

**The Covenant of Promise**  
**Genesis 12:1-7, 15:4 –21, 17:9-14**

Well friends, this morning we continue with our journey through the Covenant, looking at and learning about the successive covenant administrations that God has put in place, and understanding how they work towards restoring the original Covenant of Creation.

And as we saw last week, this is the underlying plot that moves the scriptures along... the movement and transition from one covenantal administration to the next, so this morning we're going to look at how things transition from the Covenant of Preservation into the Covenant of Promise.

And as things ended last week, Noah and his family have been spared from the flood where God basically pressed "Ctrl+Alt+Del" and executed a soft reboot of His creation.

Noah is now a second Adam, and has been charged with fulfilling the creational task of multiply and filling the earth and God has committed to restraining himself from sending

destructive judgment even though, as God says "*every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.*" (8:21) and the rainbow is set in place as a symbol of what has happened...

So how does the history of the world progress from this point on? Well in a very similar fashion to how things developed after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden...

It starts with Genesis 10 listing a genealogy of all the people and nations that came from Noah's three sons, and where they ended up settling and this is the evidence that Noah and his family were obedient in their responsibility to multiply and fill the earth...

And this is parallel to the account of how Adam and Eve were obedient to that task and had Cain and Abel...

And both accounts detail how there was also disobedience to that task – in the case of Adam and Eve it was Cain murdering Abel and then the line of the serpent developing, coming to its

fullest expression in Lamech the violent and his three sons who were instrumental in developing significant parts of civilization- agriculture, music and tool making.

And as things progress after Noah, while his descendants are mostly obedient in multiplying some are disobedient regarding spreading out to fill the earth and they determine they are going to gather together and make a name for themselves by intentionally developing civilization in opposition to God and we have the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9.

So we see the line of the serpent is still continuing – in spite of God restarting things with Noah – and they continue to develop civilization in opposition to God.

The difference here is that when God steps in and responds to their rebellion and disobedience – He does not destroy them, because of the Covenant of Preservation. Instead He confuses their language and essentially forces them to spread out because they can no longer co-operate and work together.

So the scriptures show us that there is both obedience and disobedience after Noah, and that the flood has not eliminated the offspring of the serpent from the world, but the good news that comes after Babel - chapter 11:10-26, is that the offspring of the woman are still in the world as well.

Now just as the first line of the woman in Genesis 5 listed ten generations from Adam to Lamech and his three sons – one of which was Noah, in Genesis 11:10-26 there are ten generations listed from Noah, through his son Shem, down to Terah and his three sons – one of which is Abram.

Do see how this is shaping up to follow the same pattern in describing the period leading up to the next Covenant administration...

Now – I have to make a quick side note here – again on how the context of the covenant helps us to understand things that would otherwise be really confusing to us and I want to draw your attention to the exceptionally long life spans that are listed in these two genealogies of the offspring of the woman.

People always get stuck on whether or not people could actually live that long and if the author of Genesis was counting years or maybe they meant months or some other time period and so on...

but that's coming at it with the wrong mindset; Genesis doesn't yield up its treasures to the modern or post-modern mind – it only gives them to the Covenantal mindset...

So when we are coming at it from that perspective, what these long life spans say to us is that the offspring of the woman, who are faithful covenant partners to God, are blessed with long life – as opposed to the line of the serpent where you will not find any indication of how long they lived...

There needs to be no other explanation given of their exceptionally long lives other than that it flows out of God's covenant blessings – because covenants deal with life and death, and this is an example of God's grace sustaining their lives - in spite of Adam and Eve's failing the Test of the Covenant of Creation and resulting in death.

So, with that example I hope you're starting to see, more and more, how understanding Covenant is really the key to understanding so much of what scripture contains that otherwise seems rather confusing...

But we need to get back to what God had done in confusing the inhabitants of the tower of Babel and scattering them, so that they spread out across the earth.

This act of God appears to set the stage for Abram's father Terah to leave Ur of the Chaldees which was close to where the tower of Babel would have been, and would have been under that empire's influence and also affected by its subsequent demise.

Terah initially intends to go all the way to Canaan, but for some reason he ends up stopping in Haran where he settles down and spends the rest of his days.

Then as chapter 12 starts we notice how yet again – as covenant history is playing out, generally for the worse, God

approaches one individual and reveals to that person what He is about to do.

So as we read 12:1 *“The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”* There’s a sense of “uh-oh” is this going to be what God did with Noah all over again?

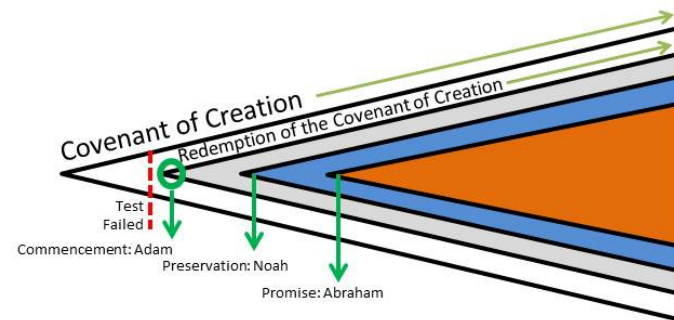
Because we’ve seen how things have been developing along the exact same path as they were in the days leading up to the flood... but, true to his word by which He had instituted the Covenant of Preservation God will uphold it and preserve the earth from destructive judgment.

So what God is about to do through Abram is not a repeat of what happened with Noah, rather it builds on and takes advantage of what God had set in place with Noah and the Covenant of Preservation – time and space for a plan to be worked out, time and space for a Promise to be fulfilled.

And this is the promise that God makes to Abram, *“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.”* (Gen 12:2-3)

Now, even though God does not use the term Covenant in this initial declaration to Abraham – this is the start of God establishing, or re-establishing His Covenant with him, and developing the next administration of His plan towards restoring the original Covenant of Creation and it takes place with-in the Covenant of Preservation and all the prior covenant administrations.

If that’s a bit hard to follow, here’s the Covenant diagram once again, which gives a visual illustration of how these administrations are developing with-in each other...



Now, to show you that I'm not making this stuff up – let's look at God's promise to Abram and see if it meets the requirements of the definition of a Covenant; a Bond, dealing with life and death, sovereignly administered.

Is there a Bond in this? Yes – God declares a relationship to exist between himself and Abram and the uniqueness of this bond lies in what God promises that He will bring about in Abram's life and how it will affect other people – which is why we call it the Covenant of Promise.

Does this deal with life and death? Yes - when God blesses it brings and give life, when God curses – as we have seen – it brings hardship and suffering and eventually death. Think back to the curses from the Covenant of Commencement, *“for dust you are and to dust you will return.”* (Gen 3:19)

And finally is this sovereignly administered? Yes – it is God alone who decides to select Abram, make him into a great nation and bless all peoples on earth through him – it's not something that Abram asked for, or negotiated with God.

And how do we see this Covenant bringing through other aspects of the prior covenants? Look at the emphasis on blessings in God's promise to Abram.

The word “bless” occurs five times in these two verses - in contrast to the five times that the word “curse” has occurred throughout chapters 1-11 in describing the fall-out from covenant violations and human sin.

So what is being emphasized is how God will begin to work towards lifting these prior covenant curses through his covenant blessings to Abram.

And as God fleshes out the details of these blessings in his later dealings with Abram we discover that God will give Abram's “*offspring*” the land of Canaan (12:9, 13:14-17) that his “*offspring*” will be a numerous as the dust, and as numerous as the stars (15:5)

God also commands Abram to *“Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”* (13:17)

All these details link Abram back to Adam. Adam was given the Garden of Eden and Abram is promised the land of Canaan, Adam is told to be fruitful and multiply, Abram is promised to become a great nation, Adam walked with God in the garden, Abram is told to walk through the land of Canaan...

And with the specific use of the word "*offspring*" God is indicating that Abram's descendants shall be the ones who continue the "line of the woman" whose *offspring* it will be that will one day crush the head of the serpent.

And of course all these blessings being fulfilled are dependent upon the Covenant of Preservation continuing in order to provide the amount time necessary for God to bring this about – as we discover in 15:13 it will be at least four hundred years before God brings Abram's descendants back from another land to receive the Promised Land.

So the Covenant of Promise is carrying through and depending upon the prior covenant administrations of Preservation and

Commencement in order to work towards God's goal of restoring the Covenant of Creation... Amazing how God works isn't it!

But as the story of Abraham progresses we see that even though it is God making these promises and they have the full weight of divine sovereignty behind them – and there is no doubt in Abram's mind that God is capable of doing it...

Waiting for God to get around to doing it, and continuing to live expectantly, and faithfully is very difficult for Abram to do.

In previous covenant administrations the human response was more of an immediate obedience or disobedience, right? Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth – well you either did or didn't...

But now, in this Covenant relationship with Abram - there is waiting, one must live by faith... waiting for the promise to be fulfilled in God's time and by God's means – and we see that is difficult for Abram to do, as he attempts to take matters into

his own hands several times and fulfill God's promises in his own efforts; he lies about Sarai being his sister twice, he fathers a child - Ishmael by Sarai's maid Hagar – all in moments of weakness and doubt while waiting for God to act.

So we see that Abram, even though he believed God could do this, needed assurance that God would do this. In 15:8 Abram says "Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" (the land)

And God in his grace and mercy responds to Abram's need for assurance by enacting a human covenant making ceremony where animals are cut in half, and the two parties making the covenant walk between the carcasses to swear their faithfulness, and bind themselves by their lives to fulfill their covenant responsibilities – or they agree to meet the same fate as these animals.

However in this case – it is only God, represented by a smoking firepot and a blazing torch, that passes through the carcasses – and the message to Abram is that God will assume

full responsibility to fulfill the promise to give Abram's descendants the land, should this promise not be fulfilled God himself will bear the penalty for it.

So this human covenant ceremony is taken and used by God as a means of assuring Abram that his descendants will inherit the land.

And with regards to his own fertility, and his own ability to produce enough offspring that would eventually become a great nation God takes another human practice, circumcision, and makes it into a means of assurance as a seal of this Covenant, for Abram and all his male descendants.

This would be a permanent mark on their body, directly related to producing offspring, that would remind them that they had a Covenant relationship with God through which all nations would be blessed through their becoming a great nation.

Now there is a great deal we can say about the seal of circumcision – but we'll summarize it in these three points.

First – it not only symbolized how God would remove the barriers to the production of many offspring, there was the actual removal of a barrier.

Second – this removal had hygienic and cleanliness implications which symbolized the need for purification and cleansing from the human tendency to be unfaithful and disobedient in their response to God's Covenants.

Third – It is a sign of sovereign grace. God instituted this seal of circumcision as an everlasting seal – to be given to all Abraham's descendants when they were eight days old.

As a seal it was the actual proof, the documentation that as a descendent of Abraham you had been brought into a Covenant relationship with God – if you did not have this seal, you were excluded, cut off from the promises and blessings of the Covenant.

As God said *“My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (17:13)*

So – we have this everlasting Covenant of Promise with Abraham and his offspring with its assurances in a covenant ceremony and a seal of circumcision – that promises great blessings but also the possibility of being left out of those blessings if you disobeyed and did not take on the seal of the covenant.

So the question is then, how can the Apostle Paul, many years later say *“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.” (Gal 5:2)*

And while I don't want to get into a full explanation of how all the covenants come to fulfillment in Christ just yet – that's for the end of February...



As we go along there are certain dynamics that occur in these covenant administrations which foreshadow how God will work in Jesus Christ later on.

And in the case of circumcision we see that this seal is about Grace, cleansing, and providing proof of inclusion – and after our Lord Jesus was resurrected from the dead and He ascended into heaven – He sent us the Holy Spirit as a seal of His grace, His cleansing and as proof that we are included in His Body, and His Kingdom that He has promised to bring.

As Paul says in Ephesians 1:13 *“When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit”*

And the symbol that assures us that this is so, that we have the seal of the Holy Spirit, to encourage and nurture our faith that Christ will make good on his promises - is Baptism.

Immersion by the Spirit into the very person and work of Jesus Christ – where we find grace, cleaning and belonging.

And friends, because of who we confess Jesus Christ to be, fully God and fully human, that means He was the only person who could ever truly bear the seal of circumcision externally... and also be faithful internally.

Paul says in Romans 2:28-29 *“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. A person is a Jew (an offspring of Abraham) who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit”*

And the last line of the Christmas story in Luke 2:21 reminds us that part of the good news of the Christmas story is that Jesus was circumcised - sealed for the promises of Abraham – on our behalf.

What was cut away externally was a reflection of how Christ’s humanity had no sin, no rebellion, no possibility of covenant unfaithfulness – unlike us.

We could cut that away but it wouldn’t change our hearts....

Thus Paul's emphasis on our need for Christ when he says *"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."* (Galatians 3:26 -29)

So friends – what do we take away from this message on the Covenant of Promise?

First that as Abraham was like another Adam... we must see Jesus Christ as restored Adam, taking what God intended to do in his promises Abraham to its fullest intentions for the entire creation.

God promised Abraham's descendants land – but in Jesus Christ this promise grows to apply to the whole world, the entire universe. We confess Jesus as Lord of ALL, and we wait for Him to return and make ALL things new. A new heavens and a New Earth.

And God promised Abraham's descendants that they would bless all nations – and in Jesus Christ we now have the command to go and make disciples of all nations – and bless them by baptizing them into the family of God.

God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and curse those who cursed him – so to God will bless those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, but those who refuse Him will be cursed – cut off from the promises and blessings of God.

So friends – all the Promises which God made to Abraham in this covenant administration are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In fact when God first declared His covenant to Abraham, those promises were as good as accomplished – but yet Abraham had to wait, and have faith, and God provided means to assure his faith.

So to friends, we must live by faith and wait for the promises fulfilled in Christ to be applied to the whole of creation.

God is still preserving this world from judgment, there is time to be sealed by the Holy Spirit and have our hearts circumcised in Christ, and be assured that we will inherit the new heavens and the new earth.

And as we wait – Christ has provided the means to assure us, so that we “can know” that we will inherit all that is promised to us in Him, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and these means are Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

We call them sacraments – but the reality is they are covenant symbols of the covenant seal – The Holy Spirit.

And by their very nature these symbols instruct us, remind us and assure us of the kind of covenant relationship we have with God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

It is one of sovereign grace, in which we are cleansed of sin and rebellion, and we are restored into a Covenant relationship with God that anticipates the restoration of creation.

And we express our faith and trust that one day this will come to pass - by reflecting the image of God in our lives right now!

In how we relate to each other, in relationships and marriages as male and female, in our being fruitful and multiplying - not only our biological families but also the body of Christ, and in ruling over the earth as redeemed stewards, and finally as we observe the Sabbath to enjoy and worship God for his creation.

In this friends, we find life and we experience a foretaste of the blessings of the world to come.

That’s the Covenant of Promise friends – and it’s our in Christ, receive it in faith! Amen.