help us. **God's dealing with Abram lays down a pattern by which we can understand what a relationship with God is based on.** It becomes clear that a relationship with him is *not* going to be based on a bilateral contract where God and man have mutual obligations to each other.
 - **We get a needed reminder that our relationship with God is ultimately based on a unilateral covenant that God initiates with us and where he is more than willing to carry the load.** I hope you come away encouraged to know that you worship – not a contract making – but a covenant making God.
- ❖ What I'd like to do this morning, as we study vv7-21, is to stress the significance of being in a covenantal relationship with God. I see three emphases in this text: (1) Being in a covenant with God offers strong assurance. (2) Being in a covenant with God calls for steady patience. (3) Being in a covenant with God ultimately depends on God.

Being in a Covenant with God Offers Strong Assurance

- ❖ Let's begin by considering how being in a covenant with God offers the strongest of assurance. **In other words, when God seeks to strengthen a promise he makes to someone, he reinforces it by entering into a covenant with that person.** That's not a foreign idea to us. It's the same idea as any man who is willing to bolster his promise to a woman – to love and protect her; to be with her through thick and thin. He reinforces that promise by entering into a marital covenant with her.
- ❖ You could argue, "What's the point of a marital covenant? If he already loves her and if he's promised to be with her, why do they need a covenant?" For assurance. **A marital covenant offers a couple strong assurance. It takes a vague promise to love you and be with you and clearly defines what that means.** A covenant defines the parameters of that love – for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; till death do us part.
 - **A covenant takes a bare-boned promise and puts meat on it and weight behind it.** Intuitively, we know how important that is. We know how much a covenant matters in the course of a love relationship. It strengthens and reinforces the surety of a promise to love you – to be with you (and for you) forever.
- ❖ And that's why God entered into a covenant with Abram. Look at v7. The LORD begins with a promise – to give him the land of Canaan. "*And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."*" That's God's promise to him. But Abram had some doubts. Listen to v8, "*But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"*"

- ❖ Jonathan was helpful, last week, in pointing out how, in the beginning of chapter 15, God is not offended or turned off by Abram's doubts. **He can handle our doubts. Especially when they're not rooted in a sinful unbelief.** But when they're more like the doubts of the man who told Jesus, "*I believe; help my unbelief*" (Mk 9:24).
 - **There's a difference between worldly doubt and godly doubt, and you can tell which type you're dealing with based on how you're responding to those doubts.** Are you settled with your doubts? Are you no longer seeking answers? Have your doubts begun to morph into cynicism or suspicion towards God or faith?
 - Or are you still wrestling with your doubts? Are you still asking the hard questions and trying to seek the answers? And especially, are you directing your questions towards God? That's what Abram was doing in v8.

- ❖ **If you're having a hard time believing God's promises because you've been disappointed so many times, you're not alone.** I can't imagine how many times – and for how many years – Abram must have prayed for a child. Yet all he received was disappointment. Or how he looked at this Promised Land with all these warring tribes and kingdoms occupying it and fighting over it (as we read in chapter 14). So I can see why he had lingering doubts – even as God promised him descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and promised him this land as far as his eyes could see. Abram had his share of doubts and questions. But the key is that he brought them to the Lord.
 - **Friends, don't be afraid to bring your doubts and questions to the Lord.** He won't be annoyed. He won't get upset. He'll welcome your questions like he welcomed Abram's.

- ❖ Look at how the Lord responded in v9. He essentially says, "Abram, you have a tough time believing my promises? Then let's hold a ceremony. Let's establish a covenant together." **God graciously responded to Abram's questions of uncertainty with a covenant.**
 - In the Ancient Near East, when two parties entered into a covenant, they would conduct a covenant ceremony where they would sacrifice animals. They would cut these animals in half and lay the pieces side by side.
 - And as the two parties affirm their promises and obligations to each other, they walk together between the cut halves of these animals as if to say, "**Let the same fate be to me if I don't keep my obligations.** If I break covenant with you – if I violate a term of this agreement – then let me be accursed. Let me be torn apart like these animals." That's the meaning behind it.

- ❖ There's actually a place in **Jeremiah 34:18** where the Lord refers to leaders of Israel who broke a covenant they made with their king. Listen to what it says, "*And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.*"
 - That's the same ceremony as what we see here in Genesis 15. With the same message. And in vv9-10, we see Abram preparing these animals – a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. He cuts them in half and arranges the pieces into two rows.

- ❖ And God is prepared to walk between these rows of freshly slain animals – to bind himself by a covenant to Abram and his descendants – in order to guarantee his promises. **To the point that he is willing to place himself under a curse if he were to ever renege on any promise or fail to meet a single obligation.**
 - That is how committed God is to keeping his promises. When he says to his people that “I love you. I am for you. I will be with you. Never will I leave you nor forsake you” – those aren’t vague promises or lofty platitudes. Those are covenantal vows.
 - **God is *not* like the wishy-washy lover who promises so many things with his lips but never backs it up with his actions.** No, he’s more like the faithful Groom who reinforces his promises by entering into an unbreakable covenant with his Bride.

Being in a Covenant with God Calls for Steady Patience

- ❖ That’s the God whom you are worshipping – a covenant making God. **And that covenantal relationship is your assurance that he’ll make good on all of his promises.** But – you *have* to be patient. That leads to our second point: Being in a covenant with God calls for steady patience. **Because if you assume he’s going to follow *your* timeline – that he will fulfill his promises according to *your* schedule – you’ll be sorely disappointed.**
- ❖ Listen to what the LORD said to Abram in v13. He just promised all this land, and he’s about to back it up with a covenant. But in v13, the LORD reminds Abram to be patient. *“¹³Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.”*
 - In other words, the LORD is saying, “I will fulfill this promise. I will give this land to your offspring. But *after* four hundred years. Your descendants will inherit this land but only after a four hundred year hiatus. And in the meanwhile, they’ll be in another land where they will be mistreated as sojourners and abused as slaves.”
 - **So this promise fulfillment won’t be immediate.** It won’t take place in Abram’s lifetime. That’s the indirect implication of v15. God tells Abram that he will go to his fathers in peace. He will be spared this affliction and will die at a good old age. That’s good for him, but the implication is that Abram will not personally experience the fulfillment of these promises.
- ❖ Friends, this is why it’s hard for us to trust God. He makes promises to us. He backs it up with a covenant. **But then he doesn’t follow our timeline. Instead, he calls us to be patient.** In this case, he called for four hundred years of steady patience. That’s hard for us.
 - When we hear God’s promises, we expect immediate fulfillment or at least within a “reasonable” amount of time. **We struggle with discouragement when a few weeks go by and nothing has changed.** But what if God’s timeframe is much longer and much wider? What if he’s focused on fulfilling, in our day, promises he made to people back in 1623? That’s what a four hundred year hiatus looks like.

- ❖ **But let's be honest, most of us lack the imagination to think in such lengthy terms, especially when it comes to God fulfilling his promises.** We live in such a busy age of immediacy. We've been trained to expect immediate wish fulfillment. But God doesn't work that way. He's not beholden to our timeframe or expectations.
 - **You don't know when he'll do it. All you know for certain is that he will.** Look back at v13. God says to Abram, "*Know for certain.*" Those three words should remove any doubt. **You can be certain – not because you know when a promise will be fulfilled – but because you know Who made it.** Granted, it may take four generations before God does it. The fulfillment you're hoping for may not happen in your lifetime. You may be long buried, at a good old age, before that promise comes to fruition. But you can know for certain that it will.

- ❖ I think about **George Mueller**, the 19th-century British pastor known for his orphanage ministry but also for his prayer life. I remember reading that he prayed for the salvation of one of his friends – trusting God's promise and ability to save even the most hard-hearted. And Mueller prayed for his friend on a regular basis for 52 years. He went to the grave still praying for his friend's salvation. And, as the story goes, it wasn't until a few months after his death did his friend finally trust in Christ. That's how God's timing often works.
 - **As we hope and pray for the salvation of our loved ones, we need steady patience.** Because often the reason why it takes so long is because God himself is being patient with non-believers. Look at v16. The LORD explains to Abram why this promise fulfillment will take four hundred years. "*And they (Abram's descendants) shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.*"

- ❖ The Amorites were singled out – not because they were anything special compared to the other nine nations they're listed with in vv19-21. **It's more likely that, grammatically, they were functioning as a synecdoche.** A figure of speech where a part functions as representative of the whole. It's like when you say you want to break bread with someone – bread functions as a stand-in for the whole meal. Or when we're taking attendance and we speak of counting heads – the head is understood to represent the entire person.
 - So in v16, the LORD is saying the reason why he's not going to immediately give this land to Abram is because he's patiently waiting for the iniquities of all the nations in Canaan to reach a boiling point. A tipping point. Apparently their sins were not yet complete, even though they were very wicked as we'll see in subsequent chapters. It goes to show how patient and long-suffering the LORD is.
 - **He patiently waits until the nations have totally saturated themselves with their iniquities.** And that steady patience is what gives more time for individual sinners to reach repentance (2 Pet 3:9). The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness. He's being patient toward sinners.

- ❖ But one day, when the land is completely full of sin – like a wet sponge that can no longer hold anymore water – know for certain that God will displace the nations from the land and give it to Abram’s offspring. **But now, because he’s been so patient, no one should interpret God’s judgment as a flare up of impulsive anger but rather as a slow-burn enforcement of his perfect justice.** We may have complained about the slowness of his timing, but I hope you see how it stems from his patience towards sinners like us.
- ❖ **Friends, what are you waiting for?** What promises of God – that you find in his Word – are you still waiting on to be fulfilled? **Those are the hardest to wait on – the promises that you know are aligned with God’s will because they’re found in God’s Word.** And yet, for some reason, he has yet to fulfill them. You’re praying for someone’s salvation. You’re praying for the nations – for the Great Commission to be fulfilled. You’re praying for your own holiness – for freedom and victory over your sins. Or you’re praying for Jesus to come back – for him to right every wrong and make every sad thing come untrue.
 - You know God wants to fulfill these promises. And he wants you to pray for them. And yet, to this point, he has *not* fulfilled them. **His promise to save; his promise to sanctify; his promise to return – are all incomplete.** But one thing we can draw from this passage is the assurance that – though we don’t know when he’ll fulfill his promises – we can know for certain that he will.

Being in a Covenant with God Ultimately Depends on God

- ❖ So be patient, and take comfort in knowing that you worship a covenant making God. **And what brings you even greater comfort is knowing the unique nature of this covenant that God establishes with Abram and his offspring.** As I mentioned before, it’s not a bilateral contract. It’s a unilateral covenant where God takes upon himself all the covenant obligations as well as the covenant curses. It all rides on him. That’s our third and final emphasis: Being in a covenant with God ultimately depends on God.
- ❖ This point is underlined in v12. Right at the point in the covenant ceremony, after the animals were slaughtered and cut in two, where you’d expect both parties to affirm their covenant obligations and covenant curses and walk through the sacrifices together – we read that “*a deep sleep fell on Abram.*” He’s completely out.
 - And then we read in v17, “*17When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.*”
- ❖ Do you see what happened? God was represented by that smoking fire pot and flaming torch. And he made that ceremonial walk all by himself. He passed by those bloody pieces of sacrificed animals all by himself. Abram was fast asleep.
 - And that was intentional. It was meant to send a message. **God was communicating his unilateral commitment to keep this covenant, knowing full well that Abram and his offspring would consistently fail on their end.** So the LORD intended to take upon himself all the covenant obligations as well as all the covenant curses.

- ❖ He was essentially saying, **“This covenant I’m entering into with Abram is unbreakable. His failures and the failures of his offspring will have no bearing on this covenant.** Because I alone made that walk. So I alone bear the responsibility to see these promises through. And I alone will bear the penalty for any covenant-breaking. That’s how committed I am to this covenant and how committed I am to my covenant people.”
 - That’s what God is saying. That’s how unique this covenant is. That’s how strong and sure it is. **And it’s because God has taken the entire weight of this covenant and carried it on his back.** So it truly does all depend on him.

- ❖ And if you follow the story of Abram’s descendants in the pages of Scripture – the story of Israel – it’s filled with high highs but also low lows. With plenty of failures to keep covenant. The people of Israel are constantly being wooed by other lovers – by other gods and idols of this world. **And yet the LORD stays faithful to his covenant and even renews his covenantal commitment on more than one occasion.**
 - The first renewal takes the place on Mt. Sinai with Moses. The next covenant renewal took place in Deuteronomy with Moses again, but he was passing on leadership to Joshua as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Then, after many centuries, the LORD renewed the covenant once more, speaking to King David, reaffirming his commitment to bless Abram’s offspring and to be their God.
 - And then a final renewal took place in an upper room; in a corner of Jerusalem; over a Passover meal between a rabbi and his disciples. **And there the Son of God entered into another unilateral covenant – where he took the weight of it all and carried on his back.** Up a hill called Calvary.

- ❖ But in this instance – as Jesus made that ceremonial walk all by himself without any of us there – **Jesus didn’t just symbolically communicate a willingness to bear all the covenant curses.** He didn’t just foreshadow a willingness to be slain like a Passover lamb. No, this time this covenant was established by the shedding of God’s own blood. There, on the cross, he suffered the consequences of our covenant-breaking.
 - **If you’re a Christian, do you see how good and glorious it is to be in a relationship with a covenant making God?** Especially One who makes unilateral covenants with undeserving sinners like us. Your struggles, your doubts, your failures to keep your end of the covenant are not deal breakers. Because you’re not in a contract with God. You’re in a unilateral, unbreakable covenant.

- ❖ When the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day, it says in v18, *“To your offspring I give this land.”* And it goes on to describe a wide swath of land in ancient Palestine. **Now historically, the fulfillment of this promise did not come to fruition until centuries later at the height of King David’s reign.**
 - But it’s questionable if even the borders of David’s kingdom, at its peak, fulfilled the promise made here. And when you read the book of Hebrews, it’s clear that it didn’t. **The writer of Hebrews says that Abram and his offspring desired something more than physical land and property.** Something greater than real estate.

- ❖ **They desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one** (Heb 11:16). They were “*looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*” (Heb 11:10) **Their hope was in a new creation; a new heavens and a new earth; a new Jerusalem that comes down from the heavens.** That’s a promise fulfillment that’s already started but not yet finished. That means the offer still stands. The promise is still made available for you.

- ❖ **Friends, do you have a better country awaiting you?** When you, Lord-willing, die full of years and in peace – what’s coming next for you? **If you don’t know – if you’re not sure – then take this promise to heart: For those who trust in Jesus – for the people of God – there’s a better land awaiting us.** It’s the same land Abram was headed when he died.
 - **I hope all of you have the strongest of assurance that, when you die, you will inherit a better country.** That you know for certain that you’ll be welcomed into a heavenly dwelling place. And the good news is that you can. You can have that assurance. You can know for certain. Not because of who you are or what you’ve done. But because of who God is and what he did – to enter with you into a new covenant in his blood.