

WALK BY FAITH

Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant | Thicker Than Water (4)

Text: Genesis 12:1-7; 17:1-16

If you are just joining us today, we're in the midst of a study of the SEVEN GREAT COVENANTS that frame the storyline of the Bible. Why are we even bothering with this topic, you may wonder? Well, first, because when you really understand the Old Testament covenants, the New Covenant that Jesus set in motion on Good Friday and Easter will take on a whole new level of meaning for you. The second reason I love this topic is because each of these Great Covenants contains principles and practices that can still help us make the most of our lives today.

How many of you have ever made a covenant? Maybe it was at a wedding altar you did that. Maybe it was with a group of friends or teammates. Perhaps you signed a covenant to take out a loan, or to become a member of a community, a church or a club. If you've done any of these things, then you understand that covenants are, basically, circles of commitment. Each party promises to bring something to the party. As everyone brings what they promised, the level of well-being or flourishing goes up. If either party fails to hold up their side of the bargain, there are "issues."

Well, two weeks ago we looked at what is known as the Edenic Covenant – the first covenant God makes with human beings. The Edenic Covenant was God's way of establishing the essential lines of life. Respect these lines, says God, and the life and world I've given you will be a thriving one. Sadly, however, our first forbearers crossed or broke those lines -- creating what? Issues! Theologians call it "The Fall." As we read along further in the Bible, we see those issues compounding themselves across families and societies until human civilization got so messed up that God performed a hard RESET to the whole affair.

As I said last week, it is difficult to accept the notion that God would send a world-wiping flood, but the more puzzling reality is why God allowed ANY life to continue after human beings treated the gift so badly? The short answer is because God is a gracious being. He is strangely inclined to extend unmerited favor (grace) to others.

We see that favor in the original grace He extends in creating a universe at all. And then, despite the fact that humanity breaks the original covenant, we see God extending more favor to humanity by preserving Noah, the animals, and the seeds necessary to keep life going on this planet. This decision to keep sustaining the conditions for life is what theologians call common grace. In the second covenant, the one God makes with Noah, God promises to continue human history, but asks Noah and his descendants to understand clearly that there will be an ultimate accounting one day for how you and I truly reverence the life of others and the life we've been given. These are the two big takeaways from the first two covenants. Are YOU with me?

OK. So history now moves forward. The human tendency to cross or break the Life Lines God established continues to assert itself. Men and women continue to struggle to truly reverence the gift of life. And so, God initiates what amounts to the greatest Recovery Act in human history. He sets in motion a plan to do a redemptive work that will one day ripple out till it sweeps over your life and mine. How does this happen? I'm so glad you asked! God comes to a man living in a place called "Ur of the Chaldeans" in a region that would one day be known as Iraq. Genesis 12 describes the moment like this: **The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. (Gen 12:1).**

Now, you need to understand that this guy Abram is doing just fine where he is. He's a wealthy man, surrounded by a fine family, living in a very nice neighborhood. But God says, I want you to get up and go from here. "Where?" asks Abram. "To the land I will show you." "I'm sorry," says Abram. "The Zoom froze. The call dropped for a moment. I didn't catch it. WHERE are you asking me to go?" "To the land that I will show you."

Have you ever heard the phrase, "WALK BY FAITH"? Well, this is where it came from. This is where it all began. When, centuries later, a strange rabbi comes to a group of fishermen and says, "Lay down your nets and follow Me" (Mat 4:19), He is hearkening back to this moment. He's saying, WALK BY FAITH. Why would someone go with Jesus? Why would YOU? Because he promises those who follow Him more blessing than they can contain and an amazing impact. The covenant God invites Abram into involves three specific blessings and one big, hairy audacious impact. The blessings God promises can be described in terms of three words: Legacy, Love and Land.

First, God promises Abraham a stunning LEGACY. When we meet them in Genesis 12, Abram and his wife Sarah are childless man and in their seventies. Yet God makes to them this staggering promise: **I will make you into a great nation (Gen 12:2).** Later, God reiterates this commitment and makes it more graphically: **[God] took [Abram] outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be" (Gen 15:5).** And then a little further on, God says: **No longer will you be called Abram (which means exalted father); your name will be Abraham, for I have 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. (Gen 17:5-6)**

OK. Nobody is saying, "Wow," so let me describe this a little differently. It would be like God comes to you while you're working one day. You and your spouse have this little business called, "**Cadabra**." You're selling a very limited line of products on this novel channel called the internet and you're doing it out of your house. Your resources are so limited that you can't run your hair-dryer at the same time that the company computer server is turned on or it blows fuses. Your business is so small that to encourage your few employees, you've set up this system where every time someone out there makes a

purchase, the computer makes a bell ring in your house and all the staff gather around the screen to see who bought the product.¹ True story.

Now imagine God comes and says to you and your spouse: "You're going to have to get rid of that bell or it's going to drive you crazy. You see, I'm going to give you a LEGACY that will blow your mind. Your people and products are going to multiply and multiply and multiply till your distribution system spans the globe. Trust me. I will make you very fruitful. Billions of people, from every country, cult and culture will know your name one day. They will feel your impact on their lives. Jeff and Mackenzie: *No longer will your company be called Cadabra. Your name will be Amazon.*

Are you getting the picture? This is the kind of thing that God promises to Abram. He and Sarah don't have even one kid, but God says: *Trust me, I will make you very fruitful, a father of many nations.* And, today, billions of Jews, Christians and Muslims across every country on the planet refer to him as Father Abraham. Why? Because God is a covenant-keeper. So, the first promise God makes in this covenant is a promise to give his servant a stunning legacy.

The second promise is to provide him with an exceptional LOVE. God says: **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... (Gen 17:7) I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse (Gen 12:3).**

In trying to get my head around this special relationship God offers to Abraham I think back to college days when my role as head of the student government brought me into close contact with Martin Griffin -- the Dean of Undergraduate Studies. Martin looked a bit like John Cleese of Monty Python fame and like Cleese, was also brilliant. Martin loved history, the Latin mass, big bowls of ice cream and the beauty of well-chosen words. In fact, listening to Martin opine on most any subject was like listening to great music. The memos and letters Martin wrote were so famously eloquent and witty that his colleagues at Yale collected and treasured them like works of art.

To this day, I do not know why Dean Griffin loved me, but I know he did. He took me under his fatherly wing and mentored me in a way that was truly priceless. Martin taught me a lot about leadership and life. He protected me and advocated for me and opened doors of opportunity I could not have opened for myself. I did not in any way merit the loving consideration he gave me. It was a "special grace." And part of what made it SO special is that it got passed down. You see, what Martin did for me, he went on to do for my younger brother, Jeff, and then my even younger brother, Tory. Wave after wave of my family were beneficiaries of his blessed influence.

In a much larger and more significant sense, God commits himself to a very special relationship with Abraham and his family. **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... (Gen 17:7)

And, then, God goes one step further. Alongside a commitment to giving Abraham a stunning legacy and an exceptional love, God offers thirdly a promised LAND. Up to this point, Abraham has been a wanderer. But God says: **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 (Gen 17:8)**. In other words, no longer will you be a sojourner and an alien. I'm going to give you a home. The land of which he speaks will be the birthplace and birthright of countless other figures we'll meet through the rest of the Bible. One day it will be on this land that Jesus is born and his Church established.

Legacy, love, and land. A forever family, a loving heavenly Father, and an enduring Kingdom. This is the three-fold promise God makes to Abraham – and Jesus will one-day make to his disciples. But like the other covenants we've studied, this one also asks something of its human partner. The Lord says: **I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless (Gen 17:1)**. In its simplest terms, God is saying, I will do all these great things, but only as you follow me – as you keep going where I call you to go and doing what I call you to do. I want you to show your faith in Me, even when it is very hard, even when you don't understand why or where.

And, then, to provide a very practical and unforgettable application of this test, God says: **You are to undergo circumcision, and 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 (Gen 17:11-12)**. It's really important we get this. There is tremendous symbolism in this circumcision thing. God is saying to Abraham and his descendants: "Following Me and My way will sometimes be painful. It will involve some cuts and sacrifices others will not be willing to make." One day, Jesus will say the same: **Whoever would come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Me (Luke 9:23)**.

As I said at the start, one of the reasons we study the Old Testament covenants is because they point us toward the New. God told Abraham that there was a reason he was giving him the LEGACY of a huge family – the people we will come to know as the children of Israel. There was a reason God was offering to Abraham and his descendants a special LOVE relationship with him. There was a reason God was going to give the Hebrew people a promised LAND. It was all for the purpose of an audacious impact. So that **All peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Gen 12:3)**, God says. What do you suppose God meant? What kind of universal blessing was God's covenant with Abraham setting up?

We'll answer that question in days to come. In fact, the fulness of that answer will be overwhelming and very inspiring, as we come to understand more of this Old Testament history. Let me say in closing that Abraham is not the only one who was called to WALK BY FAITH. Maybe you are in your own version of Ur of the Chaldeans. Despite all the storms of this last year, life is relatively comfortable and familiar for you. Is it possible that God is calling you out on a new adventure? That He's asking you to walk by faith with Him? He's saying, follow Me to the land that I will show you. I'm going to ask you to make some cuts or sacrifices, but as you are faithful, I will be more than faithful. I am going to bless you and bless others through you.

Perhaps God is calling you to go reconcile a relationship that needs healing. Maybe Jesus wants you to become the compassionate friend of somebody who's enduring the loss of a job or a loved one. Perhaps He is asking you to be significantly more generous toward the priorities of his Church or Kingdom. Maybe He is challenging you to name the problem in your workplace that needs addressing and offer to help with it. It could be that Christ is asking you to invite some friends to go on a spiritual journey with you. Let me or any pastor of this church know, and we can help with that.

Here's the Big Idea to take away with you today: God wants to bless you and others through you. God does things like Abraham and Amazon. The Church of Jesus Christ is bigger, has lasted longer, and has had more impact. It offers you and people you know the kind of loving encouragement that I experienced through Martin Griffin and far more from fellow believers and God himself. But, like any covenant, this one isn't a free lunch. God will bring far more, but you and I need to bring something. What is that for you? Where will you be like Abraham?

Please pray with me...

¹ Brad Stone, *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*. Little, Brown & Company (2013).