

More Than a Promise

Genesis 15:1-21

Sitting Ducks

What would you men do if a motorcycle gang broke into this meeting tonight and carried off all the women? A vicious, hardened gang with a reputation for toughness and determination. You know what will happen to the women here. The pretty ones will be kept for the pleasure of the gang, and the rest will be drugged, beaten, and brainwashed before being sold for prostitution in a city where no one will ever find them. As you hear the sobs, the cries, the shrieks of desperation from these beautiful women who came to this RUF meeting receding in the distance – what would you do?

Would anyone grab whatever car or truck or motorcycle you could find, along with perhaps any firearms, and chase after the gang to rescue these women? Vehicles are in short supply around here, and firearms even more so – but if you had the means to attempt a rescue – would you? You – Brown, RISD, and Johnson and Wales students – what a joke! What chance would you have against hardened criminals? You would never succeed in rescuing your friends. Is that what you would think? Would you file a police report, weigh in your rooms, and mourn for your friends who are lost forever?

Abram faced a situation not too different from this shortly before the scripture we read tonight. He was minding his own business in the land where God had led him – he and his nephew Lot. They were happy and prosperous. Abram had settled in the rough hill country, and Lot had settled in the fertile Jordan River Valley. It was a lush garden land, and marauding kings from the east decided they wanted a share of the riches of that valley. These kings raided the valley and carried Lot and his family and the whole city captive. As customary in those days, the desirable women would be taken by the men, and the rest of the people would be enslaved. When Abram heard of it, he called his three neighbors and they pursued the captives. It was a crazy idea. One man and three friends against four kings! Now it is true that each of these men had large households with men who could fight, but still – it was beyond daring. It was clinically crazy! Against all odds, Abram and his friends surprised the four kings and rescued all the captives and all their possessions. It was a stunning victory! You can imagine the adrenaline rush of relief and excitement as the captives and conquerors returned to their homes.

But now what? What will those four kings – robbed of their loot – what will they do now? Abram and his friends rescued the captives in a night raid, but they are no match for a standing battle against the four kings. If those kings return to fight, everyone could be killed. And realistically, there is nothing Abram can do to fortify himself enough to win such a battle. This time it might be not only Lot and his family who are captured – Abram and his own wife might also be enslaved. It would be as if that motorcycle gang called in its chapters in Boston and Hartford and New York to ride in here and get everyone of us. We would be sitting ducks. The adrenaline rush of relief and excitement would turn to a gripping fear of what's about to happen next.

God's Promise

It is at this point that God comes to Abram and says, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." God knows the fear in Abram's heart. He knows his love for his family, his devotion to his servants, his fondness for his friends. Of course God knows that Abram is a sitting duck. This is not the first time God interacted with Abram. Abram and Sarai had been living comfortably on the other side of the world – in Mesopotamia – when God called Abram to leave home and travel to a far distant land. Abram and Sarai packed up their belongings and made the long trip around the Fertile Crescent to the land occupied by Canaanites. God and Abram experienced several adventures before the visit we read about tonight, so God was no stranger to Abram – just as He is no stranger to many of you. Some of you have known God since you were children. Your parents introduced you to Jesus, and you recognized His voice, and you began to follow Him. Some of you were introduced to Jesus in high school, and some of you heard Jesus' voice only recently. Perhaps some of you also have never heard Jesus calling you, but perhaps He is calling you tonight. But for all of us, the key question is this: do you believe in Jesus?

Abram had no evidence that he was going to be safe from harm. The four murderous kings were still out there. But God promised to protect him. How? What does that mean? What is God going to do to protect Abram? God does not say. So Abram is left with the choice, shall he trust God, or not? He does not know what is going to happen. All he knows is that God made a promise. Can he count on that?

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 is 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 do not really believe God will come through for them. Is this how you go through the semester? 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), but the worst case scenario still leaves you with the love of God. Is God reward enough for you?

You are called to trust God, even when there is little evidence of a way out. When you have more assignments than you can possibly do, when you are too exhausted to get up and go to worship on Sunday morning, when you must forgive someone who has deeply hurt you, when God calls you into ministry against your parents' wishes, when you long to date and marry an unbeliever – God calls you to follow Him. And just like Abram, God promises to care for you. Before He ascended to the Father, Jesus said, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (John 14:18) The apostle John, speaking for Jesus, said, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world." (1 John 5:4) You might not be able to see the end of your trouble. Will you pass this course? Will your parents hate you? Will you never find someone to love you? God does not say. What He does say is, "I love you. Trust me." Will you? Is God's word enough, or do you demand that God prove Himself?

A Better Promise

Our scripture indicates that Abram did trust God to protect him. Perhaps he felt that since God had always helped him in the past, he could count on God to do it this time. Perhaps he thought that the creator of the universe must surely have the ability to keep four kings at bay. Whatever the reason, Abram believed God when God said He would protect Abram. And now that Abram has God's attention, he turns the conversation to a matter of grave importance – children, or rather the lack of them. Sarai, Abram's wife, was barren.

The ancient world, and most cultures throughout history, took God's first command seriously. They industriously went about having lots of children. Children were a sign of strength and blessing, and it was a great disgrace when a woman could not bear children. It was a sign of Abram's love, or integrity, or both that he did not put Sarai away and get a fertile wife. But now Abram is about 80 years old and Sarai is about 70, and there were no children because Sarai was barren. Like any loving husband, Abram hurt for his wife, and he was also personally humiliated that he had no children.

But you would be gravely mistaken if you thought that this passage is merely about the disgrace of barrenness. There is far more at stake here. Abram knew that in order for the human race to escape destruction, he needed a child. In the beginning God promised to save mankind through a son. Adam and Eve had brought sin and the curse into the world by eating the forbidden fruit. But when God appeared in judgment, instead of executing them on the spot, He announced an amazing plan. He would save them and their children by a son Eve would bear. Their own son! These miserable sinners, God would use them to bear a son who would save the human race! Eventually it became clear that their immediate sons were not the chosen one, so from generation to generation men and woman looked for the son who would save them from their sins and redeem the world from the horrors that sin had brought in. And when God first appeared to Abram, way back in Mesopotamia, God promised to bless him, to make him the father of many nations, and to bless the whole world through him. Abraham also would have a son who would play a role in the salvation of the world.

That was about 10 years ago. Still no children, and soon Sarai will pass menopause. So when Abram says, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir,” (Genesis 15:3) he is not merely complaining that he has not had the pleasure of little Abrams underfoot, and little Sarai’s running around the house. Abram’s concern is not the lack of *in vitro* fertilization technology. His concern is that, without a son, God’s promise to bless the world will go unfulfilled. Compared to this, the threat from the four kings is relatively insignificant. God’s purpose and man’s future hangs on the ability of Abram and Sarai to have a son.

Again God promised Abram that his “very own son” shall be his heir. God showed Abram the stars and promised Abram as many descendants as the stars he could count. God had promised this before, so He was really repeating His promise here, and adding a visual aid to lend weight to his words. What do you think? If you were in Abram’s shoes, an 80 year old man with a 70 year old wife – would you believe such a ludicrous promise? Even from God? Many people doubt God for lesser things. But Abram was not like many people. Verse six states plainly that Abram “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” No doubt, this was a doozy – a wild, extravagant claim. But Abram was willing to trust God even for this. As a result, God considered Abram righteous because of this trust.

Now if you were attentive as we read the scripture, you noticed that Abram was not finished with God yet. God explained that part of his promise was that Abram would possess all the surrounding land, which was then occupied by the Canaanites. But how would you ever do that without children? So Abram follows up with a question for further clarification. “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” At first glance this might look like Abram’s faith is wavering. God made these wonderful promises, but talk is cheap. Perhaps Abram is saying, “OK, God. I hear you. But you’ve got to do more than just talk. Prove that you’re really serious about this.” There is a note of truth in this, but it is not because Abram’s faith is wavering. It is because he is seeking a covenant.

God’s Covenant

Covenant 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 the concept of a contract 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 as 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 us 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, a 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. The covenant-making parties would butcher the animals and lay the pieces out in two rows. Then they would link arms and walk between the animal pieces each saying, "May I be cut into pieces like these animals if I fail to keep this covenant."

Third, a covenant is 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 is true. Archeological studies demonstrate that ancient covenants of this time were considered binding upon future generations of the covenant makers, and this pattern is evident all through the Bible. God made a covenant with Noah, and to this day we all experience the blessing of never having had a universal flood again. God made a covenant with the Israelites in Moses' day, and it was binding upon all their descendants. The books of the prophets record God calling the people to account hundreds of years later according to the covenant their ancestors had made with God. Now remember, you can have an agreement with someone that is not perpetual. It is a contract. You might agree to mow my grass every week for 12 weeks during the summer and I will pay you \$50 per week. But you can cancel the contract whenever you want, and for sure your son is not required to keep mowing my grass forever! Many years after Abram Jesus instituted a new covenant, and that covenant binds all future generations. It does not mean that all children of believers have faith, but it does mean that they are bound to Jesus in some way.

Fourth, a covenant specified terms of faithfulness. Between nations this involved mutual protection and payment of tribute. These terms were spelled out in a treaty signed by both kings. In marriage the terms of faithfulness are sexual monogamy, sharing of wealth, mutual help, love and care, etc. These terms are the vows spoken during the wedding ceremony, and bind man and woman to each other for life. The Bible contains the terms of faithfulness to God's covenant with us. At first these were the laws written in the first five books, written by Moses. Over the centuries God explained, repeated, expanded, and applied these laws to new situations. Finally Jesus came to put the finishing touches on God's covenant. He clarified which particular laws were no longer in force, and explained how to keep His commands in a new era.

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 where human freedom enters. Everyone has a choice to be faithful to the covenant, or not. It is similar to marriage. Being married does not mean that you are a loving husband or wife. It *does* mean that you are bound to that person for life, and it means that you are required to be faithful to him or her. And faithfulness is not some squishy feeling of attachment. Faithfulness is spelled out in the vows you took when you got married. But some men and women choose *not* to be faithful to their spouse. And while you might get away with having sex promiscuously without devastating effects before you are married, after marriage, adultery leads to divorce and all the ugliness that comes with it. Likewise, when you were baptized into a covenant with God, you are bound to Him and to the term of His covenant. You might decide to violate those terms, but you cannot escape the covenant without a terrible cost.

Fifth, covenants have signs. Marriage is signified in our culture by a wedding ring. In Abram's time circumcision was the sign that marked Abram and his household as belonging to God. When Jesus came and instituted a new covenant, He gave us baptism to signify that we are His. The sign does not declare faithfulness, but declares the bond. A wedding ring shows that you are a husband or wife. It does not show whether you are a *faithful* spouse or not. Likewise baptism shows that you belong to God and are under the terms of His covenant. It does not save you. Faith is the vehicle of salvation. But there is no salvation outside of the covenant.

So now let's pull all this together in a definition of a covenant that God makes with us. A covenant is a personal bond established with a self-maledictory oath signified by a symbol and 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 sword which guarded the Garden of Eden, the fire in the bush that spoke to Moses, 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 as all other men. So when God made a covenant to save the earth through Abram, He pronounced the curse upon Himself alone. God was saying, "If either one of us, I or Abram, is unfaithful to this covenant, let him be torn to pieces like these animals." God knew what He was doing. God knew that before long Abram would doubt His promise and create a child through his servant girl. God knew that Abram's son, Isaac, would reject God's choice of Jacob and try to give Esau the covenant blessing. God knew that Jacob's sons would commit gory crimes. God knew that their children would turn to idols and eventually their nation would openly rebel against the God who loved them and saved them. God knew all this – yet He took the covenant curse upon Himself.

Why? Why did God do such a monstrous thing? Why does anyone make a covenant? For love. God saw Abram, and He loved him. God loved Abram and his ancestors and descendants so much, God was unwilling to be merely their creator and ruler. God would be our lover. And in order to secure mankind as His love, God was willing to expose Himself to the covenant curse.

Four thousand years later God took that curse. Animals circled the magnificent Son of God, lusting for blood and vengeance. Their iron-tipped scourge tore open His back. Their sword sliced open His side. They ripped Him apart so that He was not longer recognizable as a man. As those sacrificial animals that Abram had cut open, God was ripped apart, flesh from bone, soul from body, 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 mere obedience. God does not merely want a 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. This is a picture of God's relationship with us. This is a picture of the covenant in action. Jesus abandoned His perfect life in heaven to walk this wretched earth with the people He created and loves. Finally He took upon Himself our sin and was abandoned by His Father so that we might be united to Him in an eternal covenant. With such a God, how can you not obey Him? How can you not worship Him? How can you not love Him? Isn't such a lover more valuable than a spouse? Isn't such a lover more valuable than a degree from Brown, RISD, or Johnson and Wales? Isn't such a lover more valuable than a job on Wall Street, with Google, or at Harvard Medical? God gave everything to have you. Will you not give yourself to Him?

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