

It Starts with the Covenant
Gen 17: 1-16, Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Friends, today we want to look at what the Bible says about our relationship with God. I think most people today can understand we have a relationship with God, the question is really what kind of one is it.

Is it the...

Kind Grandpa Relationship - God likes us and understands we try our best to be good and will go easy on us

Mother Earth Relationship – God is in everything around us, and in us and we kind of vibe with God when we are kind to the earth.

Strict parent Relationship – God is standing behind my back watching my every move waiting to whack me across the back of my head when I screw up.

The Bette Midler Relationship – God is there, but watching us from a distance. Or perhaps God is what inspires you, He's the wind beneath your wings.

Now where do you suppose people get these ideas that this is how God relates to us? Perhaps their experiences in life, other

religions, they just feel that this is how it is. But friends, today we're going to learn that the bible reveals to us and describes what kind of relationship that God has with us and its called a Covenant Relationship and you will see how its very different from how most people think God relates to us.

Let's read Exodus 6:2-8

² God also said to Moses, "I am the LORD. ³ I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. ⁴ I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. ⁵ Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.

⁶ "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

⁸ And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.' "

1. The first thing we learn about a Covenant relationship is that it's a gracious imposition.

God initiates it, it's his decision, and He imposes it on whomever he wants. The passage says God "appeared" to Abraham, he wasn't summoned. God decided to reveal himself to Abraham and his descendants and to Moses at the burning bush.

God can do this because He is both our creator and sustainer; it was his decision to create all of this, to create you.

This is what makes it a gracious imposition, God decided to initiate a relationship, impose it, and it will benefit those involved in it. Abraham gets a promise of many descendants, and a land for them to live in. Abraham's descendants are going to be freed from slavery and brought to a new land where they will have freedom. Odd paradox isn't it – freedom through imposition.

Now we might think that imposition doesn't seem gracious to us at all. But consider the situation when parents

adopt a baby, the baby does not make a free-will choice to be adopted, the arrangement of becoming part of a family where he/she will receive love and care, protection and support and an identity is graciously imposed upon this child, who would be without it if not for the decision of the parents.

So to, God comes to you and me and puts his claim as creator on us. He imposes a relationship on us where He will be our God, our Father and we become part of His family where we receive His love and care and protection and an identity, and we need to realize that without God's initiative we would not have this.

So, our covenant relationship with God begins with God's decision and initiative, and it is a gracious act.

2. A Covenant Relationship is all about loyalty and character and belonging.

In the ancient world a King would make a covenant with his subjects, or with less powerful Kings that he ruled over and this covenant would require that loyalty and service be shown to the High King in return. Loyalty would be shown through

things like paying tributes or taxes, grain, cattle, serving in the army etc.

From the perspective of the High King the subjects, who in spite of difficulties or challenges or tempting offers from other empires or High Kings, remained loyal and served and honored him were doing what was right and continued to belong to the Empire.

Those who broke the covenant by being disloyal – committing treason were subject to whatever consequences outlined in the covenant.

In God's covenant relationship with Israel, disloyalty was always an issue. Often God would send his prophets to speak to Israel about their disloyalty likening them to a cheating spouse. In fact God had one prophet, Hosea as an object lesson, marry a prostitute in order to get the point across to Israel, and listen to what He was supposed to call his children.

⁶ Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means "not loved"), for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them.

⁸ After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi (which means "not my people"), for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

¹⁰ "Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God.'

So here we see God reacting to the disloyalty of Israel and, essentially stating that the covenant had been undone – they are not my people and I am not your God. God tells Hosea he will punish Israel for what they had done in the form of allowing them to suffer military defeat.

Now a covenant relationship is also the kind of relationship where your true character is revealed, and in this passage two types of character are being shown;

Israel- disloyal, unfaithful, fickle in their hearts

God – Loyal, Fair and just, but merciful and some might say foolish.

Because in vs 10 there is this clause “yet”, where God like a spurned lover pauses before fully walking out on the relationship and out of a foolish love decides that He is going to make this work – even though we can all see Israel will

cheat again. But the promise given to Abraham is called to mind once more, and remembers He would make Israel into a great nation, and have a relationship with them, so he determines that they will once again in the future, be called children of the living God.

So because of God's character, even though humans break their end of the covenant relationship with God, He still is determined to make this covenant work, even if he has to do it himself.

So, a covenant relationship is based on loyalty, and faithfulness and it means you belong to someone, and it's a relationship we need to take seriously.

3. Symbols of the relationship

Now, every relationship has some sort of symbol or sign. Marriages have rings; business relationships have contracts on paper and signatures. Usually these signs or symbols have some meaning related to the relationship.

Rings have no beginning or end to show our love is supposed to be everlasting, contracts will spell out in detail all the expectations and obligations business people have to each other, etc....

So what are the signs of the covenant relationship we have with God.

Well, in the OT a covenant was sealed by taking an animal and cutting it in half, and then both parties would walk between the two halves. This said you were both entering into a relationship that was life and death. So serious were you about keeping this agreement that the penalty for breaking it was death. (Gen 15:6-21)

God also determined that this covenant would be passed on to Abraham's descendants as well, and so God makes circumcision the sign of this covenant being passed on to each generation. (Gen 17: 1-14, which is one of the passages we will read today.)

So why don't we cut animals in half, or use circumcision as symbols of our covenant relationship with God anymore?

Because later on in the story of this covenant relationship, when Israel had failed to heed God's warning and return to covenant loyalty, God had promised to make a New covenant with His people in the future because the old one had been broken. (This is in Jeremiah 31: 31-34 which we will read today.)

This New covenant was "cut" when Jesus offered himself as "the Lamb of God" The covenant was sealed in his blood, and his body was cut for it. (Luke 22:19-20)

Because Israel had proven to be incapable of fulfilling the old covenant, God himself fulfilled a new one for them, for us.

So the symbols we now have of our covenant relationship with God are the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

And even though we're taking a road trip through the Bible – this is an important stop along the way, and I want to stop and

show us how these symbols summarize for us what it means to have a covenant relationship with God.

Because in our day to day life we need these reminders of our relationship with God so that we are motivated to choose to be faithful and loyal to God, and so that we remember Christ has fulfilled the covenant obligations and paid with his life on our behalf when we find ourselves being unfaithful and disloyal.

Its also important because unless we understand the reality which the symbols point to, the symbols can often end up being the reality which is idolatry – eg. this ring is not my marriage, the communion table is not Christ, the baptism font is not forgiveness.

So, The Lord's Supper reminds us that a New Covenant was made between God and humans and sealed in the pouring out of Christ's blood, and the breaking of his body – just the way a covenant was supposed to be sealed. It is a legitimate relationship.

It's a business deal signed over lunch, but far more important. It is a covenant meal reminding us of the fellowship we have with God.

And Baptism assures us that this relationship was given to us by God's initiative; baptism is something done to you, especially when it is received by an infant, but when also you are older, you can't baptize yourself.

The waters of baptism represent the washing away of the covenant disloyalty that all humans are guilty of, and also symbolize both the death and life which covenants are sealed in, and by which Christ has fulfilled the old covenant and sealed the new.

Now does this mean if you don't have the symbols you don't have the relationship, not necessarily. Just because I forget to wear my ring doesn't mean I'm not married to my wife, but by the same token – if I am married to my wife why wouldn't I want to wear my ring.

So friends, here we see some more concrete examples of how the bible relates to our lives.

It shows us that we have a unique kind of relationship with God, a covenant relationship, which means that in our day to day life

- We are not prideful or self-righteous about our relationship with God – we didn't start it, God did.
- We begin to think about all of our actions in the light of how it shows that we are loyal to God and Christ alone.
- We make choices to become covenant keepers instead of covenant breakers
- We look forward to receiving the symbols of our relationship being re-assured that we have a covenant with God which is full of mercy and grace.

So friends, next time you're talking with someone and the topic of God comes up – listen to how they talk about God and it will reveal what they believe about the kind of relationship they have with God.

But friends you now know the truth about our relationship with God - because the bible reveals it to us. So remember we

don't have a Kind Grandpa relationship, a mother earth relationship, a strict parent relationship or a Bette Midler relationship - we have a Covenant relationship.

Don't just agree with those people who talk about God in false ways, explain the kind of relationship you have. Let them see that you belong God, that you are loyal to God and that there is joy and peace and security in this, and let them know that right now there's a special offer on – anyone can join the covenant by putting their faith and trust in Christ and receive the symbols of the covenant.

Friends, its so easy to think we can describe our relationship with God, but do we really know what it is all about, thanks be to God he gave us the bible so that we might know – and share with others. Amen.