

# In the Beginning

Message 12

## *Cutting the Covenant*

Genesis 15:1-21; Psalm 105:1-12

### *Looking for the Seed*

The earth was a wonderful place when God created it. Genesis 1 tells us that everything God made was good. There were amazing plants, fascinating animals, beautiful scenery, and stunning heavenly bodies. To cap it all off God made man, a creature like God. Man was unbelievably magnificent, and God put him in charge of developing and cultivating the whole earth. As a sign of His love for man and as an example of what He had in mind for the whole earth, God made Adam a garden, better translated a pleasure garden. The garden was full of sensuous delights to please Adam, and he was supposed to tame the wilderness so that the whole earth would become like the garden. The first step in this work was to guard and care for the garden, especially the woman God gave Adam for his wife.

We saw how this plan and the beautiful earth were ruined by Adam's sin. An enemy invaded the garden, but Adam failed to attack. He timidly stood by while the serpent deceived Eve and coaxed her into disobeying God's command. Then Adam rebelled against God by joining Eve in the sin of eating from the forbidden tree. The universe convulsed, as death entered the earth. God came in judgment and found Adam and Eve guilty and worthy of death. But as He pronounced His sentence, God astonished us by delaying physical death for Adam and Eve. Although they deserved nothing but death for treason, God miraculously promised to save them from death, and to deliver them by a child Eve would bear. In speaking to the serpent, God said, "I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel." (Genesis 3:15) I'm sure Adam and Eve were stunned to hear these words. I'm sure it took awhile for them to become convinced that they were in fact still alive and not hallucinating this wonderful news. And this time Adam *did* believe God. He trusted God to keep him alive long enough to have a child who would save them. So the scripture tells us, "Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living." (Genesis 3:20) Adam placed his faith in God, and God kept His promise. Eve bore a son!

We also saw how Eve's son was a terrible disappointment. Cain grew up to be an angry, violent young man. He refused to worship God properly, and finally he murdered his righteous brother. Adam and Eve were devastated, but God graciously gave them another son, Seth. So began a series of godly generations, as each son bore another son who also followed the Lord. But none of these was that great Seed who could deliver man from death. Then Adam died. I think this produced a huge departure from the faith, but in any case, human society grew worse and worse. Finally it was so bad, violence was everywhere. I suppose the ancient world was like our inner cities, or like the Middle East. Murder, theft, rape, and other sins were the normal state of human behavior. Into this horrible society Noah was born, so named because his father prophesied that he would bring rest. Noah did bring rest, as by his faith he survived the flood and emerged from the ark to rebuild the human race. The violence and wickedness was wiped away as the flood cleansed the earth of sin.

But sin still resided in the human heart, and soon Noah's son Ham revealed himself to have the same sinful heart as the antediluvians. What's more indicting, as Noah's descendants multiplied, they again rebelled against God by refusing to populate the earth. They refused to worship God, and instead sought to make a name for themselves. They built a city and desired to become a great civilization instead of spreading over the earth. God frustrated their plan by giving different ones languages which they couldn't understand, but in all this are you wondering – where is the seed?

It appears that true worship of God virtually died out. Apparently many of the descendants of Noah,

especially the sons of Shem, continued to worship God – but also other Gods and idols. If anyone was still looking for the seed, I'm sure he would have been very discouraged at the state of things. Human society was not so thoroughly wicked as before the flood, but knowledge of God was at a low ebb. This was the situation when God called Abram. In a sense God once again started over. Like Seth and Enoch and Noah, God intervened in a hopeless situation and called Abram out of the society around him. God called forth faith in these men, and they believed God and followed Him. God used each one to rebuild the human race, and to carry forward the line of the seed.

### ***Starting Over With Abram***

When God called Abram to leave society and follow Him, God meant to leave literally. Abram packed up his whole household and moved several hundred miles, on foot, with all his servants, animals, and possessions. But it was worth it because God had made a great promise to Abram. God promised to bless him, and God promised to use Abram to bless the whole earth. Isn't that exciting? Would you be willing to pack up and leave Lehigh tonight to go to Africa or Asia if God promised that you would bless the whole earth by doing so? I think many of us would do that. And now in retrospect we look at the call of Abram and see in this the roots of missionary work. Way, way back in the dim past, God was planning that all peoples all over the world should love and worship Him. When you witness to unbelievers in your dorm of class, and when you or your friends go overseas to share the gospel, you are true sons and daughters of Abraham. You are carrying forward God's ancient plan to save the world.

But there is one problem with God's call to Abram. Abram's wife, Sarai, was barren. She could not have children. This is a very serious problem. The whole plan depends on children. For one thing, there is no way Abram by himself could reach the whole earth. The universal blessing would come as his children formed a nation. Without children this plan was dead on arrival. Second, without children the hope of the seed would die. Mankind would be lost forever. It is a testimony to Abram's gigantic faith that he left home and traveled to an unknown land when he lacked the one essential ingredient to succeed.

How do you respond to God when He called you to do something difficult? How do you respond when God calls you to do something impossible? What do you do when the Spirit prompts you to speak to your roommate about Jesus? Perhaps you don't know what to say. Perhaps you get all tangled up in your words. Or what about spending time with someone in your Bible study or hall or class – someone who needs a friend or some encouragement? Some of you are afraid you won't know what to say. What do you do when you realize you need to speak to someone about sin? Do you let fear rule your actions? Some of you ought to go to camp after school, but you don't have the money or you have schedule conflicts. Do you expect God to solve these things, or do you avoid the issue? I am not advocating reckless, presumptuous behavior. Just running off to do some fool thing is not necessarily God's will. But put yourself in Abram's shoes. If you knew you could not possibly have children, would you embark upon a plan in which children are a necessity? The issue here is trust. How much do you *really* trust God?

Abram is an amazing character. The text doesn't tell us what troubles he suffered moving hundreds of animals and servants all that distance. The text doesn't tell us how Sarai felt about leaving a nice house in town and living the rest of her life in tents. The text doesn't tell us what she said to Abram about this ridiculous project! But it is obvious that the whole thing was a colossal headache. Finally Abram reached his destination – and guess what? There was no food there! I bet Sarai and the servants wanted to strangle Abram! Years of struggle across the countryside to a new home, and they can't find food. So they pressed on into Egypt, where Pharaoh nearly took Sarai for his wife. God delivered Abram from Pharaoh, and guess what? Back north into Canaan – where there was no food. This was not happy camping.

But in spite of the lack of food, Abram and his nephew Lot prospered. They prospered so much that they had to split up so their herds could find enough grass to eat. Lot settled in the rich Jordan valley and

Abram stayed in the hills. After a while the kings of the cities in the Jordan valley rebelled against their overlord. Chedorlaomer and his allies in Mesopotamia came into the Jordan valley and attacked the kings who ruled there. The Mesopotamians won, and they collected spoils of war and set off for home. Among the spoils were Abram's nephew Lot and his household. One of them escaped and ran to tell Abram. Abram gathered up his servants and allies and made a night attack on the Mesopotamians, and rescued Lot. After the battle Abram returned all the captured possessions and returned home.

### ***God's Promise to Abram***

Abraham had a large household. He had 318 trained servants who participated in the night raid. He was also allied with some local Amorites – Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner. Even so, in a standing battle, they were no match for a combined army of four kings. Abram rejoiced in his victory over the Mesopotamians, but there was the question of what revenge they might seek. In the midst of this uncertainty God came to reassure Abram. “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.’” (Genesis 15:1) Abram had the nerve to attack four kings far stronger than he. What would happen next? God will protect him. God will be a shield to protect Abram against enemies stronger than he. Abram had the grace to return all the spoil of the battle. What does he have to show for his efforts? He has Lot back safe and sound, but nothing else. He legitimately could have laid claim to a portion of the wealth he rescued from the Mesopotamians, but he returned it all to its rightful owners. But now God says He is Abram's reward. God is worth more than everything in the world. If Abram has God, there is nothing more valuable to possess.

Is God your shield and reward? Of course He is, if you believe in Him. If you are here tonight and do not believe in Jesus, God is *not* your shield and reward. You have no reason to think that God will protect you from problems and reward you for your efforts. You are on your own in this world, and it's a miserable way to live. But if you do believe in Jesus, He will help you and He is your reward. The trouble with many Christians is they act as though this were not true. They go through life miserable with anxiety because they don't really believe God will come through for them. Is this how you go through finals week? Do you worry and fuss and fret about your work? Or do you patiently plow on, trusting God to help you? But what if you don't get it done? What if you do poorly? What if you fail a course? Ah, woe! Life becomes unbearable! – because God is not your reward. Grades are your reward, and although you have the love of God, although Christ loves you so much He died for you, you will not be happy unless you get these trinkets called grades. You should work hard (which means you should not waste your time) during finals week, but the worst case scenario still leaves you with the love of God. Is God reward enough for you?

I think Abram trusted God and was satisfied with God alone as his reward. But how will this all work out without a child? Abram is deeply confused, because he knows that Sarai is barren, and he knows that he cannot be a blessing to the world without children. So he does the natural thing – he asks God about it. “‘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!’” (Genesis 15:2-3) Abram is saying, “God, I trust you to protect me, and I don't need anything in this life but you. But how can I fulfill your plan without a child?”

God responded to Abram's question in a deeply profound way. First, he reassured Abram that he would indeed have a child, his own child, born from his own body. Then He reassured Abram that his descendants would be a vast multitude. He showed Abram the stars and told him that is how many his descendants would be. Finally God made a covenant with Abram.

### ***God's Covenant With Abram***

We have mentioned covenants before, but we have not yet fully discussed what a covenant is. It is not a word which we use much any more. The only common use, and this is less frequent than it used to be,

is in the marriage relationship. Furthermore, we are burdened with some unhealthy comparisons which mislead us in understanding covenants. I think the Puritans, who were astonishing biblical scholars, misunderstood the essential nature of a covenant. Most of the Puritans were well-educated and some were wealthy. Many were businessmen and they were used to commercial contracts. I think they tended to import this concept into the covenant and we inherit some of this perspective. But a covenant in the Bible is *not* a contract. A contract is a negotiated financial relationship that is temporary in nature. A covenant is a personal bond, often offered unconditionally, and without an end. We do not have the time to examine all the biblical data about covenants, but we will note some points in passing. The Bible contains covenants between equals, such marriage, or the covenant between David and Jonathan. These covenants are personal bonds, but are entered voluntarily. The Bible also contains covenants between nations. These are treaties, but not like our treaties between states. An ancient treaty was a personal bond between kings. It was not negotiated, but was imposed by the conqueror.

In Genesis 15 we see God making a covenant with Abram. God did this to show His love and commitment to Abram. This is not a promise. God had already, on several occasions, made promises to Abram. This is much deeper than a promise. In this covenant, God bound Himself to Abram forever. Notice several features of a covenant which are evident here. First, it is imposed. God's covenants are not negotiated. When God decides to bind Himself to someone, it happens. Period. This does not mean that person has no free will. He is free to respond to God in any number of ways. But he can never extricate himself from the covenant with God. Let's not mislead people into thinking that they can negotiate with God. No. God is not your equal, and any covenant with Him will be imposed at His will.

Second, the covenant involves a self-maledictory oath. That is the meaning of the animals that were split open. "Self-maledictory" means a curse upon yourself. In other words, you are imposing a curse upon yourself if you fail to be faithful to the covenant. In this case, the covenant maker was saying, "May I be cut into pieces like these animals if I fail to keep this covenant."

Third, the covenant was perpetual. This is very hard for us individualistic Americans to accept. Deep inside us we rebel against the notion that our destiny is not our own. We hate the thought that our fathers have set forth the course of our lives. We refuse to believe that our faith will play a role in creating faith in our children. But it's true. Jesus said He instituted a new covenant, and covenants are perpetual. Think about the covenants that God made.... Grace. Noah. Moses. David

Fourth, a covenant specified terms of faithfulness. treaty. marriage. God.

This is where human freedom enters. Faithful or not. Marriage.

Being part of God's covenant does not mean you have eternal life. It means your life is governed by the terms of the covenant. This is not true for those outside the covenant.

Fifth, covenants have signs. Wedding ring. Circumcision. Baptism. The sign does not declare faithfulness, but declares the bond. Baptism does not save you but does place you under the terms of the covenant.

So now let's pull all this together in a definition of a covenant as God makes with us. A covenant is a personal bond established with a self-maledictory oath which lasts for all generations.

### ***Sovereign Salvation***

But now as we watch this covenant making scene unfold, it takes an eerie turn. Abram prepared the animals for the covenant ritual and waited for God to appear. According to custom they would walk together between the animals declaring their eternal bond to each other, each cursing himself upon failure to keep

that bond. But God delayed in coming. All day Abram waited. Finally in the night God came. He came in the glory cloud, the cloud which hovered over the creation, the fiery cloud which led the Israelites through the wilderness, the cloud which inhabited the temple – the unapproachable Holy Spirit. And God walked through alone. No man is able to make a covenant with God. No man is fit to walk with the glory Spirit. As Isaiah said later, “I looked, but there was no one to help, And I wondered That there was no one to uphold; Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me.” (Isaiah 63:5) Not only is no one fit to covenant with God, no man can bear the oath of curse. Abram would have perished in hell if he had taken that oath, because he was prone to sin as well. So when God made a covenant to save the earth through Abram, He pronounced the curse upon Himself alone. 4,000 years later God took that curse. His flesh was torn apart, as those sacrificial animals that Abram had cut open. God was ripped apart, flesh from bone, soul from body, even Father from Son. In this ritual, God said to Abram, “I, and only I, will be cursed if this covenant is not fulfilled.” So Christ was cursed for our faithlessness.

Brothers and sisters, God does not want your obedience. God does not want a mere personal relationship with you. God does not simply want your worship. God wants you! God will not be satisfied with anything but an eternal bond with you. The apostle tells us that marriage is the closest thing to this on earth. A man and a woman fall in love and cannot imagine life without each other. They abandon their own families, leave their homes, and become one flesh. Paul tells us this is a picture of God’s relationship with us. This is a picture of the covenant in action. With such a God, how can you not obey Him? How can you not worship Him? How can you not love Him?

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