

God of Covenant

We've started a series this month where we look at one or two major themes from each book in the Old Testament and see how that theme is carried forward throughout the rest of Scripture. Last Sunday we looked at the theme of creation from the early chapters of Genesis and saw some of the implications playing out through the rest of the Old, and into the New, Testaments.

We saw that what God has made, He owns - He has a right to it. We saw that He created with purpose, so that what He has made would bring glory to His Name -- and that glory comes from us, from people. And we saw that the good creation has come under the curse of sin and longs for its day of liberation -- a day that will come with the arrival of the new heaven and new earth that John saw in the book of Revelation.

Today I want to stay in Genesis for one more week and look at a huge theme that comes out of this book: that God is a covenant-making God. He makes promises that bind Him to mere mortals like us. He does it willingly, He does it often, and He keeps His promises.

Let's look at the story of Abram, later called Abraham, and the covenant God established with him. It's worth noting that this wasn't the first covenant God made: He had earlier made covenants with Adam and with Noah, promises that included the eventual crushing of Satan and the protection of earth from another universal flood.

So, what is a covenant? There are two kinds: one is a binding agreement between two parties that is negotiated by both sides. You hire someone to paint your house. The other party has a price and you want to pay a little less. You offer an amount, they come down a little bit and you make an agreement, a covenant, a promise that, if the work is done, the price you agreed on will be paid.

But there's another kind of covenant, and it appears frequently in the Bible. That's the covenant that God makes, unilaterally, without consultation or negotiation. "If you will forsake idols and worship Me, I will bless you and bring you into the Promised Land." "If you are careful to keep My commandments, all will go well with you." This is God making a covenant promise that may or may not have conditions attached to it, but which God guarantees.

That's the kind of covenant that He made with Abram in Genesis 12 and this will be our key text for today. The backdrop is this: Abram's father, Terah, left the area he had been brought up in, Ur, a city that scholars believe was south-east of Babylon. Genesis 11:31 tells us that Terah took his family, including his nephew, Lot, "and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there." Why did they go so far north, if their destination was directly west? The answer is the Arabian Desert. The family followed the Euphrates River all the way north to where a passable trade route could take them south to Canaan. But, instead of continuing on to the destination, Terah settled his family

there in Haran. I believe he was going to Canaan because God had called him to go there, but there's no evidence of that in the text. Instead, we read on into chapter 12:

Yahweh had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

And here comes the promise -- unconditional, unilateral:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

And Abram took his wife and his nephew and all the household servants and they headed to Canaan. Abram arrived in Shechem, and God met him again and said, "You're here! This is it!" The more accurate translation is found in v. 7:

Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."

Again, in chapter 13, God spoke to Abram:

Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.

Question: who owns the land? Do the inhabitants, the Canaanites, own the land, or does God? Who can give something away unless they first own it? That was a little review from last week's message on creation.

Let's look at one more aspect of God's covenant with Abram, this one coming in chapter 15 and I'll start reading after Abram has complained to God that he has no child to inherit all that God has blessed him with.

"A son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars -- if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed God, and He credited it to him as righteousness.

What has God promised Abram so far? That he would be the father of a great nation that will bring blessing to all the peoples of earth, that his descendants will be numerous as the stars in the heavens or the dust of the earth and that God would give his descendants the land where he now made his home.

What had Abram done to deserve all that? What had Abram given back to God for all that God had done for him and all that God had promised to do for him? The text tells us that he believed God, he trusted that the word God had spoken to him was true, it would happen - and God counted that as a credit to Abram, as a righteous thing that he had done.

The other thing we note about Abram's life is that he was a worshiper of Yahweh. We read that he would arrive at a place, pitch his tent and then build an altar for sacrificing

to his God. And, obviously, he had obeyed the call to travel from Haran to Canaan and to establish himself in a land where he knew no one -- the only reason he had for being there was that he had heard God's call.

So, Abram was an obedient worshiper who believed the word of the LORD. And God liked him.

There is one further declaration of God's covenant with Abram and that comes in Genesis 17. I'll read a bigger chunk of this chapter to give you a perspective on this covenant:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, Yahweh appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me and be blameless. I will confirm My covenant between Me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, 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 Abram; 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. 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 . . . (vv. 1-7)

Now down to verses 15,16:

As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.

When God changes someone's name, He has a purpose. Notice that in English, both Abram and Sarai are given a new name that has the letter "h" in it. In Hebrew the letter that is added is also the same for both and it is the letter that signifies "breath" or "spirit". It's like God is changing these two faithful, righteous people by giving them His Spirit and making them into the father and mother of nations.

So God just does this He promises to make this man into the father of God's people, to bless the world through him, and to give his descendants the land of Canaan. Then He changes his name and his wife's name as a part of His pledge, to signify that they would give birth to nations. There are no negotiations, no back and forth, no compromises made, no "I don't think I'm up to this" from Abraham and no "I'm not sure you're up to this" from God. This is the nature of the covenants that God makes with human beings in the Old Testament. Now, let's look at how God works within these covenants through the rest of Scripture.

Exodus 2 describes Moses' early life: his birth, his time in Pharaoh's household, his killing the Egyptian and flight to Midian and the forty years he spent there watching sheep. The chapter ends with these words:

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.

And from there God swings into action, appearing to Moses in a burning bush, sending a series of plagues on Egypt and ultimately leading His people to freedom. Once they are safely on the other side of the Red Sea, God speaks these words to Moses as a message for him to deliver to the people of Israel (in Ex. 19:4-6):

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Notice a couple of things about this passage. First, God refers to His covenant with Israel as His, rather than “our” covenant. “If you keep My covenant, then out of all the nations ...” Second, He claims that the whole earth belongs to Him, which we saw last week, but that He was looking for one nation to be a people set apart for Him; He calls them “a kingdom of priests”. A priest stands before God on behalf of the people, and Israel was called to be a nation that stood before God, that prayed, that sacrificed, that interceded for all the other nations on earth. That was an important part of God’s purpose for them.

Approximately 500 years after God delivered Israel from Egypt we hear him speaking again through the prophet Isaiah about the covenant He had made with Israel:

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

Even though we may forget God’s promises, or act as if they don’t apply to us, He doesn’t forget. His compassion and His covenant of peace remain forever.

Long story short -- Israel couldn’t measure up to the terms of the covenant God had made with her. Again and again, the people demonstrated their unfaithfulness to God, their desire to worship and serve the gods of the Canaanites, their cruelty and lack of compassion for others, their lack of concern for God’s glory, their lack of gratitude for His love.

Another couple of hundred years go by and we come to the prophet Jeremiah who talks about a new covenant. From Jeremiah 31 (vv. 31-34):

“The time is coming” declares Yahweh, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke My covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares Yahweh.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares Yahweh. “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD’, because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares Yahweh. “For I will

forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

God would do a totally new thing, establish a new covenant, a new promise under which His people would live. And so we fast forward another 600+ years and come to Jesus, reclining at the table of the Last Supper in Jerusalem, knowing that tomorrow He would be crucified and offer His life for the sins of the world. He took the common cup that would be shared and offered it to his disciples with these words,

Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26:28)

In Luke’s account, Jesus says, “This is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.” (22:20) And Paul, telling the story of Jesus’ institution of this special “meal” in 1 Corinthians uses the same language: “This cup is the new covenant in My blood.” (11:25)

Jesus fulfilled the promise that God had made through Jeremiah, the promise of a new and better covenant. And the New Testament, or New Covenant, writer who best explains this new covenant is the writer of Hebrews. In fact, in Hebrews 8, we read the whole passage from Jeremiah that we just read and then again, in 10:16 he quotes the third verse of that passage:

This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put My laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds.

And in a dramatic passage in Hebrews 12, the writer draws a contrast between the covenant that was given on Mount Sinai and the new covenant given through the blood of Christ: (vv. 18-25):

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire . . . the sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous ones made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks.

And the 12th chapter ends with a call to worship God with reverence and awe, for He is a consuming fire.

The writer is consistent in saying that the new covenant is a better one, a greater promise. Back to chapter 8 (v.6):

The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs (referring to the ministry of the high priests under the old covenant) as the covenant of which He is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

What is the new covenant? That Jesus has offered Himself as the perfect and enduring sacrifice for our sins, so that we could have a restored relationship with God.

In addition, He promises to fill us with His Spirit, so that we can live in a way that produces fruit in our lives and brings glory to His Name. And it all came from His side. This is not something we have earned, something we have had to measure up to, but it is God's gift of grace to those who believe.

So, let's summarize - and I realize that this whole sermon is a summary - so let's summarize the summary of God and covenant.

1. God chooses: He chose Abram out of Chaldea and Abram had to respond by believing God's promise and by obeying His commands. Same with us. He called out to us and we had to respond to that call with faith and with obedience. Declaring our faith is obedience as is being baptized, joining with a church body, sharing good news with others, honoring God in worship, serving and giving.

2. God promises: Some of the promises made to Abram seem to have been unconditional, some were not. But in the overall flow of Old Testament history, it seems that most of what God promises is conditional on some kind of response from those who receive His promises. He is looking for faith, looking for obedience, looking for justice, for love, for truth, for compassion. When those things are replaced by idolatry, unbelief, violence, hatred and all kinds of evil, He has the right to withdraw the promises.

3. God is faithful: He binds Himself to the promises He makes and the people He makes them to. In Exodus we are told that He remembered His covenant and that He became concerned about their welfare. Most of them may not have known Him or even been calling out to Him - they had had 400 years in Egypt to forget about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But He remembered them.

4. We are under a better covenant than Israel was. This is the really huge thing we need to understand. Israel was under God's protection, God's provision, God's deliverance and blessing. But we are under His grace, His unending mercy, His supreme covenant of love. Our covenant is sealed in the blood of Jesus who has paid the penalty for all our sins and who intercedes for us before the Father. This new covenant is also sealed by the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God Himself, who takes up residence in our hearts and who works within us to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ. We are the most blessed people on earth because of the favor we have been shown. Because we believed and accepted the invitation to join God's family, we have the forgiveness of sins, we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and we have the promise of eternal life in the presence of our Lord. No guilt, no shame, no fear for those who love Jesus and who walk in His ways.