



Important Covenant Passages

(1) Genesis 15

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We are blessed to have three baptism services within about a month's time and I thought that what I would do for the sermons in connection with these baptisms is to preach on three of the key covenant passages in Scripture. We baptize our babies because we believe that they, together with their parents, belong to God's covenant people and so I thought that it would be a good thing to hear God's word concerning the covenant relationship that God has established with his people from some of the key passages in Scripture having to do with that covenant.

God and his people are in a covenant relationship which is a formal relationship. The covenant relationship with which we are most familiar is the marriage relationship. Marriage is a formal relationship which is at the same time an intimate relationship of love. God's covenant with his people is intended to be both formal and intimate. Marriage is a relationship that involves commitments and obligations. So is the relationship between God and his people. Marriage is intended to be a permanent relationship. So is the relationship between God and his people. The marriage relationship is intended to give each of the partners confidence of the commitment of the other partner.

In the covenant relationship between God and his people, the covenantal nature of the relationship is intended to give God's people confidence in God's commitment to them, but it does not work the other way around because God has no confidence in the commitment of his people because we, the people of God, are not trustworthy. The covenant relationship between God and his people is not really for God. He does not need it. It is there as an aid and a support for the people of God.

Another important way that the relationship between God and his people differs from a marriage relationship is that marriage is between two equal partners while God and his people are not even close to being equal partners. One of the ways that this is seen is that the covenant between God and his people is established by God's initiative and his people are required to commit themselves to obeying and serving and loving the God who has chosen them as his people.

So, we are in this covenant relationship with God. Our baptism is a sign and a seal of that. Therefore, at the occasion of a baptism it is fitting that we review and celebrate some of what it means that we are in a covenant relationship with God.

Genesis 15 is one of the key covenant passages in Scripture. In verse 18 it says, "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram...." Now you might wonder what that has to do with you. How do we get from God making a covenant with Abram to believers today being in a covenant relationship with God?" The reason is that God's covenant with Abram was also made with his offspring – or at least some of them. The commitments that God had made to Abram were commitments that would be fulfilled in and through Abram's descendants and so those commitments were made to Abram and his descendants. And if we are believers in Jesus we are counted among Abram's descendants and thus we inherit those promises. In Galatians 3:29 Paul writes, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

So, one of the key aspects of the covenant relationship between God and his people is that it is a relationship with a people through time – through generations. That is why we baptize babies. The covenant relationship is intended to move through time from one generation to the next and God explicitly in the Old Testament and implicitly in the New Testament teaches that the children of believers are included in the covenant relationship.

Now it is possible for a person to be unfaithful to his or her covenant obligations to God and be put outside the covenant people, but God's promise is that he will always have a people who are faithful to him and

the promises that God made to Abraham will be fulfilled in and through them.

We will get back to how all this applies to us as we move along, but now let's see some of what this passage teaches us about the nature and purpose of the covenant. Back in Genesis 12 God had made the following promise to Abraham: Genesis 12:2-3, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is one of the seminal gospel promises in the Bible. It may not sound much like the gospel when you first read it, but the fulfillment of this promise leads to Jesus Christ and the salvation of the world. In Galatians 3:8 we have a verse that connects the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ to this very promise. "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'"

You see God was going to make the offspring of Abraham into a great nation to bless them, but also and especially so that they would be a blessing to the world. They would do that by telling the world about God and the way of salvation in him, but the chief way that God was going to bless the world through the descendants of Abraham was by causing Jesus Christ to be one of them. He is the main way that the world is blessed through the offspring of Abraham.

So, the promises that God made to Abram in Genesis 12 were seminal gospel promises and they required Abraham to have at least one child in order for them to be fulfilled. This is a key point of this whole story. God was promising salvation to the world through a descendent of Abraham. He was promising that Abraham's offspring would become a great nation. Once God had expressed the promise that way, in order for it to be fulfilled, Abraham needed to have at least one child. And year after year passed and no child came.

This was an agonizing test for Abraham's faith. He knew about the biological clock. He knew that his dear wife was not getting any younger and with every passing year the chances of her getting pregnant

diminished. And yet the years passed by until there was no hope, humanly speaking, of Abraham and Sarah having children together. And so later in the story Abraham decides to have children with other women, but God makes it clear that the promise did not apply to children that Abraham had with other women. The promise was going to be fulfilled through the descendants of Abraham and his wife, Sarah.

And time continued to pass by and still there was no child. This is the background to Genesis 15 and it is also the background to God making a covenant with Abram. The word of the LORD came to Abram which is another way of saying that the LORD came to Abram and spoke to him. God and his word are very closely related which is why it is so significant that the Bible is the word of God. The word of the LORD comes to Abram and God says, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Well that reward was tied to Abram's offspring and Abram was an old man and his wife was an old woman and there were no offspring. And so, Abram is feeling very conflicted about God's promises.

Abram is struggling. He has been living for years in the tension between God's promises and their non-fulfillment. He had trusted God and obeyed him when God had called him to leave his extended family and follow the Lord's leading to the land of Canaan. He had banked his life on the word of God. And yet it appeared that the time had come and gone for God to take the first step of keeping his promise to Abram by giving him a child to be the bearer of the promise in the next generation. Abram expresses his consternation in his conversation with God. "O Lord, what will you give me, for I continue childless.... Behold, you have given me no offspring." Abram had already designated a faithful servant to be his heir. The context of the rest of the story told in this passage is Abram's struggle to continue to believe a promise of God that did not look like it would ever be fulfilled.

So, God reiterated the promise. This is glorious! To an old man with an old wife for whom the natural conception of a child was obviously and clearly impossible, God calmly takes Abram by the arm and leads him outside of his tent and with divine confidence and certainty says, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them....

So, shall your offspring be.” What an awesome word! God is no way deterred by human impossibility. In fact, God had orchestrated this whole thing to make that very point. Right from the very beginning of the history of salvation God is making it very clear that the plan that he is unfolding is a divinely orchestrated plan. As this plan unfolds it is going to be clear every step of the way that the unfolding of this plan is God’s doing – that it is not part of the natural order of things and that it does not depend on human ability. Again, and again God shows that he is the author of our salvation.

So, God reiterates the promise that humanly speaking could never be fulfilled. He brings Abram to a dead-end from the perspective of any human ability or any natural process and he says in the face of that impossibility, “Your offspring are going to be as many as the stars in the sky.” What a glorious revelation of the truth Jesus would later articulate when he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

Then we have that wonderful response of Abram that is a foundational passage in Scripture for justification of faith. Verse 6, “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Basically, Abram believed God’s claim that he is in no way limited by human impossibilities. Abram believed that nothing is impossible with God. And through that faith Abram became the paradigm for justification by faith.

Now you would think that God would leave it at that. All was well. Abram was trusting in God to do the impossible. Things were on the right track. But it is now that God makes a covenant with Abram. God makes a covenant with Abram in response to Abram’s struggle to believe a promise that did not appear likely to be fulfilled. This is a key biblical point for our understanding of the covenant. One of the purposes of the covenant is to help God’s people in their struggle to believe. We’ll see how this works as we proceed.

In verse 7, God repeats the promise to give Abram 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.” Then Abram says, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” This is the question that the covenant answers. How am I to know that you will keep your

promise? One of the great purposes of God's covenant with us is to help us to believe promises that are hard to believe because from a human perspective they are impossible. This is key for our understanding of the covenant that God makes with us.

What happens next is very strange from our 21st century perspective. But we must remember that many things from somewhere about 4000 years ago are strange from our 21st century perspective. This was a perfectly normal thing to do in Abram's world.

God tells Abram to take a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon, kill them, cut them in half, except for the birds, and arrange the halves in such a way that there was a path between them. Abram would have understood the significance of this ritual. This was how covenants were made in Abram's world. People would make covenant with one another in connection with very serious commitments such as treaties between kings, for instance. And they would ratify their covenant by killing some animals, cutting them in half and walking between the halves together. By this ritual, the persons making the covenant were saying to each other in a very dramatic way, "Let me be like these animals if I do not keep my side of the covenant that we are making here today." By taking part in this ritual, the parties of the covenant were powerfully and vividly expressing their commitment to the promises they had made to one another.

That is what is going on here. By notice that Abram does not walk through the path between the dead animals. Verses 17-18, "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To this offspring I will give this land...." The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch represent God. God alone passes through the dead animals. God was saying to Abram, "Let this happen to me if I do not keep my promise to give this land to your offspring." Abram does not walk through the dead animals with God. It is God alone who confirms his promises with this oath that says, "Let me be cut in pieces if I do not keep my word to you."

Clearly this is designed to strengthen Abram's faith in God's promises that seemed so unlikely to be fulfilled. So many of God's promises are

like that. God promises things that seem unbelievable. God promises things that are a challenge to believe because he promises impossible things. He promises things that can never come to pass through any normal human means or normal natural process. He promises things that from our normal way of looking at things are unbelievable. And since God knows that we have trouble believing such promises, he goes to great lengths to help us to believe the unbelievable. This story is a powerful instance of that. And since we are heirs of this same promise because we are Abraham's seed by faith, the oath that God dramatically swears here is made to us as well as to Abram. The nature of the promise was that it included Abraham's offspring. And so, it is made also to us.

Now we have already seen a little of how these promises that God made to Abraham are fundamentally gospel promises. The promise of offspring is fulfilled in Isaac, then Jacob and Jacob's sons, then the nation of Israel and then Jesus who is The Seed of Abraham and then all those who through faith in Jesus become Abraham's offspring and then in the "multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing, before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands." (Revelation 7:9).

The land promise is similar. God promised Abraham and his offspring the land of Canaan. That is fulfilled literally when Israel takes possession of the land many years later. But the New Testament teaches us that the land of Canaan symbolized salvation and heaven and the new heavens and the new earth. For instance, in Matthew 5:5, Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." That is an allusion to Psalm 37:11 which speaks about Israel inheriting the land. Jesus applies that to New Testament believers. Another example is Romans 4:13 which speaks of "the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world."

The whole idea of inheriting the land is ultimately fulfilled in the inheritance which is salvation and finds its culmination in the renewed earth which the saints inherit. So, all the inheritance language of the New Testament is speaking of the ultimate fulfillment of this promise to

Abram and his offspring that they will inherit the land. The New Testament speaks of inheriting eternal life and inheriting the kingdom or just the inheritance. All of that language is connecting salvation to this promise that God made to Abraham of inheriting the land which is so powerfully confirmed by the covenant that God made with Abram which is described in Genesis 15. And that means that that promise which is sealed with an oath is made to us who believe, and our children no less than it was made to Abram. And it is a covenanted promise for the same reason, to help us to believe promises from God that seem unbelievable.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews explicitly makes this connection. Hebrews 6:13-20: The first verses of this section refer to Abraham and the promise that God made to him and the oath that he swore to confirm that promise. And this is the application. Verses 17-18, "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have felt for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."

This is a huge part of what it means to belong to the covenant people of God. We are sons and daughters of Abraham. The promises that God made to him and his offspring are made to us as much as they were made to Abraham. The oath that God swore to Abraham, "Let me be cut in pieces if I do not keep my word," that oath is sworn to us as much as it was sworn to Abraham. And the purpose is the same. To help us to believe the unbelievable. To help us to believe in promises that are impossible from any human perspective. To help us to believe promises that are a long time in being fulfilled. The oath is given because God understands that his promises are difficult for us to believe.

And one of the promises that is most difficult to believe is that how God could ever forgive us for our sins and accept us as his people. Once the grace of God shows us even a little bit of how incredibly evil our sins really are, the thing that will seem to be most impossible of all is how God could ever do anything else but banish us from his presence forever. That God is willing to forgive us and embrace us as his beloved

people is perhaps the most impossible thing of all once we understand even a little bit of what our sin must look like to God.

And then the covenant oath becomes very precious. And then our baptism becomes very precious because our baptism is the sign and seal of the covenant for those who have fled to Jesus for refuge.

And Genesis 15 gives us a wonderful insight into not only the certainty of God's promises, but also the greatness of his love. That insight comes from the fact that only God passed through the pieces of slaughtered animals that said, "Let this happen to me if I do not keep those promises."

You see one of the things about God's promises is that they require faith and obedience in order for them to be fulfilled. That is hinted at in Genesis 15 in the importance that it places on Abram's faith. The basic idea is expressed clearly in Genesis 18:19 where God says about Abraham, "For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." That last clause is very significant for the point that I am making. Abraham and his household had to keep the way of the LORD in order for the promise to be fulfilled. But the history of Abraham and his offspring shows that they did not keep the way of the Lord. One of the main points of the whole history of Israel is the incorrigible sinfulness of the covenant people.

Therefore, it is very significant that only God passed through those carcasses. By doing that he was assuming the responsibility for both sides of the covenant relationship. The reason that God could make such an unconditional promise to Abram and his seed of blessing and being a blessing is that he himself would assume the penalty for the covenant breaking of Abraham and his seed. The penalty for covenant breaking is death. This is why Jesus died. In Jesus Christ God himself bore the penalty for the covenant breaking of Abraham and his offspring. You see by being the only one to pass through the divided carcasses, God was committing himself to die in order that the promise might be fulfilled. This is he has done in and through Jesus who gave his life in order that the promises of salvation might be kept.

We have witnessed the baptism of two little covenant children. They have received the sign and the seal of this covenant. They, of course, do not have a clue about what is going on. But they will, if the Lord spares them to grow up to the age of understanding. And the message is that the promise of salvation is made to them. That promise is sealed with an oath and the promise together with the oath is intended to help them to believe.

But the purpose of baptism has just as much to do with those who are witnessing it. If we are baptized, we are reminded of our own baptism and one of the things that our baptism says to us is that the oath that God swore to Abram that day so long ago he also swore to us – for the same reason. It is when we find God's promises to be unbelievable – that we are to think of God's oath which God first swore to Abram in order help him believe God's promises when all the evidence pointed to the conclusion that they would never be fulfilled. God's promises often seem to be impossible – and yet what is impossible for man is possible with God and that is what God's oath to us sealed to us in our baptism is intended to remind us so that "we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."