

Abram's Covenant

By:
Peter Martin
July 14, 2024

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.” But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.” Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

-Genesis 15:1-6

Genesis 15 might be the most important chapter in the entire bible. Taking place right after Abram defeated the Canaanite kings in Genesis 14, Abram has another encounter with God in which he is given the opportunity to officially enter into a covenant with God on the basis of his faith. This is significant for us since the New Testament authors recognize this covenant, rather than the later covenant that God makes with Moses, as the basis for how the church relates to God.

What is a covenant?

“On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—”

-Genesis 15:18

“Covenant” is a bit of an old fashioned word that doesn't get used very much nowadays. But in essence a covenant, also called a “testament”, is a formalized agreement between two parties that allows for a special type of relationship. This relationship can be as stale and rigid as a business relationship created by a contract, or a relationship between citizens and their government through a constitution. Or it can be as intimate and personal as say a marriage created by a wedding contract. But the basic idea is that, in this world of deception and broken promises, it makes sense for us to enter into covenants in order to provide us with rules that govern our conduct and a formal agreement that provides us with a sphere of safety and accountability. This is also why

our God, when He relates to His people, does so through a particular covenant. Not because God is unfaithful, but because He loves us, He is willing to condescend to our understanding so that we might trust, and understand Him more.

In the book of Genesis we have already seen a couple of these covenants. One was with Adam and Eve, both inside and outside the Garden of Eden, and the next was with Noah. In both instances, God entered into a relationship with mankind in a special way with specific promises and expectations. So for instance, in Adam and Eve's covenant with God in the Garden of Eden, the "terms and conditions" of that particular covenant were that God promised to allow Adam and Eve to dwell in the Garden with Him and to enjoy intimate fellowship with God in an eternal context free from pain and death. However, Adam and Eve made the promise to God to not eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and Good and Evil, symbolizing their complete obedience to God's truth and goodness. Adam and Eve then broke the covenant by eating of the fruit and were cast out of the Garden.

Later on in the book of Exodus, Moses received a new covenant from God that was through the Law that God gave the children of Israel. The "terms and conditions" of this particular covenant were that God would be present with His people, dwelling with them in the tabernacle and offering them the benefits of physical prosperity and protection for their nation *if* they followed the commandments that He gave to them. By entering into this covenant, the Israelites were granted access to God that had been previously withheld from man since the time of Adam and Eve. They were able to enter into the very presence of God, worship Him directly, and were even given laws that helped them understand the divine morality of God.

The New Covenant

"But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second."

-Hebrews 8:6-7

As great as this covenant was however, it had one fatal flaw, the sin of man. The Old Covenant allowed man access to God, but it couldn't actually cleanse us from our sins, or make us righteous. It also was flawed because it was contingent on the faithfulness of the nation of Israel. The entire Old Testament is filled with the failures of the Israelites as a stinging indictment of the inability of mankind to have a genuine relationship with God through our goodness.

It was for this reason that Jesus had to come. This New Covenant could now be established through the perfect union of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ, but also that He could deal with human sin through the cross and allow us direct access with God through the Holy Spirit. But the big question of the early church was, is this New Covenant a continuation of the covenant that God made with Moses?

If this was the case, this would mean that Christians would have to first enter into the covenant of Moses by converting to Judaism before they could enter into the covenant of Christ. But, the apostles discovered that this wasn't the case. Christ actually fulfilled the covenant of Moses by perfectly obeying its precepts and also bearing its consequences. This frees Christians from having to become Jews before becoming Christians. Now, the New Covenant is actually a more full manifestation of the covenant made to Abram.

*"...just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith." Yet the law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them." Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."
-Galatians 3:6-14*

It is for this reason that Genesis 15 has so much significance for us today. By studying this particular covenant, we can actually understand the relationship that we have with God through Christ much better. Specifically we can see three things here, the basis for the covenant, the promise of the covenant, and the seal of the covenant (which we will cover next week), which all take shape in this chapter and are perfected in Christ.

The Basis of The Covenant

"And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses

took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

-Exodus 24:6-8

The normal basis for a covenant is what we see in the above passage. There is a reading of the terms and conditions, and a verbal assent to perform all that is within the agreement or else you will suffer the consequences of violating your oath. While in and of itself this is not a bad thing, when man is asked to enter into a covenant with God, we are being asked to meet the standards of God, which is something that we can not do.

Children of Bondage

"Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world."

Galatians 4:1-3

The apostle Paul tells us that this old covenant made people, in some ways, slaves to the law. This doesn't mean that Paul saw God as oppressive to the children of Israel, only that since man could not possibly meet the standards of God, the law rendered men slaves to our sin.

The truly terrible thing about slavery is that it reduces a person's worth to their labor and cuts them off from the fruit of their labor. What Paul is arguing is that since the old covenant was based on the faithfulness of the Israelites, they were unable to actually *earn* the blessings of the law, but instead they were only capable of meriting the curses of the law. This in essence reduced the children of Israel down to their works and cut them off from any reward for their labor. Jesus put it this way:

"And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? "But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? "Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

Luke 17:7-10

Those who relate to God through the law are in essence slaves and cut off from a truly loving relationship with Him. The only choice they have is to reduce their own identity

before God to their works and to expect nothing from God but a lack of punishment, and that is only *if* they actually keep the law. For many years of my Christian life, this is how I related to God. I only thought of my walk with God in terms of the good works I was doing, and the bad works that I was avoiding.

However, even at my best, when I truly thought I was doing well in my faith, I never experienced the joy of God because I thought as the servants in Jesus' parable, that I had merely done what was my duty to do. I would agree with Paul, while I loved God during this time, my relationship with Him was more of a bondage than a liberty. But why is it that Paul contends that the nation of Israel weren't actually slaves, but were actually free, though they were treated as slaves since they were still "children" under the tutelage of a "guardian"? It is because the promise of something greater had already been made to their forefather Abraham.

Covenant By Faith

"And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

-Genesis 15:6

Abram's covenant was not made by God reading out a list of laws to him that he would have to be faithful to. Instead this covenant was established through a promise of God that Abram simply believed in God's faithfulness to accomplish. It is from this that we understand that God is not merely a divine law giver who desires to have obedient servants who submit to him completely. Instead, God wants to have a loving relationship with His people that is founded on faith.

"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."

-Galatians 4:4-7

But why is a relationship founded on faith the only one capable of love and affection? The first and most obvious is that trust, and not law, is the basis for all loving relationships. To use a simple illustration, when you get a job you enter into a type of relationship with your boss. This relationship is built around job expectations and therefore it is predominantly the fear of consequences that gives assurance to both parties. Meaning, that a boss can trust his employees, but this trust is not really built around a personal or intimate knowledge of the employee, but instead an assumption that the employee will act in their best interest and avoid being fired or demoted, and

possibly work harder in order to get a pay raise or promotion. And the employee can trust their boss to be fair, not because they know and love their boss, but only because the employer has legal requirements that they have to be faithful to otherwise they can be sued. This kind of relationship can work, and both parties can enjoy one another and work well with one another, but it is not a loving or a truly faithful relationship.

However, the relationship between a parent and their child is completely different. This relationship does not begin with an assent to certain expectations, since a child can't assent to anything when they are born. Instead, the basis for the relationship is a commitment to faithfulness by the parent. Because of this, behavior is not the basis for the relationship, but love is. This "faith" builds a solid foundation for the relationship that provides security and grace that is the ground out of which genuine love and affection can grow. This is why lying and breaking promises are so detrimental to the health of a relationship. If I violate faith in my relationships, I damage the secure foundation that love is built upon and make it impossible for affection to grow.

The second reason has to do with God's perfection. Let's use a nation to illustrate this point. In a country laws will be passed by people in authority to govern those who are citizens of the nation. Because these laws are made by people in order to govern other people, they are purposefully designed to be less than perfect and contain a certain amount of leniency within them. If they didn't, if the law was actually perfect, then no person could actually live underneath them. For instance, in traffic laws, if police actually enforced the law to its letter, meaning even one mile over, or under the speed limit would be penalized, every lane change had to be done perfectly, and so on, then no cars would actually be allowed on the road.

This is true of earthly nations, but it certainly wouldn't be the case of a heavenly country. God's kingdom is not run by fallible rulers who need laws to govern them. God is absolutely perfect and governs His kingdom in perfect righteousness. This means that anything that falls short of His perfection would be deemed "sin" and prevent someone from being able to dwell with God. Even if a person could demonstrate the most righteous and selfless act imaginable, it would still be less perfect than the type of righteousness God eternally embodies. This means, God wouldn't be able to compliment even the best of actions, since, in comparison to His perfection they aren't that good, and He would also have to perfectly judge even the smallest of violations to His law. This reality prevents us from having any sort of relationship with God based on our works.

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

-Hebrews 11:6

This is why faith is the only thing that we can offer to God that will please Him. It isn't that works are unnecessary, we will talk more about that in a second, only that without the grace of God that willingly receives our faith and imputes to us righteousness, no works could be sufficient to satisfy God's perfect standard. By perfectly fulfilling all the commands of the law, and then paying an infinite price to perfectly satisfy the consequences of the law, Jesus purchased for us a means by which we could relate to God on the basis of faith and therefore build a loving relationship with God and not one governed by fear.

"Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us."

-1 John 4:17-19

Faith and Works

"But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also."

-James 2:18-26

The unfortunate thing that some Christians can do is to put faith in opposition to works. When the apostle Paul was talking about the importance of faith justifying us apart from works (Romans 3:28) he was certainly not denigrating the importance of works, merely saying that works are not the foundation of our relationship with God. All the passages that I quoted from the apostle Paul are designed to show the danger of trying to ground a relationship with God in our works, but the equal and opposite danger that James addresses is the belief that faith can exist without works. And what James does so well in the above passage is to show that works are simply the manifestation of faith, and therefore can't actually be absent from genuine faith.

I think that the metaphor of the body and the spirit that he uses at the end of the passage perfectly illustrates his point. While it is impossible for my body to be animated without my soul, the spirit of man can't be manifested without the body. The mistake that these Christians had made was in assuming that faith was merely an intellectual assent to God's promises, but it is this exact kind of "faith" that the demons have before God. What true faith is, begins with an accepting of God's promise, but then is made manifest in a willingness to lovingly serve God.

When we look at the life of Abram, this is not an inactive life. Even at this point in his story, we have already seen him leave his father and native country because of the command of God, he has offered sacrifices to God, he offers a tithe to Melchizedek in the previous chapter, and he is even willing to offer up Isaac to God later in his story. Abram's faith is not without works, but he also enjoys a loving relationship with God built upon his faith. These points are not contradictory, but they are complimentary. The odd truth is that it is actually the relationships built upon love that contain the most works and expectations and not the ones built upon rules.

In our modern age this is hard for us to understand. The reason for this is because in addition to separating faith and works we have also separated love from responsibility. We tend to think that loving another person means supporting and encouraging them no matter what. This kind of love is absent from the Bible. The love mentioned to us in the Bible is active and redemptive, it isn't a love that enables the desires of the beloved, but instead actively seeks what is best for the beloved, even when that best goes against their desires. A parent can't be said to love their child by enabling their every desire. The love of the parent is actually most manifest when they withstand the destructive desires of their child and train them to pursue correct things. This means that if God truly loves us, He must discipline us and train us to love the things that are best for us.

"And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

-Hebrews 12:5-6

This also extends to our faithfulness towards God. Using the business metaphor again, when you are under contract, you are under a "law" that has expectations on your behavior, but it can't regulate you beyond the contract. Meaning, my job can ask me to come in at a certain time, work a particular amount of hours, and conduct myself in a particular way when I am working, but it can't regulate my behavior outside the office, or my internal thoughts and feelings while I am at work. Loving relationships don't work

this way. I don't have "hours" in which I am a husband and a father, these are round the clock requirements. Since these relationships are loving, they make up a component of my identity, and they actually do affect the way that I behave even when I am outside the house.

If my wife has a problem with me drinking, this desire is going to affect my behavior no matter where I am located. If my kid goes to the hospital, it doesn't really matter what else is going on in my life, I will drop everything and seek a way to meet them there. And my wife and kids don't just require my time and effort, they also require my heart. If I do all the "correct" things as a husband, but I do them begrudgingly and not out of love, this would be unacceptable to my wife, and rightly so. The requirements of work only go so far, but the requirements of love pierce down to the deepest recesses of your soul. This is why it is a mistake to think that a covenant built on faith and manifested in love would require less of us, when the reality is that it requires much more.

The key difference however is that a business relationship can only provide for my material needs and not the fundamental human need I have for connection and love. For this reason, giving your soul to someone who merely requires your labor is dehumanizing, but giving your soul for a reciprocal loving relationship actually completes us as human beings. We were not created to be isolated and alone, but instead to unify ourselves to others in love and self-sacrifice. This means that law based relationships restrict your freedoms and promise material benefits, loving relationships also restrict your autonomy, but offer instead eternal, spiritual benefits. If this is true even in human relationships with people who are flawed, how much more true would it be in a divine love with the perfect Creator of the universe?

"For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again."

-2 Corinthians 5:14-15

The Promise of the Covenant

"Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

Genesis 15:3-6

However, this raises another question, if Abram was already devoted to God, trusted God, and served God, why does this specific action of trust towards God make him righteous? The apostle Paul answers this question for us in his letter to the Romans:

“And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.”

-Romans 4:19-25

While the previous promises of God were certainly grand, they were well within the realm of possibility. Abram has already shown himself to be an adept businessman and even a military strategist, it wouldn't be too difficult for him to believe that God would give him a foreign land. And in Genesis 15, we see that Abram understood the promise to be, not to his literal offspring, but instead to his servant. But what God is now asking Abram to believe in, that he would physically have a son that will become his heir when he was already 100 years old, would be literally impossible without God's direct intervention. It is this absolute faith, in this impossible promise that demonstrates Abram's unwavering confidence in God. And for this reason, this is the faith that makes him righteous before God.

Paul then ties this impossible faith to the faith that makes the Christian righteous before God. As Christians, we aren't made righteous for the faith that the existence of God is a rational belief, or that the morality of the Bible is something that we ought to follow, but it is only when we believe in the impossible reality that the crucifixion of Christ was done on our behalf, and that we can be forgiven for our sins and made right with God through His sacrifice that we are saved. Just as Abram looked at his mortal and aging body and recognized that without a miracle he would not be able to produce life. So the Christian has to come face to face with our spiritual deadness before a just and holy God and realize that in ourselves, we can't become worthy of a relationship with Him.

“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins...”

-Ephesians 2:1

But beyond all hope, and beyond all rationality, God promises to forgive our sins on the basis of His sacrifice. That in spite of all our failures, and all our depravity, that God actually wants a relationship with us and has made a way through His Son. That is the impossible promise that a Christian must believe in to be saved. And it is this faith that makes us truly heirs of the promise God made to Abram all those centuries ago.

“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Ephesians 2:1-7