

God's Covenant with Abram
Genesis 15:1 - 21
Hebrews 6:13 – 20
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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My favorite scene in the movie *The Outlaw Josey Wales* occurs near the end. Josey Wales has, by this point in the movie, fought his way south, escaping the Union Army, regulators, posses, Texas Rangers and bounty hunters, all of whom were intent on bringing him in, dead or alive. Along the way he has collected a rag tag community of misfits who, together with him are going to attempt to make a new life for themselves. But trouble is brewing. Josey learns that another outlaw, the renegade Indian, Ten Bears, is about to lead his men in an attack on Josey's new ranch home. As the sun comes up, Josey rides out alone to meet Ten Bears and his men. Josey offers to Ten Bears a covenant. It is a promise of a relationship between these two groups of outlaws. Ten Bears accepts Josey's offer of a covenant of friendship, telling his men, *'there is iron in these words for all to see. No paper can hold this iron.'* Since paper cannot hold the terms of the covenant, there on the field of battle, instead of a battle, these two outlaws seal the covenant of friendship between them with their own blood.

I want us to talk today about covenants.

The Meaning of Covenants – Genesis 15:1

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

The Bible speaks a great deal about *covenants*. There are a number of distinct covenants ratified in the Scriptures, but there are two primary ones. In shorthand we refer to them as the *Old* and *New Covenants*. The *Old Covenant* is that which was made between God and Abram, and Abram's descendents. It corresponds to the story told in the Old Testament. The *New Covenant* is the covenant between Jesus Christ and his Church. Its story is told in the New Testament.

In Biblical times and today, a covenant is the basis for most social relationships. A covenant could be made between individuals, families, and nations. A covenant imposed solemn obligations upon the individuals involved. While covenants often involved business contracts, the essence of a covenant went much deeper. A covenant clarified the social relationships and duties between persons. It was an agreement, but much more than a contract, a covenant was the foundation upon which a relationship between persons would be built.

A number of covenants are spoken of in the pages of scripture. The covenant that is easiest for us to see and comprehend is that covenant of marriage.

The Covenant of Marriage – Genesis 2:24

²⁴Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Our intuitive knowledge of the marriage bond helps us to understand and appreciate the depth of meaning captured in the idea of a covenant. Marriage is both a legal relationship and social relationship. The legal relationship of marriage, the legal contract, is important and necessary, but it is the social reality of a dynamic relationship between a man and a woman, the partners of the covenant, that infuse the covenant of marriage with life, making it more than merely a contract. For this reason, covenants are dynamic, living things, for they are made and maintained by living persons. Covenants create and sustain relationships within the human community. The covenant of marriage creates the foundational social building blocks of the human community – families.

The Three Foundational Parts of Every Covenant: Stipulations, Blessings, and Curses

All covenants involve three foundational elements: stipulations, blessings and cursings. A covenant entails the voluntary binding of one person (or group of persons) to another. This act of binding involves stipulations, those requirements that the parties of the covenant enter into freely. For example, the stipulations in the covenant of marriage requires the man to leave his father's home and establish a new household with his wife, providing for the well being of her and, hopefully, their children. Another is the expectation of marital fidelity: a man and women, in marriage, **forsake** all others.

Biblical covenants quite explicitly articulate the blessings and cursings that accompany the covenant. We moderns are a bit more squeamish on that part. We are comfortable speaking of the blessings that should arise out of the covenant. The blessings are those positive benefits that will result to the parties of the covenant if they remain faithful to its duties and requirements. Our covenants still include cursing. We are simply hesitant to think of them in this way. The cursing's are the opposite of blessing. A cursing specifies those costs and punishments that will result from a failure to abide by the covenantal commitments. For example, the covenant of marriage promises such blessings as children, the joys of family life, protection and care during illness and old age, companionship during the trials and difficulties of life. These things are among the blessings of the covenant. Conversely, curses accompany the breaking of the marriage vows. Think of the emotional turmoil of divorce, or the broken relationships that result from adultery, or the psychological scars children from broken homes often grow up carrying, and it seems to me that we must conclude that today, as in Biblical times, the breaking of a covenantal relationship invokes a curse.

How do we avoid Adam's curse and receive Christ's blessing? Genesis 3:24

²⁴He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

If I had to summarize the plot of the Bible in one sentence, I would say that it is: “How do we get back to the Garden?” The Bible is the story of how to counteract the results of **The Fall**, of the breaking of the first covenant between God and Adam. The story of the Bible is the story of how God enables us to both avoid Adam’s curse and receive Christ’s blessing.

One of the remarkable elements of the Biblical story is the continuing willingness of God to enter into covenants with his people, even though God’s people, following the example of our ancestor Adam, continually break our side of the covenants God makes with us. But God remains true. He remains faithful.

For this reason, each of the covenants in the Bible are important turning points in the Biblical story. It is through the covenants that we can trace the history of how God counteracts the Adamic curse and brings us to the salvation available in Jesus Christ.

There are several Biblical covenants that are mentioned in Scripture. I want us to look today at the covenant God made with Abram, recorded in Genesis 15.

The Covenant with Abram – Genesis 15:18

¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

In this passage from Genesis 15 we read of the ratification of the primary covenant of the Old Testament. This covenant established Abram and his descendants as a people called and set apart as God’s people. God gives to Abram and his descendants the land of Canaan: from the Nile to the Euphrates.

This covenant has repercussions even in our day. The modern state of Israel exists, in part, because of the belief of many that God’s promise to Abram remains in force. I am not taking a stand on this political question. Let each person be convinced in his or her own mind. But I do want us to explore together the spiritual dynamic of this covenant. First, God’s promise to Abram, and to us, to be our shield.

God promises to be our shield – Genesis 15:1

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

God makes two promises to Abram in this vision. The first is that he will be his shield. A shield was a form of protective, defensive armor. Usually it would be made of wood and coated with leather. Before a battle it would be anointed with oil in order to make it more likely the enemy’s weapons would slide easily off of it.

The first time I took our boys, Benjamin and Aaron, off to play paintball, Lois Ann spoke to the boys at the door of the apartment. She said to them: “Remember, return with your shield, or on it!”☺ The ancient Spartans were renowned warriors. In the midst of battle, they demanded courage from their men. Spartan mothers, as they would send their sons off to battle, would say to them, *return, with your shield, or on it.* The only way to lose a shield would be to die, or to turn and run in fear. For the Spartan mothers, their sons must return in honor, or to be honored in death. No other alternative was acceptable.

God is telling Abram that he, God, would be Abram’s defense. He would protect Abram’s interest. He would guard him from his enemies. He would protect him from defeat. Abram is about to step out on faith. God is saying, *do not worry I will protect you.* There are many times in life when we are called to step out on faith in God. It is at those moments that we feel acutely our vulnerability. Can God be trusted? Am I embarking on a fool’s errand? What will be the opinion of others at this faith I am now affirming?

This continues to be God’s promise to us. He will defend us. He will be our shield. God’s people can trust him to watch out for their best interests. They do not need to defend themselves. The great American theologian and pastor, Jonathan Edwards, found himself facing difficult circumstances when some people began to whisper all sorts of lies and falsehoods and rumors about him. He struggled with what to do in response. He eventually concluded that he would do nothing except trust in God’s defense. He reasoned that if he defended himself, then God would not rise to his defense, but that if he waited upon God, then he would be his shield.

God promises to be our reward – Genesis 15:1

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am...your very great reward.”

The second thing promised Abram by God is that he, God, would be Abram’s reward. Remember that blessedness is the condition of knowing God’s presence. God is telling Abram that he is going to give to Abram a state of blessedness. He, God, will give himself to Abram.

I read somewhere recently about two parents who were trying to put their small son to bed. For some reason, the boy had become scared of something in the night, and repeatedly called out for his mother or father to come and comfort him. Mom and dad were indulgent at first, but soon grew somewhat exasperated. Finally, the little boy called from his room that he wanted somebody to come and stay with him. His mother thought she had just the right answer. *God will stay with. He will watch over.* There was silence as the boy pondered that statement, then replied, *‘I want someone to stay with me with skin on.’*

God tells Abram that he, God, will be his reward. Abram, like the little boy wanting someone with **skin on**, doesn’t miss a beat ²But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will

inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” Abram needs an heir, a son. Abram essentially tells God, “*God, I appreciate the gesture, but what I really need is an heir, a son.*” In response, God tells Abram ⁴Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but 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.”

This is God’s side of the covenant. You will have a son from your own body. Your descendants will be more numerous than the stars. Abram had a part in the covenant. He had to believe God. He had to trust him. ⁶Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Abram believes, but he nonetheless asks to *know*. ⁸But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” This is a fair question on Abram’s part. Abram can read the signs of the times. God promises him a son and heir. Yet Abram is quite old, as is his wife. Abram believes, but he cannot conceive of how the things promised him by God could come to pass. Abram asks for some sign on God’s part. It is in response to this bold request by Abram that God instructs him to procure the necessary animals used in a covenant ratification ceremony. He is to sacrifice them in preparation for this somewhat dark and mysterious rite.

God puts his own reputation on the line. – Genesis 15:17 + 18

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, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

We have just completed tax season. Typically, the last thing you do before you submit your taxes is to sign them. Signing your taxes ratifies them. That is how we do it in the modern world. We sign our name. When you sign, you ratify. Josey Wales and Ten Bears after negotiating their agreement, each cut their hand. Then they ratified their covenant when they clasped hands together. They were now brothers in blood. Ratifying an agreement in the ancient world was similar. In Hebrew, to ratify an agreement, you would **cut a covenant**. This is what Genesis 15 describes Abram as doing.

Remember, a covenant involves stipulations, blessings and curses. The stipulations are God’s promises to Abram. The blessings are that God would be his shield and reward. The curse, in a covenant of this type, would be symbolized in the ratification ceremony itself. The parties to the covenant would take the sacrificed animals and divide them, literally in half. Then, to ratify, to make things legal, the parties would together walk between the split halves of the slaughtered animals. In this, they pledged that the same thing should happen to them should they break the elements of the covenant.

Abram sets the stage. He prepares the ritual. And then he waits, chasing away the scavenger birds looking for an opportunistic meal. Night falls and Abram falls into a deep trance like state. There appears a smoking

fire pot, symbolizing God's presence, and torch, symbolizing his guiding hand. These two objects pass between the slaughtered halves of the animals. While these things are happening, God reveals to Abram truths as to how the future will unfold and reassures him of his promises to him in the stipulations of the covenant. In this manner, God ratifies this covenant in Abram's presence.

It is important to note that Abram is a passive observer in the *cutting* of this covenant. It is God who walks between the pieces, not Abram. Had this been a covenant between a human king and Abram, both would have passed between the halves of the sacrifice. However, between God and Abram, it is only God who ratifies this covenant. Abram is passive. In passing between the halves of the covenant in this way, God is putting his own reputation on the line in regards to the things he has promised Abram. Further, while it is Abram who will receive the blessings of the covenant, it is God himself who takes on the burden of the curse should it be broken. He is saying, *Abram, if I do not keep this covenant with you and your descendants, may my character and name be cut, just as these animals have been cut.*

There is nothing else God could do to offer assurance to Abram. Indeed, this is the greatest assurance he could give to him. When we humans want to swear, we must do so by swearing according to something that is greater than ourselves. We swear **to God**, or on our **mother's grave**, or on **the Bible**. What do you do if you are God? Since there is nothing greater to swear by, you have to swear by your own self. As the author of Hebrews (6:13 – 18) has written,

¹³For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." ¹⁵And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷So 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, ¹⁸so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

God confirms what he has promised to Abram by his own oath. This gives to Abram the assurance, the confidence in God's promise that he seeks.

On what basis is Abram saved? - Genesis 15:6

⁶And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Since Abram is a passive participant in the cutting of the covenant. The question must be asked: "On what basis does he receive the blessings of the covenant?" On a human level we expect the participants in a covenant to make their contribution to its success. The enjoyment of the covenant's blessings is in some measure tied to the fulfillment of the covenant's obligations. What does Abram contribute?

In v. 6 we are told that Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. Abram believes God's promises. This is his contribution. Sometimes we are tempted to dismiss the significance of faith in God too easily. Unbelief is always easy. Many in our world elevate skepticism and doubting as something noble. That is a mistake, for doubting and skepticism are not noble. It is always easy to doubt. It is always easy to be skeptical. It is faith that is often a challenge. From Abram's perspective, it would have been downright logical to laugh in God's face. He was an old man. His wife was an old woman. Their biological clocks were approaching midnight! Yet in spite of these realities, somewhere, deep inside of him, Abram believed. His faith rested upon the God who was giving to him the promise.

That day God established a covenant with Abram. It formed the basis for the New Covenant that he would one day establish with us through the work and person of Jesus Christ. The new covenant shares many similarities with the Abramic covenant. Like the covenant with Abram, it is God alone who **cuts** the covenant. He sends his only begotten Son to the cross. We are not participants with him in the drama of salvation. We are its beneficiaries. Our contribution to story of salvation is also like Abram's. We contribute our needfulness. Abram contributed his need for a son. His line was ended without an heir. We contribute our need for salvation from sin and death.

Application

It is important to remember that what God establishes with us is a covenant, not a contract. He invites us to enter into the new covenant offered freely in the work accomplished by his Son Jesus Christ. A covenant is the foundation for establishing and cultivating social relationships. That is what God offers us, a covenant, a beginning, a foundation upon which our on going relationship with him will be based.

Humans, as a rule, do not want covenants. We want a contract with God. The reason is that we really do not love him. We hide from him. We reject him. But we also know our own sinfulness and need. We know that we are fallen creatures. The result is that we know that there are times when we must approach God. And so, for those times, what we want of God is a contract. We say, *God, tell me what I must do to earn your favor. Tell me to light a candle, say a prayer, give to a charity, do some sacrificial act of kindness, keep nine out of ten commandments...* etc., things like that. We figure that if we must be in contact with God, then we want to do it on terms over which we have some control. We want to earn our way. We want to obligate God so that when we have done our part, he will have to do his. We don't love him. We want to manipulate him.

In response God says to us, *no, my child, that is not the way I work. I want to know you and for you to know me. And the way for that to be accomplished is not by what you will do, but rather by what I have done for you through my son Jesus Christ. Look at the example of Abram. He did*

nothing, except place his trust in me. The same is true for you. What I want is a covenant with you, not a contractual obligation. You couldn't keep your side of the contract even if you wanted to, and you don't. Instead, turn to me in faith. Trust in me. Walk obediently with me through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the one thing required.

Genesis 15:1 – 21

15 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”² But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”³ And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”⁵ And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”⁶ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.⁷ 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.”⁸ But he said, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”⁹ He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.¹³ Then 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.¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites

Hebrews 6:13 – 20

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.